

Damian's Assassin
Sequel to *Damian's Oracle*

By Lizzy Ford

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This book contains explicit language that may be inappropriate for readers under the age of 18.

PROLOGUE

“Sweetie, you can lay down in the bed next to your daddy’s.”

Bianca looked from her pale brother lying too still on the hospital bed to the smiling nurse. The room was dark except for the light above Jonny’s bed and the red and green lights dotting the machines keeping him alive.

“Thank you.”

Adults would argue with her if she told them she wasn’t leaving Jonny’s side until he was healed. They thought her too young to understand words like *coma* and *deteriorating*, and they accused her of lying when she said she could help him.

The nurse handed her a thin blanket then pointed to the phone.

“Call me if you need anything, ok? All you have to do is pick up, and I’ll answer.”

“Thank you,” she said again.

Satisfied, the nurse swept up the linens she’d changed and left. Bianca waited until she heard the door click closed and looked across the small bay to where her daddy slept.

She’d been able to do *that*. Why couldn’t she heal Jonny? She scooted forward, frustrated and tired, and touched her brother’s arm. She felt death within him, as she had with her cat Snickers after a car ran him over.

She’d saved Snickers. She’d kept the flowers around Jonny’s bed as fresh as the day they arrived last week. She’d helped her father sleep.

She couldn’t help Jonny.

Maybe daddy was right. Maybe she was too small. But she was nine, and Jonny was even smaller at four. He really wasn’t too much bigger than a cat, not when compared to an adult.

She cried again, snuffling and wiping at her nose before she pushed herself off the chair. She tried another wilted flower, bringing it back to full bloom.

“Jonny ... “ she whispered. “I’m so sorry Jonny!”

It was her fault he was in the hospital. Her step-mother - Jonny’s mother - had said as much. Bianca cringed as she had earlier that day when her mother and Jonny’s mother screamed blame at each other until the nursing staff kicked them out of the room.

She didn’t mean to hurt him. He was annoying, and she wanted him to leave her alone. All he ever wanted to do was play with his stupid baseball, and she’d taken it and thrown it into the forest. He went after it, and she played with her toys all day.

He didn’t come back, even when it got dark, and it was time for them to go inside.

“I can help him.”

She twisted in her chair to see a man near the dark windows whose eyes were the color of her bright purple Easter dress.

“Are you a doctor?” she asked, wiping her eyes.

“You want to help him?”

She nodded.

“I can make it so he doesn’t remember that you did this to him.”

Her chin trembled as guilt flowed over her.

“You understand that medical treatment isn’t free?”

She nodded.

“It will cost you something.”

She dug through the pockets in her jeans and pulled out the stash of one dollar bills she'd been given for trips to the candy machine down the hall. She counted them with shaking hands.

“I only have four,” she said with some dismay.

“I require more than that.”

She looked up. His eyes seemed to swirl, around and around, changing from the color of her mother's tulips to a color almost as dark as the night. He wasn't like the other doctors. His voice wasn't kind. He had no emotions, like a man in a Halloween mask.

“I don't have more,” she said, voice shaking.

“What else do you have?”

She checked her pockets again then looked around.

“I don't have anything else!”

The man with purple eyes knelt in front of her. His face didn't look rubbery like a Halloween mask, but neither did he look normal. She took a step back.

“You have to help him,” she whispered. “Please!”

“I will help him, Bianca. If you make me a promise.”

She nodded uncertainly.

“You must keep this promise no matter what, or your brother will get sick and die. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“There is a man you will meet when you are older, a man who -“

“This is low, even for you.”

She jumped as a hand clamped on the man's shoulder. Her eyes flew up to another man with eyes the color of their Christmas tree. He had Papaw's face, with wrinkles around his eyes and a kind smile.

“By divine code, you can't interfere,” the man with the purple eyes said in a tone that made her shrink away.

“By divine code, neither can *you*.”

Purple-eyes rose. Green-eyes stepped between them, and Purple-eyes backed towards the window again.

“We're so much better than this, brother,” Green-eyes said. “Children are off limits.”

“For your kind, Watcher. There are no boundaries for us.”

“Divine code disagrees with you and the rest of the Others.”

Purple eyes looked at her, and she shrank behind Green-eyes.

“The Grey God will destroy us all, brother. You can stop this war here, now,” Purple-eyes said with a look that made her snap her eyes closed.

“You're a fool led by a fool. Go, brother.”

She held her breath and waited, able to feel the tension between them even with her eyes closed.

“He's gone, Bianca,” Green-eyes said.

She opened one eye, then the other, confirming his words. She started crying again.

“Jonny's gonna die!”

“You can save him.”

"I can't! I tried! I *can't!*"

"Listen, Bianca."

He took her arms and sat her in a chair, handed her a fistful of tissues, and knelt. She blew her nose loudly and looked at him through blurry eyes. His small smile was kind, his bright eyes unblinking.

"You have a very special gift. No one else has one like you."

"But I'm too little to save Jonny."

"Nonsense. You can save Jonny. You hear his body speak of the death in him?"

"It's awful," she whispered.

"If you listen really hard to what his body tells you, you can save him. No one wants to die, and his body will tell you what it needs from you. You need to rest tonight, sleep as much as you can. In the morning, you'll be able to heal him."

"But I've been trying for days!"

He touched her again, his hand cool but the electricity that shot through her warm.

"I've woken your gift completely," he said. "You must promise to keep it a secret and to make Jonny keep it a secret."

She blinked rapidly, startled by the sensations going through her.

"Do you promise?"

"Yes."

"You must also never harm another. It is the way of ancient healers. Do you understand?" he asked.

"Ancient healers?"

"In time you'll learn more. Do you understand what I ask of you?"

"I don't know. I think so."

"Can you promise to keep Jonny safe?"

"He's my brother," she said, sniffing again.

"Good. Go to sleep, Bianca. I'll watch over your brother tonight. In the morning, you'll save him."

She hesitated.

"You're not a doctor," she ventured.

"No, but I'm a friend here to watch over you and Jonny."

Something about the man made her feel safe, and the warm electricity in her body made her sleepy. She kissed Jonny goodnight and crossed the bay to curl up with their father.

When she'd gone, the Watcher placed a hand on Jonny's forehead.

Come back, god-slayer. Your time is yet to come.

As strong as the girl was, she was too small to bring Jonny back from the place the Others sent him. The Watcher's hand fell away, and his gaze went to the dark side of the bay, where the little girl was already fast asleep.

A healer and warrior born to the same family.

He smiled.

CHAPTER ONE

Fifteen years later

Miami, Florida

What a waste of five years.

Bianca drew a heart around his name, then a huge X.

"I probably shouldn't have come back to Miami," she said into the phone pressed to her ear, wishing she could talk to him without the butterflies in her stomach. "I should've just sold all dad's things after he died."

"I wish you'd told me he died when you left last year. But I'm glad you're back," was the smooth reply.

She rolled her eyes.

"Sorry to hear about your split," she managed. "She was a nice lady."

"Thanks. It's been a bit rough lately for both of us. I could use a friend. I'm sure you could, too."

Not falling for it this time.

At her silence, he continued.

"If you have time while you're in town, we could get together for coffee or something."

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said.

"Might as well. You're too sweet to get over me," he teased.

"Just because I dropped at your feet whenever you called for five years doesn't mean I'll do it now. It's been a year since I found out you were married and we split!"

"Hey, I really am free this time. Got the divorce paperwork to prove it."

She'd pined for him for five years, accepting his excuses of flying around the world for work while he just went across town to his wife. She'd left town a year ago to get away from two heartbreaks: papa's death and Aaron's unavailability, only for him to call out of the blue when she just so happened to be in town. She blamed Jonny for that one. He'd always wanted a big brother and idolized Aaron.

A part of her still longed for him, to smell him and feel his skin against hers. She'd fallen for him the day she met him seven years ago. He was her world, but she'd been nothing more than an afterthought, strung along with promises for years.

And now, he could deliver what he'd always promised: a life together.

"I'll even bring the paperwork with me," he offered. "Lunch, nothing else. If we still click, we'll go from there."

She chewed her lip. By the confidence in his voice, he expected her not only to agree, but to resume her place on his arm.

"Lunch," she agreed slowly.

"Great! How about a week from Sunday? I'll send you an email of where and when."

"Fine."

She hung up, sick of him and her weakness. She'd sworn off men - especially this one - a year ago! Of all the Jonny's childhood injuries she'd healed, she couldn't fix her own heart!

Uncurling from the couch, she started to the bedroom of her father's small Miami apartment. Jonny stayed after their father's death while she moved closer to her mom on the west coast. He hadn't changed a thing, as if expecting papa to come home at

any minute. Saddened, she considered calling him to check in when a sudden pounding at the door made her jump.

Aaron!

Her heart soared. She clawed her way into a sweatshirt as she hurried to the door. The pounding didn't stop until she wrenched it open.

"Kyle?" she asked, looking up at the freaky-looking youth in Goth clothing and multiple facial piercings.

He pushed his way into the small apartment and flung the unusual Miami rain from his clothes.

"Jonny's not here," she told him.

The pale, dark haired youth was drenched, but it was the wild look on his face that made her stop in the middle of the foyer and watch him pace with agitated energy.

"You ok?"

"I don't know," he said at last and flung himself into a chair, planting his hands against his forehead. "I feel funny, like really cold."

She was used to the teenage fits of temperament after spending the summer with her newly turned 20 year old brother. She tied her hair back and straightened the sweatshirt, somewhat relieved it hadn't been Aaron at the door after all.

"You want some cocoa?"

"B, I did something wicked wrong!" Kyle said, following her into the kitchen. "I have to tell you about Jonny."

"He's visiting our grandparents. He'll be back next weekend," she said. "You wanna call him or something?"

"No, B, he's ... "

Kyle met her gaze, flushing. She leaned against the counter. There was blood on his trenchcoat. It mixed with the rain to drip pink puddles on her ceramic floor.

"Are you hurt?"

"Jonny didn't go to your grandparents!" Kyle blurted out. "He was seeing this girl, and he told you he was going to go so you didn't think he'd spent the night with her and ... you know ... "

"Jonny's not in Indiana?"

"He's in trouble, B, and it's all my fault!"

"In trouble *how*?"

"His girlfriend is so hot but she's like a vampire," Kyle said and ran his hands through his wet hair again.

"Vampire?"

"He went to see her yesterday, and he asked me to stop by and meet all her friends tonight. I went. Fuck ... I mean, shoot, B, it was terrible. They really are vampires! They were killing people in front of me, and his girlfriend bit him, and now he's going to be a vampire. They said - "

"Kyle, are you on drugs?" she asked, baffled by his story.

"No, B, I promise. I've been clean as long as Jonny."

"*Jonny's on drugs?*"

"Not anymore. I didn't want to come here but I know about ... he told me - and I never told anyone I swear it - about your healing ability."

He'd been Jonny's best friend for ten years, and they'd started the Goth-vampire stage when they got to college. She never thought much of their black clad, piercing decorated vampire girlfriends but couldn't help being irked that Jonny had told his friend *her* biggest secret!

"What're you telling me, that Jonny's hurt?"

"I think so."

"You think he's been eaten by a vampire," she said.

"Just bit his ... actually, it was his arm, right here. She bit him there."

"Kyle, you're scaring me. But, whatever. We'll talk about the drugs later. I'm going to get him."

"I'm not going back there," he said resolutely.

She studied him, alarm swirling through her for the first time.

"You've been inseparable for ten years," she said. "What gives?"

"I don't know, Bianca," he whispered. "You shouldn't go either. We should just call the police. They can go. We'll stay here. You'll be safe."

She'd never seen him so upset in all the years she'd known him! She retreated to her bedroom to grab her purse.

"Show me where this party is," she told him. "You sure you're not hurt?"

He gripped his forearm in the same spot he'd told her Jonny had been bitten but shook his head. More blood trickled onto her tile. She frowned, uncertain what to think of his story.

She planted her hand on his forehead, coolness flowing through her. His arm was wounded, and something akin to poison ran in his blood. She couldn't quite understand what the poison was; it wasn't a normal infection, and yet it couldn't be anything else.

"You were hurt," she murmured, pitying her brother's friend. "And if you tell anyone I can do that, you'll be in big trouble."

He stared at her, trailing her out the door.

"I feel strange," Kyle murmured.

"How far is this party?" she asked, rustling around her handbag. "Oh, wait, don't shut the - "

The door to the apartment clicked shut, locking automatically.

"I forgot my keys," she groaned. "You have a car?"

He nodded and led them into the rainy night. His ancient, rusted Camaro was illegally parked in front of the building. She almost scolded him before stopping herself. The kid was upset about something. His body assured her he wasn't on drugs, and she couldn't grasp that any normal party would upset the usually jovial young man.

Something was really wrong.

She pushed fast food trash from the passenger seat and sat, giving up on the jammed seatbelt after a few useless tugs.

"B?"

She glanced at him.

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"The healing thing."

She rolled her eyes, irritated that her brother hadn't taken his promise to her seriously. Of course, if he was on drugs and running around with a vampire chic at

parties instead of going to Indiana like he was supposed to, she shouldn't be surprised he'd spilled the beans.

"I don't know. It's just something I do," she replied.

"Have you ever told anyone? Like a doctor or scientist or something?"

"It's not your normal conversation starter," she said with a small laugh. "Hi, I'm Bianca, I have magic voodoo healing powers."

He smiled, and she gazed at him, wondering when he and her brother had grown from youths into handsome young men. His features were no longer soft, his body filling out. She was so used to her brother that she didn't notice him grow up, but she saw it in Kyle.

His knuckles were white as he clenched the steering wheel, and his tall body hunched forward.

Her unease grew as they reached a seedy neighborhood outside of Little Havana. It wasn't somewhere she'd ever venture, even in daylight. There were thugs in the streets, bars on the windows of sagging houses, and cars on blocks.

He continued through the streets and slowed when he reached a dilapidated, boarded up church on a corner. Light strobed through cracks in the boards, and the sidewalks teemed with shady looking characters dressed all in black.

She heard the blaring trance music before she opened the car door and smelled the unmistakable scent of marijuana mixed with incense and body odor.

"Stay here, Kyle," she said, looking uncertainly at the intimidating scene before her. "I'll go get him. Do you know where he is exactly?"

He shook his head and squeezed the steering wheel until one of his fingers popped.

"Here's my phone. If I'm not back in twenty minutes, go someplace safe and call the police, ok?" she said, placing it on the dashboard. "And I'm leaving my purse."

"You'll lose it if you don't," he said wisely, accustomed to helping Jonny help her search the house for keys, purses, and anything else she lost.

"Yep," she agreed. "Wish me luck!"

"Wait!"

"Whatsup, kid?"

He looked at once panicked and guilty. He hesitated, then shook his head.

"Nothing."

She gave his teenage temper the benefit of the doubt and patted him on the shoulder as she left the car. Her heart quickening, she started towards the entrance of the church. Several of the men in black eyed her.

The interior of the church was packed with bodies writhing to the deafening, throbbing music. At under five and a half feet, she wasn't sure how she was supposed to find her brother among the people around her.

Most of them were men. She didn't notice until she'd jostled her way into the center of the church. *All* of them wore eerie red contact lenses. A shiver of alarm went through her, but she gritted her teeth and pressed on, hoping to find her brother fast.

The church was hot and loud, the scents that overwhelmed her outside stifling. She found a chair jammed against the wall and stepped on it to see the crowd.

She didn't see her brother's bleached hair and familiar face anywhere in the crowd. She hopped down, oblivious to the attention channeled her way by the red-eyed men

around her. Light spilled across the church as a door leading to the chambers in the rear opened.

She made her way to the hallway and breathed more easily at the less crowded space. Men and women lined the halls, most making out. Several of the rooms on either side were open, revealing couples in various stages of undress, a room with junkies shooting up and potheads lighting up, and a room filled with what looked like people sleeping.

She reached the exit at the end of the hall and stopped, puzzled. Jonny hadn't been there at all. She faced a shorter hallway leading into what may have been a kitchen at one time. Worried that something had happened to her brother in the time between Kyle leaving and her arrival, she crossed her arms and climbed the stairs to the kitchen area.

She froze, Kyle's words returning to her.

A naked, unconscious woman lay atop the island in the center with five of the men with red eyes chewing on various parts of her body, one on each leg, one on each arm, and one at her neck. She backed away, heart racing.

"What's this?"

Someone snatched her arms from behind and shoved her into the kitchen. She looked away from the scene, unwilling to believe what she saw was real.

"That's B."

"What's a B?" someone else snickered.

One of the men drinking blood from the naked woman straightened, and she gasped.

"Jonny!"

"Hi B," he said, eyes glazed and blood running down his chin to his white polo.

"Jonny, what are you doing here?" she demanded, pulling away from the man behind her.

"It's his initiation day," the man said.

She faced the speaker and took a step back. He was large and thick with glowing eyes and teeth sharpened into fangs.

"Talon, this is B," Jonny said in a breathless voice.

"A pleasure, B."

She took a step back, overwhelmed by the scene before her. She stared at her brother, who seemed unaware of where he was or what he did. Talon looked her up and down in a way that made her skin crawl before he took her arm. He sliced her forearm, watching in satisfaction as it healed before his eyes.

She wrenched away.

"The kid wasn't lying," he said. "You and me, babe. This could be fun."

She turned to run, panic flying through her at the feral look he gave her. He snatched her and half carried, half dragged her through the kitchen's opposite door. She struggled, but he wrapped his arms around her in a hold she couldn't break.

"Jonny!" she shouted.

"Do what I say, bitch, and I might not kill him!" the man named Talon snarled.

"The police are on their way! They'll be -" she cried.

"Shut the fuck up!"

He shoved open a door to the dark night and carried her to an awaiting car. She planted her legs against the frame of the car.

“Jonny!” she screamed.

Fiery pain tore through her as he stabbed her in the neck.

* * *

*Miami condo,
White God's Commander
of the Western Hemisphere*

We'll meet soon, brother.

Dustin, the White God's chief assassin and commander of the Western Hemisphere, awoke in a cold sweat with his heart racing. The clock blazed 3:30 in his otherwise dark condo. An hour of sleep was the longest he'd managed in over a week, and he felt more tired than when he lay down.

He'd dreamt many times before about his sister and his family, but she'd never talked to him directly. Her soulful blue gaze and gentle words gave him the creeps. She appeared as he remembered her the day of her murder: a ten year old with long blonde hair, striking blue eyes, and golden skin. Her words fueled the sense of dread he'd felt the past two weeks, since he'd lost contact with his brothers.

He sat as the dream faded and patted the necklace with the dangling sun-star symbol marking his demi-god status. It was a comforting combination of the symbols belonging to his adopted brothers and BFFs: the sun worn by Damian, the White God, and the star worn by Jule, the expelled immortal and Eastern Hemisphere's commander.

His condo swayed in the harsh winds of the latest storm spawned from the massive tropical storm in the Gulf. Rain splattered hard against his windows, drawing his gaze to the windows.

We'll meet soon, brother.

Dusty rose to pull on his gym clothes. He'd never thought twice of his mortality - he had none. Damian granted him immortality along with his other demi-god powers and the one authority no other immortal had: the ability to kill one of their own who got outta line or broke the divine codes. He'd been Damian's most trusted executioner for thousands of years.

He'd also been anonymously voted *least popular* by a disgruntled Guardian on their online discussion boards, and he was about 99% sure his BFF Jule was leading the pack on that one as his latest attempt to win a bet with Damian.

We'll meet soon, brother.

Yeah, creepy was the right word.

He rubbed his face and crossed to the bathroom. He'd lost another five pounds this month. He'd dropped twenty in the past six. He stepped off the scale, snagged a protein bar, and walked the twenty floors to the gym in the bottom of his condo building. He couldn't remember when he'd last had a full five hours of his own, and he knew he wasn't likely to get another break for awhile.

The moment he returned from the gym, his phone rang.

"Where, Toni?" he answered.

"Little Havana. I texted you the street address. Better hurry, boss. We gotta clean up before the cops get here."

"On my way."

A short time later, Dusty surveyed the blackened ruins of the church in the grainy light of dawn. The rain had quit for the day, though the tropical storm spinning around in the Gulf guaranteed another week or so of sporadic storms.

"There are fourteen-ish bodies towards the back of the church. The fire destroyed everything else," Toni said.

"Third flash-n-dash this week."

"TGIF, boss," the Guardians' Miami Station Chief, Antonio, said with cheerfulness out of place for the scene in front of them.

"If there's nothing here linking this to otherworldly activity, we're done here," Dusty replied. "The city can clean it up. You get the DNA from the bodies?"

"Not really, no. They're too crispy."

He glanced at his long time Miami Station Chief, the handsome Hispanic man who looked as severe as he was lighthearted.

"We've got tire tracks," one of the Guardians called, kneeling near the driveway.

"Looks like an SUV of some sort."

"I found a cell phone!" another called as he scoured the gutters around the church. "No battery."

"Take it to HQ," Toni directed.

Dusty looked around them, gaze settling on the only car on the streets that didn't belong to him and wasn't on blocks. It was a beat up Camaro parked half a block down. He sensed rather than saw that someone was in it, watching them.

"Toni, send your transporter to grab the driver in the Camaro down the street," he said, returning his gaze to the charred building in front of him. "Send me a report when you're done."

"You want me to call you if we see another one of these?"

"Not unless there's something different about it. I'm going to get a pulse check from the network to see what the fuck the vamps are doing."

"We got info on a stash-house on Broad Street. I'm waiting for Jenn to confirm, and we'll schedule to take it out tomorrow morning."

"Good. Have fun killing things."

"Ok, boss. Happy Friday."

Dusty smiled faintly as Toni walked towards the back of the church, whistling. He blinked and used his power to transport himself to his study. Someone had been using his computer; he returned the mouse and computer screen to their appropriate angles before seating himself. The house was quiet, the way he preferred it. In all of thirty minutes, some sort of drama would emerge once the inhabitants awoke.

Come see me, he texted his spy chief.

He sat back and waited, counting down from ten.

"Hey Boss," Jenn purred, emerging from the shadows.

One of the rare female Guardians, Jenn was tall and willowy with dark hair and green eyes, a studied air of seduction, and the ability to penetrate any group he sent her

to. She didn't try to hide her sex appeal and wore clothing tight enough to leave little to the imagination.

"Three," he said.

"Still under five seconds," she said with a sultry smile.

She pulled up a chair across from him and straddled it, her direct gaze settling on him.

"What can I do for you?" she purred.

He smiled to himself, enjoying the game they always played.

"Shall I make a list?" he returned.

"I'll start at the top and work my way all the way down."

"Fuck that. You'll start all the way down."

"For you, anything, any way you want it, anytime."

"I love it when you say that."

"You know what a girl likes. I don't mind trying to make your day as good as you make mine. How bout now?"

"We got real work to do," he replied.

She rested her chin on the back of the chair, waiting with a sexy pout.

"Don't," he warned. "You know you won't win."

Jenn laughed and sat back.

"Fine, boss. Work then play. Must be serious."

"Our vamp friends have had three flash-n-dash events this week so far," he started.

"Toni told me," she said. "A total of about thirty bodies."

"We haven't seen this anywhere else."

"Talon's boys are more violent than most of them. These are essentially huge orgies and feasts for initiating newbies."

"What do you have as far as sources in Talon's org?"

"Not much," Jenn admitted. "The Natural I planted there called this morning and said they were waiting to burn the place until something got there."

"Something?"

"He didn't know what it was but said it wasn't a vamp and it wasn't their dinner."

Dusty was quiet, surprised. While violent, Talon wasn't the smartest brute in the world. That he may have *planned* something for a reason other than to eat, fuck, or recruit was unusual.

"No word on what? Cell phone intercepts? Anything?"

"Not that I know of," she replied. "He's normally really loud and stupid about what he's doing. We don't usually have a problem tracking him, but this changed about two weeks ago. Either he got smart fast or someone tipped him off."

"I'll need whatever you can get me," he said. "I have a feeling something else is going on."

"So do I, boss," she said pensively. "Dusty, if I didn't think it was impossible, I'd say Talon's gonna make a play for the Black God's job."

"Talon?"

"Something is just ... I don't know. Maybe it's just a spy's paranoia. Talon's reckless, but he's cunning and he's suddenly playing very smart. We caught some of his vamps tracking Czerno's vamps more than once, and we've caught them in firefights, too."

He said nothing about the presence of one such Black God in Miami. The Black God, Czerno, had been wreaking havoc in Europe until a few days ago. He didn't know if a two-bit thug like Talon rated the attention of the King of Darkness or if Talon was stupid enough to challenge an immortal so much more powerful. Maybe the Black God was in town for a bit of vengeance while the White God was across the ocean, or maybe he'd found out about Dusty's wards, the mate and brother of the White God.

He didn't know what was going on, but he felt as uneasy as his spy chief.

His gaze went to his watch.

"You sure you don't have time?" Jenn asked too casually.

"I've got a meeting at eight."

She leaned over the chair and kissed him, a long, slow kiss.

"That's enough time for me," she whispered.

Dusty rose in response, peeling off his shirt. Her eyes went to his body hungrily, and he gripped her belt, pulling her against him. He transported them to his condo on the beach for privacy. He rarely turned down the offer of no-strings-attached sex, especially when his partner was so good at it. In all his years, he'd not found anything as soothing to his nerves as a woman's silky skin, heady scent, and warm body.

CHAPTER TWO

Her new world was tiny and white, the porcelain toilet the only chair and the tub the only place long enough for her to lay down. She huddled at one end of the tub, feeling as if she'd taken a shitload of drugs. She couldn't focus on anything farther away than her hand, and looking at her hand made her cry.

She was covered in blood. Her blood. Every hour, he came back and bit her, hurt her. She traced the channel of a newly healed scar along the inside of her forearm, where he'd split her arm almost in two in a fit of rage after she kicked him in the crotch.

She hadn't fought him since. While she could heal, she still felt pain. That level of agony was something she never wanted to go through again. What she couldn't heal was the exhaustion that came with each bout of healing. She was hungry and fatigued but too scared to sleep.

Light glowed through the hazy window overhead. It was her second morning in the tub. She wondered how many more there would be and doubted she'd last more than another day or two if he kept draining her blood.

Her head sagged against the shower wall, and she wished she could order her body not to heal her, to let her bleed out and die so she didn't suffer anymore.

The door opened, and she braced herself.

Talon entered, followed by another man. He hauled her to her feet, holding her up by one arm when she wobbled. He took her other in rough hands and nodded in approval at the healed scars.

"Impressive," the man behind him said. "I didn't think you had an ounce of sense, Talon."

Talon responded by raising her arm to his mouth. He gave a cunning smile as she tensed. She whimpered at the sensation of knives going through her arm and almost fainted.

"Taste," Talon said, handing her arm to the silver-haired man beside him.

The blurry man lifted her other arm and bit into it. She sagged. Talon let her drop. Blood trickled down both arms before her wounds healed themselves.

"Very impressive," the stranger said, kneeling beside her to look at both of her arms. "You taste like honey, love."

She shivered, sensing something truly evil in his monotonous voice and cold hands. She didn't look at him, afraid of finding the devil himself in front of her.

"Your brother's ...special as well," the man said. "He'll make a good warrior, one I can train to kill a couple pain in the asses I can't get rid of otherwise."

She looked up, fear and anger flashing through her. The man was in his prime with silver hair and dark eyes, a handsome face, and a body as muscular as Talon's.

"Stay away from my brother," she rasped.

"Ah, you do have spunk," he whispered, eyes glowing. "I'll stay away from him if you do what I say. *Exactly* what I say. You understand me?"

Her eyes watered, and she ducked her head. His tone made her want to crawl back into the tub and remain Talon's slave forever. There were worse fates than being dinner for a sadistic bastard like Talon, and she'd just met the man who was willing to show her what they were.

"Take her to the stash house on Broad," he said, rising. "I have a meeting out of town. I'll come get her when I'm back."

"Yes, master," Talon said with a smooth bow. "Pop, you promised - "

"Don't call me that, shithead! And yes, I'll make you a demi-god, not because you deserve it, but because you did something useful for the first time in your life!"

The devil left, and an angry Talon hauled her up, sinking his teeth into her arm again. He drained her life until she was near blackness before he flung his head back with a contented sigh. He jerked her forward. She careened into the door frame, a flash of pain going through her head.

He dragged her into another room. Someone else grabbed her and flung her over his shoulder. She hung, helpless and exhausted, stuck in the in-between place until the pain of her head hitting something hard jarred her into consciousness.

She was in a car with one of Talon's men, her crumpled body at an awkward angle jammed in the small area between the backseat and the driver's seat. The floor smelled of mold. She tested her body, dismayed when her limbs felt too heavy to lift.

Her thoughts went to Jonny, and she closed her eyes as tears formed. She'd do anything for him, even if the devil took her soul! And yet, she couldn't forget what she'd seen him doing - drinking another woman's blood as Talon did hers! What happened to her brother? Was this part of some phase or were these ... people ... really vampires as Kyle believed?

The idea that he'd turn out to be like Talon made her chest clench. She'd never let her kid brother end up like that sadistic bastard.

More tears came as she realized she couldn't do anything for herself let alone Jonny if they kept her in such a state. She strained against her own body again, panic floating through her at her helplessness.

Before she could ponder too long on her weakness, Talon's lackey dragged her out of the car. The thick Miami heat had never felt so good! The cool energy her body produced when she healed streamed through her, rousing her as it repaired the latest

damage. By the time they entered the building, her arms and legs were responsive again.

The lackey tossed her onto a hard couch in the rear of the house opposite a closed patio door. The backyard was fenced. She pushed herself up when Talon snatched her.

“Keep her drained and weak,” he ordered the lackey.

Pain shot through her as he bit into one arm. The lackey bit into her other arm, and she cried. Blackness crept into her vision. Talon shoved her back onto the couch.

“Put her in the garage,” Talon said.

The lackey picked her up and carted her to the garage, which served as a makeshift barracks filled with cots and sleeping men. He flung her to the ground near the far wall. She landed on a topless bottle of oil and spit the fluid out as it sprayed across her face. She squeezed her eyes closed, unable to move once again.

She felt the poison in Talon’s blood, but whatever poison ran in the devil’s body was inseparable from him. She couldn’t cure whatever it was, and she couldn’t make sense of it. There wasn’t something wrong with him; *he* was wrong!

Just like this place, filled with people who hurt her.

Just like being with Aaron.

The thought distracted her, and she both yearned to be with him and hated herself for not being able to shake the thought of him. Still, a life of betrayal with Aaron was nothing compared to a life as Talon’s slave! He really wasn’t so bad, when compared to *here*. Maybe, if she made it out of here, she’d go to lunch Sunday and do whatever felt right, like spend her life with him.

Or tell him to go to hell and never come back to Miami.

She groaned. Was he really worth her attention on what may be the last day of her life?!

The ground shook suddenly as an explosion burst in the backyard. Many of the men around her were roused by the sounds and the scent of burning flesh and wood. Gunfire pierced the garage door and slammed into men and house. More blood splattered her as someone dropped from the cot beside her to the floor.

She closed her eyes and held her breath against the smells of sulfur and blood. She couldn’t run, couldn’t move, and she tried hard to convince herself to pass out as the garage door was wrenched open.

More gunfire deafened her in the small confines of the garage, and men screamed and fell. Tears wetted her face as men in what looked like black tactical SWAT gear entered the garage.

Police!!

More gunfire and another smaller explosion went off somewhere else in the house.

Two men in black darted through the bodies and into the house while two more hung back at the garage entrance. The sounds of violence stopped. The eerie quiet that followed amplified the ringing of her ears. She struggled to move again, to draw their attention so they’d help her.

“All clear!”

She was silently thanking the heavens for rescuing her, until one of the men in black entered the garage and began shooting the downed men a second time around. Disbelief surged through her, and she clenched her eyes closed, praying they thought

her dead enough not to shoot her as they did the others. She heard the gunshots getting closer, one body at a time.

There was a silence, and she waited. She peered through her eyelashes at two armed men stopped in front of her. The one who had been shooting the others was as large as Talon and plainly Hispanic.

As handsome as he was, her eyes were compelled to the man beside him. His features were chiseled from golden granite, his blue eyes clearer than the Miami shallows. He reminded her of an ancient Greek god, his cold, hard beauty magnified by his sun-kissed skin and dark blonde hair. The air around him hummed with energy and command. His hands were clasped behind his back, his muscular chest and flat abs drawing her gaze. He was dressed in black but not in SWAT gear, as if he knew nothing in this world could hurt him.

The Hispanic man left, and the Greek prince withdrew the gun at the small of his back, whipping it towards her. Her eyes snapped closed, her last vision that of the most striking man she'd ever seen.

She waited for the end of her life. It was the longest second of her life, until she realized he wasn't going to pull the trigger. Her eyes cracked open, and she was startled to see a petite blonde woman in dark jeans standing between them.

The Greek god was cold and intense, his gaze so piercing it made her shrink back even when he wasn't looking at her. His body was as poised as a Cobra about to strike, though he'd pulled the gun up to his shoulder. He towered over the woman and glared down at her.

"No," the petite woman ordered, her arms crossed.

They waged a silent battle, and Bianca opened her eyes, praying with everything she was worth that the small woman - whoever she was - would win. For a long moment, she thought the Greek god would kill the blonde first then finish her off. As if sensing the same, the blonde bowed her head in deferment without moving.

"I saw something, *ikir*," she said in a tone far softer and more respectful than her original.

The Greek god didn't so much as blink as he stared her down. Bianca's eyes watered again. He didn't have an ounce of mercy or humanity in him!

"If I didn't love you, you'd be dead, *kiri*," he spoke at long last, his low, even voice terrifying her.

"I know," the blonde replied.

He nodded his head towards the garage door. She obeyed the command. Bianca watched her, wanting to scream at her to stay. The blonde slid sunglasses in place and strode to the awaiting Yukon idling in the driveway with a glance over her shoulder. Her beauty was cool and classic, like that of the man before her.

"Take him, clean him up," the Greek god ordered one of the men at the front of the garage. He indicated her with the gun before turning away without another look.

Relief and fear unleashed within her, and she was hauled once again to her feet.

"Sofia," he said in a tone he knew conveyed his displeasure.

He slammed the Yukon's door closed as he slid into the back seat beside her and pinned her with a look she refused to meet.

"I know," she murmured.

“Pierre, if you let her do that again, you’ll go straight to behavior modification.”

“I swear I’ll stop her even if it costs me my life,” Pierre replied.

“Dammit, Pierre!” the woman snapped.

“Sorry, ma amour, but I fear him more.”

Dusty looked at his adopted sister again. She was an *ikira*, the Guardians’ queen, and a Seer, the mate of the White God, Damian. While the White God was off fighting the vamp infestation in Europe, he’d left his mate and brother in Dusty’s protection. With their similar looks and cool reserve, he and Sofia were often mistaken for brother and sister by other Guardians, a convenient cover they exploited when she moved to Miami.

“You’ve done many foolish things, *kiri*, but stepping between me and a vamp is a first.”

“I told you. I saw something,” she insisted. “I *am* an oracle, Dusty.”

“What did you see?”

“I can’t tell you.”

His gaze settled on her again.

“Don’t look at me like that!” she growled. “I’m sorry, Dusty, but I had to do it and I can’t tell you why. You’ll understand someday! In fact, you’ll thank me!”

He sensed she wasn’t going to budge this time and relented. She’d been pissy for a couple of weeks, and he had an idea why.

“How far along is she, Pierre?” he asked.

“Dusty! Don’t you dare, Pierre!”

The brooding blonde bodyguard-Guardian driving the Yukon looked at him in the rearview mirror, torn.

“You’ve got five seconds,” Dusty said, unruffled. “Five - “

“Nine weeks,” Pierre grated.

“You’re so fired!” Sofia whispered with a sigh. “Dusty, you’re not supposed to know. No one is yet.”

“She’s saving it for when she gets in trouble again with *ikir*,” Pierre supplied. “Sort of like a get out of jail free card.”

“I am *not*!”

Dusty chuckled, glad for the distraction from his dark thoughts.

Sofia pushed up her shades to display blue eyes rimmed with silver. His humor dissipated at the sight of the black circles under her two-toned eyes. Her mind was open to him, and he watched the thoughts passing through.

The visions in her head were dark and brutal, the memories of a man enslaved by the sadistic Black God for thousands of years. As the only oracle and soul reader in existence, she was the only one who could repair the mind of her mate’s brother, the Grey God, who suffered a fate worse than death as a slave to the Black God.

While she never complained, it was clear she needed Damian to visit again soon and heal the damage his brother did to her on a daily basis.

“Sofi, you’re not going to be able to handle helping Darian and being pregnant,” he said.

“I don’t have a choice,” she replied. “Darian isn’t stable. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he said.

“No, Dusty, Darian needs me.”

He said nothing, his decision already made.

"Dealing with you is like beating my head against a brick wall!"

"Then stop beating your head," he advised. "I'm not Damian or Jule; you can't sweet talk me into anything. You're in my house. You live by my rules. You know I don't compromise."

She sighed and picked up his hand, placing it on her head. Dusty relaxed and smoothed her hair back like he might a child's.

"Boss, you can send *her* to behavior modification training," Pierre suggested.

He wasn't sure how Pierre ever made it through the Guardian basic training with his lip. While he made a good match for Sofia, Dusty had never quite met any Guardian with such a loose interpretation of discipline. For Sofia's sake, he refrained from saying what he'd like to say to the Guardian.

"Boy or girl?" he asked, genuinely happy about Damian and Sofia's first child.

"Boy," Pierre volunteered.

"Pierre!"

"The next White God," Dusty commented. "Sofi, that's awesome."

She smiled, meeting his gaze. The silver of her eyes flared and swirled as she gazed at him, an indication she was reading either his future or his mind.

"No, *kiri*," he chided. "None of that shit. You were late on purpose today so we'd happen to stop by the stash house."

"Not really."

"Don't even try to lie, *kiri*," he said with a chuckle. "I've almost killed you once today."

He'd served as Damian's executioner for thousands of years, a position he found fitting for his general dislike of the human capacity for evil. There was right and wrong, good and evil, and every human but the woman before him had fallen for some temptation of the dark side. After millennia dealing with the dark side of humanity, he didn't think there was anyone else pure left.

"I know you love me," she said. "And yes, maybe I did set today up."

"Congrats," he said. "I'll be an uncle."

"Yep."

They settled into comfortable silence, and he couldn't help feeling thrilled at the prospect of Damian's son. Damian himself would be overjoyed, and Jule - the third adopted brother in their threesome - ecstatic.

He pulled out his phone to text Damian.

Bro, come visit soon.

He hadn't heard from either Damian or Jule in two weeks. He suspected Damian sealed the European region to prevent magics moving in and out. Even so, he should've heard from one of them by now. In all their years together, they'd never been out of communication more than a few days.

He sensed something wrong but kept it from the petite woman beside him, who had enough of her own issues to deal with.

He dismissed the nagging sense of dread, concern for Sofi taking priority. He'd have to track down Darian soon, though what the unpredictable, volatile Grey God was doing was beyond his ability to guess. He'd activate the GPS later and hunt him down if he wasn't in the mansion that served as the Guardians' headquarters.

The drive home was quick as he dwelled on his thoughts. He escorted Sofi to her room, and was surprised to find the Grey God in his room. He knocked once before entering.

Darian lay on his back staring at the ceiling with brooding golden eyes, his horribly scarred body hidden from turtleneck to gloves to socks, even in the safety of his room. The only skin not covered was his face and part of his neck, both of which were as scarred as the rest of his body.

“Dusty, did you ever consider working for the Black God?”

“No,” he said without hesitation, accustomed to Darian’s odd questions.

The scarred man - who was older than everyone but Jule - was going through what Sofia called a teenager phase as he struggled to re-establish his identity after thousands of years as a brainwashed slave.

“You would have been good at it. He hates humans, too.”

“I hate evil,” Dusty replied.

“But hate *is* evil, isn’t it?”

“I don’t give a shit, Darian. I don’t second guess what I do, who I am, or who I serve.”

Darian rolled onto his side with a noisy sigh. Dusty couldn’t help but wonder how he’d got stuck with a pregnant oracle and an equally moody teenager with god-like powers and no ability to control them. It definitely wasn’t because he was the most patient of the three brothers.

“I want to go sail boating,” Darian said.

“If you’re headed towards the tropical storm in the Gulf, you can’t take any human or Guardian with you,” Dusty said, drawing a chair near the bed and seating himself in front of the Grey God.

“I don’t know how to sail!” Darian replied in irritation. “Who cares if I kill a stupid human?”

“It’s rule number one: protect humans at all cost. You know this. Rule number two applies to Guardians. I won’t let you sacrifice any of my Guardians so you can jump into the middle of a hurricane.”

“Fine,” Darian bit off the word. “Why don’t I have minions like the White and Black Gods? Damian gets Guardians, and Czerno gets vamps. It’s not fair.”

“I’m not Sofia. Don’t bitch to me,” Dusty said. “We need to talk about something.”

“Gods, what now? More fucking rules?”

“I’d like to ask a favor of you.”

Darian perked, his interest clear in his swirling gold eyes.

“Sofi’s pregnant.”

Darian sat up, joy crossing his ugly features. Dusty gazed at him, reminded of the man Darian used to be before he was destroyed by the Black God himself. He hoped one day Darian took his place beside the other gods.

Darian wrung his hands like an excited child at the news.

At the very least, he hoped Darian grew out of the fucking terrible twos.

“Boy or girl?”

“Boy.”

“That’s so awesome!”

“Yeah. Darian, but she can’t help you and be pregnant.”

Darian's gaze grew pensive.

"Dusty, I can't deal with *this* on my own," he said, gesturing to his head. "There are so many bad things in here ..."

His face grew stormy, and anger colored his features.

"I'll figure it out on my own," he said resolutely. "If that means I go crazy and break the rules, you'll just have to kill me. It's ok, Dusty, I'll accept that fate. You're the only one allowed to kill Guardians. You can kill me."

"Darian," Dusty said with patience he didn't quite feel. "Sofia needs you right now. You can help her."

"How?"

"Right now she could use some company," Dusty suggested. "She looks terrible."

Anger sparked again, and Darian stood.

"I would never hurt her, Dusty," he said. "I'll take care of her and the baby. I promise. I can deal with the mess in my head. I have to, because Damian's going to be gone for another week and a half, and then a lot of bad stuff is about to happen, but whatever. I have to help Sofi."

Dusty watched the change, irritated by the bizarre mood swings and cryptic ramblings that defined Darian's speech lately.

"You're a good man, Darian. Take care of Sofi," he ordered. "And follow the rules."

"I will. I'll make sure she rests and I'll go with her everywhere so nobody hurts her."

"Good man," he said again. "And if you need anything, come to me."

"I won't," Darian said. "I mean, I won't need anything, and if I do, I'll come to you. We don't have much time; we better go shopping for baby clothes."

He watched the confused Grey God leave, never imagining he'd deal daily with this type of drama in addition to managing the battles against the vamps in the western hemisphere. His second in command, Sasha, was in Europe, along with every body he'd been able to spare. It left him more hands-on with the western front than he'd been in hundreds of years.

Once Damian came back, he was going on his first vacation ever.

"Fuck me," he muttered and glanced at his watch.

He'd fucked Jenn only a few hours earlier and felt the need to unwind again already.

"Boss!" Toni's cheerful voice came from the foyer.

Dusty rose and trotted down the stairs.

"We interrogated the kid we found in the Camaro the other night. He's kind of a spaz. I think he's on drugs."

"Was he initiated yet?" he asked.

"No, not yet. You want us to keep him or cut him loose?"

"Cut him loose with a GPS tag. We'll see where he goes. He have any good info?" he asked.

"Good, no. Weird, yes. He seems to think Talon is the Black God."

"That idiot?"

"Apparently Talon's telling folks he's being crowned the next Black God," Toni said with a grin.

"Crowned? Don't think it's how it works. White Gods inherit their title, but Black Gods normally get hacked to pieces by their successors. I'm not old enough to know how," Dusty said, convinced Talon was psychotic in addition to sadistic.

“Me neither. Czerno will eat him alive.”

They strode into the sticky heat towards the gym between the house and the garage.

“Boss, I was gonna ask if you needed an XO while Sasha is out,” Toni ventured.

“You want the job?”

“Definitely.”

“It’s yours. Move your shit here. I need an hour in the gym, then we’ll go over the logistics issues you’re inheriting.”

“Groovy, boss.”

Toni saluted him with a smile and jogged to his car. He shook his head, relieved to have someone to fill Sasha’s spot. He’d gone a week with an hour of sleep. If Darian lost his focus and disappeared again, he suspected it’d be another week before he had a chance to sleep.

His phone rang as he entered the gym and peeled off his shirt.

“Sir, this is Speck in Ohio, Southeast Sector. We’re seeing something strange out here. Not sure what to make of it. You got someone free to take a look?”

“I’ll be right there,” Dusty said, retrieving his shirt.

He hung it up only for it to ring again.

“What, Sofi?”

“Someone’s going to ask you a question tomorrow morning. The answer is Mercy Hospital.”

“Is that all you’ll give me?” he asked.

“Yep.”

“I’m headed to Ohio. I’ll be back later.”

“Dusty, you need to get some rest,” she said, concern in her voice. “The world can wait for you to sleep for a few hours.”

“Bad guys don’t stop doing bad things just cuz I need a nap,” he said. “I’m ok, Sofi, I promise.”

“I worry about you.”

“You’re the only one.”

“You’ll have to get used to it pretty soon.”

He paused at the cryptic words then cursed.

“Fucking oracles!”

“Have a good trip.”

“You’ll get yours,” he promised. “Any minute now Darian’s going to beat down your door.”

“Remember: Mercy’s.”

He hung up and tucked the phone away, amused. He closed his eyes and summoned his power to transport, one of the most useful gifts Damian’ granted him. When he opened his eyes, he was in Speck’s backyard. Speck was waiting for him, at his feet a creature Dusty couldn’t identify. Grimly, he realized he wouldn’t be catching a nap for some time.

CHAPTER THREE

She awoke in a cocoon. The sheets were so fine and light they seemed to melt against her skin. The bed molded to her body with each movement, encouraging her to stay there even longer. Her hair was damp at the roots but her long curls as bouncy and cheerful as she felt fatigued.

She rolled onto her side, body aching from exertion. The sheets smelled of a man with an ensnaring scent, a mixture of dark musk and soap. She breathed it in again before climbing from the bed.

His room was clean to the point of anal, his color scheme black on white. Even the pictures on the wall were black and white photography in black frames. He had no family pictures, no trinkets or doodads like she had all over her apartment. There was an alarm clock on the night stand beside the black base of a lamp. It read 6:23AM.

The door to the bedroom was closed. She eyed it nervously, not wanting to venture past the safety of the bedroom. She crossed to the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror with a grimace. She wore an oversized shirt and boxer shorts, neither of which were hers.

However, on the counter was a folded pair of jeans, a set of matching underwear, and a sweater. She looked at it, flushing to think someone had taken the time to figure out her sizes.

Even the bathroom was too clean, she noticed. The towels on the towel rack appeared to have their creases ironed into them. Similar to the bedroom, there was nothing on any of the flat surfaces, even dust. Whoever lived here had nothing personal to show, no pieces of his personality for her to dissect before she faced him.

Unnerved by the idea of being somewhere she clearly didn't belong, she opened drawers until she found a pair of shears. She changed and took the shears, hiding them against her body as she approached the door.

With a deep breath, she opened the door, uncertain what horror she'd face next. The spacious apartment was decorated in an identical black and white color scheme as the bedroom. Black furniture, white carpets, black granite countertops in the kitchen, white walls and cabinets.

The view from the wall of windows made her stare. The apartment overlooked the beautiful blues and greens of the ocean. The sun lingered on the horizon, as if waiting for the closing clouds. Her gaze fell to the condo's owner, whose desk sat against the wall opposite her beside the windows. He wore headphones and spoke into a microphone, simultaneously responding to half a dozen chat windows open on this computer. He wore nothing but sweat pants, and his exposed upper back drew her attention.

Whoever he was, he was as strong as a lion. His skin was golden, his wide back muscled, lean and defined down to the slender hips and waist. She'd never seen a man as perfectly honed as he was.

She waited until she was certain he was distracted before she crept across the apartment, keeping as close to the wall farthest from him as possible. She reached the door and undid the locks with trembling hands, wondering what kind of person kept *five* locks on his door. When she'd finished, she twisted the knob and pulled.

Nothing happened. She tugged harder. She rechecked all the locks and tried one more time.

"It's not gonna open."

She jumped at his low, even voice, heart racing. She turned to face him, surprised to find the man who'd almost killed her earlier. He leaned against the wall a few feet from her, arms crossed and cold blue eyes on her. He was even more striking than she remembered. His cheekbones were high, his chiseled face matching the chiseled body. From his shoulders to his chest to his flat midsection, every part of him looked as if he'd carefully carved from stone.

"Of all the weapons under the bed, you chose that one?" he asked, looking at the scissors.

"I didn't see any others," she murmured.

"A woman always has weapons in the bedroom."

She flushed, sensing he wasn't talking about knives and guns. He studied her for a long minute. Uncomfortable, she cleared her throat.

"Are you going to ... " she drifted off and displayed her scarred forearms.

He stepped forward, taking the scissors from her in one hand and one of her wrists in the other. His fingers were long and slim, his palms round. Even his hands were muscular, and she couldn't help comparing his light touch to Talon's brutal grip. Her gaze went to his chest and thick arms. His movements were controlled, his strength restrained. She felt his body heat from the short distance between them and recognized his scent from the sheets.

"Talon?" he asked.

She nodded. He traced the long scar marking Talon's attempt to slice her arm in two from elbow to wrist. She winced and pulled away, remembering the pain too well. He didn't move away, and she looked up at last.

His direct gaze was intense as he took in her features. His gaze went lower, and she flushed again as he looked her over. It wasn't the same type of scrutiny as Talon's feral, maniacal look. His look was considering, as if he were trying to memorize her features in case he needed the information in the future.

"Sit your ass down," he said and nodded his head past him towards the living room.

"I have to go," she said quickly. "I have to find my brother. He's in trouble."

"Now."

She found herself hurrying around him to the couch at his low growl and suspected he wasn't someone who ever repeated anything. Panic stirred as she recalled what his men had done at Talon's stash house. She braced herself for him to turn into Talon and hurt her.

"You're fatigued," he said.

She followed him with her eyes as he retreated towards the kitchen. Her gaze returned to the door and lingered. She must not have twisted one of the locks, even though she'd checked them all twice. When she looked to the stranger, she found his warning look on her.

"Rule one: no running. Think of yourself in the predators' wing of the zoo. You run, they kill you. You stay put, they just might ignore you. Got it?"

The comparison made her breath catch. She knew him to be merciless, and his words only reminded her how dangerous he was. From his cold features to his controlled, efficient movement, to the low, commanding tone, there was no doubt he belonged in the predators' wing of the zoo.

“I have to find my brother,” she said in a small voice. “Did you find him in the stash house?”

“No, but I know where he is.”

Her heart leapt, and she stood, halfway to him before his sharp look reminded her he wasn't someone she wanted to approach. She retreated to the couch and sat on the couch arm.

“Is he ok?” she asked at his silence.

“We'll see.”

He returned from the kitchen with a glass of orange juice, a plate with what looked like homemade granola bars and a small bowl of sliced apples. He set it down on the coffee table and returned to the computer.

Surprised, she watched him. He said nothing as he responded to the messages on his screen. She ate quickly, looking from his perfect body to her scarred forearms. In a few days, even the scars would heal.

She wondered what was wrong with Jonny, if she'd get to him in time to heal him from whatever drugs Talon gave him. She fidgeted then rose, too antsy to sit still when her emotions were pinging around the place. She looked at the pictures on his walls, not surprised to find them bland. Images of landmark buildings, of the seven greatest wonders of the ancient world, and city scenes from around the world. Coldly impersonal, like the rest of the apartment.

“There's no life in here.”

She felt his cold gaze and didn't face him, cringing instead. He hadn't hurt her like Talon, but she had the feeling she wasn't at all welcome. Even in the kitchen, the fruits and vegetables that gave a splash of color to her own kitchen were hidden away. She opened one cabinet, not surprised to see white bone china. And no dust, even in the cabinet.

She'd go crazy in such a place!

Pushing the cabinet closed, she jumped to find the stranger so close. He'd changed into a sweater and dark jeans and gazed down at her, disapproval in his hard features.

“Don't touch my shit,” he said firmly.

He was too close again. His hand grazed her as he reached around her for a set of keys she hadn't noticed on the counter. Another warm buzz traveled through her, scattering her thoughts at his nearness and scent. She waited for him to move before realizing she held her breath.

“C'mon.”

She sprang forward, anxious to see her brother. He stopped at the door and faced her.

“Rule number one,” he reminded her.

She nodded, willing to agree to anything if it meant she could see her brother. He led her through the apartment building to the underground garage and to a sleek, black sports car with black interior.

He said nothing as they exited and drove north, towards the highway. She took in the clean car and shook her head, wondering how many hours a week he spent cleaning everything he owned to keep it all so spotless.

“Can I ask you something?” she ventured, gazing at his handsome profile.

“Depends on what it is.”

“How about your name?”

“Dusty.”

She laughed.

“You don’t think it’s ironic? You don’t have a spot of dust anywhere in your house or car and your name’s Dusty.”

He said nothing, void of emotion. She cursed herself quietly for saying stupid things.

“Name.”

“Bianca Rodriguez,” she said.

“Brother’s name.”

“Jonathan, Jonny for short.”

“Address.”

“I’m staying with Jonny here in Miami at dad’s ... Jonny’s apartment. Our dad died last year, and I moved - ”

“Age.”

“I’m 25, he just turned 20.”

“Marital status.”

“I was engaged for awhile, but that ... well, single, both of us.”

“Birthdays.”

“18 November for me and 5 March for him.”

“How’d your dad die?” he asked.

“Heart attack.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m an aspiring chef. I’ve been studying culinary arts for a few years and recently decided to branch out on my own.”

“You’re unemployed.”

“I guess,” she murmured.

She was worried and tired already, and his latest jab didn’t buoy her spirits at all. When he stopped interrogating her, she ventured,

“Do you like living in Miami?”

“Don’t give a shit.”

“You have a nice view from your apartment.”

No response.

“Am I your prisoner or are you some sort of really weird Good Samaritan that’s gonna let me go when we get to where we’re going?” she asked with a sigh. “I’m kinda not digging this whole put-me-in-the-bath-tub-and-suck-my-blood gig.”

He glanced at her.

“So, if you could tell me either way,” she continued. “I don’t think you want me imprisoned in your apartment. I’d use the wrong towel or leave a dish out, and then you’d be threatening to kill me again. It just won’t work. It’s better if you let me go.”

She waited.

“Dusty, I - ”

“You’re a prisoner.”

“For how long?” she asked, frowning.

“Not your concern.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“Right now, I’m thinking of gagging you.”

She swallowed her other questions and twisted her hands in her lap, distraught.

He almost felt bad for snapping at her, but she was driving him crazy.

Dusty glanced at her again. She was staring out the window. His gaze lingered, and he took in the beautiful doe brown eyes, deep set and large, framed by long eyelashes. Her skin was touched with caramel, her long brown hair falling in fat ringlets around her elfin features. She was built the way a woman should be: shapely, with large breasts, plump lips, tiny waist, and rounded hips and ass. She was toned and curvy, her skin as soft as her voice.

He hadn't thought twice about Toni's message that he'd delivered the package from the stash house to his condo until he walked in and discovered the vamp he expected was a woman. She didn't have Jenn's drop dead, gorgeous beauty or Sofi's classic, cool beauty. Bianca was the epitome of adorable, her dark eyes sparkling and warm, and her sweet glow innocent and fresh. She didn't realize her natural affect on men, what with the sultry sway of her hips and ass and her large, dark eyes.

He hadn't paid much attention to any woman in many, many years, but couldn't help thinking her one of the most attractive he'd ever met. If shit was about to hit the fan like he suspected, he'd rather not spend his last days alone. Then again, if his shithead BFFs in Europe answered their phones, he *wouldn't*.

Sofi wanted her watched for some reason. After the trip to the hospital, he'd drop her off for the oracle to deal with and go back to work, where maybe he could slake his sense of doom by killing some vamps.

"Oh, my god!" she exclaimed.

He glanced out the window and realized he'd pulled in the entrance for the emergency room and morgue. Bianca gazed at him, pale and stricken. Her hands trembled.

"He's not dead," he assured her.

Her gaze remained on him, disbelieving. He resisted the urge to reach out to her as he did Sofi when the oracle cried after a particularly brutal session with Darian's bad memories. He wondered if Bianca's thick curls were as soft as Sofi or Jenn's hair.

His phone rang, and he snatched it from the dashboard.

"Dusty, I'm - "

He knew at once by Darian's tone that whatever the Grey God wanted to do, it would get him in trouble.

"No."

"But I met this girl and she - "

"*Fuck* no."

"Dusty - "

"My house, my rules, no compromise. Get your ass to the range and learn to shoot. I'm activating your GPS. If you're not there in half an hour, I'm coming to find you."

Darian gave another of his annoyed sighs and hung up.

Bianca was staring at him. He ignored her and parked, leading her into the hospital. He hung back as she approached the first nurse's station they came to, aware of the affect he had on humans. Those around him moved away, and those on a path towards his side of the hall changed their minds and turned around. He looked at his watch, aware he had a morning packed with activities to follow-up on.

His phone rang again, and he answered, trailing Bianca to an elevator.

“Hey, boss,” Toni said. “I took a look at the logistics info you showed me. Hector in Missouri is gonna help me straighten it out. We should have it done by noon. Also, *ikira* said you needed help managing your schedule, so I’m forwarding you your schedule for today. I’ll take a couple of the meetings, and I tasked Jenn to start forwarding intel reports to me as well. Are you groovy with all that?”

“Yep,” he said, pleased. “Do what you need to. Sasha’s files are on the shared drive. You can dig through those as well. He was more anal than me, so I know everything is in order.”

“Hey boss?”

“Yeah?”

“It gets kinda crazy around here, doesn’t it?”

“Definitely. If the inmates try to run the asylum, give me a call.”

“Groovy.”

“What exactly do you do for a living?” Bianca asked, staring at him.

He tucked the phone away without answering her. He met her gaze, watching the emotions that crossed her face. Red crept up her features, and she looked away. She still looked fatigued, with dark circles under her eyes and skin pale beneath the caramel.

He sensed the presence of the vamp before they exited the elevator. The sense grew stronger as she led them down the hall past a waiting room and nurse’s station towards the quiet hallway lined by patients’ rooms, each housing 4-5. She slowed to look at the room numbers.

The hairs on the back of his neck rose as she stopped in front of one and pushed the door open.

“Jonny?” she called, entering the well-lit room.

“Hey, B,” he said in a groggy voice.

Dusty followed her, a familiar tension filling him as he looked at the lone person in the room.

Her brother was a vamp.

Jonny sensed him as well and looked up, confusion and fear crossing his face. Bianca hugged him, and Dusty resisted the urge to pull her away and snap the vamp’s neck. Instead, he sat down across from him, penetrating gaze on the newly turned vamp. His blood quickened with bloodlust at the thought of ending the life of another miserable vamp.

His phone vibrated, and he withdrew it.

Just wait.

Fucking oracles, he typed back before putting it away.

Bianca looked at him, and he ignored the sense she wanted to be alone with her brother.

“I’m so sorry,” Jonny said, horror crossing his face. His gaze went from Dusty to his sister. “I never meant to drag you into this, B.”

“We’ll talk about the drugs or whatever later,” she said. “Are you ok?”

“Not really.”

They both looked at him. He didn’t move. She sighed and reached out to her brother, resting her hands on his cheeks.

“No, B,” Jonny said, pushing her away. “I screwed up. I’ll make it right.”

“Stop it,” she ordered in her soft voice. “You’re acting like a kid.”

He relented and closed his eyes.

Dusty felt the slow change in the air around him and tensed. It was a subtle shift, an undercurrent of cool energy that brushed by him, like when Sofi used her voodoo fortune telling powers around him. Until that moment, he hadn’t really cared why Sofi saved the life of the woman before him. Talon’s work on her arms pissed him off, but he didn’t consider that the wounds were recent.

Healer.

It was Sofi’s whisper in his mind, a new trick she’d picked up from Darian. Dusty straightened. The spidey senses that warned him when a vamp was around calmed until he no longer sensed Jonny.

Bianca drew away from her brother, eyes glazed. Jonny opened his eyes, and the red ring around his irises was gone.

She’d just turned a vamp back into a human. He’d never heard of such a thing!

“Excuse me. Are you next of kin?” a doctor asked, knocking on the door.

“I am,” Bianca said, rising. She wobbled and balanced herself against the wall.

They stepped into the hallway, and Dusty’s gaze returned to Jonny. Jonny clutched his sheets, his gaze down.

“You know you fucked up,” Dusty said.

Jonny nodded.

“Next time, you’ll answer to me.”

The young man’s face paled even more, until he was as white as his bleached hair. He’d never be normal, not with what he’d done. Dusty knew the memory of killing in order to be initiated wasn’t something Bianca could take away from him. He didn’t think it was enough of a punishment for taking the life of an innocent human, but he was constrained again by the primary mission of the Guardians to protect humanity against evil, deserving or not. Jonny was once again a human, albeit one that deserved a beating for dragging a sister as sweet and innocent as Bianca into Talon’s grip.

He dialed Jenn.

“Hey.”

“I need Travis at Mercy Hospital, room 515. You may want to talk to the occupant as well,” he said.

“I’m on it.”

He rose without another look at Jonny and intercepted Bianca on her way from the nurse’s station back.

“We’re leaving,” he directed.

“Can I say good-bye?” she asked.

He stepped aside, waiting impatiently. She looked up at him as she returned, as enthusiastic as a man walking to his own hanging. He nodded for her to walk ahead of him.

The elevator door opened to reveal Travis’s massive form, one of Jenn’s spies on the local police force. Clad in the dark blue uniform of the police, Travis gave a nod of deferment as he passed him. Dusty ignored Bianca’s searching look and punched the button for the ground floor.

He sensed the incoming vamps before the elevator door opened. They were somewhere in the hospital.

“You know where the car is?” he asked her, holding out the keys.

“More or less.”

“Wait for me there.”

She gave him another odd look but accepted the keys. He fully expected her to ditch him and run, but the car was tagged and could be tracked. There weren't many places she could go where he couldn't find her, especially if Sofi kept interfering.

He watched her until she exited then remained in place long enough that he knew the vamps could pinpoint where he was. He exited through a different route, one that took him across a courtyard large enough for the vamps to see him as he crossed it, and between two buildings.

There were more than he expected, and he counted six. Talon's goons were coming for the kid.

“Dusty!”

He turned, irritated to see Bianca held by the neck by one of Talon's vamps.

“I told you to go to the car,” he said, leveling a glare on her.

Her cheek was red as if she'd been struck, and there were tears on her face already. Her large eyes were fearful once again.

The others found him at the same time, and his blood ignited. He drew a deep breath, refreshed by the idea of slaughtering six bad guys at one time. The vamp holding her grinned, his eyes glowing. He placed the tip of a gun to Bianca's head.

“Tell us where the kid is or - “

Dusty didn't let him finish. The vamp's head exploded with the first shot of his hand cannon, the bullet missing Bianca by a couple inches. He snatched her and shoved her down, under the protection of a dumpster. The two vamps behind the first went down with one shot each, and he grunted as the others racing down the opposite side of the alley managed to plant two rounds in him before he blasted all of them to hell.

He glanced down at the bullet holes and splashes of blood in his chest, agitated at having to change clothes so early in the day. His body rejected the bullets, and they popped out of his chest.

He'd never gone a day without silently thanking Damian for the gift of self-healing.

Pissed that his morning hadn't gone as planned, he strode forward and put another bullet in the heads of each of the vamps to ensure they weren't returned to life by their brethren. He tucked the gun away at the small of his back and looked at Bianca.

Her face was white, her eyes glassy. He didn't think twice about offing anyone who posed a threat him, and he didn't remember what it felt like to be a human who witnessed what looked like a mass murder. Most Naturals got over it soon enough.

“We don't have much time,” he said, pulling her up.

Her whole body trembled. He fished his keys out of her pocket and hurried her towards the parking lot.

She didn't move the entire trip back to the condo, as if afraid he'd blow her head off next. Sofi would chew him out if he gave Bianca to her like she was, and he himself couldn't help but feel somewhat concerned that she'd gone unresponsive. Her beautiful eyes no longer sparkled, and he was surprised to find he *felt* the absence of her warmth and liveliness.

She showed no sign of life until he locked the door behind them. Only then did she move forward woodenly to the bedroom and close the door.

He peeled off his ruined sweater and tossed it in the trash. He reloaded his weapon first, then entered his bedroom for a new shirt.

The shower was on and the bathroom door closed. He paused, sensing her distress. He opened the door enough to see in and blew out a breath.

Bianca sat, fully clothed, at one end of the shower, drenched and shaking.

Damn humans.

So maybe she wouldn't get over what she'd seen as fast as she should.

He pushed the door open and opened the shower door. The water was cold, and she shook, her arms hugging her knees to her chest. He lifted her and set her on her feet in the middle of the bathroom, turning off the shower. She didn't move, didn't speak. Her skin was cold; she was in shock.

Suspecting he'd just driven Sofi's healer completely catatonic, he peeled her soaked sweater and jeans off to display matching pink underwear. Goosebumps rose all over her body, and he dried her as quickly as he could before draping a bathrobe around her.

Wondering what twisted sister of fate thought him capable of mothering one let alone three people, he lifted her and laid her on the bed. She curled on her side, shaking. The loosely tied bathrobe fell away from one smooth leg to her hip at her movement, and he paused.

Even traumatized, she was one of the sexiest women he'd ever seen. The sight of her shapely form in his bed made his blood burn for a different reason.

He should walk away, leave her to figure things out, and finish what he needed to this morning. But he stopped, a twinge of something akin to regret filtering through the hard layers protecting his emotions. He really didn't want her to lose the spark of life he'd found as appealing as her body. After all, that spark was why he fought so hard, so humans didn't turn into someone like him.

He looked at his watch again, then settled in bed on his side behind her. He smoothed her hair from her face and rested his hand against the soft skin of her exposed thigh, admiring her body. There were tears on her face, and her breathing was shallow and ragged.

"You killed them," she whispered.

"That's what I do. I kill bad guys."

Her breath caught at his admittance.

"You won't kill Jonny?"

"He's safe for now."

"Will you kill me?"

"Only if you turn into a bad guy."

She squeezed her eyes closed.

"Mine is a very brutal world," he said. "My job is to protect people like you from monsters like those in the alley."

"You can't just *kill* people!"

"They're not people. Talon's men turn them into killers who take the lives of the innocent. Your brother had to take at least one life to become one of them."

"Jonny would never do that!"

"It's the only way for him to become a vamp."

"But he's not one of them!"

He said nothing, knowing she was right. Whatever Natural talent she had, she'd somehow turned her brother from a vamp back into a human. He'd never heard of anything like it in all his years.

She rolled onto her back, unaware of how exposed she was. The bathrobe fell away to the knot, revealing her almost to her bra. He looked her over, enjoying the view, and rested his hand on her warm stomach.

"He's not!" she insisted.

"Not anymore," he agreed. "You brought him back."

"Then you shouldn't kill *any* of them, if they can be saved!"

"There's no such thing as asylum for vamps," he said, amused. "And your brother may not thank you when he realizes he must live with the reality that he killed an innocent for the rest of his life."

"He wouldn't ... "

She stopped, pensive. He met her gaze and saw her look.

"You walked in on him," he assessed.

Her eyes watered again.

"Tell me about your healing ability."

She shook her head.

"I don't ask twice."

"It doesn't matter. You're just going to kill me," she said in a tiny voice.

"You think I wouldn't have killed you by now if I wanted to?" he challenged.

"I think you'll do whatever you want."

"I'm not going to hurt you, Bianca."

She searched his face, troubled.

"I belong to an organization called the Guardians. We're commanded by the White God, who is charged with protecting humanity against the Black God, commonly referred to as the devil. Your ability to heal makes you what we'd call a Natural, a human with extraordinary capabilities. We find Naturals and bring them into our organization before the Black God makes you one of his. We offer safety in exchange for the use of your abilities to support our mission."

"But you kill. How are you good?"

"I only kill bad guys."

He held her gaze, gauging her reaction. She didn't have a clue what to think. Her eyes traveled his face, and he saw her pupils dilate as the nearness and heat between them fed into the sexual tension. His gaze lingered on her lips, but he didn't move. She was too traumatized and he too busy to deal with another source of drama.

No, he preferred his life much simpler than it already was.

She wiped her face and returned to her side. His hand remained on her hip until she shivered again. He pulled the robe over her exposed body, feeling the urge to run to the gym or call Jenn for a quick fuck to relieve the sexual spring within him.

He didn't have time for either.

"As of today, you're a ward of the Guardians," he pronounced the words that would forever alter her life. "You belong to me."

He rose and pulled on a sweater.

"The door will be locked while I'm out."

She said nothing, and he left.

Part of her accepted his explanations after what she'd experienced the past few days. Another part of her couldn't fathom how a man colder than a sociopath could be working for the side of good. Nevermind she felt awed by how sexy he was lying in bed beside her, his muscular chest inches from her and his large hand resting possessively on her stomach. He could have told her he was the devil and that he now owned her soul, and she would have stayed there, wondering if he'd kiss her.

She slept until the edge of her fatigue was gone before borrowing his neatly folded clothing and making herself a huge pancake and egg midday breakfast. She'd tried the door many times and finally decided that if it didn't open, it was because he didn't want it to.

Jonny was safe, even if she hadn't been able to wipe away all traces of the poison in his blood. She wasn't sure why she trusted the stranger, but everything he said was said with conviction. She, on the other hand, was living a Stephen King novel in the clutches of a mass murderer. She watched TV for awhile, waiting for details of the Mercy Hospital massacre to air. Nothing did.

"Dusty said I have to leave the cat with you," an agitated voice jarred her.

She twisted to stare at a large, wiry man with a whip-like body and a face that would scare Freddy Kreuger standing in the middle of the apartment, her cat in one arm and the litter box in the other.

"My god, how did you get in here?" she all but shouted, hopping to her feet.

He looked pissed as it was, his unusual golden eyes swirling in a way not even remotely human.

"I like your cat," he said. "Dusty won't let us have pets. It's, like, rule 36 or some shit."

She gaped at him as he set the cat and the box down. Sunny darted for the darkened bedroom.

"I'm grounded, but I'll come back later," he said.

He disappeared right before her eyes. Bianca sank onto the couch, staring in disbelief. The litter box remained, and she knew if she looked under the bed, Sunny would be there.

It wasn't a dream. This world was real. She felt the sudden urge to join Sunny under the bed.

"Sofi said to give these to you. She's grounded too, but I can just pop in and out. If she leaves, then Pierre tells Dusty, and we *all* get yelled at. It's totally not fair."

The man appeared this time near the windows and had in his arms a stack of clothing. He set them down on the chair near the desk and looked around.

"What's your cat's name?" he asked. "It took me forever to get it out of the closet in your apartment."

"Sunny," she managed.

"She matches Dusty's condo."

She nodded, trying hard to recover from the latest surprise. He was right. Sunny was black and white, just like the rest of Dusty's world.

"I'm Darian," he said. "I'm not allowed to shake hands with humans. Bad things happen."

She gaped.

“Sofi told me your name is Bianca. She said to tell you not to worry, you’ll adjust, okay?”

“How can you just up and disappear?”

“Dusty can do it, too. It’s so much cooler than, like, *walking* somewhere.”

While he looked to be in his early thirties, he spoke like Jonny and Kyle. If she closed her eyes, she would have guessed him to be no older than her brother.

“Who’s Sofi?” she asked.

“She’s my sister-in-law. She’s pregnant!”

He did a small dance, eyes glowing. Bianca stared at him.

“I gotta go. Bye, Bianca.”

He disappeared again. She waited for a long moment in case he came back. When he didn’t, she rubbed her face, wondering what exactly she’d been dragged into and if her heart would explode if he reappeared. She retrieved the clothing, judging that Sofi had been the one to pick the original clothes out. She’d gotten the sizes right and even remembered matching socks and lounging clothes.

Bianca put on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Darian’s popping in and out stressed her out, and she turned up the TV, trying to lose herself in a movie as she calmed. Sunny found her courage and emerged from the bedroom a short time later, meowing as she stood on her thigh, staring at her.

“Don’t ask me,” Bianca said. “I have no idea what’s going on.”

The sunset drew her gaze to the wall of light, and she watched the sky darken over the beautiful Miami waters. She shooed Sunny away from her half-eaten pancakes.

A knock at the door surprised her. She crossed to it, doubting the locks would cooperate with her this time, either. To her surprise, she opened the door with no problem.

A tall woman beautiful enough to be a model stood in the hall in tight black leather pants and a tight pink t-shirt that drew attention to her large breasts.

“Hi Bianca, I’m Jenn,” she said with a quick smile. “May I come in?”

Bianca stepped aside. Everything about Jenn was sexy, from her tight clothing to her sensual walk to her smoky make-up and low, gravelly voice. Bianca closed the door behind her then tried to open it again.

It wouldn’t budge.

“Dammit!”

“The wards won’t let you out,” Jenn told her. “Dusty’s smart like that.”

“Are you another one of the ... Guardian people?” she asked.

Jenn picked up Sunny and sat on the couch, making herself at home.

“Yes. Sweet cat,” Jenn replied. “You doing ok?”

Bianca hesitated.

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

“C’mon, sit down. We’ll chat.”

Bianca liked her, though she felt there was more to Jenn than she could pinpoint. She sat down on the couch and folded her legs beneath her.

“I talked to your brother earlier,” Jenn started, leaning back. “He’s a bright kid. Fell in with the wrong crowd.”

“Yeah,” Bianca said thoughtfully. “It’s been hard for him this past year. He’s had problems with college since our dad died last year.”

“Dusty scared him straight for now. We think he might have some Natural ability. Most vamps do and are drawn in by the bad guys.”

“Wow,” she breathed. “I was hoping you were going to tell me this Guardian-bad guys thing was something I’d dreamed up.”

“Sorry, babe, but it’s real.”

She sighed.

“You know why Dusty pulled you in?”

She nodded.

“We all have super powers. Tell me about yours,” Jenn said with a smile.

“I can heal,” she said after a pause. “Myself and others.”

“You’ve had this your whole life?”

“It comes in handy when you have a younger brother.”

“Dusty said you healed Jonny yesterday.”

Bianca looked down, recalling the mass murder with confusion. She nodded.

“It’s ok, Bianca. We all get overwhelmed when we’re first brought in,” Jenn said, sympathy in her dark eyes. “I love Dusty, but he’s about as nurturing and subtle as a jackhammer. He’ll never, ever let you down, but he’s not the warm-fuzzy type who will hug you when you’re down, either.”

“He sent you to talk to me?”

“Yep.”

“He killed, like, six or seven guys right in front of me,” she said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It’s what we do,” Jenn said. “Those guys would have killed you if he didn’t.”

She flinched, looking at her arms again.

“I’d be really hard to kill,” she said with a ragged laugh. “Talon tried.”

“How long did he have you?”

“Two days. He came in every hour. I pissed him off one of the first hours, which is why this happened,” she pointed to the long scar.

“Talon is a pretty sick bastard,” Jenn observed. “We’ve lost a couple of Naturals to him.”

“I think it would be ok if Dusty killed him,” she said. “I’m just not so sure about the others. They *look* human, Jenn. Oh, and the devil. Dusty can definitely kill the devil.”

“Who?”

“Talon brought in some man to see me. He was just ...” she shuddered and crossed her arms. “You ever meet someone and you knew there was something just wrong about them?”

Jenn smiled faintly with a nod.

“This guy was the devil. He was coming back for me before you all blew up the stash house.”

“What did he look like?”

“White hair, really big like Talon, these eyes that were darker than night, and when he talked, you could tell he didn’t have a soul.”

“I know him.”

Jenn’s voice was hushed, her gaze growing penetrating.

“But I don’t know what he wanted with you.”

“He didn’t say. Just said he was coming back for me after he went away for a couple days,” Bianca said with a shrug.

The air around Jenn had stilled, and she searched her gaze.

“What’s wrong, Jenn?”

“You were right on about meeting the devil himself,” Jenn answered.

Bianca shuddered again at the memory.

“Don’t worry,” Jenn said, her smile reappearing. “You’re safe now. Just don’t open the door to anyone.”

“Where’s Jonny?” she asked.

“He’s at HQ, not too far from here. You’ll get to see him soon.”

“And he’s ok? Dusty’s not going to kill him?”

“No,” Jenn said.

“I like you, Jenn,” she murmured. “In the future, you should do the recruiting of Naturals, not Dusty.”

Jenn laughed.

“But you don’t have to tell him I said that,” she said quickly. “I don’t want to make him angrier at me. I think he blames me because he ruined a sweater when he got shot yesterday. He can heal, too, did you know?”

“Yeah, the White God granted him many gifts,” Jenn said, smiling widely. “I like you, too, Bianca. You’ll be good for him.”

She smiled, puzzled. Jenn winked and rose.

“Keep the door locked at all times, ok? Don’t talk to strangers, and if you see someone with red eyes, run like hell back to Dusty. I’ll check with him to see if I can leave you my number. You’ll get lonely here alone.”

“Thanks, Jenn,” Bianca said.

Jenn smiled, waved and disappeared. Bianca shook her head, her hands trembling again at the otherworldly display. Her conversation with Jenn made the world around her more concrete. Her parting words were baffling, but like many things she’d experienced the past few days, she knew she’d probably never figure them out.

Tired but more at peace with the strange world, she stretched out on the couch to watch TV.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Boss, what the fuck is this?”

Dusty looked up from the computer screen as Toni walked in, staggering under the weight of a massive box.

“Send it to the lab. Don’t open it,” he instructed him. “It’s my souvenir from Ohio.”

“Is it alive?”

“Not anymore.”

Toni grunted as he backed out of the study. For the first time in ages, Dusty was falling asleep at his computer. It was midnight, and he’d just finished reading Jenn’s latest report. This one was on her interview with Bianca. And the fact the Black God wanted her.

He rubbed his face. They'd suspected Talon was one of Czerno's many bastard children, and the fact the sadistic bastard had called his daddy to tell him about Bianca confirmed it.

"Iggy's running it to the lab," Toni said as he returned. "You look beat."

"I feel beat," Dusty admitted. "Read this. Start pinging our sources in the underworld. I need some sleep."

"Groovy!"

He closed his eyes, the soft sound of the TV greeting him before he opened them. He looked around, at once irritated. Bianca was asleep on the couch, the cat curled on her back. A plate of half-finished food sat on the coffee table, and the kitchen was a disaster. Dainty cat prints trekked through the flour she'd spilled on the counter. He followed the trail to the edge of the carpet then took in the dirty dishes in the sink.

"Bianca!" he barked.

She groaned and rolled onto her side.

"Bianca!"

The woman pushed herself up.

"Clean up this shit," he ordered. "Rule number two: if you make a mess, clean it up."

"Ok," she said in a sleepy voice.

He looked at her again, taking in her warm features and shapely body. Her hair was free, the long, loose curls cascading down her shoulders and back. His gaze lingered before he strode towards his bedroom, determined to get a few hours of sleep.

"Dusty," she called, following him.

"What."

"Thank you for rescuing me yesterday," she said. "I don't know what to think about everyone you killed, but I do appreciate you protecting me."

"It's my job."

At her silence, he faced her. She chewed her lower lip, warm eyes troubled.

"I don't really have a choice about anything going on, do I? I have to be a member of your group, and I have to stay here so the bad guys don't get me."

"For the most part, the major decisions were made for you," he replied. "You do have the choice of sharing my bed or sleeping on the couch."

His words took her a minute to register. She flushed and looked him over, then took a step back in to the living room. Dusty tossed his phone on the nightstand and set the alarm clock.

"Do you have any extra blankets?" she called from the living room.

"Nope."

He was being more of a dick than usual, he knew, but he was too tired tonight to care. He threw himself down in bed and closed his eyes.

His instincts reacted to the threat before he was fully awake. He wrenched the attacker across his body and pinned him beneath his own body weight. Only when he heard the soft, female, wow did he realize who it was.

He blinked, registering the blaring alarm. He released one of her wrists and leaned over, slapping it, before returning to the warm body beneath him.

"It's been going off for five minutes."

He looked down at Bianca, whose body was pressed beneath his. She smelled of her own musk, strands of hair escaping her braid to tickle his face. Her large eyes were

pinned to his, her pupils dilated and breathing quick. He had her wrists pinned above her head. She wore a camisole and shorts, her large breasts straining at the thin fabric between them.

Desire rose hot and fast in him, more so when he felt the cool tickle of her power, the combination of cool energy and warm skin making his blood race. He felt the rise and fall of each breath and was inches from the slightly parted full lips just begging for a kiss.

She gazed up at him, soft eyes taking him in.

"I didn't mean to scare you," she whispered.

"I can't complain about waking up on top of a woman," he replied.

He admired her flush, and she looked away. She tugged at her hands, but he held her tight, enjoying the feel of her beneath him. He could imagine a great many things to do to her perfect body. She met his gaze again, her breath catching.

"You get one freebie," he warned her. "Next time, it'll cost you to leave my bed."

In that moment, he had a feeling she'd pay up without resistance.

Of course, a woman like her wasn't the type he could fuck and walk away from like Jenn. Bianca was warm and sweet, the kind of woman who deserved better than he'd ever have to offer.

With some regret, he rolled off her and padded to the bathroom, feeling her eyes on him. He couldn't shake the fire in his blood or the sense of how soft her supple skin, how warm her body felt beneath him.

His freezing shower did little to calm his blood, and he was pissy before he saw the number of voice mails and texts awaiting him. He strode from the bedroom, tucking his gun at the small of his back. The condo smelled of breakfast, and he looked around, satisfied to find it clean again.

"Dusty, I made breakfast," she called as he passed the kitchen.

"I'm late."

"I made it to go," she said cheerfully.

He altered his path for the kitchen. She handed him a baggie with an egg, sausage, and cheese sandwich. Her eyes sparkled again, her face glowing. She didn't meet his gaze and spun away when he took the sandwich. He retrieved orange juice from the fridge.

"Do I have to stay here all day?" she asked.

"Yep."

She didn't complain, but he felt her disappointment. She was too lively to be trapped in the condo on her own.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I'm ok. Still feel a little tired."

He remembered his cruelty from the night and glanced at the couch. For the second time in as many days, he almost felt bad. She'd been through hell at Talon's hands.

"I shouldn't have been a dick," he said. "The bed's big enough for both of us."

"I don't do one night stands, Dusty," she said, face red again.

"Bianca, I won't touch you," he replied then added "unless you want me to."

"I can't tell if you want to kill me or sleep with me," she said with a laugh.

"I do want to fuck you," he replied. "Still borderline on the killing."

He closed his eyes to transport himself out of the condo, aware he'd shocked the hell out of her once again. When he opened them, he was in his study. Toni was asleep at the computer. He nudged his XO awake.

"Got something, boss," Toni said instantly.

"Good, what?"

"Intercepts picked up a call Talon made to one of his guys who we know plans his recruitment fairs. He's planning something big for the weekend, and it sounds like his pop will be in town for it."

"Fuck."

"Yeah."

"How big and where?"

"They're putting out an announcement to every vamp east of the Mississippi River east. Talon's renting out a country club between here and Pembroke Pines."

"What's the event?"

"Allegedly, Talon's been given demi-god status. Might be a promotion party. Might be something else. We can't figure it out. But there will be a few thousand bad guys within a stone's throw of us ... " Talon stated.

"Pull in everything we can from the east coast sectors."

"We're down to skeleton crews already," Toni said, facing him. "Everyone's in Europe."

"Make a call to Jasmine in Latin America and see what we can get from them. Have Jenn twist a few arms for details and to validate the intercepts. And ready an emergency evac plan, just in case. Talon's a violent fuck, and the Czerno-Talon combo will be worse than the incoming hurricane."

"Where should we evac to?"

"I don't care. Pick one of the spots Sasha identified."

"Awesome."

"I'll be back in a few."

He strode out and down the hall, stopping to pound on Sofi's door. She opened it and smiles.

"Sofi, what can you tell me about this weekend?" he asked.

"I can't see much yet on my own," she admitted. "My crystal ball doesn't work as well as it should. But, what I've seen thus far is that it could be really bad."

"Define bad."

"Talon's a demi-god, and he thinks he can take on Czerno. I don't know if he's going to try Saturday or if he's just flexing his muscles."

"Fuck."

"Can you bring in someone for me to check their future?"

Sofi's skill was relied mostly on reading the future of a specific soul by touching them, and he'd not let her within miles of a vamp since taking over her guardianship. She was too young of an oracle to have mastered her ability yet.

His thoughts turned to Jonny, who'd been taken to the Guardian's barracks.

"Maybe," he said. "What else?"

"That's all I can say."

It was enough to make him realize Damian needed to know. He didn't know why Talon would choose Miami to make a stand, unless he wanted to take out as much of

the Guardians' infrastructure as possible if he found some way to beat Czerno. Amassing thousands of vamps in the same place wasn't a good sign. Even the Black God didn't normally act so brashly.

Dusty had maybe, *maybe* a thousand Guardians assigned to North America remaining after he sent all he could spare to the European front.

"I'm prepping an evac plan for you," he said, rising. "Pack a bag, just in case."

She frowned.

"We'll sit down tomorrow," he promised, concerned. "We haven't had a chance to talk in awhile."

"I'd really like that, Dusty," she replied. "Darian's probably going to ask you if he can go visit the cat."

"He can go this morning," he said.

"I'll let him know. Am I still grounded?" she asked, pinning him with a cold glare and crossing her arms.

"You're on parole. The next time you leave the compound without telling me, you'll be grounded until Damian returns."

"I hope it's soon," she said, a look of longing crossing her face.

"Don't worry, Sofi," he said. "And if this Miami thing gets bad, he might have to come back soon anyway. I have to go."

She gave him a hug. As a stranger to human affection, he'd never quite gotten used to her hugs. He squeezed her back and left.

"Boss, Jasmine wants to know how much more you're going to fuck her over this year. She means that respectfully," Toni called from the foyer. "She said she'd tell you that in person if you hadn't already taken her transporter."

Dusty chuckled.

"I'll go see her later today," he said.

He whipped out his phone and trotted down the stairs, typing a response to one of the many texts he'd received. He froze at the bottom of the stairs, the hair at the back of his neck standing up. He followed his instincts to the kitchen and cursed.

A slight man with white hair, velvety green eyes, and a fatherly smile stood in the middle of the kitchen.

"I tried to call you, but you didn't answer," the Watcher said.

As a member of the oldest beings in the universe, the Watchers saw all. According to the divine codes, they were forbidden from interfering in human affairs, unless they fucking felt like it, which they'd decided to do openly over a year ago. He didn't know how they chose when and when not to interfere, but when they did, it normally resulted in some sort of universal catastrophe, like the Schism that split the divine world from the physical one and nearly wiped out humanity and divinity alike.

A Watcher appearing in his kitchen was the worst sign of impending doom yet.

"What the fuck do you want?" he demanded.

"You found the healer?"

"You know I did."

"We destroyed all the records predating the Schism, but I thought you might want to know something about her," the Watcher offered.

"Do tell."

"What do you want to know?"

“What do you want to tell me?”

The Watcher didn't speak.

“Why is she special?” Dusty asked at last.

“She's a healer.”

“And?”

“She's an exceptionally powerful healer, the kind that haven't been seen since before the Schism,” the Watcher explained. “She can help finish what Sofi started with the Grey God, and she's of value to Czerno.”

“Why would Czerno need a healer?”

“He doesn't yet, but he will, when he realizes the Others he entrusted are working against him. He's weakening, Dusty. He's flaunted the divine codes for too long.”

“There must be a Black God,” Dusty mulled, only vaguely aware of the Others, the Watchers that favored humanity's demise.

“Precisely.”

“Then what we've heard is true: Talon wants his job. But Talon can't kill him.”

The Watcher said nothing, and Dusty sensed he was nearly at his limit in cooperating.

“Why can't I contact Damian or Jule?” he asked warily.

“I had to seal the hemispheres. The White God is safe and well, but there are incidents that must unfold here before they can return.”

Dusty glared at him, hating the way the Watcher community doled out knowledge at their convenience and not his.

“You got anything else?” he snapped.

“Jonny's special as well. You need to keep him safe. Oh, and the tropical storm will become a hurricane late Saturday night.”

“I really don't give a shit about the weather.”

“I texted you my email address in case you want to email,” the Watcher said and held up his phone.

“Why the fuck would I want to email you?”

“I forgot. You don't like electronics. I understand. Darian can email me if he wants.”

Dusty spun on his heel. He'd never understood the Watchers or any of the otherworldly beings Damian or Jule had known pre-Schism. He'd been a kid when Damian found him and a human when the Schism occurred. Damian granted him his god-powers after the Schism, whereas Jule was expelled from the divine world for crimes he'd never discussed. As the youngest, non-natural deity-like being, he didn't have the history - or the patience - D or Jule had with such creatures as the Watchers.

“Toni,” he called from the bottom of the stairs.

“Yeah, boss!”

“Call together the planners and have them meet me here later. We need to dust off a few ops plans for this weekend.”

“Groovy!”

“I'm going to the gym.”

He wolfed down the sandwich Bianca made him, unable to remember the last time he'd eaten breakfast. Or at all.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Oh, my god, cookies!”

Bianca jumped at the voice and peered out of the kitchen at the man named Darian. He was dressed in all black again from turtleneck to heavy boots despite the heat of early afternoon, the color emphasizing the zero body fat of his lean body.

“Sunny!” he called.

She couldn’t get over seeing a grown man acting like a teenager. She pulled the last of the cookies from the oven and set them on top to cool.

“If you sit on the couch, she’ll come to you,” she offered, watching as Darian searched the condo.

“I’ve never had a cat,” he said, excited. “What do they eat?”

“Cat food.”

“Oh.”

She bit back a laugh as he reddened. He sat, and she took in his scarred features, wondering what could leave such entrenched scars.

“You want some cookies?” she asked.

“Yeah! Hi Sunny!”

She brought him a plate with warm cookies and a glass of milk. Sunny perched on his thigh, purring as he patted her.

“Dusty’s apartment is soooo boring,” Darian complained.

“It needs color,” she agreed.

“He’s a dictator,” he supplied. “He probably scared the color right out of the condo.” She laughed.

“He’s a good guy, though,” Darian admitted. “I’m not easy to live with, and the structure is good for me.”

He rolled his eyes, as if repeating something he heard regularly.

“He saved me from bad guys,” she said.

“That’s his job. He has to do that, or he’d be in violation of rule number one.”

She laughed again. Darian looked at her, content with cookies resting on one thigh and the cat on the other.

“Sofi says you can heal,” he said curiously. “Can you heal scars?”

“I can.”

He peeled off a glove to display a hand as scarred as his face.

“You’ve been through a lot,” she murmured.

“I’m not allowed to stress you out, but can you, like, try?”

She took his hand and turned it over. The scars ran all the way through his hand, as if it had been chopped up and put back together. The idea of something so horrible happening to him saddened her. She placed her hands on either side of his and closed her eyes, concentrating. The cool energy came when she summoned it, and his body directed it where it was needed.

“Wow.”

She opened her eyes, feeling the drain. Darian held up his hand and stared at it. The scars were gone.

“Do my face!” he said, excited. “Wait.”

He picked up Sunny and crossed to the kitchen to stack the plate high with cookies.

"I'm glad you like them," she said. "Do you have a favorite kind?"

"Any kind. Dusty only eats organic shit, and Sofi can't eat at all, so I never get real cookies."

"I made these with Dusty's organic ingredients," she told him.

"Really? They're really good. Maybe it's just because Dusty and Sofi can't cook."

She laughed.

"Face!"

She scooted forward and placed her hands on either side of his face. Her breath caught as his body sucked up her cool energy. Poison lingered in him. Though his body didn't speak of it, she directed her power towards it as well. She withdrew, startled at the vacuuming of her power.

He was a darkly handsome man, his features heavy and masculine. Without the scars, he looked like a whole new person. The angles of his face were too sharp for traditional male beauty, but she admitted he was sexy in a dark, sinister way with his low brow, large gold eyes, and angled features.

He crossed to a mirror. He touched his face, tumultuous emotions crossing his face. She neared him, sensing a flood of raw emotion she didn't understand. He dropped his hands to his sides and stared at himself.

"I'm sorry, Darian, maybe I shouldn't have done that," she said, resting her hand on his arm.

"It's good," he said in a strangled voice. "Just didn't expect to see ... me ... again."

He turned around and hugged her hard.

"I'll tell Dusty that we're keeping you."

He released her just as quickly and wiped tears from one eye. She looked up at him, touched, as he felt his face again. His hand went to the back of his head, and he grimaced.

"I think Dusty already made that decision," she said. "You're a handsome man, Darian."

"I know. I mean, I am now again. I was ugly as shit for awhile."

The effort of healing him had given her a headache. He looked down at her intently.

"I stressed you out," he said with a frown. "I'm sorry, Bianca."

"I'm not stressed," she replied. "I'm happy to help you, and I'm happy you came to visit. It gets lonely here."

He took her arm and led her to the couch, retreating to the kitchen for more cookies, water, and a bottle of pain killers. He ate another cookie in troubled silence.

"Have you met my brother yet?" she asked, wanting to draw him from his thoughts.

"No."

"Jenn said he's at HQ. His name is Jonny if you ever see him."

"I'll look for him," he said.

"He's a little confused."

"So am I. We'll make good friends."

"Are there many Naturals like me?" she asked.

"Yeah, quite a few. Not as many as Guardians, though."

He touched his face again, then rubbed the back of his head. His words were distracted, his confusion clear.

"This is really weird," he said. "Sofi said you were special."

"Who is this Sofi?" she asked.

"She's my sister-in-law. She's an oracle who can see the future."

"Wow, really?"

"She's cool. My brother's in Europe, but she had to stay here. She and Dusty take care of me. It's really hard, and they're really good to me."

"Will I get to meet the others in your organization?"

"Yes," he said then sighed. "I'm not allowed to take you anywhere. Dusty said you're safer here than anywhere. You'll get outta here soon. Then you can meet everyone."

"I met Jenn," she said. "I really liked her."

"Jenn is so hot!" he exclaimed. "Oh my god is she hot. She's Dusty's fuck-buddy. He's got it so good."

The news startled her, and she wasn't sure why it made her feel ... bummed. He looked up, a surprised expression crossing his face, as if he'd told her something he wasn't supposed to.

"It's not serious," he said. "It's just physical, because they don't have time to have real relationships."

"If he wants to have a relationship with her, it's his choice."

"I know but ... just so you know, it's not a relationship. She's on fuck-buddy status."

"I don't think there's a difference."

"Oh, god, I fucked this up!"

"What? They're adults. They're allowed to do what they want."

Jenn was beautiful. It was no mystery to her why Dusty would want her, though she couldn't help but feel disappointed. Maybe she'd hoped his parting words in the morning were serious. Maybe he screwed every woman he ran across. Maybe he wasn't the kind of man who would commit or put any woman above his rigid sense of duty.

Maybe every man out there was like Aaron, unable to commit to one woman.

Darian was gazing at her in earnest, torn.

"Darian, it's ok," she said, smiling at him. "You didn't say anything wrong."

"I have to go."

He sprung up and grabbed the cookies.

"Can you make peanut butter tomorrow?" he asked.

She nodded. He disappeared, and she stared at the place where he'd been, wondering why he was so upset with himself. Healing his scars made her feel a familiar sense of exhaustion, and she retreated to couch in front of the TV, content to doze and recover.

The sound of furniture crashing against the tile floor jarred her awake, and she sat up from where she'd fallen asleep in front of the TV. At first she thought it was the thunderstorm she'd fallen asleep listening to.

Dusty and Darian, both drenched and covered in what looked like seaweed, were in the foyer. Both breathed hard, with a red slash across Darian's face. He sat on the floor, hands covering his face, while Dusty stood.

"Darian! Are you ok?" she asked, surprised and concerned.

A look at Dusty's tight features revealed he was furious. She looked away fast for fear of the sizzling blue gaze and dropped to her knees in front of Darian, pulling his hands from his face to see the wound.

Dusty stalked off and slammed the bedroom door. They looked after him before she met Darian's gaze. The wound healed itself.

"Are you ok?"

His eyes watered, and he shook his head, shivering. He smelled of ocean water and blood.

"I broke all the rules. Dusty's gonna kill me," he whispered, stricken.

If he'd been talking about any other man, she would have doubted his words.

"C'mon. Let's at least get you dried off. Then we'll have cookies, ok?"

He nodded and stood. Her eyes went to the bedroom, and she walked the opposite direction to the laundry room and ruffled through Dusty's neatly folded laundry.

"Go change," she said, handing a towel, t-shirt, and jeans to the distraught man.

He obeyed, and she went to the kitchen. She'd automatically made enough dinner for three after cooking for Kyle and Jonny for three months. She put a heaping plate in the oven and returned to the living room with cookies and milk for Darian.

He was hugging Sunny as if she were the only thing in the world that mattered. He reminded her of Jonny when her brother had learned of his father's death last summer. She'd never seen anyone cry as hard as he did.

Sensing similar distress in the man before her, she sat down.

"Anything you wanna talk about?" she asked.

He hesitated and ate a cookie.

"I ruined his life."

"I doubt that, Darian," she said, holding back a smile. "What happened? Why were you guys covered in seaweed?"

Darian looked at her apprehensively.

"I have issues," he said, pointing to his head. "Sometimes they overwhelm me, and I kinda go crazy. I went sailing."

"In the middle of a tropical storm?"

"Yeah. It's stupid."

"Darian!" she exclaimed. "And Dusty fished you out?"

"Yeah."

"You shouldn't do things like that."

"I don't care what happens to me," he said stubbornly.

"But you care what happens to Dusty, don't you? I mean, it's one thing to hurt yourself but to hurt someone else is just wrong!"

"He's going to kill me anyway."

"Dusty cares about you or he wouldn't have come after you."

Darian's face fell.

"You really shouldn't do things like that," she repeated, reminded of similar conversations with Jonny. "It's kinda selfish, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't hurt him on purpose," he said, upset. "I figured when he found out I ruined his life, he'd kill me anyway."

"Why do you keep saying that?"

He clenched his hands in his lap and shook his head, the way Jonny did when he didn't intend to tell her what was wrong. Bianca sighed.

"At least you're safe," she said. "Don't make me make up my own rules for you, Darian!"

He smiled tightly.

"Can I have another cookie?" he asked.

She rose, pitying him.

She'd asked if *Darian* was ok. Darian, who had willingly hired a sailboat and sailed straight into a tropical storm. Darian, who *he'd* just pulled off the bottom of the ocean instead of attending his planning session to deal with the Talon issue.

Dusty wrenched the bedroom door open, even angrier to see Darian and Bianca on the couch, talking. Darian had a plate of cookies in his lap and milk on the table.

"He needs an ass beating, not coddling!" he snapped.

Both jumped at his tone, and he waited, wanting to pick a fight with someone. He was exhausted and wired with angry energy. If Jule or Damian were there, they'd take a trip to the boxing ring and take turns beating the hell out of him until his blood settled. If he had a full night, he'd spend it killing vamps until too tired to pull the trigger.

Darian flushed and looked down guiltily. He waited for Bianca to defend him, so he could tear into someone, anyone.

"Your dinner's in the oven," she said.

She'd chosen a subject he couldn't argue over. Frustrated, he stalked to the kitchen and opened the oven, sensing her enter.

"I spend an hour at the bottom of the ocean saving his ass because he decides to try and kill himself, and you give him milk and cookies!" he muttered.

He lifted the heavy, foil covered plate out of the oven, stomach roaring at the scent of spiced chicken and vegetables. He'd been too busy to eat again today since the sandwich she made him for breakfast.

"There are enough milk and cookies for you, too," she replied.

He turned to glare at her and almost snapped at her for sitting on the counter. She met his gaze, her features warm. There was compassion in her sparkling gaze despite the gentle humor in her voice. Her warmth and openness disarmed him enough to take the edge off his anger. She wore the camisole that amplified her breasts, her curls captured at the nape of her neck.

"You need a hug, too?" she teased.

"You're playing with fire, woman," he warned.

She flushed again as she always did, and he crossed to her, resting his hands on her thighs as he leaned his hips against the counter between her knees. She leaned back, the audible sound of her breath catching music to his ears.

"Hug, no. Kiss, yes," he ordered. "Now."

She laughed nervously, and he leaned forward.

A flash of cool energy zipped through him as their lips met. She was hesitant, and he kissed her gently, not wanting to scare her despite his raging blood. Her plump lips were perfect for kissing. He nibbled on her lower lip then deepened the kiss. She responded and opened to him, leaning into him. She tasted like honey, and he reveled in the warmth of her body, her hot mouth. He kissed her long and light, enjoying the

sensations of her body as she became aroused. Her lips grew hungrier, her breathing quickened, her body warmer. She didn't have his cold control; she was the kind of woman who would give herself freely in bed and hold no part of her back.

"Dusty!"

Darian's voice reminded him of the world outside Bianca's body. He withdrew and dropped his head, not looking at the shocked man standing in the kitchen doorway.

"You have to the count of three to get the fuck out of here, Darian," he said in a low, even voice. "One."

Darian was gone.

He was almost relieved for the distraction. He didn't need this type of drama, and she was too good for a man like him in her life.

He met Bianca's beautiful brown eyes. She gazed at him, lips parted and face flushed. Her raw sweetness threatened his resolve to keep his distance. He took in her features, gaze resting on her lips. He gave her a light kiss, unable to resist.

"I have to go," he said and pushed himself away.

"Dusty ... I kinda feel like you're running away from me," she said.

He drew a deep breath, not wanting to end this badly.

"Maybe we should talk about it," he replied, calming further. "Bianca, my duty to Damian and humanity in general always comes first. I've offered you my bed, and that's all I can give you."

She chewed her lip, dark eyes swimming with emotions.

"Guess I get tired of always being second," she said and looked away. "I appreciate your honesty, Dusty."

She hopped off the counter. He watched her go, even more frustrated. Her cool energy quelled the fire raging in his blood, and he wondered vaguely if that was part of her healing gift. He turned to grab the plate of dinner before closing his eyes to transport to the office.

As soon as he opened his eyes, the cell rang. Toni's number flashed across the screen, and he answered.

"Boss, Iggy at the lab sent me her report."

There was a puzzled note in Toni's voice.

"I'm already here. Wanna meet me?"

"Yeah, on my way," Dusty said. "Give me five minutes."

"Groovy."

He strode to the kitchen and wolfed down his dinner, surprised to find the chicken tender and juicy and the veggies still slightly crisp and well-seasoned. Bianca was the only one of those around him who could cook.

"Watcha got, Iggy?" he said, transporting himself to the basement lab.

Iggy was a slight Natural with dark hair and eyes who happened to have a doctorate in every type of science he could name. She'd spent the past four hundred years in college, gleefully learning more and more and working out of the lab he'd funded for her.

"This isn't normal," she started.

"Duh," Toni said.

"What is it, first of all?" Dusty asked, seating himself on a stool beside Toni on one side of the lab.

"It's ... it was a pig," she said. "Do you want to see it?"

“Not really.”

“No.”

“Ok. Pigs have some features similar to a human’s that make them good test beds for the type of science stuff I do. Specifically, a virus or bug passed to a pig is considered a huge threat in the medical community, because pigs can pass their diseases onto humans. Am I speaking simply enough, Dusty, or do I need to dumb it down more?”

“You’re good.”

“So, it looks like Talon’s goons took our pig and injected it with something to turn it into a vamp.”

“A vampire pig?” Toni asked with a laugh.

“More or less. But, it’s not the vamp-pig that’s the most interesting part. I found pieces of DNA on its teeth. It bit another animal before they killed it.”

“And?” Dusty prompted at her silence.

“Don’t you see? If they were successful in turning a normal pig into a vamp-pig, and that vamp-pig could in turn bite say, a human or another animal, and transfer the vamp bug, then you’ve potentially got a new tool you can use to transform the human population into vamps.”

“*What?*” Toni asked, baffled.

“You mean cats and dogs could be used to turn their masters into vamps?” Dusty asked.

“Exactly! It’s pretty clever. If it worked – and I don’t know if it did – you’d see something like the black plague in Europe, only it wouldn’t kill people, just turn them into vamps.”

“Fuck,” Dusty breathed.

“I wouldn’t call that clever,” Toni said in a hushed tone. “Diabolical, maybe.”

Iggy beamed, proud of herself.

“You up for a field trip?” Dusty asked.

She hesitated.

“You can cut apart any suspected vamp-pigs you find.”

“When do you want me to go?”

“Pack your shit. You’re going now.”

She looked unsettled at the idea of leaving her lab and looked around, as if trying to figure out what to take. She hurried into the back room.

“Are you sure Europe is worse than here?” Toni asked, shaking his head. “I don’t see how.”

“I’m beginning to wonder myself,” Dusty admitted. “How did the planning go?”

“Sasha thought of everything before he left. He had a plan A, B, and C all ready. The barracks at HQ are full from the incoming Guardians, and I have an emergency order for more weapons in. I started staging Guardians in our stash houses in Orlando.”

“You still want to be XO?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s groovy. I’m learning a lot. I didn’t know how hard it was. I’m taking calls and dealing with issues almost 24/7. We seem to be the emergency points of contact for anything that goes wrong anywhere in the western hemisphere. There’s a *lot* of shit that goes on. I didn’t know about *ikira*, either. We all thought she was your sister, not Damian’s wife and I had no idea she was an oracle until this morning, when she told me

to evac the motor pool. Darian accidentally blew up a car an hour later and blew the roof off the garage,” Toni shook his head. “Talk about fucking chaos. I don’t know how you do it, Boss.”

“It’s just how it is,” Dusty said, amused. “You’ve taken a great deal off my shoulders, and I appreciate it.”

“Happy to help,” Toni said with a wide smile. “I’m having a great time. You gonna make the intel briefing this morning in an hour?”

“I plan on it.”

“Jenn’s been puttin’ the hurt on her sources for info on Talon’s plans. I’m not sure she’s hearing anything, though.”

“Talon’s an idiot, but he’s getting help from someone else. No way he can create vamp-pigs on his own. Whoever’s helping him might’ve gotten rid of any leaks. What about the kid you picked up at the last flash-n-burn? Anything there?”

“Not yet, no. Think we scared him. He’s been in northern Florida since we cut him loose.”

His thoughts went to Jonny again. He glanced at his watch.

“Iggy, move your ass!” he shouted. “I need to drop you off in Ohio now. I got shit to do!”

“Dusty, I’m not ready!” she replied, panicked. “I can’t leave all my equipment!”

Toni laughed, and Dusty strode to the small residence in the back of the lab. Iggy was frantically filling a huge, blocky suitcase with books.

“Igg, you’re not moving there. Can’t you just take what you need?” he demanded.

“I’ve never been to Ohio. What if it’s cold or the flora is significantly different and I - “

“Fuck it,” he muttered and took her arm.

He transported them to the large living room of Speck’s farmhouse. Iggy looked around, dismayed.

“Dusty, I - “

Her voice was cut off as he transported himself back to his office.

“Dusty.”

He’d planned on waiting until his anger cooled before dealing with Darian. He faced the man, unable to help but feel surprised to see him without scars. Darian was staring at the ground.

“I’m sorry, Dusty.”

“Not as sorry as you will be.”

“I learned something this time,” Darian said, continuing despite the red creeping up his face.

“What.”

“I never meant to put you in danger. I don’t think about that part when I do things. I don’t care what happens to me, but I don’t ever mean to do something that would make you get hurt.”

“Then stop doing this shit,” Dusty replied. He planted his hands on Darian’s shoulders, and the Grey God looked up.

“You’re my brother, Darian. I won’t let anything happen to you. I won’t let *you* happen to you, if I can help it. You can be a fucking idiot sometimes. The rules are there for a reason.”

"I know. I love you, Dusty. I don't want anything to happen to my family. I'll try to be better."

Impressed, he wondered if Darian was beginning to grow out of his insolent teenager stage.

"Can we keep Bianca?" Darian asked. "I like her."

"Yep."

"Can I have a cat?"

"Nope. You can repair the roof of the garage, though."

Darian sighed. Dusty seated himself at his computer.

"I'm sorry I almost ruined your life," Darian said quietly.

"Don't think that's possible," he said, looking up in amusement.

"I told Bianca about Jenn. Sofi said not to do that, and I did."

He twisted to look up at Darian. The man's face was red with shame this time.

"I'm sorry, Dusty."

"For talking to Bianca about Jenn?" he echoed. "So what?"

"Nevermind! You'll never understand!"

The moody teenager was back. Darian jerked the door open and stormed out. Dusty wondered what the fuck was wrong with everyone around him and rubbed the back of his neck.

He checked his watch and rose, trotting out of the house to the barracks. Toni was right; the barracks area was packed. He went to the newbie wing, where Jonny was placed, and rapped on the door.

Jonny answered, plainly pulled from sleep. His bleached hair was disheveled, his eyes squinting at the hall light. They widened as he recognized who was at his door.

Dusty pushed the door opened and flipped on the light. Jonny sat on his bed stiffly. His eyes were dark and warm like Bianca's, his frame just over six feet and still lanky, though he showed signs of starting to fill out.

"I've been good," he whispered.

"Good," Dusty said, sitting on the bed opposite him. "How you feeling?"

"B can heal anything."

Jonny looked up at him then away.

"Am I in trouble?"

"You probably should be," Dusty replied. "I'm still trying to figure out what the fuck to do with you."

"Toni said he thinks I have some of the um, Natural ability."

"What's your talent?"

"He thinks its weaponry or something. I can master any weapon without really trying."

"Not bad."

"Is B ok?" the youth asked in a hushed voice.

"You mean, after you sold her out to Talon?"

A look of anguish crossed Jonny's face, and he nodded.

"She's fine. You'll probably have some explaining to do to her, though," Dusty replied.

"I know. I never, ever meant for her to get hurt. Can I see her?"

"Soon. Did anyone ask you about Talon?"

"I spoke to a few people. I don't remember much, though. It's like I was in this weird dream. Everything's fuzzy."

"I'm going to have someone else talk to you today," Dusty said. "We'll put you in the Naturals training program. Welcome to your new life."

"Is B a Natural, too?"

"She is."

"Who's her assigned Guardian?"

"I am."

Jonny hesitated then looked up again.

"She's a good cook, but she's afraid of spiders, and she always loses things. Don't give her your only set of keys to anything. Or the remotes. She'll lose those, too. She's always happy - I've never seen her upset. It's annoying sometimes. Just please ... be nice to her. I'm a screw up, but she isn't. She doesn't deserve what I put her through. I gotta make it up to her somehow."

His last words were whispered, his face red. Dusty gazed at him, sensing how much he loved his sister and how hurt he was by his own actions. He understood what it was to lose a sister and hoped the stupid kid before him never went through that pain.

"I'll take care of her, Jonny," he promised. "Get your shit straight and keep it straight."

"I will."

He rose and returned to the main house in time for the intell briefing, expecting another nonstop day. The skies opened once again as he reached the house, and thunder boomed in the distance.

CHAPTER SIX

Someone beat on the door across the hall loud enough for her to hear over the TV and sporadic thunder. She rose, bored after being trapped alone the whole day in the condo, and peered through the peephole. Two large men stood in front of the door across the hall. Unease spiraled through her. She'd only seen men built like that in Dusty's organization and Talon's. Dusty's men would know where to find her.

The two looked up and down the hallway, then withdrew a lockpick set. One turned all the way around to ensure no one was watching. His eyes flashed red.

She gasped and stepped away, heart pounding. She tiptoed away from the door. The building swayed gently at the strong winds whipping through southern Florida, and water pelted the windows across from her. It was in the middle of the afternoon, but the skies were dark grey.

She looked around. She had no phone, no way of contacting Dusty or Jenn or Darian. She'd not been able to log onto Dusty's computer, because he kept it locked out. She had no money, no purse ...

Keys. She had Dusty's car. She pulled on jeans and a sweater, hands shaking as she pulled on socks. She snatched the keys and jammed them in her pocket then peered through the peephole again.

One of the men was in plain sight in the middle of the condo opposite hers, waiting on the other. She ran to the bedroom and flipped on the TV loud then hid in the coat closet beside the front door.

Their knocking made her heart flip, and she covered her mouth at her gasp. She heard the locks slide, one by one. The door opened, and she heard the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked as they entered. She peered through the crack in the door until certain they both entered the bedroom, then opened the closet door and slid out the opened front door.

She sprinted down the hall and ducked into the doorway with the stairwell. No one followed. She opened the stairwell door and hurried down the stairs two floors then darted into a hallway to the elevator.

The ride to the garage seemed longer than the longest car ride she'd ever taken. She jumped when the door dinged finally as she reached the garage. The scent of rain and oil made her nose crinkle after so long in the condo. She clicked the buttons on the keyfob until Dusty's car blinked in response, then trotted to it.

Hands shaking, she looked around the interior for a cell. Or a map. There was an old school cell phone in the glove box. Anxious never, ever to run into Talon or his men again, she left the garage and drove through the streets. Water streamed through the gutters, and those cars out in the storm crawled block-to-block.

She stopped at a stoplight, only for the car behind her to slide into her. The bump jarred the cell phone loose, and it fell in the space between the seat and door. The driver from the car behind her approached. She cracked the door to squeeze her hand in the space as well as to tell the other driver not to worry about the car.

The door was wrenched open, and a man pointed the gun at her.

"Out of the car, bitch!"

She whipped the seatbelt off and obeyed, all but falling into the street as he yanked her out. He climbed in, maneuvering it through the crowded street.

She stared. She didn't know how much an Aston Martin cost, but it was enough that Dusty would probably be pissed. Worse, she didn't grab the phone in time!

Within seconds, she was drenched. Careless, lost, moneyless, she retreated to the sidewalk.

This time, Dusty was going to kill *her* for losing his car. Shivering, she walked until she found a Starbucks and ducked inside. There was only one other customer and several barristas talking loudly behind the counter. They looked towards her as the bell over the door rung.

"Welcome to Starbucks!" one greeted her. "A little rough out there?"

"You have no idea!" she said with a rueful laugh. "I just need a place to duck out of the rain for a bit."

The young woman motioned to the sitting area, and she went, relieved. She faced the windows, watching the torrent outside.

"On the house," a barrista said, placing a drink before her. "It's your favorite."

She looked up at him with a curious smile. He was tall and lanky with a huge smile and close-spaced eyes that seemed more soulful than his youthful looks warranted.

"You ok?" he asked.

"Yeah, thanks," she replied. "I'm not having a good afternoon."

"You need me to call anyone?"

His tone was unassuming, but his gaze was intent, as if he were trying to gauge if she recognized him or not. She hesitated then asked,

“Can you call someone to come get me?”

“Definitely.”

He walked away, responding to one of the barristas teasing him.

She sipped her drink, surprised to find it really was her favorite. She chuckled to herself, wondering if guessing someone’s favorite drink was his Natural gift. He returned after a few minutes and sat across from her.

“Is this your gift?” she asked, holding up the drink.

He laughed.

“HQ put out a BOLO for you half an hour ago. Any of us in the field receive it,” he said and held up his iPhone. “It lists your pic and all your bio info, which includes your favorite food down to the coffee.”

“Really? Wow!”

“They’ll come get you.”

“Here I thought you were a mind reader or something!”

“Alas, no. I’m just Jerry.”

“Are there many of you?”

“Quite a few, and they’re pulling in everyone from the east coast to Miami and Orlando. I was working in Georgia ‘til this morning. I’m surprised to say the weather was better.”

“Yeah, anywhere is probably better than this,” she said. She shivered, cold and wet.

“You can go wait in the back if you want. There’s a dryer and a stack of towels next to the shower. The BOLO said you’re probably running from bad guys. Might do you good to get out of sight,” he said, nodding towards the windows.

She shivered again, this time out of fear.

“Been there, done that,” she said, rising. “Thanks, Jerry.”

The break room in the back was small with a table, refrigerator and microwave, a white board listing names and schedules, and a locker room with a shower and washer and dryer. She tugged off her shirt and wrapped it in towels to dry it before tossing it in the dryer. She blotted herself dry.

“You should have one of these.”

She whirled, startled. An older, harmless looking man with white hair and beautiful emerald eyes stood near the door, holding out a phone. For a moment, she thought she should know him. The sense passed.

“Who are you?” she asked, covering her chest with a folded towel.

“I’m a friend.”

“Are you my ride?”

“No. Here.”

She accepted it.

“I assigned everyone a ring tone and put their phone numbers in it,” he said somewhat proudly.

She gave him a puzzled smile and selected the address book on the phone. *Dusty, Sofia, Darian, Damian, Jule, Jenn, Toni, Jonny, Watcher.*

“Watcher?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s me.”

"That's your name?"

"More like my duty position. Dusty should have given you a means of contacting someone in an emergency," he said with disapproval.

"I doubt he expected the bad guys to find me," she replied.

"The bad guys have someone telling them where to look. It makes a difference."

"Yeah, I guess."

"My email address is in there, too. And you can text me."

She tried not to laugh at his eagerness.

"I'll update your address list virtually over the next few years."

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome. Your ride is almost here. We'll meet again."

He disappeared much as Darian did. She stared in the space he'd occupied and looked at the phone. He'd been so excited about his phone. She typed a message to him.

Stay dry!

LOL – I will!

The reply was instant. She set the phone down and retrieved her sweater from the dryer. It was almost dry. She dialed Dusty.

"Dustin," came his low bark.

"Hi Dusty."

"Bianca?"

"Yeah. I'm at a Starbucks."

"Stay there."

He hung up. She looked at the phone, disappointed he was so abrupt after their kiss. Then again, she wasn't interested in the only type of relationship he had to offer. Darian had also been clear about the type of relationships Dusty preferred. Maybe it was better he was so prickly.

His kiss, though, had been spectacular, so full of passion and promise that the memory made her blood burn. She shook her head and sat down, sending a text to Darian.

Can you check on my cat?

OMG – what happened 2 u? He replied.

"Ready, babe?"

She looked up at Jenn's voice. The sexy woman was on edge tonight, her gaze restless. She was accompanied by another massive Guardian.

"Hi Jenn!" she said. "I'm so happy to see you!"

A smile escaped despite her wariness, and the model held out a manicured hand. Bianca took it and gasped. Coldness ran through her. Before she could shiver, she was somewhere else.

She looked around at the quiet foyer of a massive house.

"I need to check you for a tag," Jenn said. "C'mon."

Bianca shuddered and followed her into a large bathroom.

"I should have done this before," Jenn admitted. "Talon doesn't normally think with anything but his dick, so I didn't bother. Strip down to your unmentionables."

She obeyed. Jenn ran small wand over her body, eyes expertly taking in her skin.

"Clean," she said. "Wait here, and I'll get you some clothes."

The Guardian was all business. Bianca wrapped herself in a towel, cold. Jenn returned after a few minutes, her gaze softening.

"You ok?" she asked.

"Dusty's gonna kill me," Bianca replied. "I got carjacked. I think his car was pretty expensive."

"Sweetheart, his car is the least of his concerns right now," Jenn said with a laugh. "You wanna stay with your brother?"

"Yes!"

She followed on Jenn's heels through the silent mansion and into a bustling barracks teeming with Guardians. They entered a quieter wing, and Jenn stopped to knock on a closed door.

Jonny opened it. His eyes lit up, and Bianca flung herself into his arms, thrilled to feel her brother's lanky body again. She breathed in his familiar scent.

"B!" he exclaimed, giving her a bear hug.

"I'll leave you here," Jenn said with a smile.

"Wow, she's smoking," he murmured.

"Hello!" Bianca said, glaring up at her brother.

He hugged her and pulled her into the small room. It housed two beds, two sets of drawers and was connected to a shared bathroom by a closed door.

"You've got a shitload of explaining to do," she told him.

Jonny sighed and relaxed against her.

"I know," he mumbled. "I'm so sorry, B. I promise I'll never do anything so stupid again."

"Tell me what happened, Jonny."

"No, B. I did bad things. I won't drag you into it."

She pulled away and met his gaze, surprised to see his resolve. He'd changed since she last saw him. His eyes were wiser, his face firmer with few signs of the troubled youth she remembered. Even his air was different.

The poison she thought she'd cleared from his body lingered. She released her cool power into him, but to no affect. She dismissed the uneasy instinct.

"You've turned in a man overnight," she said softly, ruffling his hair.

"I figured some shit out. You and the Guardians gave me a second chance, B, and I owe it to you, and me, and the ... the girl I hurt to make things right."

Her eyes watered at his brave words, and she hugged him.

"I love you, Jonny, no matter what," she whispered.

"I love you, too, B. I know I'm a Natural warrior now, but can you still make me some cookies?"

"Of course! Do they have a kitchen around here?"

He took her hand and led her out of the barracks through the back door and into the main house. Several of the Guardians were in the kitchen making sandwiches or rifling through the massive pantry.

Jonny started collecting the supplies she'd need, and she watched him, proud. The Guardians glanced at her curiously but didn't talk to her. Her phone vibrated. She pulled it free to see a text from Dusty.

Foyer.

Puzzled, she walked from the kitchen down a wide, long hall to the foyer. He stood in the center, on one phone and texting on another. He glanced at her then back, hanging up the phone.

She cringed as he approached, sensing his anger. His blue eyes were sharp, his jaw clenched. He stopped too close for her comfort, and she looked up at him, breathless at how handsome he was.

“I’m so sorry about your car,” she said quickly.

“I don’t give a shit about the car.”

He stared down at her, and she wondered what else she might have done to piss him off.

“Bianca, I’m sorry. I left you completely exposed. It’s the most fucked up thing I’ve ever done.”

Surprised, she gave him a warm smile.

“No worries, Dusty. Everything’s ok,” she assured him.

“Everything’s *not* ok. It was an amateur mistake.”

She sensed nothing she could say would placate him. Instead, she hugged him. He hesitated, then wrapped his arms around her, resting his cheek against her head. She loved his scent, the feel of his hard, warm body against hers. He stroked her hair.

“It won’t happen again,” he said with conviction.

“You get the couch from now on,” she teased.

“Fuck the couch.”

She laughed.

“I’ve gotta go,” he said, withdrawing.

The front door opened, and Jenn peered in. She winked at Bianca.

“Boss, we’re ready,” she called. “Bianca, we’ll be out back in the command center for a bit.”

Bianca waved as they left. She couldn’t help wondering about the two of them and why she felt suddenly jealous, even though Jenn could give Dusty something she wasn’t willing to. They made a sexy pair.

Conflicted, she returned to the kitchen to find Jonny seated on a stool near a counter. He was glaring at Darian, who sat across the kitchen on another stool.

“Tell him whose cookies you’ll make first, sis,” Jonny said testily.

“God, boys,” she said. “I can make more than one kind at once.”

“Peanut butter,” Darian demanded.

“Chocolate chip,” Jonny said in the same tone.

“What about peanut butter chocolate chip?”

There was a pause as the two eyed each other.

“I can live with that,” Jonny said slowly.

“So can I,” Darian agreed.

She rolled her eyes and started her cookie prep.

* * *

“Babe, there are other ways to get rid of that energy.”

Chest heaving, he lowered the two-handed sword he'd been using to hack apart one of the practice dummies in the back of the command center. He was coated with sweat and exhausted, but he wouldn't stop until he beat the fury out of him.

Jenn was dressed in a revealing top and tight jeans, her arms crossed and her features amused.

"Not now, Jenn," he replied and returned to his target.

"I meant, you may need it to fight Talon's goons soon. Toni's plans looked real good."

"I know what you meant," he said and returned to hacking at the dummy.

"Or that," she said with a husky laugh.

"I fucked up."

She stepped into his view, and he dropped his arms, throwing back his head to suck in deep breaths.

"How many times have you picked me up after I fucked up?" she challenged.

He didn't answer.

"And everyone around you. So you fucked up *once* in your entire life. She's smart enough to figure out what to do."

"That's not the point," he snapped.

"Does it matter?"

He glared at her, unable to shake the sense that if Bianca hadn't thought smarter than him, she'd be dead. With all the Guardians in the western hemisphere and god-powers granted him by Damian, *he'd* been the weak link. It was his job to protect humans, and he'd not been able to protect one woman in his own home!

He'd never been afraid of anything in his life until that moment when all his power and control meant nothing.

Her gaze raked over him, but she kept her distance.

"Give yourself a break. You've been run ragged for too long. You don't eat, you don't sleep. I should start charging you for taking the edge off as often as I do. Not that I don't appreciate the favor," she said.

"Someone's gotta save the world!" he snapped.

"And you will. This isn't gonna help you, though."

"I could do something more useful," he allowed.

She rolled her eyes.

"I was thinking more along the lines of you going in there and fucking her. But, whatever."

"Don't have time, don't want the drama," he replied and swiped his t-shirt from the ground. He placed the sword in a rack with others and exited into the night.

The cool rain felt good against his hot skin, and he stood in the dark walkway between the gym and the house, soothed by the storm.

He missed his brothers. He didn't realize how much until he actually needed their brutal take on reality to ground him. As the baby of the three, he'd always been the rock star among them. He'd never been alone. He wasn't used to failure, and he didn't know how to take it.

He wiped his face and walked into the kitchen, starving. Several of the Guardians were gathered in the informal dining area at the far end of the kitchen, laughing and talking as they played cards. His gaze found Bianca's curls. She sat between Darian

and Jonny across from Toni and two others. There was a plate of cookies on the counter and the scent of dinner lingering around the oven.

He knew without asking she'd left him dinner again. He recalled how soothing her hug had been earlier and itched to feel her soft, warm body in his arms again. Even more frustrated, he pulled the food out of the oven and retreated to his office, not caring that he was drenched.

She trailed him up the stairs.

"Jenn said ..." her soft voice drifted off as she took him in.

He glanced at her. She looked well-rested, her cheeks glowing and her eyes dancing.

"There's more if you want," she said, glancing at his plate.

She pulled up a chair, her movement giving him a peek of the swells of her breasts as she bent. She sat next to him and propped her chin on one hand, gazing at him.

He touched her face, and she took his hand in both of hers.

"You're cold," she murmured.

He leaned his forehead against hers, listening to her breathe.

"Will you stay with me tonight?" he asked.

"No one-night stands," she said, though her tone was considering.

"We don't have to do anything," he said with a husky chuckle. "I promise to behave."

She hesitated then reached for him, her cool touch soothing the fury in his blood. She leaned back to kiss him, the feel of her soft lips against his both infuriating and placating. He kissed her gently, unwilling to drop his restraint.

"*Kiri*, you don't want to kiss me like that," he told her, pulling away.

She settled again into his hug. He sensed he'd hurt her, but she didn't leave, just squeezed him tighter.

He took them to the condo, and she tensed.

"Is it safe?"

"It is," he said, more self-anger stirring at her fear. "Lay down. I've gotta clean up."

She withdrew, and he felt the loss of her presence like the sun going behind a cloud. He took a long shower, exhausted, before retrieving his now lukewarm dinner from the house. He ate alone in the condo's kitchen, not surprised to see Bianca asleep when he finally returned to bed. He gathered her warm body in his arms and smoothed away the curls that clung to his face, breathing her deep scent before he dropped into the first peaceful slumber in ages.

It wasn't quite morning when he returned her to the extra bed in Jonny's room. After a few solid hours of sleep, his sense of center was back, his mind clear. He paused as he passed the library. The lights were on.

"Sofi?" he called.

The library was her refuge, though he had to wonder why she was up so early again.

"Hey Dusty," she said in a tight voice.

He approached her favorite chair. She was curled up in it, her head resting on one of the arms. Her swirling silver eyes were red with tears. He sat on the ottoman in front of her, reaching out to tuck her hair behind her ear.

"I miss Damian," she whispered. "It's really hard to deal with all the bad stuff sometimes."

"Trust me, I know, *kiri*," he said. "I feel like I had a fucking meltdown last night."

“You? Never,” she said with a smile. “You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I’m hard on everyone,” he reminded her. “No exceptions.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Though I regret missing our lunch yesterday,” he added. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“I just want this Europe thing to be over. You do enough for us anyway.”

“You’re my family. I feel like I should be doing more. I just don’t have the time.”

“You need to take care of yourself, Dusty,” she advised.

“I will, *kiri*,” he said. “We’re a lot alike, aren’t we?”

“Yeah, we are, which is why I know you’re not taking care of yourself as much as you should be.”

“Stubborn woman. I told Darian not to let you help him.”

“He can’t do it on his own, Dusty, and it’s not because I’m being overprotective.”

A troubled look crossed her features.

“Dusty, I’m worried about him. To take his place as the Grey God, he has to overcome some really large hurdles. I don’t know if he can do it.”

He leaned back.

“The Darian I remember was the strongest man I’d ever known. I believe ... I hope ... that man is still inside of him somewhere. If so, he’ll take his place and probably knock the shit outta Damian and Czerno both a few times.”

“I hope so,” she replied. “He’s about to run into something bad. I can’t see well enough yet to know what happens, but it scares me. It’ll make or break him, and I don’t feel like he’s anywhere near ready.”

Her words sent a streak of cold through him. His phone rang.

“I gotta get going,” he said.

“Dusty, remember that Bianca can heal anyone and any wound.”

He looked up at her cryptic words. Her eyes were swirling again.

“You sound like the Watcher,” he said warily.

“Just keep it in mind.”

He squeezed her arm then strode out, whipping out the phone.

“Boss.”

He turned at Toni’s voice.

“I dug this out of a box of cool shit upstairs and programmed it to your new phone. That flip shit is so old school. I didn’t get you the full touch screen, though, cuz your paws are too big to text,” Toni said, holding up a sleek phone and Bluetooth earpiece. “I tagged both with GPS and a speck of C4, so if you lose either, we can blow it up.”

“Do I really want that next to my head? It’s bad enough that it might fry my brain.”

Toni grinned, took his phone and swapped SIM cards with the new one. Dusty clipped the earpiece to his ear.

“You gave Bianca a phone?” he asked.

“No.”

“Someone did.”

“Not one of our issues. I’ve repaired the computers in your office, too. Boss, you had so much malware I don’t know how you got anything done.”

“Yeah, e-shit isn’t my forte,” Dusty admitted. “Glad you’re here. Make sure Bianca’s phone is tagged as well.”

Toni saluted with another large grin. Dusty tested his new phone by sending Damian and Jule a text.

911, bro.

He didn't know if they'd reappear before his weekend went to shit, but he hoped they did.

"Ok, boss. Now for the bad news," Toni said.

He glanced up.

"This weekend looks worse than we thought. Jenn's guys got something. They're at the safehouse off Biscayne."

"I'll go there first. Send Jonny to see Sofi sometime this morning," Dusty directed.

"Darian in his room?"

"He's in the gym."

"Call if you need anything."

Dusty strode to the gym, surprised to see the Grey God up so early. His wards rarely rose before mid-morning. Darian was at a row machine, covered in sweat. His long, lean muscles bulged with the workout.

"Darian!"

The Grey God rose, a guilty look crossing his features. Dusty eyed him, waiting. Darian swiped his towel from another machine and approached.

"I'm sorry. I know you said no," he grated.

"Then why'd you do it?" Dusty asked.

"I didn't want the cat to stay all alone at your condo. It's not fair. She's in my room. I won't let her out, so she won't bother you."

Dusty almost rolled his eyes. He was expecting worse than having a cat in his room. It was the least of Darian's many offenses.

"We'll deal with that later," he said. "Go get ready. I want you to start learning what it means to be in charge of something."

"Really? Oh, my God!"

Darian darted towards the house. Dusty sighed, unable to reconcile the Grey God, the man who had been Darian, and the man running gleefully into the house as being one and the same. He hoped, no he *prayed*, Darian regained himself someday soon.

His gaze strayed towards the barracks, where he'd left Bianca. Regret sat in his stomach. He'd done the right thing. Rather, he'd done the *decent* thing and spared her further heartache. Yet he couldn't shake the memory of her body against his, her musk, the way she'd looked at him last night. No woman had gotten through his guard ever.

And then he thought of how he'd felt when he thought the vamps took her from his condo. Cold fury replaced the regret, and he knew he'd do anything to keep her from danger. The safest place she could be was with him, and he'd nearly gotten her killed by lowering his guard.

There was a reason he'd severed his connection to his emotions all those years ago. He didn't need the distraction, but Gods, he wanted her in a way he'd never wanted anyone else! The safest thing for both of them was for him to keep his distance and remain objective. After all, he didn't think he'd survive the weekend.

He returned to the house to await Darian, not surprised to see Bianca's black and white cat darting down the stairs. It slinked down the hall and slid into the narrow space of the cracked door of the library.

He almost preferred the idea of death by Black God to the mayhem his wards caused. Reminded he didn't give Bianca the rules he gave Darian and Sofi, he retrieved his phone.

Rules of the house: 1- u don't leave w/o permission & escort; 2- obey Toni & the other Guardians when I'm out; 3- assume I'll find out, no matter what u do; 4- ask b4 u do anything or don't do it.

She grimaced as she re-read the text, torn between amusement and disappointment. Darian was right about Dusty being a dictator. His scent still lingered on her skin, even though she'd taken a shower earlier. He'd wanted her, but he kept his distance. His rules made it clear she was just another of his duties.

She didn't expect it to hurt as much as it did. Maybe that's why she couldn't stop making cookies.

"Look, sis!"

She shoved the phone in her pocket and forced herself to smile as she faced Jonny, who'd been in training since shortly after she awoke. His face was excited as he held out the contents of his hands.

"A *gun*?" she gasped. "They gave you a *gun*?"

"Isn't it awesome?"

"Jonny, you shouldn't have a gun! You're only 20!"

"Old enough to buy a prostitute in Vegas, old enough to own a gun," one of the Guardians replied as he grabbed a handful of cookies from the counter.

She recognized Toni, his brooding looks at odds with his wide smile.

"He's not getting a prostitute, either!" she replied. "Toni, I don't think he should have a gun!"

"Overruled."

"Are you going to teach him to use it?"

"Yep."

Jonny was grinning.

"It's not loaded, sis."

"Yes, it is," Toni said, glancing at him. "Why would you carry a gun that's not loaded?"

"Oh my God. This is a nightmare waiting to happen," she said with a sigh and a hot glare at Toni.

"We all carry," Toni said. "You want one?"

"Of course not," she replied and crossed her arms. "I really don't approve of this."

"I'm a man, now, B," Jonny argued. "I'm old enough, and I'm going to protect you from bad guys."

Toni gave him an amused look. She said nothing, not wanting to deter him from his newfound path. She couldn't bear the thought of him returning to the troubled teen he'd been.

"Man or not, I still worry about you," she returned. "And I'll be the first person to yell at you if you do something stupid."

"No, B, Dusty will kick my ass first," Jonny said, a haunted look crossing his face.

"You got that right," Toni agreed.

She didn't doubt it and felt somewhat satisfied her brother at least knew there would be consequences to any stupidity. Jonny wouldn't listen to his nagging sister, but he'd darned well listen to a man as terrifying as Dusty could be.

"Can I see your phone?" Toni asked, breaking their tense silence.

She handed it to him.

"Not one of ours," he said, examining it. "I'm gonna put a tag in it. Where'd you get it?"

She watched as he pulled a small pouch from his pocket and unzipped it.

"A friend," she replied.

He glanced at her.

"What friend?"

"None of your business."

"As long as it's not tagged by anyone else, I don't give a shit," he said with a faint smile and took the battery out. "Looks clean."

Jonny took it when he'd put it back together and looked through her addresses.

"Watcher?" he asked. "Who's that?"

She snatched it back from him.

"Is this code? Are you seeing someone?" Jonny demanded.

"Better not be," Toni seconded.

"I don't think not dating was one of my rules," she retorted.

"Oh, it is," Toni replied with a wink. "Boss put you on the top three to evac when shit hits the fan. It's not because of your cookies."

She shook her head, not sure what to think of his words.

"Anyway, I'm going to practice shooting things," Jonny said, missing the look Toni gave her.

He grabbed a handful of cookies and left. The oven timer buzzed, and she turned away from Toni, not wanting to deal with him any longer. He left, and she gazed at the plates full of cookies around the kitchen.

She didn't know what else to do. She felt wired, her emotions in turmoil. Darian was gone, Jonny distracted by his newfound gun, and she in need of a friend. She flipped through her address book, gaze settling on the Watcher. He seemed the most approachable of everyone she'd met in her book. She hesitated then texted him.

Do you want to come by for tea and cookies?

I do indeed!

She smiled at his reply, relieved, then texted Dusty.

I'll leave dinner in the oven. Have a good afternoon.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Kinda looks like Armageddon," Jenn's voice was quiet in his ear.

"Yeah," he replied, peering again through the binoculars.

He lay under bushes on a hill overlooking the resort area of the clubhouse with another Guardian. It was teeming with vamps, and he'd set up several Guardians around the country club to surveil the activities.

"We can put the explosives around the perimeter," another Guardian said to his left.

"They were seen stringing up motion sensors earlier. I'm expecting a report on their security later," Jenn replied. "I'll forward to you Jimmy."

"How many we got so far?" Dusty asked.

"We tracked three hundred that flew into Miami or Orlando. No way of tracking how many drove. Talon booked up all the surrounding hotels. He's got space for almost nine hundred. I think that's an optimistic count on our part."

"Two surveillance teams in place," Jimmy added. "We're tagging everyone we can. Talon's a no show though."

"To pre-empt or wait," Jenn murmured.

"Set up something for tomorrow night," Dusty replied. "We'll start by taking out what's here and the warehouse where he's storing weapons. Precision strikes, Jim, none of that messy shit."

"Messy shit later, boss?"

"Yeah. I'd like nothing more than to round them all up into a stadium and wipe 'em clean. Toni, you gettin' all this?"

Dusty positioned the earpiece of his comms headphone better.

"Yeah, boss," Toni replied.

"Coordinate a plan to evac the humans from the hotels. Jimmy, rig them as well, just in case. I don't intend to take any prisoners. Jenn, I need to know where Czerno is staying, what his plans are."

"I've got a partial on that one," she replied. "You're not going to like it."

"Send me coords."

"Don't have to. He's in your condo building. Got there a few hours ago."

"Fuck," he breathed. "He knows I won't take the building down with all the humans."

"I got a plan for you," Jimmy said with a smoky laugh.

"Jim, Toni, Meet me at HQ. Darian, with me."

He closed his eyes and opened them, arriving to his favorite room in HQ, the war room. Three walls were covered with digital maps, the fourth with a blank projection screen. He'd used the excuse of HQ moving to Miami a year before to upgrade everything in the room. It hummed with electronics. Darian's eyes were huge. He'd not said a word most of the day, taking in Dusty's world with fascination.

"We gonna blow something up?" Darian asked.

"We are."

Jimmy appeared, Jenn his ride. Toni trotted down the stairwell leading to the main house. He flipped a switch to display an aerial of the country club on one wall and Dusty's condo on another.

"Evac and implode the building before dawn," Dusty said. "I want to make it uncomfortable for our friend here in Miami. It'll be a good distraction while we rig the country club and other hotels."

"I can do that," Jimmy said, a slow smile spreading across his face.

Dusty gazed at his condo building. He never considered anywhere home. Every few years, he had to move anyway; they all did, for security reasons. His condo was as Bianca had said, boring with no color and no character. He was rarely there anyway.

So why did he feel a twinge of loss at the order to send it up in flames? It had something to do with Bianca, with destroying where he'd started with her.

"Dusty, can I go to watch the building explode?" Darian asked, eyes large.

“No. We’ll watch it from here,” he replied.

“Jimmy, I’ll schedule the condo for 0530. That gives you three hours. Is that enough?” Toni asked, whipping out his PDA.

“Yeah, good,” Jimmy confirmed.

“Bring in the explosives teams to prep the country club and hotels. As soon as the condo goes up, have them start,” Dusty directed. “Jenn, start intell feeds every 30 minutes starting now. Toni, ready evacs, just in case. I hope to disrupt whatever it is they’ve got planned for tomorrow night. Everything needs to be ready, especially if the hurricane shifts to make landfall.”

“Got it,” Toni said and sat, logging into the computer at the table.

Jimmy jogged out of the basement war room, and Jenn disappeared.

“I’m glad I got the cat,” Darian murmured. “I hope you get him, Dusty.”

His words were hushed. Dusty didn’t have to ask who; he knew Darian’s painful history, thousands of years as a slave to the sadistic Black God. Dusty couldn’t kill him and didn’t expect to. If anyone could, it would be Darian while Damian was away.

He looked at Darian, recalling Sofi’s warning. Darian was excited and anxious, the mention of Czerno making his features darken.

“Darian, I wanna give you a new rule,” he said.

The Grey God rolled his eyes.

“No matter what, you will always, always protect your family first. Sofi and Bianca. You understand?”

“I know that one, Dusty.”

“At all costs. Even your own life. You will not fail them, even if you face Czerno himself.”

Darian looked at him uneasily.

“I promise, Dusty,” he said.

He understood Sofi’s concern. Darian was scared, unsure. He had no control of his own powers, and he’d not yet been tested in a confrontation with the man who enslaved him. Dusty didn’t know if a year and a half of his own mind was enough to erase thousands of years under the control of another.

He had a feeling the worst was going to happen, and the sense they wouldn’t all make it through the weekend returned.

“Toni, if at any time you feel the girls are in danger, evac ‘em.”

His XO looked up with a frown.

“You going somewhere, boss?”

“Not planning on it. Always good to have a backup plan.”

He glanced at his watch, suspecting where Bianca would be.

“I’ll be back,” he said.

He materialized in the common area of the newbie barracks, where Bianca lay on her stomach across the couch in front of the TV. Jonny was sprawled on the floor in front of the TV, asleep.

“Hey,” she murmured.

He sat across from her, elbows on his knees, watching her. She wore a t-shirt and shorts that revealed her shapely, soft legs.

“I’m mad at you.”

He smiled.

"You shouldn't have given Jonny a gun."

"He's a man now and a Natural," he replied.

"I don't like it."

"It's who he is."

She sat up and gazed at him, chewing her lip in a way he knew to be an indication that she was troubled.

"We'll teach him how to use it," he assured her, taking in her loose curls and large eyes.

"Something bad's going to happen, isn't it?" she asked.

"Why do you say that?"

"Someone told me."

"Sofi?"

She shook her head.

"Maybe," he said at last. "You're safe, though. The first sign of trouble, you'll be evac'd."

"What about you?"

"I fight. It's what I do."

Her frown deepened. She rose and approached, resting back on her heels in front of him, close enough for him to smell her musk and feel her heat. He touched her automatically, stroking the side of her face and tucking errant curls behind her ear.

"You came to say farewell, just in case," she assessed.

"Something like that."

He took her face in his hands and drew her to him, kissing her once again. She leaned into him, and he pulled her against him.

"Stay with me," he whispered. "And I don't mean to sleep."

She touched his face, then his hair, her cool power soothing him. He wanted to lose himself in her warmth and liveliness on his last night. Something bad was going to happen when he faced Czerno. Without Damian and Jule and with Darian not yet able to take his place as the Grey God, he wasn't going to walk away from this weekend alive.

* * *

She awoke alone. Stretching, she couldn't ever remember feeling so relaxed or deeply sated. Or sore. She grimaced. She wasn't surprised to find him gone. Her skin smelled of their lovemaking, her hair and the sheets of him. She recalled the unforgettable night with a deep flush, still feeling his hot mouth and touch branding her body.

She looked down at the swing of a necklace grazing her chest. It was too short for her to see clearly, and she crossed to the mirror on the other side of the room.

He'd given her his necklace, as if marking her as his. She fingered it and took in her glowing features. She was in one of the main rooms of the mansion and changed clothes, ravenous. Her phone vibrated as she trotted down the stairs, and she glanced down, smiling to see he'd texted.

Stay inside the gate.

Puzzled, she started to respond when someone rushed down the stairs by her. She recognized the petite blonde, who wrenched open the door and ran.

“Sofi!” Toni bellowed, tearing after her. “Stop, Sofi!”

Stay with Sofi.

This text came from the Watcher. Bianca jogged after the two, who raced towards a small crowd at the opened gate of the compound. Her breath caught as she saw Talon leaning against a black car.

The devil was with him.

“Darian!” Sofi cried.

The man was cowering at the gate-line, his wide shoulders hunched and his frame shaking. Toni snatched Sofi’s arm before she could reach him, then grabbed her as she neared.

“He can’t enter,” he said harshly, angry gaze on the devil. “Dusty’s wards keep him out.”

“They’ll come to me, my friend,” the devil replied with a small smile. “Won’t you Darian.”

The devil’s smile grew as his cold eyes took all of them and settled on her necklace. Bianca shivered and moved closer to Toni.

“I was a bit pissed this morning to have my condo blown out from under me and quite a few of my vamps vaporized,” the devil said, glancing down at clothing displaying signs of burns and plaster. “Thought I’d return the favor.”

“Darian, come here,” Sofi called.

“Stay where you are, Darian,” the devil replied, gazing at the blonde. “It’s been awhile, love. Ready to take your place?”

“You don’t want to do this, Czerno.”

“Between the two of you, I think we’ll have a good time,” he said, gaze returning to her. “Darian, bring me Sofi. Talon, shoot Toni.”

Toni pushed both women behind him, and Darian took a teetering step towards him. Darian’s eyes were glazed and still, his confusion clear. Bianca cried out in surprise as Talon unloaded on Toni. The Guardian staggered, and Darian took Sofi’s arm. Sofi dug her heels into the ground. Bianca grabbed her other arm, instincts screaming.

“Darian, no!” she shouted.

“It’s ok, *kiri*,” he replied in a mechanical voice.

He wrenched Sofi off the ground in a tight bear hug and deposited her on the other side of the gate line. Before the blonde could run, the devil snatched her.

“Get in the car, Darian,” he ordered.

The man hesitated before obeying.

“Now for you,” the devil said, facing her.

Bianca backed away. He held out his hand to Talon, who plunked a gun into it.

“Run, Bianca!” Sofi ordered.

The devil shot her twice, thrice, and Bianca stared, horrified, as the blonde dropped.

“Now, you have a choice to make,” the devil said with a calm smile. “You can step out here and heal her, or you can stay there and watch her die.”

Bianca looked fearfully at the pregnant blonde, whose blood already soaked her clothing, then at the waiting devil beside her.

Stay with Sofi.

She took one step forward, then another, throwing herself onto the ground beside Sofi. She touched her once before Talon wrenched her up. Talon all but threw them both into the backseat while he climbed into the driver's seat. Darian sat, hunched and unresponsive on the far side.

The car jarred her as they launched away from the gate. Bianca righted herself then carefully straightened the blonde, panicked by her pale features. She placed her hands on her face and winced as Sofi vacuumed her power as Darian had. Awkwardly jammed in the back seat, she sneaked a look at the occupants in the front of the car and withdrew her phone.

I need you.

Her eyes watered as she typed it. She sent the text then tucked the phone in her pocket, praying they could track her with the tag Toni placed there. The thought of Toni lying in the driveway made her chest tighten. She looked at the unconscious woman in her lap then twisted to look up at Darian.

His golden gaze was down, turmoil on his face. He folded, face turning crimson and gold eyes swirling madly. He clutched his head and gave a small moan.

"Darian," she whispered.

Her hand trembled as she touched him. His body sucked healing power from her. The lingering sickness in his body fled, gone for good.

"No!" Darian roared.

The world around them stopped. The car, the traffic, the wind. He fought himself, groping with unseeing eyes for the crumpled oracle. She pushed herself away, uncertain which terrified her more: Darian's meltdown or the fact he'd stopped the world in its place.

Talon's jaw was lax, his eyes wide.

"What the fuck did you do?" he demanded, the first to break the terse silence.

She could hardly breathe, as if the air in the car was running out. The devil's cold hazel eyes flared and turned black.

The devil reached over to Darian, placing a hand on his red forehead. The door tore off, and Darian was flung out, his grip around the oracle tight enough to take her with him. Before they hit the pavement, they disappeared.

"Get outta the car," the devil ordered.

She couldn't move. Talon reached in and snatched her, dragging her out.

The world was dead. There were no sounds, no movement but theirs.

"Pop - "

"Don't ever call me that," the devil snarled. "You're the son of some whore I don't even remember!"

Bianca righted herself. Talon released her, wired and uneasy. The devil looked around

"Can't you fix this?" Talon demanded and began to pace.

She looked into the car beside them at the smiling family frozen in place. Afraid of what she'd feel, she resisted the urge to touch them.

This can't be real.

Though his eyes were still dark, the devil appeared calm. He struck off in one direction, back the way they'd come.

"Pop, what the - "

“Shut the fuck up. Bring the girl. We’re going back to the portal.”

Talon appeared as baffled as she felt. He hesitated then snatched her arm, following the devil as he walked down a sidewalk full of frozen figures.

“Fucking creepy, fucked up ...” Talon mumbled then stopped.

He withdrew a small case with a needle in it and several small vials. She watched him shoot up. At once, the tension eased from his frame, and his eyes went glassy. He returned the case and grabbed her again.

She brushed one of the frozen women trapped in time on the sidewalk, surprised to feel her warm skin and the brush of the wool suit. Cold fear spiraled through her.

What kind of creature could do this?

* * *

“How many people in the village?”

“They call them towns in this century,” Iggy corrected him.

“Boss, you can take Iggy back any time you want,” the disgruntled Southeast Ohio Sector chief grumbled. “About two thousand.”

“Two *thousand*?” Dusty echoed.

“Everyone’s contained. We’ve got patrols around -”

“Speck doesn’t understand that if even a *mosquito* leaves the town, there’s no way we can stop the spread!” Iggy cut in, agitation clear as she fumbled to open the case to her iPad. “Let me show you the virtual re-enactment of what happens if -”

“Don’t need to see it,” Dusty said. “Iggy, give me a minute with Speck.”

She left in a huff, and Dusty crossed his arms against Ohio’s fall breeze. Speck’s sector headquarters was abuzz with activity; the only private place to talk was the back porch overlooking a field of knee-high winter wheat facing a sun setting too early. His breaths hung in suspension with his thoughts as he mulled the fate of two thousand souls.

“I’m not the idiot she takes me for,” Speck said, looking from the screen door Iggy slammed closed to Dusty. “How do you wipe out an entire town down to the rats without anyone else ever finding out?”

“You make it look like an accident. Assassinations 101,” he replied, though he’d been thinking the same. “We did it all the time in the Dark Ages. More of a challenge nowadays.”

Speck shifted away from him, a response Dusty was accustomed to after thousands of years as Damian’s lead executioner.

“Can’t exactly blame this one on contaminated water, boss,” Speck said a little uncertainly. “The mad scientist is right - we can’t let anything living out of this town.”

Speck waited. He sensed the man as large as he was dark wanted to pursue but didn’t.

“I need a drink,” Speck said. “You want anything?”

“Vodka. Straight, no ice.”

“I’ll bring the bottle.”

Dusty waited until he heard the door close behind him before he moved. He rubbed his neck, unable to shake the feeling that something was wrong. Rather, that

something else was wrong. He doubted anything could make this fucked up situation appear less unsettling than it was.

He shouldn't question what to do. He loved clean-up duty, the mass execution of vamps.

This was different. This time, innocents had been infected. He had no pity for those who chose to become vamps. He had little pity for humanity in general.

But two thousand innocent people, down to the family dog.

There was one solution: wipe everything off the map. The fallout was less important than ensuring the safety of everyone outside of the town.

Bianca healed a newly turned vamp.

He closed his eyes, feeling her warm breath and soft skin against his again. She smelled musky and sweet. He could imagine her horror when she discovered what he planned.

For the first time in his life, he wondered what solutions other than execution would work.

"Hesitating for a fucking woman," he muttered.

The sense of ill-boding returned. He expected these days to be his last, but he'd give the order to decimate the entire state if it meant humanity as a whole survived. He pulled his phone free, realizing neither Toni nor Darian had checked in for a couple of hours. The Grey God might have realized his suicidal wish and was lying on the bottom of the ocean by now.

"Dusty."

His hackles rose at the Grey God's hoarse, broken tone. He turned.

Darian was in the shadows, dressed in his workout gear despite the cold weather, splattered with blood. His golden eyes blazed from the shade of the farmhouse like two candles.

"Dusty," he repeated.

Dusty saw his mouth working, the glint of moonlight off the tears on the Grey God's face. His air was beyond agitated. Moonlight and darkness alike bent and danced around him, surrounding him in a hazy metallic shimmer.

"What'd you do, Darian?"

"I don't know!"

A hard knot formed in his stomach as he took in the blood and dirt.

"Where are the girls?" he asked in a low, level growl.

"Sofi ... she's safe," Darian said and stepped from the shadows to pace. "I did something bad, Dusty."

"Where's Bianca?"

Darian hesitated, and fury filled Dusty. He closed the distance between them, his own tightly controlled god-power unfurling. His power hit Darian at the same time he did, and the Grey God crumpled, pinned to the wooden deck.

"Safe!" Darian gasped. "Dusty, she's safe!"

He paused, bristling with lightning and rage at the thought of Darian betraying their family.

"You have 60 seconds to tell me what happened, Darian. I'll kill you here. I don't give a fuck what you are if you hurt either!"

Darian wept.

“Fifty seconds.”

Darian spoke in hoarse, sob-punctuated words. Dusty was prepared for the worst, but Darian’s story left him speechless. His rage simmered, yet he couldn’t maintain the rage when faced with the sudden need to think.

“You broke two divine codes!” he shouted. “You left Sofi and Bianca to fend for themselves!”

Furious, he shoved himself up from the crying god and paced.

“But they’re safe, Dusty, I promise. Sofi is in the netherworld, and Czerno knows he can’t hurt Bianca or -”

“You left Bianca with the Black God! On what fucked up planet have you been living, Darian?! Have you learned - no, do you *remember* nothing about loyalty, integrity, and family? I knew you were fucked up, but this, *this* -“ he blew out a breath. “You’re no brother of mine, Darian. I don’t know what the fuck you are.”

“I can fix it, Dusty. I can fix it,” the Grey God swore, large body seated and hunched as he held his head. “I promise.”

Dusty rubbed his face, wanting nothing more than to kill Darian where he sat but knowing only the Grey God could un-fuck what he’d done.

He’d spend so long hoping Darian became what he once was. His gaze returned to the Grey God, who looked both pleading and tortured.

The Darian he’d known was gone. The shell of a man before him was too weak to ever measure up to Damian’s noble brother.

“Get away from me, Darian,” he said.

“Dusty, please! Sofi made me come. I can fix the village!”

“I don’t give two shits about the village, Darian! Bring Bianca back!”

“I can’t, Dusty. I’m not strong enough!”

“You sent them to that temporal dimension! Bring them back.”

“I don’t know how.”

“They’re *stuck*?”

“Czerno can bring them back.”

“And kill Bianca when he does,” he said. “You fucked up good this time, Darian! I can’t fix this one.”

“Czerno ... I know he can ... “ Darian struggled visibly. “He and Damian can use the portals. I think ... no, I know they have to be able to, if I can.”

He felt sick to his stomach and wondered how Bianca had become so much a part of him in so little time.

“I can fix the village,” Darian said again.

Dusty didn’t care about the village. He wanted Bianca back. He wanted Darian dead.

He didn’t want to die this weekend.

The last was a thought he never expected to have. He’d never had a reason to live if the immortality thing didn’t work out.

“Dusty?” Darian asked. “Are you gonna kill me?”

“After this weekend.”

“I deserve it.”

“You do.”

Darian sniffled and stood.

"Can I save the village first?" he asked in a sad voice.

"I don't give a fuck what you do. When dawn hits, I'm wiping every trace of that village off the planet. You wanna solve both our problems, be there when I do!"

He stalked away, sensing how hurt Darian was. The Grey God didn't follow, but Speck - who'd been lingering in the shadows - did. Dusty strode to the small gym behind the main house, stripping off his jacket and shirt as he did so.

"Boss," Speck called, trotting after him. "You want us to prep a clean-up crew?"

"Do it."

The sector chief remained in the doorway, watching as he unleashed his fury against a punching bag. Dusty fought it until his anger subsided, unable to shake the sense of fear. He'd last felt the cold sense of impotent rage when he was a child and his family was slaughtered before his eyes.

Before the physical and divine worlds split in the Schism, he'd been a petty slave in a world of gods and demi-gods. His family's master flew into a rage one day, when they'd refuse to turn over his sister, sweet Trinka, to his harem. He'd ordered them all slaughtered. Somehow, he'd survived and was auctioned off like an animal with several other children his age. Damian saw him and bought the herd of them, freeing all but him. Damian's mother, an oracle as crazy as she was powerful, told her son about the slave child with blue eyes who'd one day change the path of fate.

Breathless, Dusty closed his eyes and leaned against the punching bag, unable to shake his first memories of Damian or his last memories of Trinka.

He'd trade all the powers Damian granted him after the Schism for his sister's life. He'd trade them for Bianca. He couldn't lose the only other woman he'd ever loved.

"You need anything, boss?" Speck asked.

Dusty straightened, the pain of his memories subsiding.

"Send Iggy in. I need to know how this happened."

"Vampire pigs," Iggy replied from the doorway.

"Talk to me, Iggy," he said and wiped his brow.

Speck tossed him his shirt, which he donned as he listened.

"They infected the animals in the town with the vamp disease. Animals bit the people. People bit others. You tracking, boss?"

"I get it. No cure?"

"Nope," Speck said.

Iggy hesitated, and Dusty's gaze sharpened.

"Boss, I heard you all turned a vamp into a human," she said. "Can you bring him here?"

"Why? We've never been able to transform a vamp into a human in thousands of years."

"How do I explain it to you ... " Iggy said with a thoughtful pause. "They're vamps but they haven't completed initiation."

"So?" Speck asked.

"So, Speck," she said with an exaggerated sigh "they're more like humans with some nasty disease that *might* have a cure and not like vamps, who are just good for pushing up daisies. As long as they haven't completed initiation ... well, I don't know. Can you bring me one?"

"One what?"

“Someone infected. And the guy you turned back into a human.”

Dusty exchanged a look with Speck.

“We’ll bring ‘em, but I’m leveling the place at dawn,” he warned.

“At least let me look at a couple of things. This *is* why I’m a Natural, you know.”

“Hurry.”

“Boss, you can have my room if you need to rest,” Speck said as she darted past him.

“Thanks, but don’t -“

His phone rang. Speck crossed his arms and waited.

“Watcha got, Jenn?”

“You remember a few days ago when we were talking about Talon and Czerno?”

“That’s been every day for the past month,” he said with some impatience. “And for now, they’re contained.”

“Hold that thought. You remember how your condo building came down this morning an hour before you planned?”

“Yeah.”

“It wasn’t Jimmy,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, it wasn’t Jimmy. He rigged the building but didn’t blow it. I thought it was strange, since Jimmy’s the last person who would veer off course from your orders cuz you let him blow up whatever he wants and he doesn’t wanna lose that. We started looking into it and sure enough, it wasn’t Jimmy.”

“Then who was it?”

“My money’s on Talon.”

“Makes sense, since he knew I was there,” he muttered.

“No, boss, he didn’t. Czerno sent the vamps to your condo building for Bianca, not Talon. Talon was after Czerno.”

He rubbed his forehead.

“Talon can’t kill him.”

“Jonny can. Found out he’s got some rare Natural gift,” she said with some excitement.

“What?”

“You’d be proud, boss. I put some hurtin’ on a few sources and am down to one now. Talon wasn’t after Bianca - he’d been after Jonny. Bianca was a bonus he didn’t expect until Jonny told him about her.”

“Stop,” he said. “Whatever you found, keep it to yourself. No more conversations on the phone. Bring Jonny here. Now.”

There was a pause, then a curious,

“Sure, boss. I also checked on Toni. He’s in bad shape, but he’s alive.”

“My only piece of good news today.”

He hung up and lifted his chin at Speck, who obeyed the silent command to leave. Dusty looked around the gym, sensing it was beyond time for him to admit he couldn’t prevent what was coming. He flipped through the address book in his phone and dialed.

“You almost waited too long.”

He braced himself and turned to face the grandfatherly figure in the corner with a smile and emerald eyes.

“No bullshit, Watcher, or you can watch me fuck up the rest of the universe,” he warned.

The Watcher nodded.

“How can Jonny kill Czerno?”

“It’s an interesting time to be here,” the Watcher said. “Oracles, healers, many of which haven’t been seen since the ancient times. In the ancient times, there were also God-slayers, men of a special kind who were bred and raised by the Gods for immortal wars. They possessed a unique gift, the ability to kill an immortal without being an immortal. The Gods raised them like sheep, because men were more plentiful and easily replaced than immortals. The trick was to breed men who could kill immortals without ever allowing them to become immortals themselves. If they did, their gift was elevated and what made them dangerous to immortals then made them dangerous to the Gods. The White and Black Gods never allowed the slayers to become immortal, no matter how bloodthirsty they were.”

“Jonny’s a god-slayer?”

“He is.”

“Talon wanted him to kill Czerno. But he couldn’t take over, if that’s his goal.”

“There’s a way he could. There’s a transfer of power from the moment a Black God dies and his successor takes his place. If Talon killed Jonny during that split second of vulnerability, before Jonny gained Czerno’s powers, he could become the Black God.”

Dusty felt cold inside.

“Talon wouldn’t have Czerno’s restraint,” the Watcher added quietly. “As sick as Czerno is, he largely preys on other immortals.”

“Talon would wipe out humans as fast as he could.”

The Watcher said nothing, and Dusty stared hard at the wall.

“Damian - “

“I can’t allow Damian to be here in the presence of a god-slayer,” the Watcher interjected. “You - and Darian - have to fix this.”

“Fix this?” he echoed, anger burning through him. “Darian is a fucking mess! He sends a human to the divine world, the Black God to some in-between place and you think he can *fix* anything?!”

“You have everything you need to make things right, Dusty, as long as you’re willing to do what you must.”

The Watcher’s grim words stopped his retort. He heard the soft voice again.

I’ll see you soon, brother.

“Whatever it takes,” the Watcher said. “Talon can’t become the Black God.”

Dusty said nothing, mind racing once again.

“I’ve said too much,” the Watcher said. “Sofi is safe. If Darian can’t return her, I’ll bring her back after the battle is over. The Black God will have to bring Bianca back; I can do nothing to undo what Darian did to them.”

“Can you stabilize Darian?”

“You’ll have to trust him.”

“Fat chance,” he retorted.

“You have no one else to help you, Dusty.”

Dusty's phone rang, and he glanced down. When he looked up, the Watcher was gone. Mumbling curses, he answered the phone.

"Um, boss, that Darian guy is trying to walk straight into the town."

Dusty's jaw clenched until he felt the muscles tick. He felt a mix of fury at the mention of Darian's name and resignation. As pissed as he was, Darian was his brother. He'd sworn to Damian that he'd protect him. And if what the Watcher said was true, Darian would probably be the only one left standing at the end of the weekend.

Trust him.

Of all the coddling he'd accused Sofi and Bianca of doing, *he'd* been working hard to protect Darian from anything that might force him to grow into his powers.

"Let him go," he said softly.

"Boss?"

"Just do it, Speck."

"Ok, boss."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The lights in every house were on, the doors boarded up, and people somewhere were screaming. It smelled like the sewer system was overflowing. Darian felt like he was walking through a dream. His footsteps made no sounds, and the infected humans staggering through the streets walked *through* him. He held up a hand, fascinated to see through it to the car parked in front of him.

Zombie vampires!

He almost chortled at the ridiculous thought, wishing someone was there with him to tell. He'd felt funky for awhile, since Bianca fixed his face. He touched it with some trepidation, fearing it'd changed back into the scarred maze that was him for so long.

He was normal, aside from the weird buzz at the base of his skull that'd kept him awake every night since Bianca touched his face. It'd gotten worse after she touched him in the car. Her healing magic zapped him hard enough almost to right his head. He didn't understand it, except that Bianca's touch finished what Sofi started.

At least he was in much better shape than the zombie-vamps around him.

He willed himself solid, surprised when it worked. The zombie-vamps didn't rush him as they would in a real horror flick; no, they ran away. He felt compelled towards them, as if whatever it was he was supposed to do had to be done with one in front of him.

Fix them like Bianca fixed you! She'd told him when he dumped her in the divine world.

"I'm not a healer, Sofi," he complained again.

The back of his skull buzzed harder until he wondered if his scalp was about to spin off and fly away. He rubbed it, vexed, and spotted one zombie-vamp moving slower than the rest. Uncertain but determined, he strode to the teenage girl and snatched her arm.

She stared at him through listless eyes, the gaze of a human awaiting only the final step in the transformation process.

"Ready, set, heal," he said.

The zombie-vamp blinked and leaned away. He let her go, perplexed.

“Sofi?” he called, wondering if her mind-talking would work from the divine world.
“This isn’t cool, Sofi.”

He felt panic bubble within him as he looked around. Dusty was going to kill *all* these people if he didn’t figure out how to fix them. And then, Dusty would kill *him*. So he deserved it, after all the trouble he’d been, but these people didn’t!

Darian grabbed another zombie-vamp and tried to heal him. Then another and another and another. When he was too pissed to think straight, he slammed his hands into the boards covering a store’s front door.

“I’m fucking worthless!”

He threw himself down and squeezed his head, furious at his own weakness.

He couldn’t resist Czerno. He couldn’t save Sofi. He couldn’t do *anything*! He wasn’t a god - he was a freak of nature everyone else had to take pity on because he was a fucked-up weakling!

Listen.

He froze at the distant voice in his head. It was faint, but sounded like the Watcher’s.

“Listen to what?”

He waited for more. Nothing came.

Listen ... listen ... listen ... he slapped his forehead with his palm in a rhythmic beat, waiting for some sort of divine inspiration.

He was divine! What the hell on this stupid planet was too hard for a *god* to fix?!

He pulled out his phone, texted Bianca and waited, willing the message to make it to her in the in-between world where he’d accidentally sent her.

Darian lowered the phone, losing hope once again, when it vibrated.

I don’t understand.

Overjoyed at her response, he sat cross-legged, hunched over the only lifeline the thousands of innocent people around him had.

I mean, how do you heal people, like step-by-step? He typed.

There was a pause, then a longer response: *I’m not sure. It’s just something I do. I put my hand on them and I wait for their body to tell me what’s wrong. And then I fix it.*

He lowered the phone thoughtfully.

*You *listen* to them?*

Yes, I suppose, she answered. Sometimes they know how to fix themselves, like you did, and I just give you my power and let them do it. Sometimes, I have to figure it out. Hey - can you get me outta here? Talon’s gonna kill me before long.

He bounced to his feet.

He can’t kill you in that dimension, he assured her. *Gotta call Dusty before he blows me up. Will chat later.*

She waited for more, puzzled, but nothing came. Bianca hid the phone as Talon glanced over his shoulder again to ensure she followed. The Black God had been marching for what felt like hours, through the city towards the beach, and now, down the beach. Talon hauled her along until he, too, wore out and she dropped behind both.

The time on her phone was the same as when they'd entered this strange world. She stepped over a tourist in a bikini on the silent beach. No one else would attempt to catch rays with the clouded sky and massive storm clouds in the distance!

Not even the ocean moved. The air was heavy and fragrant, the wet, solid sand near the ocean welcome after her initial attempt to keep up in the sugary sand higher up the beach.

It was the worst place she'd ever been, worse than any horror movie, worse than any nightmare. The world was dead. They'd been there what felt like a day, and yet the sun was in the same position as when they'd been thrown into the world.

Talon didn't even bother to wave for her to move faster but instead turned back around. The Black God was so far ahead, she wouldn't have been able to see him except that he was the only other thing in the world moving. She sneaked a peek at her phone, agitated that Darian hadn't been at all concerned with the situation he left her in. She didn't feel any better knowing Talon couldn't kill her here! She hadn't been able to get through to anyone else and wondered if there was some magic trick he'd done to reach her.

She didn't realize the Black God stopped walking until the speck in the distance grew larger. Exhausted, she reached them some time later, praying for a break or a snack or something!

"Try to keep up, love," the Black God said in distracted irritation. "Time doesn't move here, but it does in the real world."

"It does?" Talon echoed. "It's gotta be well past midnight! I've got important shit to do!"

"Shut up, idiot."

Talon's flush grew darker beneath the red of exertion on his face. His eyes flashed, and she willed Darian to respond to her. If the Black God was anyone else, Talon would've killed him several times over by now!

She held her breath, not wanting to draw the attention of either creature. They glared at each other for a long moment before Talon gritted his teeth and lowered his gaze in reluctant deference.

"Where we going, father?" he asked.

"Don't call me that, shithead. You see the black clouds?"

She followed his pointing finger with her eyes.

"The portal is in the center."

Talon looked as surprised as she felt.

"Without a boat? We're *swimming*?"

"Fucking idiot."

The Black God shook his head and strode towards the still water. She sensed Talon was about to rebel, as was she at the thought of swimming after so exhausting of a walk.

The Black God climbed a wave as he might a grassy knoll and picked his way across the choppy waters near the beach, walking atop the transparent shallows towards the dark depths beneath the black clouds. Her mouth dropped open, and Talon murmured a curse. They stared for a long moment, then Talon shoved her towards the water.

"Easy for a fucking god," he muttered. "Let's see how you hold up."

She went, curious and hopeful she *did* fall into the water and end everything right here!

The waves near the shore were like walking on rubber mats. Astonished, she stared through the shallows to the sand, shells, and critters below as she walked, admiring and uneasy with the changes in the terrain and creatures as the ocean grew opaque and deep.

She stopped at the edge of where the clear water dropped suddenly into impenetrable blue depths. Talon strode by her and slapped her on the back of the head, hard.

“Hope you can swim when this is over,” he snarled.

She rubbed her head and glared at him, watching as he followed his father in the direction where both sky and sea darkened into blackness. The still air became more charged the closer they got to the center of the storm, the sky darker. She avoided looking down, afraid to imagine just how deep the waters were or how far from shore they’d gone.

What would happen when the Black God righted their world? Would she end up at the bottom of the sea?

Dusty wouldn’t be there to fish her out as he had Darian. Her stomach dropped at the thought of him, and her eyes watered. She didn’t want to die; she wanted to be with him, even if only during the nights. He cared for her, but she didn’t think he’d ever let anything between him and his duty. Maybe that was why he didn’t date Jenn seriously.

If that’s all she got, she’d take it. He’s saved her brother, her, the world. No woman would ever be more than second to a man like that, but being the woman who was second in his world sounded better than anything else she’d ever wanted.

Talon barked at her, and she realized she’d stopped walking. Tired, she wiped her eyes, an ache fluttering through her at the lingering scent of Dusty on her skin.

Runner-up never sounded so good!

God, she was a mess!

The air grew chilled, and she stopped again. The frozen sea beneath her feet was the color of tar, the black clouds paused mid-swirl around a pop of blue sky in the storm’s center. Frozen in mid-air were fat raindrops, arching from a wind she didn’t feel.

The storm was beautiful and terrifying in its frozen fury. She climbed frozen hills of waves through the raindrops, surprised when they popped like tiny water balloons. Before long, she was drenched and chilled, her skin crawling from the bridled charge of the storm.

And still the Black God walked. Talon swatted at raindrops ahead of her, and she crossed her arms, shivering. Her eyes went to the angry clouds.

She did *not* want to be there when the storm awoke! The rain fell almost horizontal, and she hurried to follow Talon as he found a path among the black waves, many of which were taller than buildings.

They both lost their footing at the top of one wave and tumbled into a valley, bouncing against the rubbery trough.

“Fucking mortal shitheads! Keep up, or I’ll leave you in this dimension!” the Black God barked from atop another wave.

Bianca scrambled up, energized by the threat of staying in the creepy world. Talon shoved her back into the valley with a snarled threat under his breath, and she hurried

out of the trough again, breathing hard by the time she'd clambered twenty feet to the top. To her relief, the Black God stood in the center of the storm's eye, bathed in sunlight that touched nothing else.

While Talon was breathing as hard as she was, the Black God was barely sweating.

"What do we do now?" Talon asked.

"We wait."

"For what?"

"I need to be at full strength to send us back through the portal."

The Black God's eyes settled on her with a look that made her wonder why she hadn't just sat where she entered the world and waited for Darian to rescue her. He turned away, hands on hips as he surveyed the distant beaches. Talon threw himself on his back. She suspected the Black God thought her useful, or she'd be in pieces.

"We're not swimming back to shore, are we?" Talon asked the question she feared voicing.

"You both may want to get some rest," the Black God responded then started towards the dark waters.

"Where - "

"Shut up and stay here. None of us can leave without the others. If I could, you'd both be dead. I'll be back."

She moved away from Talon towards the violent waves, then sat with her back to a wave as high as her waist. Talon watched the Black God go. He didn't take his eyes off the god until he disappeared among the maze of waves. She watched him as well.

He ignored her. She wrapped her arms around her knees and closed her eyes for a brief rest. When she opened them, she lay on her side with her back to her protective wave. A form too slight to be the Black God stood beside Talon, speaking quietly. She wiped her eyes and started to sit, then froze.

It wasn't the Black God. It was a man too familiar to be a stranger with beautiful purple eyes, a small frame, and a face without emotion.

She closed her eyes, suddenly remembering where she'd seen the Watcher.

"I can help him," the Other said.

She twisted in her chair to see a man near the dark windows whose eyes were the color of her bright purple Easter dress.

"Are you a doctor?" she asked, wiping her eyes.

"You want to help him?"

She nodded.

"I can make it so he doesn't remember that you did this to him."

Her chin trembled as guilt flowed over her.

"You understand that medical treatment isn't free?"

She nodded.

"It will cost you something."

She stood to dig through her jeans and pulled out the stash of one dollar bills she'd been given for trips to the candy machine down the hall. She counted them with shaking hands.

"I only have four," she said with some dismay.

"I require more than that."

She looked up. His eyes seemed to swirl, around and around, changing from the color of her mother's tulips to a color almost as dark as the night. He wasn't like the other doctors. His voice wasn't kind. He had no emotions, like a man in a Halloween mask.

"I don't have more," she said, voice shaking.

"What else do you have?"

She dug through her pockets then looked around.

"I don't have anything else!"

The Other knelt in front of her. His face didn't look rubbery like a Halloween mask, but neither did he look normal. She took a step back.

"You have to help him," she whispered. "Please!"

"I will help him, Bianca. If you make me a promise."

She nodded uncertainly.

"You must keep this promise no matter what, or your brother will get sick and die. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"There is a man you will meet when you are older, a man who -"

"This is low, even for you."

She jumped as a hand clamped on the man's shoulder. Her eyes flew up to another man with eyes the color of their Christmas tree. He had Papaw's face, with wrinkles around his eyes and a kind smile.

"By divine code, you can't interfere," the Other said in a tone that made her shrink away.

"By divine code, neither can you."

The Other rose. The Watcher stepped between them, and the Other backed towards the window again.

"We're so much better than this, brother," The Watcher said. "Children are off limits."

"For your kind, Watcher. There are no boundaries for us."

"Divine code disagrees with you and your kind."

The Other looked at her, and she shrank behind the Watcher, understanding little except he was bad.

"The Grey God will destroy us all, brother. You can stop him here, now," the Other said with a look that made her snap her eyes closed.

"You're a fool led by a fool. Go, brother."

She held her breath and waited, able to feel the tension between them even with her eyes closed.

"He's gone, Bianca," the Watcher said.

The memory - always fuzzy - grew crisp, and surprise and hope went through her as she recalled the night that'd changed everything.

Her hand went to her phone. She lay back down, hoping they hadn't noticed, then rolled onto her other side.

If he's here, can you come here, too? She texted to the Watcher.

She waited.

I've broken enough Divine codes for the week. I told you not to leave Sofi, came the chiding reply.

I remember you both.

Is the Other there?

Yes.

This time, do as I say. When the portal opens, go with the Black God. Warn him about the Other.

She re-read the message, startled. A shadow crossed, and she snapped the cell against her body. The Black God shoved her on her belly and pressed his knee in her spine.

"Hand it over, or I'll break you in half then feed you to Talon."

She obliged, tensing as she waited for him to finish with her phone.

"Who is the other?"

She hesitated, and pain spun through her as the pressure of his knee increased.

"I don't know who he is! He came to me when I was a little girl, and the Watcher ran him off. I saw him with Talon!" she exclaimed.

"Describe him."

"A man with purple eyes."

The Black God growled low in his chest, an inhuman sound. He clamped a hand around the back of her neck and yanked her to her feet.

"Say anything to anyone else, and you'll spend eternity in the greatest agony I can create."

She managed a nod at the eyes that had grown darker than the sky. He released her and tucked the phone in his pocket. Dismayed, she shuddered from cold and fear. He said nothing to Talon, gave no trace he knew something was wrong. Yet she knew when his fury unleashed, he'd be as merciless as Dusty was with vamps.

I did it, Watcher. Not on purpose, but it's done!

"It's time," the Black God said over his shoulder.

Talon hurried over. The Black God ignored him and turned to her, a cold smile crossing his face. He held out a hand.

She shuddered to her core at the evil peering through his gaze, feeling very much like the devil was offering her a deal without telling her the price.

Heart quickening, she crossed to him and accepted his hand. Talon looked from the Black God to her, fire in his gaze.

She had no choice but to trust the devil.

* * *

It's time.

Dusty didn't remember dozing off but snapped awake. His sister's warning came an hour after he last remembered looking at the clock. He pushed himself out of bed and stood for a long moment, gazing out the window at the fields of winter wheat glowing in the moonlight. His light was off, a sign he'd been sleeping too hard to notice someone come in.

Two hours before dawn. He replaced his weapons and washed his face, feeling very much like this was to be his last day alive. His jaw clenched as he thought again of

Bianca, and he forced the thought of her away. He felt the loss already, a pain similar to the loss of his sister so many years ago.

He stepped into a hall with streams of Guardians preparing for the dawn raid. The warm farmhouse smelled of gun oil and breakfast. A form loitering against one wall straightened as he started towards the stairs.

“Dustin!”

He turned to see Jonny. The youth’s eyes were wide and bright, his skin flushed with health. Jonny stopped in front of him and stared. Dusty turned around and kept walking.

“Dusty, wait, I’m s...sorry. I just ... is B ok?”

“For now,” he replied.

“For now?” came the uneasy reply. “I thought she was here with you but when I got here, I didn’t see her. I started asking around, but no one would tell me, so I - “

“Jonny!” he barked.

“She’s my sister!”

He turned to see the young man’s face flushed this time with anger, his eyes glittering. The Guardians moved around them in the hall, and Dusty studied the young god-slayer. If the man before him was who the Watcher said he was ...

“I have a right to know,” Jonny said less forcefully.

“Come with me.”

He spun again and continued walking, aware of the anxious young man at his heels. He found Speck on the back porch, smoking a cigar while gazing at the glowing wheat fields. The dark sky stretched far overhead, no sign of morning yet visible.

“You don’t leave my side,” Dusty ordered Jonny. “Got it?”

“Yes, but - “

“Shut up.”

Jonny fidgeted but fell silent. Speck rolled his eyes in amusement, and Dusty paused beside him.

“Any word from Darian?” he asked.

“Nada,” Speck replied. “You think he’ll pull it off?”

“He’s gotta be good for something.”

Speck snorted.

“Heya, Jonny.”

At the husky female voice, Dusty turned to see Jenn fluff Jonny’s hair as she passed. She stopped beside him then indicated him with her thumb.

“He’s here. Wanna tell me what you’re thinking, boss?” she asked.

“I’m thinking Talon wants him real bad. Will have to take me out to get to him,” he replied.

“This kid?” Speck asked, looking Jonny over critically. “Can he even carry a gun?”

“I can shoot!” Jonny replied. “Real well. Any weapon I come across, I can master without even trying!”

“Good you have a talent, or your skinny hide’d be shit up a creek,” Speck replied, amused again.

“It’s a byproduct of his talent,” Dusty said slowly. “Jonny is a god-slayer, which means he can kill Damian, Czerno, Darian, as well as Jule or me. Talon made him into

a vamp. Bianca turned him human again, but she can't make him mortal. You're looking at the only known god-slayer in existence."

Speck stared, and Jenn frowned. Jonny looked at once horrified and surprised.

"I get it now," Jenn whispered. "We were right all along - Talon is usurping the Black God."

"Yep," Dusty said and glanced at his watch. "Everything set for tonight in Florida?"

"As much as we can. Will start evacs for our skeleton crew at noon. Most everyone has been evac'd by the state cuz of the storm swallowing up the levies, and we sent folks north. Dusty, there are more vamps than we expected."

"Not for long," he said. "I don't know when Talon and the Black god will reappear, but we need to be ready. Evac our folks out of HQ and southern Florida at dawn."

"Got it."

"Speck, check in on Iggy. Jonny, come with me."

He held out a hand. The young man took it hesitantly, and he transported them to the town, utilizing his god-powers to locate Darian. His skin and senses crawled with the sensations of being surrounded by vamps. He stayed his urge to unleash the hand cannons on them all and stood stiffly.

Darian sensed him and whirled, his eyes lighting up before he looked down. He was surrounded by the half-vamp, half-human creatures of the town and waded through them to where Dusty stood.

"I figured it out," he said before Dusty could speak. "But it'll take awhile. I can only heal them one-by-one, but Dusty, if I don't do it, then you'll kill everyone, and it's not fair when they're just innocent people. Please, please, please don't -"

"Show me," he said.

Darian hesitated then waved to someone. An elderly woman approached.

"The ones I fixed are all over there. This is Hazel. She's volunteered to help me round up the people and knows, like, everyone in town."

Hazel was human, and Dusty followed Darian's pointing finger to a hotel ablaze with light.

"You're taking care of the pets, too?" he asked.

"Yes, everything. I'm killing the rats and stuff. Maybe ... if you want to send in someone to help, then they can help me kill the bugs and rats? Oh, and I found where I think the lab was. Iggy asked about it, cuz she said we have to destroy it, too."

Dusty looked from Darian's hopeful face to Jonny's pale features. As if noticing him for the first time, Darian stared at Bianca's brother, an odd look crossing his face.

"I can leave Jonny," Dusty said.

"No," Darian said in a low growl.

"No?"

"No."

Darian had tensed, his gaze suspicious of Jonny. Jonny looked confused and uneasy, while Darian looked like he was ready to pounce.

"God-slayer," Darian added. "He has to stay with you. It must be so."

For a moment, Dusty was reminded again of the strong, confident leader Darian had been, long ago.

“Very well. I’ll send others,” he said. “But I want you to move the cured people out of here then level the city and the lab. I’m not taking chances that mosquitoes or whatever remain.”

Darian’s gravity lifted.

“I saved everyone?” he asked, hopeful once more.

“We’ll know when everything’s done,” Dusty replied.

“You won’t destroy the people?”

“No.”

“You’re not mad at me anymore?”

Dusty gave him a sharp look, and Darian looked away again.

“You’re in charge of this operation,” Dusty said with some effort.

“Oh, my god! Realy?!”

“You’ll be held accountable if anything bad happens,” he reminded him. “Clear the people, wipe out the town.”

“Do I get minions?”

Dusty gritted his teeth, feeling much like he was setting a child with a credit card free in a candy store.

“Nevermind,” Darian said hastily.

“I’ll send a team to help you. They’re not minions, Darian, they’re Guardians. Treat them with respect and take care of them. You need to learn a few more things on your own. I’m entrusting you with this operation.”

Darian’s eyes glowed. He straightened.

“I can do it, Dusty!”

He responded with a curt nod, hoping the Grey God was right. His gaze turned to the east, where yellow lined the horizon.

It’s time.

“You remember what I told you about family?” he asked.

Darian’s face fell.

“I won’t fail again, Dusty, I promise. I tried to make it right.”

“I’ve gotta return to Florida. If you fail, I’ll send Jonny here after you.”

Darian glared at the confused young man and said,

“I promise, Dusty, I’ll take care of the girls even after the Black God kills you.”

Johnny gasped, but Dusty nodded, aware his fate was sealed.

* * *

Some strange poison ran through the Black God’s body. It was familiar to her, but too much a part of him to heal. She glanced up, troubled. If she didn’t know better, she’d say whatever it is, it felt like what lingered in Jonny’s body.

Talon was glaring at her, ready to attack when the Black God launched them through the portal.

Raindrops splattered against her head. Startled, she looked up. The clouds far above were starting to swirl with hypnotic slowness, the rain beginning to fall again, the sea beneath their feet rippling and shifting beneath the rubbery surface.

The Black God ignored Talon as the vamp snatched his arm to retain his balance, instead wrapping his free arm around her and clamping a hand around her forearm. His

skin was colder than snow, the power radiating off him like an arctic breeze. His eyes turned black, fathomless, and she knew whatever creature possessed the human body was losing its powers.

Despite her fear, she wrapped her arms around him. Thunder roared, lightning exploded. Rain pelted her. The wind snapped free of its bonds, nearly tearing her from his grip with its first gust.

The world exploded into life, sucking the air from her lungs and drenching her.

And then the sea swallowed them. She breathed in nothing but water and panicked, clawing at the arm wrapped around her.

He's going to kill me.

She kicked and fought, unable to escape his grip, when the cold in-between world swallowed her. It freed her atop a pile of sand near the boardwalk with the angry black sea roaring behind her. Her body strained to heal itself and the Black God, whose touch sucked her healing power fast. He released her, and she rolled, coughing. Water, sand, and hair stung her vision and lungs. Through blurred eyes, she saw the ocean poised above them and to either side, angry waves kept at bay by whatever magic the Black God employed.

He was the first to his feet and dragged her up the beach, his own body telling her he was spent. He shouted at her, fury on his face, but his words were lost to the storm. She struggled to get her feet beneath her before she finally found her footing in the sand. He refused to release her, instead pushing her into a painful run up the beach, over the sandbags, and out of immediate danger.

She dropped, exhausted. It was then she noticed Talon wasn't with them.

Fury was on the Black God's face as he stared down the storm, ignoring the gale tearing at his clothing. She dared not stand on her own with the winds strong enough to knock her over.

The Black God moved at last, turning to her with his fathomless eyes. She looked away, wanting nothing more than to disappear! He snatched her arm. She felt another drain, as he took another swig of her power, and coldness, then silence.

She fell when he released her. They were in someone's living room. She thought him gone until he knelt before her, phone outstretched. His eyes were closer to normal, swirling black spheres.

"Call him, love."

She inched away at the inhuman tone. He snatched her neck and shoved the phone at her.

"Now."

"Who?" she gasped.

"Your Watcher."

Confused, she concentrated on gripping the phone. He released her. She hit the speed dial button.

"It wouldn't be fitting for the Black God to call you."

She looked up. Czerno's head was twisted to face a familiar form, newly appeared.

"No, it wouldn't," the Watcher said in a tone more subdued than any she'd heard.

"You know what I can do, Watcher."

She was even more unsettled to see the Watcher's reluctant nod. The emerald eyes stopped sparkling, and his face grew long.

“There must be a Black God,” the Watcher said. “Only one.”

“My time isn’t up!”

“You started down this path when you enlisted the help of the Others. When you forsake divine code, it has a way of forsaking you.”

“Yet you warned me,” the Black God stated.

“I did.”

“It wasn’t you influencing Talon.”

“The Others betrayed you and chose Talon to replace you. I cannot let that happen, lest the balance sway permanently, and all is lost,” the Watcher said.

“No one will *replace* me!”

A thick silence fell. The Watcher looked at her. The Black God was bristling.

“Then keep the healer with you,” the Watcher said with resignation. “She has the power of ancient healers to return to life that which otherwise wouldn’t live. What’s been set into motion can’t be stopped, but you at least have a chance if you have her.”

“Get the fuck outta here!”

Her mouth was slack as she watched the Watcher disappear in a wink of light. She’d wanted to yell at him to save her, and he’d all but guaranteed the Black God would enslave her!

Czerno snatched the phone from her.

“Stay here.”

He disappeared. She sagged, horrified and fatigued. Looking around, she realized why the tiny living room was so familiar.

It was her father’s.

She pushed herself up, cold inside and out. Without even asking where she lived, the Black God brought her home. The apartment was identical to when she’d left it a week before.

Bianca stood, wobbled, and straightened. The cluttered apartment where she’d spent two months this summer was inviting and warm, yet foreign. She couldn’t explain the sense that she didn’t belong despite the pictures of her and Jonny on the walls and all her things sprinkled around the room.

She made her way to the notebook near the desk phone.

Aaron.

Her eyes went to the wall clock. She was supposed to meet him in a few hours. Such a normal thing seemed ... weird.

With a frown, she wondered why she’d never seen it before, why she wasted seven years trying to make things work with someone who couldn’t hold a candle to the man she was meant to be with.

Her hand went to her throat, where Dusty’s necklace dangled.

She belonged with him, even if she was second rung to his war against bad guys or even if he was never able to devote himself to any one woman at all.

She was doomed to fall for men unable to commit to her!

She rubbed her face and wobbled towards the bedroom, determined to change before the Black God returned for her. A few minutes later, she sat in the living room, granola bar clenched between her teeth while she tied her shoes.

She felt him appear, like the AC was suddenly set to high.

“Why don’t I show you what I’m going to do to that little shit of a brother of yours?” he asked with a slow smile and a gleam in his eyes that made her breath catch.

The Black God was covered in bright blood. She winced as he snatched her arm, and familiar coldness descended over her. When the coldness released her, she stood in the middle of a large conference hall. The storm beating against the windows had shut down the power; the hall was lit by candles and makeshift torches. She looked around.

One buffet table sagged beneath the weight of five kegs while another held food wrapped in cellophane and tinfoil. The room was otherwise arranged as if for a wedding with two sets of neatly lined chairs on either side of a long aisle. Where the altar would’ve been were two long buffet tables lined with weapons.

She shivered, not wanting to know what Talon planned.

Czerno slammed open the doors at one end. She started to follow and tripped, then stifled a cry. What looked like a leg lay in her path, and a pool of blood and more mangled flesh nearby indicated where the Black God had gotten the blood covering him.

She covered her mouth and hurried away. The Black God strode through the quiet buildings until he reached a long hallway overlooking a courtyard packed with hundreds of vamps and several bonfires. She slowed, unwilling to join the throng of bloodsuckers. Instead, she pushed open a door leading to a small balcony overlooking what would’ve been a large garden, prior to the vamps arrival.

The first story of the building was overflowing with vamps. She wondered what Czerno planned on doing, until she saw him stride out of the building towards the center of the vamps.

“Gotcha, bitch!”

The vicious whisper was accompanied by a thick hand clamping around the back of her neck. Talon hauled her away from the balcony.

“You left me in the fucking ocean! When I’m the Black God, you’ll be the first human to suffer like no one else ever has!”

CHAPTER NINE

Dusty studied the scenes on the screens of his command center, agitated at the weather hindering their ability to deal with Talon’s vamps. Radar and thermal image coverage was decent, indicating the vamps were mainly gathered in one spot. He took in the various scenes, to include the local news, which blasted photos of the black skies and mounting waves of the tropical-storm-turned-hurricane.

The Black God was back, which meant Bianca wasn’t far from him. It took effort to repress his anger and his desire to tear outta there to find her.

“No word on Talon,” Jenn said from beside him.

“The Black God’s there?” Jonny asked. “What about B?”

“Shut up, kid,” Dusty replied. “How many vamps?”

“A few hundred, close to a thousand.”

The young man drew away from the table. Jenn touched the earpiece tucked in her ear, frowning.

“And so is Darian.”

“Darian?” Dusty echoed.

“Hey, boss, the storm blew out our explosives work,” Jimmy’s scratchy voice came across the intercom. “We can blow half the place up and send in a team to finish off the rest.”

“Wait one,” Dusty said and whipped out his phone.

He prepared himself for the worst and dialed the Grey God.

“Don’t yell!” Darian picked up after the first ring. “I have to, Dusty! You’ll understand!”

“We’re gonna blow the place, Darian! Get the fuck outta there!”

“Dusty, you can’t! Bianca’s here!”

“What happened to taking care of Ohio?” he asked after a pause. “Shouldn’t you be saving those people so I don’t blow them up?”

“I will, I will. Iggy found a temporary solution to stop the spread, and I sealed the area around the town. Nothing can get in or out. Trust me, Dusty!”

Dusty wanted nothing more than to order Darian back to Ohio to finish one mess before dragging them into another. Instead, he drew a deep breath and said,

“Find Bianca. I’ll be there soon.”

“Talon just showed up,” Jenn said quietly.

It’s time.

Dusty hung up the phone and gazed at the screens.

“Jimmy, throw everything you’ve got at the target in 30 minutes,” he said into the intercom. “Jenn, keep Jonny away from that place and safe.”

He checked his weapons and pulled off his jacket, clipping as many magazines to his belt as he could.

“Got it. The thing blows at 11:30.”

“What’re you doing?” Jenn asked, watching him closely.

“Whatever I have to,” he replied. “Watch the kid and get word to Damian tomorrow morning.”

“Dusty, just send in a team to pull her out. We’ve done this a million times!”

“Not this time, Jenn. Talon and Czerno are about to face off, and Talon can’t be the one to walk away from there.”

“At least hold off on - “

“Jenn!” he said, gripping her arms. “I don’t have time for this shit! Watch the kid, and make sure nothing - and I mean *nothing* - leaves that place alive! If I can’t do what I need to in 30 minutes, we’re all fucked!”

Jenn appeared torn but gave a nod. Dusty released her, strapped in the last weapon, and looked around.

“Where the fuck’s Jonny?”

“I’ll take care of it. You’re running out of time,” she said tightly. “He can’t go anywhere anyway.”

Dusty gave a curt nod and closed his eyes. Coldness, then the sound of the storm beating the building around him. The conference hall was dimly lit, and he immediately smelled the blood of a recent kill. His senses thrummed with presence of so many vamps. Drawing a weapon, he walked through the hall and into a corridor. He sensed

Darian and Czerno distinctly, the level of power the gods possessed distinguishable despite the massive presence of vamps.

He moved through the building towards Darian, finding him on the ground floor away from the vamps. The Grey God was pacing, his golden eyes glowing in the dark room.

“Are you even trying to find Bianca?” Dusty snapped.

“I know where she is.”

“This place is gonna blow soon. You need to leave, Darian.”

“No, Dusty!” the Grey God said firmly. “I have to be here, same as you.”

Something in his voice had changed. The teenage whininess was gone, replaced by confidence.

“Where’s Jonny?” Darian asked.

“With Jenn at HQ. He’s too chicken shit to kill you, Darian.”

“Not worried about him killing me.”

“Where’s Bianca?”

“You don’t wanna go after her yet, Dusty.”

“Just answer the fucking question!”

The Grey God gave a familiar, noisy sigh and turned, pointing out a window. Dusty’s gaze followed his finger, where Talon and the Black God stood a part from the others under the protection of a small verandah. Bianca hung back from both, kept in place by two vamps on either side of her.

She was pale beneath her warm color with dark circles beneath her eyes. He studied her, feeling as though he was seeing her for the first time and the last.

She was the most beautiful being he’d ever seen.

If he weren’t damned to die this night, he could see himself with her forever. His gut twisted at the idea of never again seeing her bright smile, holding her, smelling her sweet scent.

But if he didn’t act, no one walked away from here alive, even her.

He looked away and steeled himself.

“Take this,” he said, handing Darian the phone. “If you let anything happen to her, I swear to the Original Beings I’ll haunt you from the grave for the rest of your life!”

Darian accepted the phone.

“What’re you doing?” he asked in a hushed voice.

“I believe in you, Darian. Always have,” Dusty said, slapping him on the shoulder. “Don’t fuck up.”

“Dusty, we can just blow everything up,” Darian said, a note of panic in his voice.

“We will. You’ve got 27 minutes to get the fuck outta here before Jimmy levels this place.”

Dusty walked away, drawing his weapons. He strode through the vacant hallways to the verandah doors. Rain and wind battered him. The vamps around Bianca whirled, and he raised the hand cannons, blasting all four before they reached the door.

Bianca gasped as he strode by. Talon drew his weapons, but the Black God smiled.

“Damian’s assassin,” Czerno purred.

Talon’s nostrils flared, and Dusty lowered his weapons.

“My beef isn’t with you, Czerno, but with your pet,” he said.

“Fuck off, Dusty. Pop, blast this fuck!” Talon snarled.

“Looks like a convenient match-up between demi-gods,” Czerno responded. “Do your own dirty work, *son*.”

Talon’s sneer faded. The Black God held out a hand, and Dusty took it, feeling the cold of transporting from one place to another. They appeared in the conference hall, whose seats were filling with vamps eager to see Talon’s show.

Czerno had left Bianca, giving Darian the opportunity he needed to snatch her and run.

At least, he *hoped* that’s what Darian did. He glanced at his watch.

24 minutes. He needed to draw this out as long as possible, so Jimmy’s explosions took out Talon and all the vamps if he couldn’t.

“You’re too young to remember, but in my time, we didn’t have guns,” he said. “I don’t give a shit how I have to kill you!” Talon replied. “You want knives, I got knives. You want swords, I got swords. Either way, you’re dead.”

Dusty stripped off the clunky modern weaponry, keeping his sword and knives. He removed the bullet-proof vest and the body armor on his arms and legs to help free his movement.

Czerno was gone. He looked around, bristling, then saw the Black God reappear with Bianca.

“Fucking Darian!” he muttered.

“It’s cool, bro,” Darian said from nearby. “I’m here to make sure you don’t fuck up the universe.”

“I don’t give two shits about the universe!” he said, turning to face the Grey God.

Darian’s eyes glowed and swirled. They were pinned on Czerno, his power once again bending light and dark around him.

“Just fight, Dustin,” the Grey God said in a hushed voice. “I’ll take care of everything else, I promise.”

The Grey God looked possessed. Dusty studied him a moment longer, recalling his conversation with the Watcher. Czerno gave the Darian a warning look, and Dusty stepped onto the dais, where Talon awaited him.

At this point, he had no choice but to trust Darian.

Bianca watched in horror and awe as the two men fought. The brutal display of strength and speed was unlike anything she’d ever seen. Swords clashed and spit sparks while their feet danced too fast for her to follow. Talon fought with fury, his eyes glowing red, while Dusty fought with a calm, controlled intensity.

Several times she’d thought Dusty had the upper hand and could’ve killed the leering vamp, and several times, he’d deferred, once with a glance at his watch. Lightning tore across the otherwise silent room, where vamps stood enraptured by the battle before them.

Darian hadn’t been able to look away from the Black God, whose hand was clenched with painful tightness around her forearm. She quelled her rising panic. She hadn’t seen Darian since he dumped her with the Black God in the alternate dimension, and she didn’t like the way the air around him shimmered, at once dark and light. While he stood in Dusty’s corner, she wasn’t convinced he’d chosen a side.

Talon stumbled, and Dusty froze rather than pounced, his head whipping around. The Black God tensed simultaneously, and Darian’s eyes glowed brighter. They stared

towards a hallway too dark for her to see into. Talon lashed out at Dusty, and she gasped as he barely blocked in time. The two continued, but the Black God snatched her by the neck and moved out of the candlelight, into the darkness.

Whatever was in the hallway distracted Dusty again, and red splashed across his forearm as Talon's blow grazed him.

"Dusty!" she cried.

Czerno squeezed her neck hard with a shake, and she gasped as he cut off her air. Across the room, Darian shifted closer to the battle, one hand rubbing the back of his head.

Lightening split the ceiling with a boom, frying several vamps in the crowd. The force of the strike knocked everyone off their feet and deadened the firelight, except for the torches in the corners. The storm roared in through the ceiling, hail and water pelting her body while thunder deafened her.

Still, Czerno didn't let go of her. He pulled her to her feet and against the wall, where the rain was less harsh. He'd stopped draining her healing power, and she felt a change in his body. He was weak, a type of weakness she couldn't heal.

In another flash of lightening, she saw a form dart from the hallway, around the stunned crowd, towards her. The scent of burning flesh filled the hall, and she shuddered beneath the onslaught of rain and wind.

Dusty and Talon rose, Talon taking the chance to launch himself at Dusty. She gave a strangled cry as Dusty twisted out of reach, the sword slicing through the back of his shirt. Sparks soon flew again.

Some vamps raced out of the hall while others crowded around them, the Black God forgotten. Still others torched the wooden chairs until a fire blazed in the back of the hall.

On Dusty and Talon fought. Dusty's shout to Darian was lost in another burst of thunder. He pointed to his watch.

Suddenly, she was flung to the wet floor. Surprised, she twisted in time to see a tall form hack again and again at the Black God, whose own knife was planted in the attacker's chest. Lightening revealed Jonny's face.

"B!" he shouted, dropping beside her. He pulled the knife from his chest, tossing it on the still body of the Black God. His face was drawn and pale, his eyes wild.

"Jonny!" she flung her arms around him.

His body drank her healing power. She squeezed him tight.

"I got you, B, don't worry!" he said, breathing hard. "I got you!"

He shuddered as her magic worked on him then wobbled to his feet, taking her hand.

"Dusty's gonna blow this place up! We gotta go!"

"Blow it up?" she shouted above the storm, careening into him as he maneuvered around a fallen table.

"C'mon, B!"

She stopped him, heart wrenching.

"Jonny, we can't leave him!"

"B, we have to go! Now!"

"No, Jonny, I - "

He pulled her towards the dark hallway, staying close to the walls. They ducked into the hall, and she pulled away.

“Jonny, please! We have to - “

“Bianca!” he said, shaking her. “Come with me, *please!* We don’t have much time!”

His attention was drawn over her head, and his mouth went lax. She turned to see the hall in disarray, a mist darker than night slowly creeping through the crowd. Talon and Dusty no longer fought, instead searching their surroundings wildly in the light of strobing lightening and the fire at the far end of the hall. Talon knelt where Czerno had fallen then rose, roaring in anger. His gaze turned towards the hallway.

Darian was a black hole for light and dark, both swimming around him until he appeared encapsulated by them. In the distance, she heard the familiar, unmistakable sound of an explosion. The dark mist slid to the floor and crept towards them. Vamps, chairs, the floor - all disintegrated at its touch.

“I don’t have much time,” Jonny whispered. “Run to the end of this hall, then go out the double doors to the left. It’ll take you outside to the west lawn. Run, B, and don’t stop.”

He dropped her hand and started back to the hall.

“Jonny? Jonny!”

“B, go, please!”

He pushed her further into the corridor, and she watched, horrified when he broke into a run, headed straight towards the dark mist.

Talon grabbed him, his movement blurred. She rushed forward, screaming when his dagger fell twice, thrice, five times.

Jonny fell and didn’t move. Talon stood with a roar.

Suddenly, Dusty was there. He knocked Talon off his feet, and the two began their battle anew.

“Jonny!” she shouted, running to drop beside him.

Talon had torn his chest and abdomen open. Jonny’s eyes were open and blank, his face pale.

The ground beneath them shook, and suddenly, the world slowed and fell quiet. She looked up at Darian a short distance away, watching his dark-light power streak around the room. Raindrops fell as if in slow motion, and lightening stayed, brighter than the midday sun.

The vamps moved as if in slow motion. Dusty, Talon, Darian, Jonny, and she alone weren’t affected. She touched Jonny’s lifeless body, recalling the Watcher’s words.

“Come back to me, Jonny,” she whispered, crying as she placed her hands on his face.

She concentrated as hard as she could, listening for his body to speak to her. At first, there was nothing. She concentrated harder. A tiny cry and a spark reached out to her. She channeled her energy towards it, and it roared awake, thirsty and demanding.

Jonny breathed. She sat back, dizzy with effort. He sat with effort and looked around.

“Jonny! I can’t hold this!” Darian bellowed. His face blazed red from exertion, his eyes glowing brightly.

Her brother rose, helping her to her feet. The world continued in its delayed movement, and they turned to watch the battling duo. Talon went down hard. Within seconds, his head flew across the room.

She watched as the mist swallowed his body and paused at Dusty's, creeping up his boot without harming him. It moved up his leg. His body shook, and he flung his head back to the sky with a hoarse shout.

"Dusty!" she whispered, stricken.

The earth trembled, and her legs crumbled beneath her. She felt Jonny's intent gaze on her as he knelt.

"None of us are gonna survive this!" she cried, looking up at the sky.

"I love you, B," he said and hugged her.

"I love you, Jonny."

He kissed her forehead and launched to his feet. Startled, she watched him dart towards Dusty. Jonny snatched the sword Dusty used against Talon and plunged it through the frozen demi-god.

Dusty fell, the mist swallowed Jonny, and Bianca screamed.

Darian shouted, staggering. She crawled and clawed her way to Dusty, looking wildly for her brother. She collapsed on top of him, her healing powers flowing unabated.

"Bianca!"

The Grey God snatched her in one arm and Dusty in the other. The slow motion world around them snapped into real time, throwing them against a wall. Explosions ripped the ground from beneath them and blinded her.

Familiar coldness and silence washed over her before the quiet was replaced by the storm's furious bellow.

Darian staggered, dropped her, and landed hard on his backside. She looked around, disoriented. Her ears still rung from the explosions lighting up the sky.

"Jimmy's ... real good ... at that," Darian managed, gasping.

"Jonny," she whispered.

"He's ok."

She twisted to see the Grey God, whose ashen face and dulled eyes were trained on the still body beside her.

"He escaped?" she rasped.

"Sorta."

"Where is he?"

"He's ok, I promise. Can you fix him?"

She looked at Dusty's still body, feeling overjoyed and fearful. With effort, she rolled him onto his back. He was alive and unconscious. His body drank what healing she had to give. She brushed water from his face and traced a finger along his jaw.

"Damian's gonna be so pissed," Darian said to no one in particular.

"Dustin!"

The familiar voice was carried on the wind. She squinted towards the blazing buildings to see a dark figure half-trotting, half-limping towards them. Jenn reached them and bent at the waist, gasping.

"Don't even try ... to help," she griped at Darian.

"I didn't know you were here," he said with some chagrin.

"That little shit Jonny made me bring him then knocked me out. Where is he? He needs an ass beating!"

"He's ok."

"Whatever happened drained all my power," Jenn said. "You?"

"Kinda used up all my resources and then stole everyone else's. Figured everything'd turn out ok," he said with a weak shrug. "Looks like I was right."

"You are a shithead! Didn't stop to think we might be in the middle of helping when you sucked us dry? Gods, I don't know what might've happened if I'd been in mid-transport or some shit! Not to sound like Dusty, but you gotta learn some self-control! Who knows what the f-"

Darian grumbled as Jenn berated him.

Bianca listened, numb. Her hands rested on Dusty while her gaze remained on the burning clubhouse. She waited for Jonny, her gut twisting in fear.

* * *

"Trinka," he said, kneeling in front of his little sister.

"Hi Dusty," she murmured.

She flung her arms around him, the sweet smell of innocence and softness of her body making him melt. Gods how he missed her!

"I brought you something," she said, holding up her tiny, balled up fist.

He held out his hand, and she deposited a small trinket in it. He recognized one of the orbs she'd played with. The orbs resembled marbles with colorful lights that danced. He'd given her more than one as a child.

"It's so you don't forget me."

"I've never forgotten you, Trinka."

"Yes, you did, Dusty!" she said in as stern of a voice as a ten year old could muster.

"You brought me here to lecture me, little one?" he asked with gentle gruffness.

"You died, Dusty. I just wanted to say hi before you left. I miss you."

At the mournful note in her voice, he hugged her tightly.

"I miss you," he whispered.

"I want you to be happy."

"Very hard when I'm there and you're here," he said with forced lightness.

"I'm there, too! I'm always there!" she said stubbornly. "And you're not happy. But now you will be."

He hadn't thought himself un-happy; he'd never thought about it at all. He was content with his life, and yet, at her words, he remembered what it was like when he truly was happy. Long ago, before her death.

If he let himself, he'd feel that again with Bianca.

"You have to go," Trinka said with some sadness. "You have my plaything. Now you won't forget me!"

He squeezed it, not wanting to let her go.

His first vision that of Bianca's wet, pale face with dark curls stuck to her cheeks. He felt completely depleted of his power, the sense of being fully human again returning. He'd felt similar when the Black God's powers crept through him, stripping his demi-god powers in preparation to give him something more.

Jonny. Trink.

Dusty's memories righted themselves. He sat, surprising Bianca, who wrapped her arms around him. He almost dropped the orb in his hand.

"I thought I lost you!"

"Poor excuse for not following my rules," he grumbled.

Darian looked like shit, a stone wall propping him up. Jenn was hurt and pissed, and the woman in his arms shaking from cold and fear. He gazed at the distant blaze, the scent of burning vamps carried on a wind along with the rain.

He looked at his watch, satisfied to see it was past dawn despite the storm-blackened sky. Bianca's cool magic ran through his body, repairing all but his exhaustion. He held her, never imagining anything could feel so right despite the rain and cold. Carefully, he shifted her and placed Trink's orb in his pocket.

"Uh oh," Darian whispered.

He felt the Black God's presence and released Bianca. He stood. A tall form stood halfway between the fire and them, flanked by two vamps.

"Jonny!" Bianca cried, seeing the man as well.

He caught her arm as she launched forward. She looked up, eyes bright.

"I didn't lose either of you!"

Dusty looked at Darian, who frowned. He took her hand, his other pulling his remaining knife free. They moved towards the three. Jonny looked healthy and rested, his dark eyes swirling, his clothing dry and neat despite the storm. He motioned the vamps away.

Dusty stopped a safe distance from the Black God, sensing Bianca's confusion. Jonny held out a hand, and Dusty reluctantly let her go. She closed the distance between them and hugged her brother.

"You're *him*, aren't you?" she whispered.

Jonny nodded and smoothed her hair from her face with a gloved hand.

"I wronged you and had to make it right," Jonny's voice was coldly monotonous but soft.

"I forgive you, Jonny. I'll always love you. Will you still come to papa's grave tomorrow evening?"

"I will," Jonny said then looked to Dusty. "Tell your king I will abide by the divine code, but that I have a duty to perform. You *will* take care of my sister."

Dusty gave a nod of agreement. The Black God released his sister. She stepped away from him. Jonny turned and walked away, disappearing after a few steps. Exhausted, Dusty took a silent Bianca's hand and led her back to the others.

An odd ring punctuated the rumbling storm. Surprised, Dusty turned to see Darian pull his cell from a pocket. By the Grey God's cringe, it could only be one person.

He held out his hand, and the Grey God tossed it to him.

"Damian!" Dusty greeted the White God.

"So ... what's up?"

Dusty smiled, then chuckled, relieved.

"Jule and I were transporting back. Kinda felt like our power short circuited. Dropped me in ... not sure where, but Jule thinks he's in Ireland. My batteries are low - think I can transport in an hour or so. Jule's shit outta luck," Damian continued with

forced calmness. “The fucking Watcher just popped in with a furious Sofi who refuses to talk to me. What did Darian do this time?”

“I’ll tell you everything when you get here.”

“That bad?”

“I missed you, bro.”

Damiam snorted. The phone beeped, and Dusty glanced at it, not surprised to see his other brother and Damian’s commander of the Eastern Hemisphere, Jule, on the other line.

“See you in a few. D out,” the White God said.

Dusty waited to hear Jule’s voice, never imagining how happy he would be to hear from either of his brothers again.

“There’s a man on the corner with a sign saying the world is going to end, but the sign’s dated last year,” Jule said. “Any fucking idea what that means?”

“I’m going on vacation,” Dusty replied.

“Good call. Looks like I’m on an involuntary one myself,” Jule said with a warm chuckle. “Say hi to Darian. Tell him I got a new tattoo. Oh, and I look forward to kicking his ass.”

“Will do. Safe travels, bro.”

They weren’t any closer than they had been, but the sound of their voices made him realize how alone he’d really felt the past two weeks.

And how fortunate he was to have people who cared for him. His eyes found Bianca, who stood shivering in the rain, staring towards the fire, as if waiting for Jonny to reappear.

“Jenn, looks like we need a ride. And comms to Ohio. I need to know if the infected town is still under lockdown. Looks like Darian took out everyone’s power but Damian’s.”

“I’m on it,” the pissed Guardian replied and tugged a phone free. “If I wanted to be a fucking mortal, I would be!”

“I think I can transport,” Darian said as he pushed himself up.

Dusty looked at Bianca, not wanting to send her away before talking to her. His gaze caught the movement of a few vamps that had escaped gathering around the edges of the fire.

“Take Bianca home then come back for us,” he said.

She didn’t respond to his words. Darian moved sluggishly towards the shivering woman. Dusty watched her until they disappeared. Jenn met his gaze, and he looked again towards the fire.

“I think you need to be somewhere else,” she said. “Why don’t you let me take care of Ohio?”

He clenched his jaw, torn between his heart and his duty. He reached into his pocket to wrap his hand around the orb.

“I *am* capable, you know,” Jenn said and crossed her arms.

“I’ve never walked away from a battle,” he said with some difficulty.

“You have a reason to now.”

He said nothing, one hand going to the chest wound she’d healed.

* * *

She *hoped* Dusty's direction wasn't as farewell-ish as it sounded. When she opened her eyes, she was distraught to see the cozy living room of her father's apartment.

It was where she belonged, now that she'd helped those that needed it and lost her brother.

She felt crushed.

"Maybe tomorrow ... would you ... you know," Darian said.

"Peanut butter?"

He nodded, concerned gaze on her face.

"Sure," she said, forcing a smile. "And maybe you can bring Sunny back, too."

"Yeah."

"Thanks, Darian."

He waited. When she moved woodenly towards her bedroom, he disappeared. She paused in the hallway to gaze at a picture of Jonny and her from the previous summer. He'd been wearing his vampire gear and refused to smile, but she'd wrapped her arms around him and beamed.

Even then his gaze was haunted, as if he somehow knew his fate.

She shivered and shrugged the sense away. He was alive, after all, and there was some good to him for wanting to make things right.

She'd lost her father and her brother. She'd hoped not to lose the man she loved as well.

"Peanut butter," Darian hissed.

She turned in time to see Dusty glare hard at the Grey God, who took the hint and left. Dusty was bloodied and drenched, his clothing torn from his battle with Talon. He remained every bit the noble Greek prince with his commanding blue gaze and chiseled features.

"Shouldn't you be saving people in Ohio or something?" she asked, crossing her arms.

"I am where I belong," he said with his unflappable confidence.

Any resistance she might have mustered melted at his words. She flung herself into his arms, gratified when he squeezed her hard.

"I owe you one for bringing me back from the dead," he whispered into her hair.

"Yes, you do!" she replied in a small voice.

"I'm sorry I couldn't spare you or Jonny from all this shit, Bianca."

Her heart somersaulted.

"Rule number 5: you are mine for all eternity."

"You're the most unromantic man I've ever known," she said, a laugh bubbling free. "I'll agree, if I won't be second rung to your duty or other women."

"Where the fuck did those come from?" he asked.

"I've had bad luck with men."

"Gods. No, woman, you won't be second rung."

"Ok, then, I have some rules for you," she continued.

He eyed her.

"Rule one: I get to decorate your apartment next time. Rule two: Sunny is coming with us. Rule three: you will eat three square meals a day and sleep every night with

me, because you couldn't take care of yourself if you tried. Rule four: I want to try to help turn vamps into humans again."

He snorted.

"Rule five: Jonny is still my brother. Tomorrow is the one year anniversary of our father's death, and we made a pact a few months ago to go there every year at the same time. I want to go every year, peacefully, without any gunfights or whatever."

She stopped and waited.

"Yes to the first four," he said. "The last will require some discussion with Damian. He'll have to talk temporary truces with the Black God."

She looked up at him, surprised at his easy agreement.

"Now, you wanna get outta these wet clothes or not?" he asked.

She smiled in response, needing his touch.

* * *

. A team of Guardians lined one road on the small country cemetery while a team of vamps lined the opposite road.

Two figures stood between the two lines in front of a headstone.

"Your brother-in-law's the Black God," Damian said with a snort.

Dusty glanced up at the sky, where the clouds had gone from black to slate. The rain had stopped, and the landscape around the graveyard was dotted with reflective pools.

He met the White God's golden gaze. Damian's silver-white hair was braided down his back, his thick body causing him to sink two inches into the mud.

"Kinda fucked up."

"What's fucked up is the fact none of us can use our power," Dusty replied. "And Jule's stuck overseas."

"Whatever the Watcher did to keep us there is preventing me from going back," Damian said with a frown. "Hate those little bastards."

Dusty didn't say what they both knew, that Darian's attempt to save the world broke something they didn't know how to fix. None of the Guardians, save Damian and Darian, had their immortal powers, though the Naturals seemed unaffected.

"What's worse is they want to use our backyard as their warzone. Thank the gods they picked a fool like Talon," Damian continued.

Both their gazes returned to the two figures talking quietly in front of their father's grave.

Poor Jonny.

Dusty didn't think he had an ounce of sympathy in him, but he couldn't help wishing he could spare Bianca's brother the hell that came with being the Black God. Jonny's penance for betraying his sister would last an eternity.

"Shit happens, bro," Damian stated softly, reading his thoughts. "We got a war to fight and women waiting for us. Darian won't stop talking about Bianca's cookies."

"Darian's grounded 'til further notice. When he finishes clean-up in Ohio, he's been instructed to count the stalks of wheat in the field outside Speck's farmhouse and not return until he's done," Dusty growled. "Cookies are absolutely forbidden."

"Good thing Bianca sent him off this morning with a bag full."

"Fucking women."

They were quiet, watching the siblings talk. Both were dressed in black, the Black God pale and stoic and Bianca smiling sadly while a stiff breeze whipped her curls around.

Her brother was alive. It was something. That he was the Black God was another issue he and Damian didn't know what to do with. Jule would remember the last Black God's transition, but Czerno had been the Black God since long before Damian's birth.

"We're going on vacation. I left you a mess to clean up in Ohio," he said.

"The whole world saw that go down," Damian said with a sidelong look at him. "You could blame the explosions and shit down here on the hurricane. A little harder in Ohio."

"Just one massive gas leak," he said with a shrug. "Shit happens, bro."

He slapped the White God on the arm and moved towards the two figures, holding his arms out to the side of his body to keep the vamps across the cemetery from blasting him.

The Black God turned at his approach, Jonny's brown eyes now black. They traveled past Dusty to Damian. He gave a nod of greeting, then spun on his heel and strode towards the awaiting vamps.

Dusty gave Bianca a moment. She knelt beside her father's grave to place flowers, then rose and turned.

Her smile lit up his day. Her eyes were watery, and she crossed to him, sinking into his arms. He breathed in her familiar scent, her curls tickling his face.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she whispered.

"Let's go home, *kiri*," he replied.

She took his hand. They walked towards the White God and the Guardians. He felt the Black God's piercing gaze on him.

Good-bye, Jonny.