



Tess Williams

Love Sworn

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Smashwords Edition

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CHAPTER ONE

Adele

“Rachel, where are we?” I asked, in a fairly panicked, somewhat squeaky voice.

My sister stepped away from her place beside me—where she’d been holding her hands over my eyes—and gestured to the building ahead. “A nightclub of course. Ta-da!” Her introduction fizzled with my flat return expression.

Okay, maybe I was just hoping it was flat; maybe it was really horrified.

Whatever this “nightclub” was, it was around a lot of other ones, and dark, with neon blue and purple lights and a lot of people.

And a lot of people.

“I can’t go to a nightclub. I’m...”

“This is a special one,” interrupted my other sister, Shauna, coming back from parking the car. “They let in eighteen-year-olds.”

I scoffed. “Which, if you will remember, I’m not yet.”

“In a week,” dismissed Rachel. I could tell my attitude was starting to bring her down, and my maroon-haired, fun-loving, sister—who’d decided on a faux-fur rimmed coat this evening—did *not* like being brought down.

I took another wary glance at the club—hoping I didn’t look like I was wearing a wince. “Well, I’m not dancing,” I finally said.

Rachel cheered, grabbed my arm, and pulled me across the street. “We’ll see about that.”

The steps leading up to the entrance were strange. It felt like we were scaling the side of a mini pyramid; high flame torches rose up to the left and right.

Shauna and Rachel talked about something job related while I took the moment to readjust the outfit my sister had made me wear. Somehow—thankfully—she’d let me keep jeans, but my shirt was a strange blousy thing, and my hair was blow-dried into waves that made my regular matted crinkles much longer. It took conscious effort not to rub the mascara on my eyes; I put a finger up just to try and lift a little away.

“I.D.,” said the man at the door. It was funny how much he looked like a “bouncer” should in my head.

My mouth dropped open in panic; he was holding a hand out to me. My sisters had no need to show theirs—they were twenty-three and twenty-five—they stepped between us confidently.

“She forgot her I.D.,” Rachel said.

The man just lifted a brow. Unimpressed.

“Oh, come on. It’s her birthday, that’s why we’re here. She really is eighteen.”

Rachel was hanging on my arm. Like it would help if she proved I was cuddly.

“Guys, let’s just go,” I mumbled when he didn’t respond. A few couples eyed us standing there, and I rubbed my arms uncomfortably.

“No,” Rachel whispered back, giving Shauna a look. “*Shauna.*”

“We should be on a list,” Shauna said. “Name’s Sinclair.”

The bouncer looked us over once more, then grudgingly turned to the doorman a little further inside. “Hey Matt, do you have a Sinclair on there?”

“We’re on a *list*?” I asked intently.

“Matt” nodded back. “Top order. Looks like friends of the boss.”

The bouncer reared his head in surprise.

“Why are we on a list?” I continued.

Both my sisters gave me a face.

“Alright, I guess you guys are free to go. Sorry about the delay.”

“No problem,” said Shauna, ushering me ahead of her.

Rachel patted his back as we passed. “Keep up the good work.”

Seconds inside, it was crazier. Loud. So loud. There were bodies everywhere—on all levels of everything. Staircases. Tiers of dancing floors. Mostly people danced on the upper levels while the whole bottom floor was for lounging, with circles of couches and strange decoration. A bar of course. Had I mentioned it was loud?

“Shauna, why are we on a *list*?” I repeated. “How did I get in?”

“...owns it,” she answered; or tried, but I hadn’t heard the first half of what she’d said.

“What?”

“Lo-la!”

“Your boss?”

She nodded. She wasn’t paying attention to me; her eyes were scanning the room. Rachel was already half-dancing beside us.

“Oh...”

“Come on, Adelle,” she said. “You’re just trying to stall.” Then she pulled me into the mayhem while I tried to argue—until I realized that she may have been right and I was subconsciously stalling.

After soda, food, failed attempts at getting me to dance, and *more* failed attempts at getting me to dance, my head was pounding, but I thought I was doing a pretty good job keeping it together. A few friends and cousins “happened” to run into us there. Which somehow led to singing happy birthday around a table.

I *was* honestly trying to embrace the whole scene, but...clubs just weren’t my thing.

“Do you guys know where the bathroom is?” I asked my sisters skeptically. In all directions I looked there were just more ornaments, dancers, speakers, and bars.

“Second floor, to the left just after the stairs,” Rachel answered, humming to herself.

“Come here often, do you?” I asked, unable to keep from wondering what dad would think. Of course I was the only one who still lived with dad. Shauna and Rachel had an apartment together near school.

“Chase likes it,” she shrugged.

“So does James,” Shauna complained. “What’s with them?”

“Well, I think it’s fun,” Rachel added.

I started walking away—or rather I was *pushed* away by an onslaught of random walking people—before I could hear their comparison on significant others. It was difficult to listen to anyways. My two sisters were all but married and I was and always had been alone.

“Scuse me,” I mumbled, when someone almost knocked into me going up the stairs. It happened twice more and I responded with a similar apology.

The third time I just groaned, then lost balance and nearly slipped backwards on the metal steps.

“Adelle?”

I looked from the hand that was steadying me to the boy that had just said my name. I knew him.

“Jake?”

He grinned. “Hey.”

“Oh, ah...” I took my hand away. “Hi.”

He scanned the stairs around me, then adapted a condescending expression. “What are you doing?”

It took a second for me to gain enough clarity to answer; when I did, I had to half-scream it thanks to the pounding base of the music.

“My sisters took me here. I’m celebrating my—”

“No, no, I know that,” he said, waving a hand and eyeing a girl walking down the steps beside us. “I meant the stairs. You’re going backwards.”

“I’m what?”

He nodded to stairwell parallel to ours, on the opposite side of the room—the one on which everyone was going up. Then he nodded to the few people scattering this one—going down.

My face burned red.

“You always were slow,” he told me, leaning in. “But don’t worry, in an endearing sort of way. Where are you trying to get to?”

“Um... the bathroom,” I answered, uncertain of how to respond to his...insult? Right?

He took my hand and started pulling me down the steps. “I’ll take you.”

Whether I wanted him to or not—I didn’t really—Jake drug me through the crowded floor and up the other side. It was much easier with him—or should I have said *for* him. He was adept at weaving. It only made it *harder* for me though, because then I was compelled by my outstretched arm to push through.

A lot of people said hi to him as we passed. And he yelled something to the bartender from the staircase—in a brutish tone, I noticed.

By the time we got to the quiet hall preceding the bathroom I just wanted to leave. “Well, bye. Thank you,” I muttered.

His brow instantly narrowed. I ran off.

“Jeez.” I went to stand in front of the mirror of the inexcusably elaborate bathroom. With fountains, colored lights, and foamy soaps.

Jake. Just the topper to this evening; probably my sisters had invited him like everyone else.

I’d known Jake since elementary school. He’d been alright then, but since about fourth grade on to twelfth, he’d completely ignored me. Which made sense—he was popular, wealthy, the son of a politician—I was unsocial, middleclass, and my dad ran a modest antique shop. I’d never minded because I didn’t like Jake much. The one fatal problem in this scenario was both my sisters’ obsession with needing to fix me up with someone.

I splashed water in my face and twisted my dark blow-dried hair into a messy bun. *I’m glad I never have to go through one of these eighteenth things again.*

When I walked out, I thought I was free, but Jake was waiting in the hall; on the phone.

Maybe he's not there for me, I told my flustered self and tried to walk by.

He put a hand out to stop me, then seconds later clicked his cell shut. "You're running off quick."

"Rachel and Shauna are waiting for me."

"So you've said. I think I still deserve a chance to wish the birthday girl happy birthday."

I searched his abnormally blue eyes as someone passed us. "How do you know it's my birthday?"

"Well, it's not really, right?" he drawled, tone low and humored in a way that bothered me. "That's why you need my mom to get you in?"

"You mom...?"

"She owns it, remember?"

I looked around. Then remembered what Shauna had said about me getting in because her boss owned the club. Her boss, Lola. As in Lola, Jake's mom.

"Really it was me that got you in," he said—bragged. "I pretty much run this place."

"You *do*?" I couldn't hide my surprise. He'd only gotten out of school a few months ago; I'd graduated early.

"I know, pretty amazing, right." His eyes wandered to a group of people behind me.

I took the moment to look him over. I decided he hadn't changed much since school. He had a button-down dress shirt, loose at the collar, well-polished nails, high-lighted hair. "Yes, that's very *'cool'*," I said, "but I really need to get back to—"

"Let's go," he interrupted. "I have something for you."

Instead of pulling me back out towards the crowd, he pulled me down the hall, up a short flight of steps, and into a room that gave a glass-screen view of the entire club. There was only one person inside of it besides me and Jake. He was eating chips and sorting papers on a small desk in the corner.

"Chris, will you tell Griff Peter won't be in till twelve," said Jake.

The young man nodded, gave me one quick glance, and left the room in a hurry.

I scanned my surroundings, somewhat frantically, finally landing on Jake who was opening up a drawer on the largest desk. "Jake, I really don't want to be..." he tucked something from the desk into his pocket and straightened, meeting eyes with me "...in here alone," I finished.

He smirked. "You never change, Adelle. You're eighteen. You've gotta loosen up." He casually stepped closer.

"I'm not eighteen for week." That was becoming my staple excuse for the night.

"Check this out," he said, nodding to the window. "And at least let me give you your present. Or else my mom will seriously kill me." His features were pleading. I guess he *was* trying to be nice. I mean, I doubt he took a lot of people up to see this. Except...well, Chris's rapid departure made me question that a little.

No, Adelle, you're just being weird, I groaned. *Relax*.

I walked up to the glass.

"There are your sisters," he said, pointing down. "Rachel looks like she's having fun."

She was dancing. The view was daunting to me. More daunting than entering because you could really see everything. Spotlights on the ceiling. Smoke coming off the walls. Dancers on the floor. Couples making out in the corners. The one relief was the muted music.

“Is it a lot of work running this?” I asked politely.

“For most people it would be,” he said. “But my dad says I’m a natural.”

Natural at this. Man.

“Here,” he said, holding out a box.

I turned to examine it. It was small. Square. With a red ribbon.

“Happy eighteenth.”

I looked up at him once, then took it carefully. “Thank you.”

I was gentle loosening the ribbon, and under the wrapping paper was a box with cursive writing on it. Feeling knots in my stomach, I opened it. A sparkling diamond-stoned bracelet set in its center.

“Like I said, it’s really from my mom,” Jake repeated—maybe because my face had turned red at the sight of it.

He took the box from me, then held a hand out for my wrist. I hesitantly gave it to him, checking the glass beside us to reassure myself that there were people nearby.

“She knew you didn’t have a mom growing up, so...” He let the sentence trail, clicking the bracelet into place, then twisting my wrist so I could see it—but *not* letting go of my hand.

For a moment I was too taken with the beauty of the bracelet to consider that. It was a thin, braided rope of silver, with small diamond-ish stones beaded into it.

“It’s not...I mean, *real* is it?” I asked, gulping. I was no expert, but it looked so shiny.

“Diamond?”

I nodded.

“Of *course*,” he scoffed, then wound my hand around, till it was locked completely in his. I was torn between a shock at the gift and complete uncertainty at what he was doing now. “She says it’s a graduation present, too. I told her you graduated ages ago. Too smart for the rest of us, right?...”

I met his eyes, but they were on my hair as he pushed a lock back with his fingers. “I thought I w-was slow,” I stuttered out, attempting to back up.

He smirked. “About some things.”

“I can’t take a gift like this, Jake,” I said, nodding to the bracelet. “It’s too much.”

“Adelle. That’s nothing to my family.” His tone was belittling. I checked the beautiful chain. “Besides...it may be too much for the daughter of a friend. But for your son’s girlfriend...”

“What are you *talking* about?”

“We’ve known each other for years, Adelle.”

I got a slight scoff out for how that *wasn’t* really true.

“You’re accomplished, beautiful...who would have guessed, the only one out of school that even comes close to being good enough for me.”

“I—”

“When I see something I want, Adelle, I go for it. I see no point in waiting.”

“But you’ve never even said anything about this before,” I broke in, shifting back again to no avail; the desk was in the way. “We haven’t talked to each other in years.”

“What difference does that make? *I’m* saying I want you.”

“But what about *me*?” This was so crazy.

He momentarily stopped moving closer, mouth sagged disbelievingly. “Like you’re going to say no to *this*?” He shook his head and leaned in. “I don’t think so.”

“*Jake*.” I turned my chin sharp to stop him, chest rising high, pulse going wild. “I need time to think.” When he didn’t move back I tried again. “*Please*.”

Slowly, he shifted away, then released my hand.

“Thank you.”

“It won’t be a favor if you don’t get smart,” he said. The venom in his tone was almost unbelievable. But *my* legs were barely stable, and he looked fine—if not put out—maybe I was being and weird and simply didn’t realize. “Just remember I don’t like to wait,” he added, then nodded to the door. “You can see yourself out. I have work to get to.”

I swallowed uncertainly, thought about trying to apologize, but just dropped my head instead, and quickly exited the room.

Before I went back to my sisters, I made sure to rinse my face again. It didn’t do much good; they asked where I’d been and if I had run into Jake. They knew he would be here—surprise, surprise.

Narrowly avoiding spilling everything, I told them he’d shown me the office and delivered a present for his mother. I omitted the “real diamond” part. Rachel still instantly decided that Jake and I should get married.

I tried to ignore it.

Chafe showed up soon after with my sister’s birthday presents. CD mixes full of random songs they’d put together for me. My favorite. It made good headway in making up for the night.

After that we drove home. Dad was already asleep when I got inside and of course there was no one else there. With a few long sighs I went to my room, shoved open then window, then dropped into my bed.

“Eighteen,” I sighed, just once, before falling into a troubled sleep.

*

“...song that never ends. Yes it goes on and on my friend. Some people, started singing it, not knowing what it was. And they’ll continue singing it forever just because—”

Carter held his hands out to me for the next line. He’d been singing this song for a good ten minutes, which I thought was impressively persistent. We were in the back seat of his parents’ minivan, on our way up to Flagstaff.

I’d been nannying for Carter since he was three—five years—so I knew the ins and outs of the job. This was a full weekend trip. His mom was in the front seat, his dad was driving. *Both* were on their cells, but this was pretty much routine. Carter was the most adorable kid, ingeniously witty. His parents were usually *okay*, but when we went on these long vacations—where they would always bring me along—they all but ignored Carter.

That was the reason for the singing now; he was trying to annoy attention out of them.

“Oh, come on, Adelle,” he groaned, shaking his bowl-cut head, “don’t leave me hanging.”

I laughed. Then checked the front seat warily. They were both still on their cells. I leaned in and whispered, “This is the song that never ends.”

“Ah, that was *lame*,” he groaned. “Let me show you. This is—”

“Carter Timothy Hanson, if you sing that song one more time, you’ll be spending the entire trip in your room.”

That was Mrs. Hanson.

I mumbled an apology then grimaced at Carter. For naught, I guess. He was sinking back into his seat with his arms crossed and a wide grin on his face.

“Works like a charm,” he bragged.

I laughed again despite myself, then leaned my head against the glass. It was cold—and everything outside looked cold and white and frosty. This would be a nice break from sunny Phoenix.

And not just because of the weather, I thought to myself.

I sighed, wishing I hadn’t brought that up now: all the things that I needed to think about that I was avoiding. Dad’s shop. School. My sisters’ imminent engagements. Jake’s left-field proposition. But more than that. Turning eighteen. It was like I’d been...waiting for something to happen my whole life and now it felt too late—like I needed to give up and start making things work where I was at. Adapting.

Adapt. The word sounded strange. Too strange. I spent the rest of the drive imagining how I would follow through with this once I got home.

*

“Yes. Yes. Yes. We’re here. We’re here. We’re here.” Carter had been running around shouting like that since we arrived. It was a nice cabin; large, on the far end of an open field. I was standing near the kitchen entrance by the phone, both bags at my side. One that held my clothes, toiletries, and such. And the other a backpack that I went absolutely nowhere without. This contained...books.

“Wanna go outside now, Adelle?” Carter asked excitedly. “We’ve got like...two hours before dinner.”

I smiled. “Sure. I just have to—”

“Not until you’ve put away your luggage young man,” called Mrs. Hanson from the other room.

Carter winced grudgingly. I mouthed him an “after” to him and he darted off.

I was about to ask to use the phone, until I remembered that I had my own. With a head-shake at my own absentmindedness, I took it out and started dialing my dad.

He was fine; a little down about the shop, but mostly interested in how my birthday clubbing adventure had gone. That is: how my conversation with Jake had gone. Jake’s mom, Lola, was a friend of my dad’s, and apparently she’d called to “make sure I got the bracelet okay.” On top of that Rachel had already talked to dad about it. He very poorly hid his enthusiasm about Jake and I becoming “better friends.”

That’s when I got off the phone.

Jeez, something must have been wrong with me. Everybody loved Jake, suddenly wanted us together, and I thought it was the most preposterous thing I’d ever heard.

I’d walked into the back room while talking; it gave a panoramic view of the forest behind the cabin, rich green pine trees. I wished I could escape to it now.

Sadly it was an hour before Carter finished unpacking. And then we only had about thirty minutes until dinner. This only made Carter more determined to explore the forest at top-speed, which I didn't mind so much, because it was freezing outside and I'd only worn a tank-top and jeans. Carter had on a red sweater with a blue shirt underneath. *That*, combined with the racing around, made him look like a mini wannabe superman.

"We better get back, Carter," I said, catching the silver sky growing dimmer.

"What? Not yet," he argued. "It's only been like twenty minutes."

"Yeah, and we have to get back the way we came in time. Which we ran, so,"

"Can't we go a *little* farther?"

I considered his pleading features, then the hill a dozen yards ahead of us. "Just over that hill, then we gotta go."

"Woo-hoo!" He ran off.

I smiled and slowly followed step. I kept glancing around and up at the sky. I didn't know why, but since this morning I'd had this gnawing feeling in my stomach. Or maybe it was since my birthday.

Or maybe I really need to stop mulling over the same things.

Carter screamed over the hill ahead of me. It sounded so severe that I instantly shuddered.

"Let go!" he cried next.

Without a pause, I bolted, up and over. What I saw took my breath away. A truck, with two motorcycles behind it, and two men standing between them. Not at all friendly looking men. And no Carter. For an instant I was in shock, then I dropped down to the leaves.

"Shut it, kid," I heard a woman snap. She appeared from behind the truck, dragging along a flailing Carter.

"*Let go*," he responded.

"What's he doing out here?" asked one of the men.

"I don't know," said the other, "Why don't you ask him."

"Lynn, ask him."

The woman grimaced. She was very beautiful, which seemed a weird thing to notice in the circumstance, but it was just so out of place. "Where'd you come from, kid? Are you alone?"

"I'm not telling you anything," Carter yelled.

She rolled her eyes. "Fabulous."

"Let's just leave him, Nick. It's not like anyone will believe him if he squeals."

"Do you know what's going to happen to us if the cops catch us before we make it across the border," Nick chastised. His eyes grazed up and down Carter. "We can't take the risk."

"You just want to sell him," the woman claimed, laughing.

Nick smirked. "Wouldn't mind the bonus."

"Do you think the buyer here would want him?" asked the other man.

"You're not selling me!" Carter screamed. It took everything in me not to jump up to help him, but I knew I'd be doing harm. If I stayed back, there was a chance they'd let him go. If not, I'd call the police.

"Shut up, kid."

"No! Let go."

“Lynn, shut him up.”

The woman gritted her teeth and then swung something, a gun maybe, into his head. I hissed a gasp.

Nick narrowed at the second man. “Are you kidding me, Paul? This guy wouldn’t want a kid. Have you seen him?”

“Once.”

Lynn sighed wistfully. “Just once.”

“You have a crush on him, that’s the only reason we still do this job, isn’t it?” grumbled Paul. He straddled the motorcycle as he spoke.

Lynn glared at him.

“We do it because it pays a boatload,” said Nick. “Now, toss me the kid.”

“We’re keeping him?” asked Lynn.

“Yeah. We’ll tie him in the back. We can see about selling him in town.”

She drug him over and Nick checked his head, then tossed him into the back of the truck. My palms gripped the dirt.

“See you there,” Nick drawled. He kissed Lynn once on the cheek and jumped onto the second motorcycle. Lynn headed for the front seat of the truck. I held back screams as the engine started.

“Can I just sit this one out?” asked the second man.

“Afraid of the big bad animals, Paul?”

He glared at Nick. Then they both took off; passing in front of the truck, which followed moments later.

I stood up and ran forward, almost wishing they’d see me and turn around. They didn’t. I ran a panicked hand through my sweaty hair and reached into my pockets. Cell phone. Police. Cell phone. But it wasn’t there. *It’s in my backpack*, I remembered. My backpack...that Carter was carrying.

With a curse I kicked the tree beside me. What was I going to do now? If I left, they could get away. *Adelle, you’re so stupid, stupid!* Tears stung my eyes. *I should have fought. I should have tried to stop them.*

Now there was only one thing I could think to do. Because I couldn’t leave. It would take too long. They said they were going somewhere close. Maybe I could get there and get him out, or at least try. I had to try. Without another thought, I raced along the tire tracks of the winding road.

CHAPTER TWO

Dmitri

Oh, great. I'm awake. Get to start another meaningless day.

I didn't open my eyes. No point. I knew what I'd see. Deep blue oil-painted ceiling with crown molding cutting across it. Each section depicting one part of a larger celestial sky. Night. Two moons. Lots of stars. Seeing it one more time had a good chance of driving me insane.

Oh well. I'll just go back to sleep and it won't matter.

The next few times I woke up I repeated the process—until the urge to do anything else was more appealing. Then I cracked my neck and opened my eyes.

Look Dmitri, you were right, it's still there. I leaned up on my elbows. *And the rest of the room hasn't changed either.* The walls were stone, mostly obscured by shelves, paintings, or tapestries. The furniture was mahogany. The stone floor—like the wall—was hidden beneath rich maroon rugs. And I was in the middle of it all on my large bed only half-covered by my satin sheets and knotted blankets.

I ran a hand across my chest and looked towards the window. It was white outside. Whatever day it was, it was obviously the *day* part of it. Good to know. Or not. Whatever.

I got out of bed and headed for the bathroom. Seeing myself in the mirror was strange for a number of reasons. One being that the last time I did so, I'd looked...different. I dipped my head towards the sink, rinsed my face, and checked back up. Of course it was just as likely due to my appearance in and of itself. Dark, ideally-pieced hair, pale skin, structured muscle, unflawed complexion.

Jeez, did I just describe myself to myself? That's messed up. Really though, no one can blame me—they'd do it to if they looked this good.

I swung a towel over my shoulder and reentered the bedroom. The lack of noise was already bothering me. I flipped the stereo on and dropped straight to the floor, forgoing a shirt. Exercise was better with the least amount of clothing possible...*Everything* was better with the least amount of clothing possible.

Especially if—as I previously noted—you looked this good.

I started with the usual stuff. Pushups, crunches, handstands. It got old quick so I made it more interesting. Single arm push-ups. Chin-ups on the doorframe. Back-flips off the bed.

Okay, I'd just made that last one up, but the rest...

It got boring just the same. I let the CD play out then went to take a long shower.

When I got out there was a tray sitting out beside my bed. Like it was every day. It had a variety of breakfast options. Pancakes. Eggs. Toast. I dipped my finger in a random purplish sauce, then raised a brow.

“No lemons?”

Clearly there was nothing more to drink than coffee, orange juice, tea, and water. I hated all of those besides and how could I possibly be expected to drink water without lemons?

This is unacceptable. Verlaine will have to remake it all.

After exchanging the towel around my waist for nice—and by nice I meant extremely expensive yet ruggedly handsome designer—jeans and a white t-shirt, I headed downstairs. It took a while to get there in this place and I ignored how quickly I was moving through. Lensen had it in his head that I relied on the animals' company. Which was ridiculous.

I didn't rely on anyone.

Two of "them" were passing me in the hall now. Both cats. One was a leopard named Alastair; the other was an orange tabby named Brynn. The latter narrowed at me contemptuously when I walked by. Brynn always did this, and I had no urge to figure out the reason behind it.

Seemed obvious anyways.

The animals of this prison did little more than annoy me...a retarded addendum to an already retarded curse. I was stuck here and that was life but I didn't need a bunch of fur-balls tacked on. They could at least have been turned into something more useful—or entertaining. Half of them were bats.

"Oh, hello master," said Verlaine as I strode into the kitchen. She was rolling out dough on the large wood island that took up most of the room. Something had her anxious. For any normal person it would have been difficult if not impossible to perceive such an inflection from a raccoon, but I had long since adjusted.

Did I care that she was anxious? Not really.

"I need breakfast," I said without ceremony.

She narrowed for a moment at the left-over preparations set before us, then skittered off her stool. "Right away, sir."

I turned to lean my back against the cupboard.

"Did Lensen not bring you your tray?" she asked after a pause. I could hear her cutting behind me.

"Yes, but it was inedible."

"Really?" came the familiar voice above. "Did I fold your napkin in the incorrect fashion? Or perhaps there was a smudge on your dish?"

I ignored his dry tone and turned to where he'd landed, on a perch beside the table. Lensen was a falcon. In my opinion the beady eyes and curved beak matched his personality better than his human form ever had—like it'd always been lurking somewhere inside him. Maybe that was how the curse worked.

So, what does that make me?

"I only ask so I won't repeat the mistake again," he finished.

I narrowed. "There were no lemons. I can't drink water without lemons."

"Ah; so sorry." He turned his beak down to a piece of scribbled paper on the cutting board. "I suppose, in my current condition I've lost the sense for such discriminations."

"You're in a pleasant mood," I told him. Verlaine dropped the items onto the stove-top, sending a sizzling aroma into the air.

The frequency at which Lensen mentioned our predicament was just wasted exertion. That and his eccentric need to keep the mansion running in perfect order. Then

again, he was a bird. What else could he do with his time? This at least made things more comfortable for me.

“And *you’re* awake,” he replied. “I guess we’re both full of surprises this morning.”

Verlaine sat a glass down beside me. I picked it up, examining the contents. It had lemons. Three.

“Why? What time is it?” I asked.

“Noon.”

Okay, he was right. It was early. “Guess it’s just your lucky day,” I told him, then took a swig from my glass.

He made a face, turning back to his paper. “Hardly.”

If he thought I was interested enough to ask what that meant, he was kidding himself. Verlaine saved him the disappointment.

“Are you worried about the suppliers?” she guessed, setting a plate of food down in front of me. I ate while they spoke.

“Not worried,” Lensan replied. “*Bothered*. I don’t trust them to put it simply. They’re sluggards. Degenerates.”

“They’ve never missed a shipment,” Verlaine proposed. “That’s more than could be said for the last.”

Lensan darkened at the comment. “The *last* wouldn’t have made me wonder, when they were late, if it was because the authorities had finally caught up with them.”

“Surely they can’t be that bad, Lensan.”

The falcon sighed. “I’ll be keeping my eye on them at any rate. By the way, have the dogs come down for lunch yet?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Around an hour ago. They went outside afterwards.”

“Do you know if they remembered that the delivery is coming in?”

“They didn’t mention it.”

“Hmm,” he started, folding one wing close to his body. “I’ll have to make sure to remind them.... I know you already made your list, my dear, but did you have any final additions?”

“Pool table,” I answered for her.

Lensan ladled his gaze over to me slowly.

“And make sure it gets here sometime in the next year,” I continued blithely. “The wait for my Dolce order was ridiculous.”

Lensan closed his eyes like he might implode.

Dude should be a phoenix instead of a falcon, I thought. That way he could combust at random and come back later—preferably in a better mood.

I smirked at him then looked back to Verlaine. Mythical creature lore was countable among the many subjects I knew everything about. Not hard to guess why. Apart from sleeping...and eating...screwing around...its study was my most common past time.

And thus far my most pointless.

“Oh come, you old shrew,” said Verlaine, walking over to take my plate. “I think a pool table sounds fun.”

Lensan didn’t respond. I lifted my brows to him tauntingly. He returned the favor by going over the entire supply list with Verlaine.

After breakfast I lingered around until their lack of interesting discussion became unbearable, then I wandered upstairs. I passed the library first, but had no desire to read. The study was next. It contained wall upon wall of bookcases (like the majority of the second-story rooms), a fireplace, a widescreen TV, and a long window that stretched the length of the back wall.

I studied around it with my fingers hanging back on the doorframe. My eyes wound up locked to an empty floorboard in the corner.

That was the sort of thing that happened once you'd gone through blood-hacking, body-writhing, pain somewhere—the spot tended to leave an impression. I had one of these for every room in the mansion by now. This was still the original—undoubtedly the worst—the one that most often plagued my nightmares.

One second I'm headed to Santorini, the next I've got some wacko with a complex telling me I've been a bad boy like it's new news.

Whatever. That was how it was. I lived with it. The pain didn't even bother me anymore. Not when there were so many other things to be tortured by. For instance: utter boredom, no control over my own life, and no idea when, or if, all of this would ever change.

I'd probably be locked away from humanity forever. Never anyone, always alone.

I fell into the couch in front of the TV and hit the power button on the remote. Credits covered the screen. I went back to the menu and started the ancient horror flick from the beginning. It was one of those cheesy black-and-whites from the mid 1900's—gore not excluded.

Why am I even watching this movie? I thought as I dropped my head idly to my palm and started picking out melody lines I'd heard a-million plus times.

Because I can't think of anything better to do, I countered. *When I do think of something better, then I'll stop watching this movie.*

It passed the part where the idiotic lead gets bitten by a werewolf. This was the first of many ridiculous fabrications portrayed in the film; I'd never in my life seen a werewolf, nor been stupid enough to go walking out in a condemned forest at midnight, and yet, here I was...screwed.

And what is that? I complained. *He goes animal-style once a month? What does he have to whine about? Like that's that bad? What I wouldn't give to have 29-30 days of pure Dmitri fun-time. Rich, attractive; so what if the full moon sent me wofly? I'd pop a couple pills and sleep it off.*

The music rose to a curdling high when the “star's” transformed face first appeared on the screen. *Yeah right, you wished you looked that good,* I told myself. All this guy needed was a shave. There weren't words for what happened to me.

Well...okay, technically, there *were* words. Just, “two-legged” wasn't one of them.

I watched the rest with my eyes half-lulled, particularly savoring the dramatic moment when the monster wound up killing the girl he'd professed to love. As the credits rolled I willed myself to fall asleep, but it just wasn't happening: the one downside to sleeping excessively. I'd heard babies worked differently: the more they slept, the more they slept, and so on in a wondrous circle of sleeping.

Too bad for me, I was about twenty years past that mark—then I could have theoretically slept my whole life away, right?

How preferable.

I stood and went to the window. The sky was still clear white. Clouds, sure, but no sign of snow or rain. I took in the view from my mansion with dry satisfaction. It represented the second series of traits I shared with our film's star:

Wealth. Privilege. Birth-granted awesomeness.

Oh.

Right.

And isolation.

At this high level, the mountain peaks could be seen above the tree-tops. Not everything was snow-covered yet but it would be soon.

Lensan was speaking with the "guard dogs" in the courtyard below. This probably meant the supplies were coming; I'd wait for the distraction.

Soon after leaning into the windowsill a truck came into view, preceded by two motorcycles. Lensan was right about one thing: our liaisons were degenerates. On off-weeks I imagined they stole candy from babies in parks; and weekends they saved for kicking puppies.

I just didn't particularly care.

My four dogs below wouldn't be getting kicked around at any rate. They fell behind stone tiers as the vehicles approached the gate. Smart. They tended to intimidate guests.

Without fuss the "evil" crew got out and began unloading. Two men and a woman as always. I watched the latter. It amused me that with little more than the sight of me I could persuade her to come inside...only that would cease to be enjoyable if I transformed at any point.

What would you do then, Dmitri? Kill her?...

Mnm. Or else hold her prisoner.

I snorted as she shouted out an angry command.

Stuck with that? Not likely.

In that exact moment, my eyes caught movement from the trees. I glanced over, expecting an animal of some sort. Instead I saw a girl. Full, parting lips; pale skin; large, heavily-lashed eyes; piles of curling, brown hair; and a distressed look.

One thought came to mind.

More likely.

She looked to be in opposition to the three suppliers from the way she was hiding back. The question was—what would she possibly be following them out here for?

As if in answer to my first question a commotion started near by the wagon. The crew had managed to stack most of the boxes, but now a little kid was running around in their midst. I looked back to the "girl" automatically. She was anxious—enough to tell me that the boy was her reason for being here.

The three suppliers continued chasing him in circles.

Blah, the creeps were probably traffickers. I should have known better than to leave this stuff to Lensan. Unfortunately at present I was *stuck* relying on him. I couldn't hear a thing and if I tried to go down now I'd miss the outcome of the scene. He was still perched on his statue, wings spanned for flight.

The supply-woman got hold of the boy by the arm. Just as she was bracing to slap him, Ritold pounced.

Ritold was the oldest of my four dogs. The other three were already snarling and snapping at the two men. *Sucks to be them*—Australian Ridgebacks weren't the type you wanted to get on the bad side of.

I looked back to the trees for eye-lash girl. The spot was vacant. It heightened my annoyance in a way I hadn't planned for. Since when did I get hot and bothered over dwarf girls playing crouching-tiger hidden-dragon in the trees?

Lensan continued to glide above the little kid—which seemed completely pointless, and strangely discombobulating. The three traffickers were on the retreat, though. By the time they'd reached their vehicles—abandoning everything but the truck—Ritold was pulling the boy towards the house.

He better not be...

I swore an oath. They drug him straight on through the door with Lensan close behind.

Like I'm getting stuck with a kid on top of all these fur-balls.

But that would have to wait. I scanned the courtyard thoroughly, pressing harder into my palms on the windowsill. I was going to be even more annoyed if that girl was stupid enough to get taken by the suppliers. And just when I was thinking, yeah she was that stupid—*obviously*—she appeared from behind a statue. Her eyes scanned the mansion with uncertainty, then she started creeping towards it. Her steps were so precise I thought there must be something wrong with her. Even at the slow pace she tripped twice before reaching the door.

Er...okay, I didn't know they let dummies babysit.

When she pulled at the door handle I knew it would be pointless; it was locked. The only entrance she might get through was the front—if she could find it—unless I sent someone out for her.

I'd decide once I found out how the kid was. Either way she wouldn't be leaving without my consent.

No one would.

CHAPTER THREE

Adelle

I am going to kill that kid when I find him, I fumed, as I trudged my feet along the edges of the ridiculous tall, devious, and foreboding, stone wall.

I didn't have a good reason for wanting to kill him of course. In fact I didn't even want to kill him at all. It just made it easier to follow four dogs inside an ominous mansion if I was angry at someone and I really, *really*, didn't want there to be anyone else inside to be angry at—besides Carter.

Oh, but what is the chance of that?

I put both hands to my face, tucked hairs erratically, and moved faster.

What exactly I had just seen, I wasn't sure of. I'd followed the vehicles as best as I could down the road. Somehow it wasn't far before I'd found them stopped at a gate. Why they'd stopped, I hadn't known—my attention had been struggling with other things: Like how snowy it had gotten all of a sudden. Or how high the trees were growing. How black they were. How dark the soil beneath me was. None of this was Arizona appropriate. Still all of it had been of minor importance compared with reaching Carter.

I tripped now and caught a hand against the rocky side of the mansion.

Then I'd seen this gigantomous thing, which, I supposed wasn't that strange. There were other homes in these woods. I knew that. But something about it looked immediately...outdated. I shook my head as I forced my steps. I was so cold, I couldn't think straight. Curse tank-tops. Curse kidnappers. This was exactly the type of thing my sisters had always warned me would happen. I'd never actually believed them of course, but how could I have believed a *forest* could be so hazardous?

The end of the ordeal had made the least sense. First Carter running out, then the dogs, a...*bird, I think*. It had looked like the group had simply been dropping off supplies, but then why would they have been attacked?...

All things I couldn't answer. All things that didn't matter anyways. I just needed to find Carter and get him home safe.

I finally wrapped the corner of the wall and saw what must have been the intended front of the place. Like the rest of the house it was stone with bronze-paned windows. A courtyard with random slabs of rock wall and statues stretched around it, followed by a sea of trees. Magnificently tall trees.

I almost wanted to cover my eyes so I could continue walking without being distracted. This place was not really like anywhere I'd ever seen before. Maybe in a comic book or a magazine. *Oh Adelle, concentrate on Carter. You're angry remember.* As long as I stayed angry I was capable of *so* much more.

Courage for one, I thought, breath catching at the base of the front steps.

Two statues perched on either side—this time impossible to ignore. Maybe because I was pretty sure I'd just seen one that was *not* frozen rock. Falcons. Large falcons, with

their talons sunk deep into the podiums. They looked so life-like. I eyed them as if that were true and ran quickly up the stairs.

Now I had a decision to make. The predicament wasn't a good one, mostly because no one accepting supplies from the type of people I'd just encountered was likely going to be morally subservient—or safe.... Then again, they had chased them off. *And every second I waste those dogs could be doing who knows what to Carter.*

I lifted my hand knocked duly.

No response came. Everything was quiet but the wind whistling through the forest at my back. My fist looked tiny and feeble against the ten foot door. I pounded again, incapable of patience.

Nothing. "Damn it." My eyes caught sight of a doorbell along the frame.

I rolled my eyes dramatically and pushed it. Waited. Waited.

I am so done with this.

I latched my hand around the handle, cranked, and shoved. It wasn't locked—good news—but it was blasted heavy. I pushed my weight against it so hard that my eyes squeezed tight in exertion. Once I had cracked the door wide enough to fit through, I slipped in and closed it behind me with my back. At the distinct scuff I looked up.

A room like this wasn't really possible to describe. The floor stretched out long and wide before me; the walls seemed to be only an extension of it. There were heavy drapes falling back down them. And paintings. A man-sized fireplace in the left wall. And corridor exits leaking golds and reds across the floor. The ceiling was so high it seemed more like a cave—there were even birds up on its highest lofts.

My hands pressed back against the wood of the door. I had the sensation that I was shrinking, or falling backwards, while the room just kept expanding. My lips pressed to utter words that would not come out. I was at a complete and total loss.

At the far end of the room, lastly, I saw a staircase that diverged up into two directions. Standing in the direct middle of it was a figure that my mind could neither accept nor deny.

Leopard. A leopard. An actually leopard.

I blinked. At least... I thought I did. It was highly possible that I was hallucinating at this point. I realized soon after the leopard thing—when a shadow flew through the air—that those things in the rafters were hardly birds; they were *bats!* The leopard watched me from across the way. I didn't have many options so I just stared back, entranced and frozen.

After a few seconds, it flicked its tail loosely, cocked its head around, and began to walk back up the stairs as if I'd been of no interest.

I decided that I shouldn't complain.

Then I heard a voice.

"Co-co. The best!"

Carter! That was carter's voice. I heard loud laughter quickly follow his declaration. My legs were moving before I'd even grasped it all.

"Carter!" I choked out, running towards a glowing corridor.

Co-co. He said co-co. Co-co is generally a good thing. He's okay. Everything's fine.

My lungs were panting. "Carter," I shouted one more time as I wrapped the edge into the room. I almost screamed at the sight beyond. He was in the middle of a thick carpet, surrounded by the four black dogs. I *didn't* scream because it only took a moment

to realize the dogs were licking him, rather than enacting any of the horrible atrocities I had imagined they were.

The bowl-headed boy was giggling with a mug between his hands.

“Carter Hanson, what on earth are you doing?”

“Adelle!” he greeted, stretching his arms around the smallest dog. “Adelle, you gotta meet these guys. They’re amazing.”

I checked behind me for the leopard, then started towards Carter intently. “Carter, this is absolutely not the time to be making friends. We need to get out of here now—”

All four dogs swung towards me in unison.

It may not have been the brightest plan to rush into a room of guard dogs, I realized then—no matter how much they’d seemed to like Carter. I froze.

One of the dogs drew my gaze above the others; the larger one that had pulled Carter inside. He took a step towards me but I hardly noticed. His eyes...weren’t like other dogs’. Too deep and expressive. I was terrible with dog types—some sort of hound maybe?—dark...but whatever he was I was sure his body was larger than it should be.

Somehow the thought of petting him seemed wrong.

And I wasn’t sure why, but this realization drew me to study the room around more thoroughly. It was warm; that was the best name for it. The opposite atmosphere of the large hall I’d entered. Still eerie though. The windows weren’t clear but glazed over to a tinted brass. A stairwell led to a second balcony that lined the room. The sheer number of paintings and assorted sculptures was overwhelming. Most of all I felt a strange urge not to leave.

A growl drew my head back straight.

“Ritold, it’s okay,” started Carter. “She’s a good guy.” I lurched with panic when Carter scruffed the regal head. The dog simply snorted, distracting me from the worries that were most assuredly necessary.

“You named him already?” I asked, studying both Carter and the dog. The other three formed a half circle behind them.

“Course not,” said Carter. “I wouldn’t name him. He told me himself. That’s what’s so cool.”

Carter thinks dogs talk. Great. His parents are going to kill me. Even as I thought this I watched Ritold warily. There was something about him that made me think...

Adelle, quit it! This isn’t some fairytale; Carter’s in danger.

“We need to go, now,” I said. Then I grabbed his arm.

“Hey!” he shouted. I was surprised when the dogs stepped back. “We can’t go yet!” he complained, “The raccoon’s bringing cookies.”

“The talking raccoon, I’m guessing?”

“Course, but she’s a girl.”

“Of course,” I scoffed.

A loud clash came behind us. Without thinking I spun. My jaw popped open and my hold on Carter’s wrist started shaking. There, in the doorway opposite us, stood a raccoon. It was up on its back legs, with a face that couldn’t be described as anything but shock. Around her was a tray of scattered food.

“See?” cried Carter.

I blinked once, very slowly. When I opened my eyes, she'd changed position. At least, I thought it was different. Maybe Carter was just starting to get to me with his talking animal declarations. She was down on all fours, expression visceral.

Carter darted towards her. "Verlaine, show Adelle you can talk." Then he picked up a cookie. "Five second rule?"

Just when I was about to run again to pull him back, the raccoon skittered forward. She seemed frantic, panicked, to push him on.

What on earth?

"What are you doing, Verlaine?" asked Carter. "I don't want to go yet."

Her eyes searched me. The dogs let out a couple yelps. She continued to push at Carter. I was in shock at what I was seeing, but it was clear she wanted us to go and the wisest part of me agreed. I ran forward and scooped Carter up into my arms.

"Hey, Adelle, stop it. I don't wanna—"

I reached the door without looking back or acknowledging Carter's complaints. I half-noticed the dogs were moving out the other side, and the raccoon was gone. Something stopped me. A form, moving across in the shadows. Something like the leopard I had seen on the steps—or maybe another dog.

"A-Adelle," called Carter.

"Not now, Carter. We need to—"

"*Delle*," he repeated, batting at my back. His tone was different, cold, enough to spin me around and draw my eyes directly to his line of sight. There was something terribly wrong happening to the fire. The flames were curling into silver threads at the tips and the hue kept switching between gold, orange, and red. It settled on a deep maroon. Then, for no reason I could name, my gaze moved to the stairwell.

A figure stood at the top of it. A man.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dmitri

I thought the girl had looked anxious before she saw me; now her features were contorted to new depths. If I wasn't in shadow, this wouldn't have been the case. She would have been dumbfounded, sure, but for a completely different reason. She actually looked so horrified that I considered just helping her find her way out now.

No. It would be too much fun to mess with her; she could go back to her life after that and I'd be nothing more than a bad dream.

"Adelle, why did you stop?" asked the boy. "Are we staying?"

She shook her head. She was holding the boy protectively in her arms. It made me wonder if she thought I was going to hurt her. I watched, waiting to see if she'd say something. She didn't, but the munchkin did when he turned around and saw me. "Whoa. Who are you?"

"Carter, don't," she chided.

"Is this your house?" he continued. "You know your animals talk."

"Really." My tone was dry.

The girl sucked in a breath that was loud enough to hear from the top of the staircase. From her expression, I was surprised she wasn't just making a run for the exit. When I dropped down a step it set her off; she darted towards the doorway.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," I said before she reached it. "Pretty sure there's a hungry leopard in the hall."

Her feet skidded to a stop and she looked back with shock and something like resentment. What was she upset about? That I'd given her fair warning? There *was* a leopard out there. Not that he would have touched with her without my permission, but she didn't know that.

"Mind telling me what you're doing in my house?" I asked, after a pause to let her catch her breath.

"I—" She spoke in a barely audible stutter. "I'm sorry. We didn't mean to trespass. We must have been walking too close to the house. The dogs drug him inside and I came after. I tried to knock first."

Terrible liar.

"And you were wandering the grounds in the first place because...?"

"The kidnappers brought us here," announced the kid.

"Carter!"

"Well, not Adelle," he continued undaunted. "Just me. They knocked me on the head. They were unloading boxes. Then Ritold came and saved me."

Yeah. That was great of him, I thought, scanning the dimly lit room. Both Ritold and Verlaine were gone.

"I heard him talk too—when he brought me inside," said the boy. "I tried to tell Adelle, but she won't believe me."

He was right. She didn't believe him. Her jaw locked at his words though. Either she didn't like that he mentioned the suppliers or...

"Adelle," I tested. "That would be you?" And pointed to her.

Her face contorted. "No," she argued, head shaking. "I mean...It's a nickname. Not a real name. It's not my name."

The boy was eyeing her. I did too. Maybe someone should tell her that giving your first name out wasn't dangerous.

"Please," she started anxiously. "Please, just let us go. We never meant to come. We haven't taken anything. We're no danger to you."

And all this time I'd been worrying I was done for. Good thing she cleared that up. Only, when her eyes started watering I felt less like I wasn't in danger than I had a moment before. Then I remembered I was tired. Very tired. And so impossibly bored by this conversation that I might imagine anything up just to stay interested.

"Adelle?" the kid whispered. "I don't..." His voice trailed. It looked like he went limp. She panicked of course. Just what I needed.

"Carter?" she called, shaking him. "*Carter?*" She set him down on a couch near the fire; rubbed his head, checked his pulse. He was definitely out. Verlaine had probably drugged him so she could take send him away before I realized he was here.

"What did you *do* to him?" the girl shouted, glaring up at me with widened eyes.

Ah. "Nothing," I answered, offended by the presumption.

I had to duck when a mug came flying at me. She pointed to it. "What *was* that?" she asked through angry tears.

I started walking down the steps; slowly. "I don't know," I said, "You might have asked *before* you threw it across the room."

"I—"

"Rohypnol," I interrupted, landing at the bottom step, "would be my guess."

She shivered at my proximity. I expected that if not for the kid she would have moved further away.

"Will it kill him?" she managed.

"Only if he took enough."

She gasped.

"He didn't," I assured, a smirk crossing my face. Her own features narrowed with distaste. She must have been able to see me now—at least enough to catch the smile.

"What do you want with us?" she voiced. "He's just a kid. I told you why we were here."

"You weren't very honest."

"*He* was." She pointed down. "We were in the woods. Those kidnapers took us. There's nothing we haven't told you."

"What were you doing there to begin with?" I asked, for no other reason than I wanted to know...for no good reason at all.

"Just walking," she explained, tears pricking her eyes. She kept checking the kid like he might randomly expire. I wasn't worried. Verlaine would never give an amount that could hurt him. It probably wouldn't even be that long before he woke up. I leaned back against the railing and studied the girl. It made sense enough just to keep them here until he did.

"Please," she cried again. "He needs to get to a hospital. He could be sick."

Her hands were shaking less now that she was yelling. Pretty sure that was backwards. Out of nowhere her shaking stopped altogether. So did her crying. I checked the boy but he was still lying motionless. My brow narrowed. It would have been nice to have a better view of the girl's face. She looked like she was thinking, but honestly, could anyone sit there thinking that long?

"Just let," she finally whispered, only to swallow most of the words. I maintained my upright posture, arms crossed, and seriously debating just sending the poor girl off. "Just let him go and I'll stay," she finished.

My brows shot up. *What did she say?*

"I won't try to run," she continued, looking up at me. "I'll do anything you ask me to, please, just—just let him go."

My throat constricted, but I ignored it. All this because I hadn't let her go yet? What did she think this was—some cheap romance novel?

She kept her eyes on mine. I could tell it was difficult for her; her pulse was beating out of her neck. She looked terrified.

No, I thought, jaw tightening. Of course it's not a romance novel. Because I'm a monster. Monsters see faces like that. She'd decided who I was from the beginning. No, I should say: she knew. So blasted obvious, right. Well, hey, if I'm going to be treated like monster, I may as one act like one. Wouldn't want to let people down.

"Fine," I said. "You stay the kid can go."

She sobbed instantly. I forced myself to ignore it. I was a monster, right. I took pleasure in this kind of stuff.

Her head dropped to her hands and her shoulders started shaking. She was still kneeling on the floor between the boy and the fireplace, looking like a poster-child for victims.

"Ritold," I called, striding forward. This distracted her enough to still the sobs. When I got close, she backed away. I checked the boy's pulse methodically.

"Where will you take him?" she asked.

"Home, I assume." I looked back at her. Her body was braced against the wall—like a mouse pressed away from a coiled snake. "Unless you have something else in mind."

"The hospital," she choked out. "He could—he could be hurt. Will you make sure his parents find him?"

"I don't know. If it's convenient."

"But you—"

"Promised to let him go," I finished, lifting the boy in my arms. "You're lucky I don't just toss him out in the woods."

She fell to her knees, bursting back into tears. I spun around to the doorway. *If I'm as monstrous as she implied with her offer, that really shouldn't have been that surprising.*

Ritold was waiting for me in the hall, standing with his neck tight, at attention. I could see the curiosity past his reverence, but I wasn't about to offer an explanation. He was only a servant. Besides this was no one's business but mine.

"Take him to the nearest hospital," I said, setting the boy on Ritold's back. He eyed the action reluctantly, shifting under the weight.

"What is?—" The question broke off.

Ritold already had an exceptionally low voice and he tuned it even lower now. “What is going on, Master?” he asked, eyes on the study behind me. The girl’s cries were echoing from there.

“Nothing that concerns you,” I stated, turning around. “Just make sure the kid’s taken care of.” Without waiting for an answer, I walked through to the study.

The girl was crumpled in a heap, hands back to her face. It stopped me for a moment. She didn’t look like someone I wanted to push around or even play games with. I instinctively wanted to comfort her.

How stupid.

“Do you just want to stay like that all night?” I asked, tone harsher thanks to the unfounded thoughts.

She caught her breath, looking up involuntarily. Then sobered at the sight of me. There was a new horror in her eyes. Unless she planned on offering herself up for something else I didn’t know what she had left to be afraid of.

“Where,” she mumbled, “where will I...?”

“Just follow me.”

She obeyed, rising slowly and waiting until I started towards the front hall.

The corridors felt darker than usual and the walk was terrible. She wasn’t crying but she kept sniffing incessantly. I led her up the main stairs and down the longest hall. She kept her eyes glued to the floor. The few animals we passed, she didn’t notice. She wasn’t very observant.

I stopped at a door near the end of the west hall. She slowed in plenty of time to get nowhere near touching me. Of course she did. When I put my hand to the knob she looked at it. I watched her stare for a moment then pushed through, heading straight for the curtain on the far side.

“This will be your room,” I told her, drawing the heavy material across the glass. It was close to dark outside, but it provided dim light. She stood near the entrance like she was afraid to come in, arms cradled around her body. Her eyes darted between the bed and myself. I leaned against the pole at the end—to make her feel more comfortable—while I watched her reaction to the room.

Awe was expected. The bedroom was fully furnished. The walls were a mix of dusk blue wallpaper and stone. Crystalline fixtures lined them, along with assorted bookshelves and wardrobes. She had her own bathroom and a walk-in closet.

Even with all this her gaze dropped to a blank patch of wood on the floor.

Dmitri, what the hell did you do? I thought, watching her stand there like that. Weak. Small. I just stared while the world went out of focus.

Whatever I want. That’s what. This is my house. And I have a right to do anything that makes this lame existence more bearable.

Without another word I straightened and headed for the door, brushing past her.

“Wait,” she called. Her voice was uneven. I slowed without turning. “The boy. He isn’t with you,” she said. “Are you going to take him now?”

Still worried about the kid? If she were smart she’d be thinking about her own position.

“He’s on his way already,” I told her. “Ritold is bringing him.”

“The dog?”

I looked back with a derisive glance. “If that’s what you want to call him.”

Whatever she was going to say she swallowed instead; then dropped her head down submissively.

“He’ll get him back,” I added, almost as an afterthought. Before I could really contemplate why I turned towards the hall. “By the way,” I said from the doorway. “Don’t try to leave. It won’t work.” With that I left the room.

No one was in the kitchen when I got downstairs. Whether they were or not didn’t matter to me. I just needed to make sure everything I wanted made it off the truck. The animals would be unloading now.

I picked out an apple from an open bowl, leaning back against the counter and distracting myself with the task of figuring out where and how we’d get new suppliers.

Before long, Lensan and Verlaine entered.

“They leave everything?” I asked. Lensan ignored me, landing on the counter with a box. My mouth curved to a smirk.

“Thank you, Lensan,” said Verlaine. She hopped up to her usual place, breaths quick, and her mane disheveled. She inhaled deeply, refusing to look at me. You’d think these guys would tire of getting all hot and bothered over the same old subjects. My morality for instance.

“Were you trying to get him out before I came down?” I asked her.

No response.

I clarified. “When you drugged the kid.”

“Yes,” she hissed, head down. “And protecting your secrets in the meantime.” She was pulling something animatedly from a box as she added: “In case you hadn’t realized, it doesn’t work to send people off coherent once they’ve seen us.”

I looked down at my apple. So she was angry. Big surprise. Everyone probably was. Like I cared.

“Well you don’t have to *dope* them, Verlaine,” I said mockingly, looking back up. “Don’t you think my way works just as well?”

“You selfish, heartless, child!” she shouted. Her lips curled up around her teeth.

I bit into my apple, half chuckling.

“Verlaine, settle yourself,” chided Lensan.

“Don’t think to speak to me,” she said. “He cannot do this! It is a life. A person. I will not sit by while—”

I snorted. “Since when do you have a choice?”

Lensan glared at me for that one. I met his eyes full on and took another bite, unwilling to acknowledge that he knew what I was doing. If he was smart, he’d hate me too. His expression dropped. “Dmitri,” he said simply. His tone was calm; that certain one I hated most. He’d used it on me when I broke a vase at five and never stopped. “A moment please,” he whispered, then flew from the room.

Great. Like I didn’t know this was coming. I took one last bite of my apple, then discarded it on the counter, following after him. He went to the lower-level den. It was a dark room, with a dozen couches, a stairwell, and a full glass side wall that gave a view of the stone sculptures in the courtyard.

“What?” I asked boredly, dropping down into a couch and tossing my legs up on the table. He landed beside them.

“You think to ask me that when you very well know the answer,” he replied. His eyes were dark.

I met them. “What I choose to do is my business.”

He scoffed. “If only that were true, maybe things wouldn’t be like they are. As it is, your decisions affect all of us.”

My jaw flexed. So they did. There wasn’t a lot I could do about it.

“Dmitri, you cannot simply take someone’s life away,” he pressed.

“I didn’t take,” I responded casually. “She offered. If you had been there you would have seen that for yourself. Or have you already forgotten that’s a pretty common reaction with me?”

He took in a slow breath. “Do not pretend you have no fault in this.”

Never do, I thought placidly.

“Don’t you care at all that it is wrong?” he asked.

I laughed without humor. “What do you think?”

“Yes,” he said. His tone was confident. “In fact, I know you care. It’s *you* who seems to have forgotten it.” I met his gaze, even less amused. “Dmitri,” he implored. “You must—”

“Don’t pretend to know me, old man.”

He dipped his head. “If not I—then who?”

“No one!” I answered, and just as soon regretted it. My light façade dropped, features tightening. *Screw this*. I put my hands to my knees, stood, and started walking.

“You’re right,” Lensan admitted. “I do not understand—neither you nor your intentions. I have tried but...” he sighed. “Dmitri, I can’t let you harm this girl.”

I stilled, turning with a dubious glare. “What do you expect that I’ll do?” I asked. “Give me a break.”

“I think you’ve made it clear that I do *not know*,” he said. “You will give her her own room, and space whenever she needs it.”

“Already done,” I drawled. “Any more instructions?” He knew better than to push me much further. Raising me had given him pull but I was still the boss. So it was unexpected when he answered “yes” and flew to an empty space across the room. “I believe this is hers. It doesn’t match the other supplies. And it has a phone with her name inside.” He regarded it. “I thought you could bring it to her at any rate.”

I stepped closer—interested, though I didn’t show it. “Sure that’s safe?” I drawled. Mostly to test him. Didn’t make much sense that he would give it to me.

He scraped his talon against the floor, speaking in a low voice. “You’re the only human here, Dmitri. Have you considered?...” he broke off. “At least try to be kind. Some of the time.”

My features returned to dubious indifference as he lifted into the air and exited the room. I put the whole conversation behind me and bent down to the backpack. Whatever it held, it was full. Side-pocket had the cell-phone Lensan mentioned. No service. Big surprise. I confiscated it anyways. Then there was gum. A ridiculous number of pens. I undid the buckle and reached in for the first object. Book. Gripping. I passed on the rest. I could look at it later; it wasn’t like I was actually going to give it back to her.

After discarding the backpack in my room, I went to the library. The windows leaked deep blue, signaling that it was getting late. I was still nowhere near sleeping. Music was playing from the last time I’d been in here.

Classical. Chopin specifically.

Where was I? I thought, cracking my neck as I walked to the table I knew I'd used last. There were a dozen others like it in the room, long, mahogany, each lit with its own candelabra. Next to the front hall and the back den this room was the largest in the mansion. All filled with books; most of which were never used.

There was only one thing I ever read about.

I spun a pen around between my fingers and examined the open pages. *Vilkacis*. That was right. They were a breed from Latvia, in northern Europe. They were *notable* because the trigger didn't relate to lunar periods (the god-awful majority did, including those boasting cures). But these were of no use to me.

I sighted some key words then went to get the books I needed. Every section of the library was kept in perfect order. Except for mine. I wouldn't let the animals touch that. The result was a careless pile of tomes beside a floor-to-ceiling section of half-empty shelf space. Lensen hated it. Which was probably the only real reason that I kept it that way; I could find what I wanted no matter how the books were arranged.

Within minutes I returned to the table with three volumes. The first held information on the climate in Latvia. But its importance was dependant on the other two. The second documented an "interesting" trait. The *Vilkacis* infections related to misbehavior.

Which meant the *Vilkacis* related to me.

My eyes lifted off the page after I read the points of note. Couldn't keep from contemplating my past. Chopin helped contribute some nostalgia.

So what was a crime worth the punishment of ears, fangs, and eternal solitude? I'd been bad, yeah. Worse than other teenage boys? Maybe. Not all. Just most. Only because I had enough money to get into real trouble with. That I'd used it for my own pleasure shouldn't be criminal. My father did the opposite—no games, all power grabbing—and what did he get? An early death, a shammed marriage, and me to carry on his legacy. No. If any of these were the problem, they wouldn't have been enough.

The truth was much worse.

I dropped my eyes back down to the page, considering the name that might be mine. Who I was. *What* I was.

I pushed this book aside and went to the last—which would contain a picture of...not me. I cursed when I saw it. Nothing more than a furry man with a tail; claws and fangs maybe, but not conceivably mistakable to my shape. I closed the book, letting my hands massage my temples. Was it even worth looking into further into the breed at this point? Probably not—

Thunder crashed around me. My body shook and buzzed at once.

None of it would matter soon.

I walked over to the window and searched the sky. Dark. *I'll just wait then*. The fleeting remembrance of the girl crossed my mind. I didn't care, but...Lensen would be pissed if I let her hear me screaming. I closed the door then walked back inside, turning the stereo to screamo. Blaring volume.

Not long now. I pulled my shirt off first; pants, socks, everything. The ripping clothes thing was hot, sure, but I simply didn't have the good humor to enjoy it once the agonizing pain kicked in.

The song reached its peak drone just as another strike sounded. I caught sight of a single drop hitting the window, then pulled my lips to a smile.

Perfect.

CHAPTER FIVE

Adelle

I woke up with a hollow feeling in my chest. My eyes blinked clear; everything was bathed in white. I didn't look again. Instead I buried my face back into the pillow. It was too soft not to be grateful for. The entire bed was.

That's probably why I slept so well, I thought.

Despite the circumstances.

Last night I'd cried for a long time—till tears wouldn't really come out anymore. They offered no condolence anyways. I'd considered everything. My father. My sisters. My life. It seemed stupid when I couldn't change what I'd done. Whatever that was exactly. The whole thing was a blur of panic and confusion.

Now that it was morning I didn't have any better idea of what I was doing here than I'd had then. I brought a hand up to my face, rubbing it absently. The skin around my eyes was puffy and I had something caked to my cheek; either dirt or blood. I leaned up on my arms and twisted around.

The room was as unbelievable as it had been before. Like the courtyard, the only places I'd ever seen to compare it to were either in designer magazines or my own imagination. The bed alone had a canopy that wrapped up above me to the ceiling. And every piece of furniture was made from a deep red-toned wood. The window was half clear of the heavy curtain, as the man had left it last night. It was raining outside.

Oh. There, I thought. The rain. That's why I'd slept so well.

It seemed a stupid thing to think at the moment, but it was still true. I rose out of the bed—shivering when my feet hit the icy floor. I walked to the window. Drops of rain tapped against the glass, creating a soft sort of melody. The courtyard I'd been in yesterday was below me. I must have been at least three stories up. The water fell across the statues there too, turning snow to ice. My chest rose at the sight of the tress beyond the grounds; they seemed to go on forever. And there were mountains in the distance. Mountains I was sure I hadn't seen when we'd reached the Hanson's cabin....

I turned around with a jolt. "What is this place?" I whispered, brow dipping disconcertedly. I peered into a half-opened door on the center wall. It was a bathroom—gorgeous like the rest. Brass, antique, fixtures. Marble counters. A soft blue light encased in crystal. I eyed the shower longingly, then looked down at myself. I was covered from head to toe in dirt, scratches, and leaves.

"No point in showering if I just change back into this," I said aloud.

I walked back out the wardrobe I had seen before, next to a long mirror. When I stopped to look through it—for no reason at all it seemed—I thought of Jake. It was probably the bracelet on my arm—such a contrast to the rest of me, though it actually *fit* my surroundings. *Maybe this was my punishment for saying no to him like any normal person would have,* I thought unwillingly.

My head dropped to a slump. *Clothes, Adelle. Find clothes.*

"Hello!" something shouted.

I screamed. Thunder crashed in time with a voice from the open wardrobe. I jumped back, toppling over completely.

“Umm...sorry,” said the cat. The cat. Yes cat. The talking cat...was apologizing. *No one* was allowed to call me jumpy. “Wow. You’re the new girl, hunh,” he continued, stepping out nimbly. “I guessed that he would put you in here. That’s why I was hiding—I wanted to get a first hand examination.”

I stared and blinked.

The moment Carter had said the dog could talk, I’d believed him. I think I’d read too many fantasies, the concept wasn’t that estranged to me. It was a very pretty cat—or kitten rather—that would have fit perfectly into the role as magical side-kick. Burnt orange fur in multiple shades. Vibrant blue eyes. Remarkably slender.

“He wouldn’t be happy if he knew I’d predicted his plans,” the cat continued. “But he’s not as smart as he likes to think he is—that’s what Verlaine says.” The cat stopped right beside me, eyes on mine, tail twirling around. “So, are you mute then?” he asked.

It took a moment but I shook my head.

He moved in closer, studying hard. A soft paw touched my arm. “You’re not exactly disproving me.”

“No,” I answered. “No, I’m not mute.”

“Good. That’s more entertaining.” He hopped back for me to stand. “I’m Brynn, by the way.”

“Umm—”

“Adelle, right?” he checked. “Don’t ask me how I know. I’m just swift like that.”

“Oh.” I smiled awkwardly, letting the shock relax from my face.

“So...,” he went on. “Were you trying to find something to wear before? I can help you.”

“No,” I lied quickly, shaking my head out. “No, I was just looking.”

“Ah.” He appeared disappointed. “Well, in that case, I should bring you downstairs with me to eat. You must be hungry; plus I’ll bet Verlaine wants to see you.”

My body rushed at the suggestion, eyes snapping to the door. I hadn’t exactly planned on leaving this room until I was made to.

With that (my chest tightened) with that man out there, it wasn’t safe. Out there was the last place I wanted to be. No matter how curious I was, I wasn’t that insane. I didn’t have much of an appetite either.

“No thanks,” I apologized. “I’m fine here.”

“Oh, come on. You have to come.” He eyed around. “What else are you going to do?”

Hide. “I’ll...I think someone is coming to tell me what my duties will be soon,” I said.

He snorted a laugh.

“What?” My face perplexed.

He shook his head as he spoke. “You won’t be working. That’s ridiculous. Lensen would *never* let you. He’s all hoity-toity about guests—that’s what Max says.”

A guest? Is that what they told this little kitten I am? I could tell Brynn was young by his voice. That was...assuming talking animals aged that way. It was hard not to get pulled into watching out for him, but— *Oh, Adelle, he may very well be an evil kitten. What on earth are you thinking?*

“Jeez, *I* don’t even work half the time,” he continued, bounding off towards the door. “Do me a favor and don’t bring it up while we’re down there, k?”

“Brynn,” I called uncomfortably, drawing his gaze back. “I can’t. I—”

“Sure you can,” he told me, then turned to face the door. “It’s not locked.... Mind?” He bobbed his head up at the handle, clearly *not* grasping the meaning behind my objection. I stood and went to turn it for him.

“No. Not because of that,” I said, twisting the handle carefully. I felt like, at the crack, a gush of water might pour in, or a blinding ray of light, something extravagant. It didn’t. There was nothing. I was being over-dramatic.

Brynn stepped through with almost mocking nonchalance. “Then why?” he asked from the hall. I took the opportunity to peek up and down either direction.

The walls were deep maroon, but not the color one would normally expect to see on the walls of a mansion; they were much colder, almost plum. There were crystalline bulbs like the ones in my room lining the walls in either direction. The lights weren’t turned on though. Only windows lit the way and they were very sparse, allowing for diffused patches of grey color.

Altogether both directions seemed unexpectedly inviting.

“Adelle?” called Brynn, reminding me of his presence. I hadn’t forgotten about him—or his question—I just didn’t really have a good excuse to give him. Apart from the truth.

“Look, Brynn,...me and—” I realized then that I didn’t even know *his* name “—the person who owns this place.”

“The master,” he filled in.

“Yes. He and I aren’t exactly friends,” I explained. “So I don’t really want to go wandering around in case I run into him.” My face was flushed by the time I finished.

“No worries. I don’t like him either,” Brynn said. “And I definitely wouldn’t risk running into him for breakfast. *Ugh*.” He made a gagging sound that almost, *almost*, made me laugh. “He isn’t here though,” the cat continued. “So we don’t have to worry about it.”

My feet rocked unstably. “He’s not here?”

“Nope. Max is, and they’re never here together.”

“Max?”

“I’ll show him to you later,” said Brynn. “We’re not really supposed to talk about it. Now come on, let’s go, I’m famished.” He sauntered off down the hall, tail twisting up behind him.

I was half-way out the door already...

No. No. No. Adelle. You cannot follow the cat. You cannot just wonder around. You cannot— Next thing I knew I was chasing after him. “Wait, Brynn.”

When I did catch up he smiled smugly. Then he led me down a series of halls. One after another, after another. I didn’t talk. I was too busy looking around. Most of the corridors were thin—like the one that my room had been off of—but a few of them were wide and majestic. It reminded me of walking through a museum. Everything was detailed, as if it had been crafted for the singular purpose of being placed inside this building. Wood-framed display cases, filled with books and gems; or other things I couldn’t name. Lights, that curled and twisted around in strange shapes of blown glass. Rugs, splashed with patterns. Cut-out coves.

When we reached a staircase the view was just as startling. Especially when I realized it was the same staircase I had seen from the entryway when I'd first entered the house. Brynn continued down the steps, but my eyes were on the door, my chest beginning to pound ever so lightly with hope. If he really wasn't here as Brynn had said, maybe I could get away....

The man's final words resounded in my head.

'Don't try to leave. It won't work.'

Whatever else I thought of him, I didn't think he'd been lying then. I sniffed in bravely and caught up to Brynn, not really succeeding until the cat wrapped around the edge of a short hall into a brightly-lit kitchen.

"Hello," he announced. He gave me no time to see who he was addressing, when he added: "Look what I brought."

I watched him hop up to a tall wooden counter in the center of the room. It was spread with chopped fruit and carrots. My eyes continued on to study the rest of the kitchen. There were cabinets, with stove-lined counters wrapping beneath them. On top of those were pots filled with colorful dishes that smelt so amazing they should have seized my attention immediately, but didn't. No. The two animals did that. A falcon perched on a pole and raccoon slicing peaches on the island. They both looked as surprised as I was. Brynn was the only one who didn't.

I reconsidered my previous notion of fleeing. The falcon interrupted that possibility: "Brynn, what on earth?—"

"She was hungry," Brynn defended, picking at a tomato with his paw.

"Verlaine was going to send something up," the falcon continued. "I told you that last night. Please tell me you haven't been bothering her all day."

"It's only eight. How could I have bothered her *all day*?"

"Lensan, Brynn," the raccoon chastised, giving Lensan the longer and more pleading of the glares. "This is hardly the time, when—" Her black eyes moved to me reflexively.

I gasped again.

"Don't worry, Adelle," Brynn assured me. "They're totally chill.... A little boring, but,"

"Oh, Brynn," sighed the raccoon in an obviously feminine tone.

"Can I have some milk?" he whined.

"That is your name, girl?" asked the falcon, drawing my wide and awestruck gaze over. "Adelle?"

I nodded hesitantly.

"Well, that's a lovely name," said the raccoon in an overtly pleasant tone. She'd retrieved the milk for Brynn.

"I agree," said the falcon. It surprised me. He looked too mean to compliment a person's name.

"I think it's weird," drawled Brynn, licking fervently. "Who's ever heard of 'Adelle?'"

The falcon shook his head, extending a wing politely. "My name is Lensan," he said, bowing. His voice was cordial—like it should have been accented English, only it wasn't. "And that is Verlaine." He gestured over to the raccoon, who was trying to smile.

"Please," she said, "sit down if you like. Are you hungry?"

I considered the chairs that she'd pointed to; they were pushed up against the island counter. Though I really didn't feel safe enough to sit, I did. By now I had absolutely no notion of what to do in relation to how a person would normally behave. So I just obeyed.

"Umm...No thank you," I responded to her offer of food.

"You say that a lot," noted Brynn.

Verlaine's brows narrowed. "Are you sure?" she asked me.

The smell was enticing, but— No. It wasn't as if I were on vacation. I had work to do. Or at least I thought I did. I would have asked right now if these two knew what my duties would be, only Brynn had warned me not to bring it up.

"I'm fine," I repeated, voice raspier.

Verlaine nodded. I noticed the falcon mouthing something to her that she frowned to.

"Well, if ever you do get hungry, I'm usually here," she told me. "And you're free to raid the cupboards."

Brynn glared up. "*Hey!*"

"Brynn, don't start," she snapped. It stopped him quickly enough that I could tell the exchange must occur often. Brynn turned back down to his milk with an indignant expression. Watching them, they seemed more like normal bantering humans than animals. I wasn't sure what to make of it. Only the falcon, Lensan, didn't talk much, watching us from his pole.

"So, you're like...the cook?" I finally asked.

"Yes." Verlaine smiled brightly, as if it pleased her that I spoke.

"Are you..." I was trying to make conversation I supposed, but couldn't think of anything to ask. "Have you worked here long?"

Lensan made a noise. Verlaine waved to cover it. "Oh, yes," she said. "A very long time."

Silence followed.

"It's beautiful," I admitted.

She picked her knife up and resumed slicing. Peaches now. "Yes. It is." There was sorrow in her expression that unnerved me.

"I've never been anywhere like it," I added, a bit lighter. That was just speaking of the mansion, not even including: the inexplicable snow. The mountains. The trees. The talking animals. I figured that it would be better not to bring these up. "Was the house built a very long time ago? It looks so old."

"I think a few centuries," she replied. "I'm not very good with those things."

I nodded. Of course not. Why was I asking a raccoon how old the house was? This wasn't *conceivably* on the list of important things that I should be trying to figure out right now. *I've already gone absolutely insane, haven't I?*

"Adelle," called the falcon, in a gentle voice. "Do you mind if I have a word with you?"

I looked at Brynn; he was busy drinking.

"I...I guess not," I mumbled.

The bird's head shifted. "In the other room?"

Verlaine flinched. "*Lensan.*"

"It's alright, Verlaine." He waited for me to answer.

I didn't. I only rose, shakily albeit.

As I followed him through the unfamiliar exit my mind ran through the full extent of horrible things a falcon could do to a single human, in a room, alone. Gouge their eyes out. Scratch their arm. Maybe lift them off the ground a few inches. This one could *verbally* abuse me—that was a new trick.

“You’re welcome to take a seat anywhere,” he said. “But I would suggest you do sit.”

I gulped, unable to wrench my eyes from him to the new space we’d entered yet. He was walking on the ground rather than flying. He came up to my waist in height, with silvery-brown speckled feathers, all polished and unruffled.

Finally looking around, I saw that we were in a den. It fit with the rest of the house—particularly the room I’d been in last night with Carter. Two things stood out as extraordinary: The immense number of couches—which were arranged in groups around the room. And the full-glass wall across the room’s longest side, that gave a view of the outside grounds and pouring rain.

I chose a couch closest to where I’d already been, and sat awkwardly, tucking my hands beneath my legs. Until I’d entered this room—with the background of chiming taps from the rain—I hadn’t realized how quiet the rest of the mansion was.

“You don’t have to be nervous,” he began.

He’d paused after hopping onto a short coffee table a few yards away. “Though I suppose you do have good reason for it.” I chewed my lip as he lifted his head a fraction higher. “I wish I could tell you that there was something I could do about the situation you’re in, but there isn’t.” He sounded more annoyed than remorseful when he added, “I’m sorry.”

My throat got dry. The drops slid down the glass behind him like a moving picture in grayscale and the thunder made a low guttural rumble.

“No,” I said—or forced rather. “No, it’s not your fault.” I felt sure of this, though stupid for admitting it. How would I know, anyways? “At least I don’t think it is...or it doesn’t seem that...”

“That animals could be responsible for anything?” he filled in, calmly.

No. That’s not it. My head shook in answer, then I corrected, “Well, no, normal animals wouldn’t be, but...” I lifted my shoulders in implication of the obvious.

“We’re not normal,” he said, amused.

I felt instantly awkward—like I’d said something offensive. I had, hadn’t I? It wasn’t exactly polite to call someone unusual.

“That brings us to one of the things I wanted to speak of with you about,” he went on. “By now you must have noticed some abnormalities.”

“Yes,” I said dumbly, playing at the rug with my feet. He stared as if he were waiting for me to continue but I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“And?” he finally posed.

I shook my head, not understanding. Did I always have to be so clueless? “And what?”

“Don’t you have any questions?”

“Well...sure,” I admitted. “But I didn’t think anyone would want to answer them—or be willing to.” I narrowed. “Aren’t I supposed to be working anyways? Do you know what I’ll be doing? I couldn’t ask before when . . .” My throat swallowed the next words.

“Doing?” he repeated, rearing his head back. Then his eyes closed—as if he were fighting against some internal implosion. “*Please* tell me that you were not told you would be working here.”

“Of *course*,” I answered. “I—” But then I thought about it. Or I tried to. It was difficult while not allowing my mind to rest for a single instant on my captor. I blocked out the tone of his voice, and the glimpse of shadowed features that I’d seen, the pale hand on the doorknob, considering just the facts.

“No,” I whispered, as much to myself as to the falcon. “He never said anything at all about me working.” My features turned dark. “But then why would he keep me here? What could he possibly gain from it? I don’t understand.”

The bird was silent for a long time, giving my pulse a chance to settle. “I don’t have an answer for that,” he finally said. My brows veed; I turned to look downward. “I can assure you though,” he went on, “that you will *not* be working. And while you are here, you shall be treated with as much courtesy as can be managed under such circumstances.” He sounded surer of himself, adamant even. His gaze turned towards the window. “I may not be able to speak for the master, but we servants will cook you whatever you like, and there are dozens of rooms where you might find something to entertain you. If you are not allowed access to the library, I can bring any book that you ask for.”

I was amazed at what he was saying. Not just at the facts, but the delivery. It was as if he was actually concerned with my well-being, or upset that I was ever here. No, it was *clear* he was. Between he, Brynn, and the raccoon, I was starting to wonder if the animals weren’t evil at all.

Of course, I posed rashly. *It made all too much sense*. My eyes wondered the eerie, grey-shadowed room as a story formed itself in my mind.

An evil wizard casting spells on his collection of animal pets. Hidden safely in his secluded lair—where he would be free to perform all sorts of atrocities. Tests. Experiments. My body shook involuntarily, deep in the pit of my stomach—as much from excitement as anything. It sounded like an adventure game.

“I myself am the head servant,” Lensan continued. “So if you tell me something you require, I *will* strive to retrieve it.”

I watched him with new fascination now, taking in the curve of his beak, the way the feathers at the very tips of his wings reflected light like a mirror.

“Thank you,” I said weakly.

“Back to your questions, then?... You said you had some.”

I let my body relax. “Yes, I—”

“Lensan,” called a voice from the hall behind us.

I was instantly shaking from head to foot—any thoughts of relaxation gone. And all at the possibility that it could be the man. I didn’t know his voice well enough to tell. This one sounded low and authoritative. If it was him, what would he do? What would *I* do?

“In here,” answered Lensan, who then turned to me. “It’s just Ritold,” he assured. “He’s safe.”

I sighed audibly. In the next second a dog wrapped the edge of the doorway, stopping once he’d reached us. He gave a curt nod then opened his mouth to speak until I

let out a gasp as I realized that he was the one I'd seen before. His eyes laced over to me. They were just as black and soulful as when I'd first seen them last night.

His jaw bit down like a clench and he looked back to the bird. "Report," he started officially. "Is this...is this a bad time?"

Lensan considered both of us. "No, I'm sure she'd like to hear it."

"Hear what?"

The dog sat back on its hind legs, remaining at attention. "I took him to the medical facility in town. It was difficult, but I managed to get him to the steps without being seen."

"Carter?" I guessed. Then I remembered the man had told me that Ritold was the one taking him back.

"Yes," Lensan answered before Ritold went on.

"The doctors found him soon enough. I waited. After a few hours he came out with two adults that I'd seen go in after I'd arrived." Ritold's eyes moved to me. "They got into a black minivan."

"That's them!" I confirmed excitedly. "That's his parents! How was Carter? How did he look coming out?"

"Good," the dog admitted. "A bit flustered maybe. As short the amount of time as he was in there, he obviously wasn't injured."

A rush of relief swept through me.

"What about the authorities?" asked Lensan in a curious tone.

The dog shrugged. "That's the strange part. I didn't see any go in or out. The parents did look anxious when they were loading the boy...There may have been cops on site already."

"Hmm." Lensan tapped his talon, considering it.

This should have disturbed me—they were talking about a lack of enforcement on my kidnapping—but I didn't care. Carter was safe. He was actually safe. Back with his parents and safe. Just about anything could happen to me right now and it wouldn't matter.

"As far as security goes, I think the best move is to," Lensan began, then seemed to remember me—with the relieved half-grin plastered to my face. "Well, we can talk about that later," he told Ritold, eyeing me.

The dog was giving me a look too. I made myself lose the grin.

"Is there anything else I can do for you while I'm here?" asked Ritold in the voice of one who was clearly addressing his higher-up on the chain of command.

"Yes. Take *her* back to the kitchen," answered Lensan. "I'm sorry, I know I didn't get to answering your questions, but I have pressing business now. Perhaps later."

I nodded hesitantly, realizing strangely that I didn't want him to leave. His presence had been the only thing to make me feel safe since I'd gotten here.

"Business?" Ritold asked.

"With the master," answered Lensan.

"Ah. Good luck."

The falcon gave the dog a sorrowful look as he took the air...and then he was gone.

Ritold led me back without talking. It looked a few times like he might try, but then his jaw would lock again and he would press on. When we got to the kitchen he said a quick goodbye. It seemed he'd told Verlaine and Brynn about Carter first—though Brynn

wasn't anywhere in sight now. Verlaine was delighted. She didn't speak much of it but I could still tell. Probably particularly because I was so happy myself. Such a stupid thing to be; I couldn't help it though.

I stayed in the kitchen at Verlaine's request that I at least *try* to eat a little. I didn't do very well. She gave me a bowl of that mixed rice with onions, eggs, and sausage. It looked moist and delicious, but I couldn't eat it. I just shifted it around with my fork and watched the raccoon, wandering at the enigma of the place. Mostly the wizard man. I felt better about him now that I had a guess as to what he was. I was dutifully ignoring the facts I *did* know—imagining others. Was his hair silver? Did he have a staff normally? Or a pointy hat. He must have been *much* older than I'd guessed to be skilled enough to make animals talk.

"Ta-da," said Brynn, with a prominent jump onto the island. "I'm back."

"Goodness, Brynn, you're completely soaked."

"Yeah," he answered Verlaine. "I was checking out the awesome rain."

"You were looking for Max, that's what you were doing," she chided distastefully, then her eyes snapped to me, as if she were sorry for mentioning it in front of me. Did it revolve around this Max person...or animal rather? This was the second time I'd heard his name and both times they'd gotten dodgy about him. "You know it worries me when you wander out too far," said Verlaine, ladling a pot. "Kite saw a bear recently..."

"Yeah, well," shrugged Brynn, "I stopped before the mountain. I didn't have any luck anyways."

It got quiet enough that I decided to try asking about Max, but Brynn interrupted me.

"You ready to hit it, Delle?"

"Hunh?"

"I thought we'd take a tour of the place, or ah..." He eyed me head down to foot with an incredulous expression. "We could go look for some clothes."

"Brynn." Verlaine was aghast.

"What?" he replied. "She's covered in dirt."

"That doesn't excuse you."

He sighed, leaping off the table. "We'll just go with tour then. Come on."

*

Brynn walked me through the rooms that once again reminded me more of a museum than any house I'd seen. Every room had such a distinct feel to it, yet somehow it all tied together. Deep reds, blues, and maroons appeared often. And the chalky stone. Muted wood. It was hard to grasp really. This was all moving too fast. I'd been awake for maybe a few hours and already I'd been shuffled between four of the—*talking*—animals. This was probably due mostly to Brynn. He led a few paces ahead, steps lively, commenting here and there—though the significance of the points he made was questionable.

Most of all, I didn't think I felt how I thought I should be feeling. Enslaved. Scared. My skin was prickling but not with worry—with wonder at the mystery of it all. I kept expecting to come upon a room with bubbling cauldrons. I really was insane, wasn't I? No one else would be thinking this. In fact, anyone else would be trying to find a way out. Especially if they heard that their captor was gone...

I had a hard time believing that he really was though. Every corner we rounded, my heart caught at the possibility of seeing him. The “*master*”. Or whatever his real name was. Now that I felt braver, it was bothering me that I hadn’t seen his face at all. I wanted a dark, ugly, decrepit, distorted, *evil*, image to put to the monster, and I didn’t have one.

I crossed my arms around my body just as Brynn disappeared into a side room. It was strangely unadorned; basic. It had a few objects. Games, I thought. One foosball table. A mini golf tee. A chess board.

“This is the *bil-i-ard* room,” announced Brynn, nodding around. “Billiard. Billiard.” His face skewered. “I think that’s how you say it.”

I smiled and studied—more out of courtesy than anything. To be honest, I felt tired, dirty, and too overwhelmed by all the *other* rooms to even grasp my surroundings any longer. This place was a little too large. If I weren’t with Brynn I would have gotten terribly lost.

“Alastair comes in here a lot,” continued Brynn, “and...I’m pretty sure Alastair might eat you if he got you alone. So I’d avoid it.”

Eat me. Excellent. I massaged my neck. Brynn sighed and hopped onto the chess board tabled in front of the window. I sighed too. I thought I must have been boring him. “Hmm...still raining,” he noted.

“Does it do that a lot here?” I asked, moving closer. We were even higher than my room and facing a different direction. The sky was a much lighter white than it had been, but I was hesitant to examine more. Who knew what I might see next if I did.

“Yeah,” he shrugged. “But it won’t be very long before it’s only snowing all the time instead. Which is cool. Then we can go sledding.”

Sledding. Sledding.... Somehow this was a surreal thought—that I could be here that much longer. That anyone could possibly think I would be willing to sled. But that was sort of how all the animals were treating me—like I was just a visitor.

I supposed, I had to admit, if not for the man this would be a nice place to visit. Like a super-inclusive, magical, hotel.

“Sweet! Max is back!” shouted Brynn, rocking me out from my stupor. He jumped off the table immediately. “I’m going to go see him. I’ll be back. You wait here, okay?”

I raised a hand to stop Brynn, but before I could, he was gone. I let my palm fall back to my pant leg with a huff.

Great. Now I’m stuck alone in the room where Alastair might come and eat me. My chest lifted with a quick and unexpected (hyperventilated-type) inhale; I twisted to the window to brave the view.

It was scary. Definitely. Everything that I didn’t need to see more of right now. The rain sprinkled down and made it seem like there would be no snow on the landscape. But there was, stretching out across a long field, followed by cliffs and jugged hills that looked like they might go on for miles. There weren’t many trees in this direction, except where the forest wrapped and ended. Just below, there was an oval of ice that looked like it must be a lake in the summer. Shallow water pooled across it. Reflecting the cloudy sky, made it the only dark patch on the landscape. Maybe that was why I caught sight of the wolf while I was staring at it, where otherwise I would definitely not have.

It was scraping the frozen surface as if it were looking for something. It was larger than I’d imagined wolves to be. An absolutely pure ivory white.

I felt myself leaning close to the glass as I watched it. Eventually it stopped its digging—which didn't seem that directed anyways—and went with a shake of its fur towards the mansion—out of my view. I felt inexplicable disappointed when it left. I let my head fall against my arms on the table with an ineffectual sigh.

I'd had a dream about a wolf once. A long time ago. It had been white too.... I supposed I'd dreamt about a lot of things I was seeing now.

Utterly disheartened and simply worn, I turned my head in the direction of the window and watched the drops of water slide down the glass.

CHAPTER SIX

Dmitri

“What do you think you’re doing, cat?” I asked Brynn. He was practically crawling between my legs as I walked towards the house. Snow was crunching around my nails, up my paws, getting my door coat wet; I didn’t really care how many people in the mansion were pissed at me—I wouldn’t avoid my own house any longer.

“Trying to see if you have any cuts,” he answered. “Last time you were bleeding, and Verlaine yelled at *me* for making a mess. I want to be able to tell her if it was your fault.”

With little more than an eye-roll, I pushed past him, entering the mansion through a side door. Now we were—both—in the back entryway. Ironically, furs lined the walls. A memento of my mother and her expensive taste. The animals weren’t big fans, so I made sure they stayed up. Sadly bugging them was one of the most interesting things to do around here.

I shook my body out from head to tail, splattering bits of ice in every corner of the room. “There. How’s that?” I said. *Should make Verlaine happy.*

Brynn narrowed. “Don’t you care that she’ll yell at you?” Despite the doubt, his tone radiated his awe of me.

“*She* works for me, remember,” I said, then started walking out of the room. My paws made their familiar taps against the hard stone floor as I wound through the halls.

Brynn chased after me. “I *know*,” he drawled.

Did he? Because it was pretty obvious he treated *human* me entirely different than *hairy* me. I’d told the animals to start calling me Max when I was like this a while ago. I figured my better half deserved his own title. Still...it *was* just a name. And they all knew it. Except for Brynn.

“But she’s still scary,” he finished.

I’d give him that.

“What were you doing all day, anyways?” he asked breathlessly. “I tried to look for you.”

“Sleeping,” I lied. We rounded the corner to the lower study.

“But you weren’t in your room,” he prodded.

No. I wasn’t. Because last night—for whatever reason—I couldn’t sleep. Or even sit still for five minutes straight. It had been great fun.

“I was on the mountain,” I threw out.

“*Sleeping?*”

I didn’t respond this time. Which made me wonder why I was even answering him to begin with.

“Well that’s cool I guess,” he said eventually. “Did you see any bears out there? Verlaine won’t let me go far out anymore because she thinks there’s some.... Hey—since you’re the boss can you tell her it’s allowed?”

Ugh...

"I want to take Adelle sledding," he added. "And if I can't take her up on the mountain, we'll just have to use lame hills."

I slowed; reflexively, and after glancing once around the room, dropped into a couch. "She told you that?" I asked, sounding disinterested.

Brynn jumped onto the table. "She didn't say she *wouldn't*."

I made face. *Right. Not happening.*

"If we can't sled we can always have a snowball fight. If she'd like that. I don't know. I haven't decided." He looked like he was recounting a conversation, then announced: "She's really weird."

I almost laughed. "Weird how?"

"I don't know," he said. "It's just hard to tell what she's going to say."

Maybe for him, I thought, remembering that she'd been easy enough for me to predict.

"She's cool though," he said. "She does pretty much anything I ask her to. I think she really likes me."

If he cut it with the bragging, I wouldn't complain. "Like what?" I asked. "What did she do?"

He narrowed in thought. "Well, we had breakfast together. She met Verlaine. Then talked to Lensen. I gave her a tour."

She'd been so scared of me, I'd thought she would have hid out in her room for days at least. "Were you the first one to talk to her?" I asked, envisioning the reaction.

Brynn nodded again, grinning proudly.

My lips pulled to a smirk. "Did she freak out?"

"When she saw me?"

"When she *heard* you."

"Oh." He paused. "Not really."

"Not really?"

His head shook. "Nope. I mean, she fell backwards on the ground and stuff. But I think that's because I jumped out at her. She didn't say anything about me talking."

My features leveled; mostly out of annoyance that I hadn't predicted, slash, didn't understand the reaction. I shrugged it off. I was getting my information from a cat. What did I expect?

At least the falling part was entertaining.

"She *doesn't* like you," Brynn announced suddenly, in a loud, exaggerated voice. He backtracked when he caught my un-amused glare. "Well not *you*, you. The other you."

I snorted. "You mean she doesn't know we're the same?"

"Nope."

My brow lifted dubiously. "Lensen didn't tell her?"

Brynn shook his head. "He was the one that told us *not* to tell her."

I looked out at the raining landscape. This was the second time Lensen had done something weird. Not telling the poor innocent victim who the bad guy was? Unheard of for him. If I cared at all to know the reason, I would have figured it out then and there from Brynn. As it was...

"Where is she?" I asked, turning back to the cat.

“Um...” He sniffed. “I left her in the game room. I hope Alastair doesn’t eat her.”
I jumped off the couch and started towards the staircase. “That would be a waste, wouldn’t it?”

“Are you gonna go see her?” Brynn asked, following after me.

“Probably.”

“Oh. Can I introduce you?” he begged.

I was about to tell him “no” and “get lost”, but stopped myself. She’d probably feel safer with him there. I was a wolf after all. And the safer that she felt around me the more fun I could have with the situation. “Yeah. If you stop talking,” I told him, and we went the rest of the way in silence. Mostly.

He entered the room ahead of me.

Just before I rounded the corner I realized I almost felt hyped up. Jeez. Over this girl? *Any* girl. I really had been stuck here too long. When I saw her the feeling didn’t diminish. Just the opposite. She was in a chair against the window; with one arm stretched out on the table in front of her and her head lying across it. Her face was turned the other way, leaving only a pile of knotted curls showing. Her clothes were still covered in dirt. Torn in places. What bothered me most (but was so prominent that it was almost like a screaming in my head) was this big: “I’m helpless, please take care of me” sign that came through in every part of the haphazard gesture.

“I think she’s still sleeping,” whispered Brynn, using a tender voice that I immediately sneered at. Mostly because it was the exact tone *I* felt compelled to use at the sight of her.

I hardened myself against the brunt of these feelings, wrapping around the edge of the room as Brynn leapt onto the table. “Adelle?” he called.

She lifted immediately and he jumped back. “Oh,” she gasped. She put a palm to her chest. “I thought you were that...” her hand fell to her lap as her face contorted in thought.

I held back from finishing the sentence for her. Brynn didn’t.

“Alastair,” he said.

She nodded. “I guess so.” She smiled sweetly.

It was like the helpless thing full-throttle. It should have bugged me—in the past overtly helpless people bugged me—but...it didn’t. I left the thought at that.

“Were you sleeping?” Brynn asked her.

“No,” she said. Her tone was defensive. *Like it’s a bad thing to sleep*, I scoffed internally. “I was just watching the rain,” she explained. “Did you find your friend, though? Max, right?”

I stood taller.

“Ya-huh,” said Brynn. “He came to see you.”

She looked startled all of a sudden. Her body tensed and her eyes darted around the room, finding me instantly of course. Hard to miss a big white wolf. At first I thought she was going to look away, but my gaze worked to hold her. I had that effect—if I chose to. I could also make sure they *stopped* looking, but I wasn’t about to do that with her.

In effect, she looked ridiculous. Her mouth had popped open. Her eyes were wide. But there was something about the way she looked that made everyone else and *everything* else I could think of seem fake. Laugh-ably so.

Beautiful faces I’d seen many of; this was new.

I let an entertained brow slip up. She clamped her mouth shut.

“Oh,” was all she said at first, then eventually added, “Hello.”

“Max is a wolf,” announced Brynn.

My gaze slid over to him dubiously.

“Yeah, I—” back to the girl. “I know,” she said. “I saw him...I saw you before. Outside.” She pointed down.

She was so stuttery I would have assumed she were working the angle, if it wasn't so obvious that she wasn't. I still felt that inexplicable pull to be gentle with her.

“Nice weather for walk,” I said, sarcasm light.

She nodded...then her eyes moved to the window, narrowing uncertainly.

Joke, I wanted to say, but didn't. I noticed a scar running down her neck, some dirt across her cheek. It bothered me that she was running around doing whatever and hadn't taken care of it, or even cleaned herself up yet. And what were those animals good for if they hadn't? Not only were they servants, they were self-proclaimed do-gooders. Lensen could cut it out with his lectures. If I were him, I would have made sure she got a bath at least by now. *And, why am I thinking this much.*

“So I heard you got a tour of the place,” I went on casually.

She looked back with startled eyes, and nodded.

“And?” I said. “What do you think?” I stretched my front legs out on the carpet, leaning in with a yawn.

“Oh, it's. Well, it's beautiful,” she answered without pause. The tone she used and the way her face lit when she said it made me lose the cavalier gesture for a more observant stance. “I've never really been anywhere like it,” she continued. “The walls. The sculptures and colors. The snow. I...” her gaze fell. “I suppose it's hard to appreciate completely.”

I smirked, but it was gone by the time she looked back at me.

“You *do* know why I'm here?” she asked.

“Adelle,” interrupted Brynn, drawing her gaze. “Everyone knows.”

She bit her lip. I didn't really feel like getting into a deep discussion on the topic. I eyed her over again. “You know there are clothes here you could change into,” I said.

She followed my nod, blushing.

Blushing. Right. Who blushes in front of a cat and wolf?

“I told her that,” said Brynn. She kept staring down, fingering the corner material of her shirt. “I think she's afraid the master will get angry with her.”

Her round eyes shot up in panic. Okay, so the cat was right. She was scared. Question was, why would he...I...care what she was dressed in? This girl really didn't make a lot of sense...

“I'm not afraid of him,” she lied bravely.

I felt a pitying pull at my brow; it was almost pathetic.

“Me neither,” added Brynn.

Both turned to me expectantly.

“There are showers too,” was all I said. “Hot water. Soap.” I was inadvertently allowing myself to bend to the “helpless” thing. “You should take a long one. Then put something expensive on. That would really piss him off.”

“Good idea,” chimed Brynn.

The girl looked horrified. Maybe she wouldn't listen. Her eyes had moved back to me; they were holding oddly, like she was searching me for something. She cleared her

throat. “Do you mind taking me back to my room then, Brynn?” she asked, then smiled. “I think I’d like to change now.”

“No problem.” He leapt off the table.

Adelle stood. “It was nice meeting you, Max...thanks for the advice.”

“Anytime,” I said and tipped my head.

Her exit was reluctant; awkward. She half ran into the door frame. I moved to watch them go down the hall.

“So what did you think?” Brynn’s voice trailed.

“Umm...he was nice.”

She said more, but I couldn’t hear it.

I turned around.

Like I cared anyways. *What sort of person talks about their personal opinions on animals? Weirdo’s—that’s who.* She was weird and I didn’t care.

I walked over to the window she’d been sitting beside and looked out, instantly recalling the ring dangling from my neck. It was what I’d been digging for outside. Not a good thing to drop. The silver chain that held the ring wasn’t visible through my fur, but I didn’t wear it for the fashion statement.

It was one of the few things that the girl who’d cursed me had elaborated on. Small, marked with non-descript symbols, and apparently if I ever lost it I could never change back to a human for good. Like, *never*.

That makes sense, I mused sarcastically. *As long as you’re turning someone into a werewolf as immortal punishment, you may as well tack on a lesson in keeping track of personal belongings.*

Whatever. For me it was proof that I *could* change back for good. There *was* a way. I just didn’t know what it was yet.

“Dmitri?” called a voice behind me that I knew well enough not to have to check for.

“It’s Max, actually,” I said, turning around. “But I know it can be hard to tell the difference sometimes. ‘Is he a wolf? Or did he just forget to shave this morning?’” I mocked. “‘If I go with the first and I’m wrong, will he be offended?’”

“You were with the girl,” he stated, ignoring my oh-so very hilarious satire. Lensen’s head bobbed back. “I passed her in the hall.”

“Did you?” I let my features relax to normal. “I heard you talked to her.”

“Earlier,” he confirmed, then his face twisted distraughtly. “She was under the impression that she would be serving here.”

“I didn’t tell her that.” Normally I would have used this to give Lensen a hard time, but the thought of her working instantly bothered me.

“I know; she told me. Ritold came in when we were talking,” he continued with a sigh. “She knows that the boy made it back alright. Hopefully she’ll be able to settle in now, knowing we at least keep our word.”

At least, I repeated slowly. The words echoed around, leaving room for all the other unspoken things I *did* do wrong in his mind. A humorless smile crossed my face.

“Anyways, that’s not really why I came,” he said. “I wanted to know if—on Verlaine’s behalf—if we might have the girl down for dinner. She has something special in mind. And I thought it would be a good chance for Adelle to meet more of the servants.”

My brows lifted mockingly. “Sounds like a blast.”

“Well,” he huffed. “As long as we don’t know *how long* the girl will be here, we’d like to make her feel comfortable.”

I sighed internally. Could they be more dramatic? Probably not, but diverting some of the angst off of me wasn’t a disagreeable suggestion.

Silence filled the room.

“Go ahead,” I said.

“Thank you.” He smiled at me warmly. In that smug way that meant he was thinking—again—about how much better he knew me than anyone else, and how sure he was that deep down inside I wasn’t a screw-up. He turned to leave before I stopped him.

“Lensen, why didn’t you tell her who I was?”

He looked back at me with a dark glare; his smile turned devious. “You think you’re so ingeniously sneaky, boy. But don’t forget who raised you.” There was a pause in which my brows rose, almost painfully. “*I*,” he boasted wryly, “am the original trick-master.”

“I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Don’t be jealous of my wit.”

I laughed. A smile was crossing his face too when I gave him one last dubious glance.

“I’ll see you at dinner,” he said.

I nodded once. Then he was gone. I looked back out at the silver-white sky and voiced a silent reply.

Maybe...