



**FROM**  
**ACID**  
to

**ASHES**

ENNE KARINA

## Table of Contents

Love is an Open Road.....	3
From Acid to Ashes – Information .....	6
From Acid to Ashes .....	7
Chapter 1 .....	8
Chapter 2.....	41
Chapter 3.....	65
Chapter 4.....	99
Chapter 5.....	127
Chapter 6.....	161
Chapter 7.....	186
Author Bio .....	198

# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## FROM ACID TO ASHES

**By Enne Karina**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

From Acid to Ashes, Copyright © 2015 Enne Karina

Cover Art by [Tsubaki Li](#)

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

# FROM ACID TO ASHES

By Enne Karina

## Photo Description

A dark-haired man lay naked in bed with his sheets tangled around him. His face is contorted into an expression of agony. He is screaming in his sleep. All around, phantom arms reach out from the bedding to grab and claw at his body.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*It's weeks since I last slept. The same nightmare each time I try. They come for me, their ice cold fingers pressing into my skin, holding me down. I sense something coming, and wake screaming.*

*Am I possessed, haunted, going mad? I know one thing, I can't go on. I need help, but where do I turn?*

HFN will be fine. No vampires though please.

*Sincerely,*

*K*

## Story Info

**Genre:** urban fantasy

**Tags:** magic, macabre/dark, angst, law enforcement, nightmares

**Content Warnings:** gory and bloody, mentions of childhood abuse, violence

**Word Count:** 75,907

# **FROM ACID TO ASHES**

**By Enne Karina**

## Chapter 1

Tyler woke up in a field covered in blood, bones, and sweat. The air was pungent with the stench of rot and decay. His breath caught and he choked. His chest tightened with every painful attempt he made to inhale. He struggled to calm himself before he wound up with a full-blown panic attack.

He sat up slowly, cradling his head in his arms for several long minutes, looking up only when he was sure he could stomach it. A dark-crimson river flowed by in front of him, complete with bits and pieces of floating *something*. Tyler could feel himself growing faint at the sight and quickly looked away. He had no interest in looking too closely. The rest of the field, or bloody swamp, as he quickly realized, was covered in just as much gore. It was more death than anyone should ever be comfortable with, but it was a sight that had become disturbingly familiar to him.

The sun hung low in the sky, throwing out an eerie light and dark shadows that made everything so much worse than it already was. *Like that was even possible*, Tyler thought bitterly. The whole place was unnervingly still. As if everything was holding its collective breath and keenly waiting for something to happen.

Tyler shuddered violently. He knew what he had to do, he'd gone through the same routine dozens of times now. But the mere thought of it still filled him with cold dread.

"Come on Tyler, this is just a dream. A nightmare. It's not real. You know that..." he whispered quietly to himself. It was his mantra these days, almost second nature. He knew he had to find a way to wake up. *Am I a butterfly dreaming of being a man or a man dreaming he's a butterfly?*

Did it even matter?

Before he could talk himself out of it, he stood and walked away from the river. He was careful with his steps on the wet and uneven ground, the last thing he wanted to do was to fall face-first into it. Whatever *it* consisted of. Forget that he had to pick himself off the ground earlier. He noted with some relief that his clothes were mostly dry, probably because he had been on a patch of raised ground.

*Just water and dirt*, he willed himself to believe.

It was almost completely dark by the time he made it to the edge of the swamp. In front of him loomed a forest of distorted, misshapen trees and gnarled branches. The trunk of each one bore faces, their expressions twisted into wretched horror. The sun was lower now, casting the world in ghastly shades of crimson and purple. Pitch-black shadows formed where the light did not reach, and he could barely see five feet into the forest.

And yet, he felt compelled to enter. The trees blotted out what little light there was almost immediately, but there was enough left for him to pick out the outlines of vague shapes. He walked slowly, carefully, his senses were on high alert. Like before, there was no sound or movement save for his own. He had no idea where he was heading.

Tyler was startled out of his thoughts by the onset of complete darkness. The minuscule amount of light that filtered through the trees was gone now, leaving him in a world of sightless black.

His senses reeled and for a second, he felt the world splinter into disjointed pieces. He spun around quickly, trying to regain his bearings, but it was already too late. He knew he screwed up when his next step did not connect with solid ground. His leg sank into thick liquid. He lost his footing and barely had time to brace for impact. He tried his very best not to think about what he was falling into as the liquid engulfed him.

He was drowning, being pulled down into the abyss, and gasped for breath where there was no air. Panic overtook his senses as he struggled against the now-boiling liquid.

\*\*\*\*

Tyler woke to the echoes of an ear-piercing scream, gasping for air and panicked. Pale-blue light and gray shadows swam in his vision. He stayed stock still as his brain caught up with his new surroundings and realized he was, in fact, in bed. Safe and not drowning to death.

He took a long moment to simply appreciate that thought, but the relief didn't last long. It never did.

A quick glance at his bedside clock let him know that it was barely five in the morning. Two hours before he needed to be up and three hours before he was supposed to be at work. He took a few more shuddering breaths and braced himself for the inevitable.

He slid out of bed slowly. Despite knowing what he was going to find, he winced at the sight that greeted him. Even in the low light, he could see the

sweat and dried blood that stained the once-clean sheets. He was almost afraid to see what kind of damage he'd managed to do to himself during the night. He ached everywhere.

After a quick debate, he decided to shower and clean up before he attempted anything else. No point in dirtying more furniture when he could avoid it.

He studied his reflection in the mirror critically. He looked like crap. His short black hair was sticking out all over the place, there were dark shadows under his pale-green eyes, and the rest of him was pale as a corpse. But aside from a few bruises and superficial cuts on his arms and torso, he was relatively unharmed.

At least the wounds would be easy to hide away under a long-sleeved shirt, and he could fix up his hair after his shower. The rest, he'd just have to pray for the best.

He sighed, the adrenaline was quickly giving way to exhaustion. Thank God he worked a low-key and mundane job.

\*\*\*\*

By the time the sun had risen to a respectable height, he was already drowning his sorrows in coffee. Or espresso as the case may be. The light streaming through the windows was bright and crisp, two things completely at odds with Tyler's current mood. Not even the best espresso in the world could lessen the pain of what he knew he had to do next.

A dream diary, he huffed in annoyance as he finished up his newest entry. Some days, he really wanted to punch Dr. Kenaston, his psychiatrist. He had insisted that analyzing the dreams during daytime would help internalize them and help him cope. Tyler was half-convinced the guy was nothing more than a quack. There was no way in hell that writing down all those nightmares was helping with getting rid of them.

Not if the increased frequency was anything to go by. *Not to mention the escalation in disturbing-ness.* Tyler shuddered again as fragments of the dream flitted through his mind. It was not something he wanted to think about. Or analyze. Ever. Just looking at the damned notebook made him nauseous these days.

Sighing, he shoved the notebook and pen in the drawer as his alarm went off, notifying him that he needed to go if he was to have any chance of arriving at work on time.

He looked in the mirror one last time to make sure he appeared respectable before heading out the door. He checked off his mental list as he walked to the bus stop, making sure he had everything he needed. Working as a secretarial assistant to the company president was tedious, but it paid well enough. And didn't require any brainpower. He liked to believe that he was good at his job, but the truth of the matter was that anyone would be hard-pressed to really fail at it.

Go in, make sure everyone knew what they were doing, when their appointments were, and keep the different departments from tearing each other's throats out. Simple. Twenty-six and already burnt out. He snorted. It would've been funny if he hadn't been working the same job for the past three years. Four years of business school and a fancy piece of paper later, the best he could manage was a dead-end position in a small importing company. At least it was a step up from his last job.

He flashed his bus pass at the driver as he boarded, heading straight to the back in search of an empty seat. As usual, it wasn't too crowded. One of the few things he liked about the company was that it put him in the opposite direction of rush hour traffic.

At least he'd managed to get a job right out of school. That was one thing he'd managed to get right in life and one less thing for his parents to worry about. Tyler felt the familiar stab of guilt as he thought of them. He'd been avoiding them ever since he'd moved out and wound up where he was now. Never mind that he hadn't mentioned a word of his newest problem to them at all.

He kept telling himself that he just didn't want to worry them. He already felt like a complete failure in their presence so there was no need to add insult to injury. They never said anything, but then, they didn't need to. It was plain as day to everyone. How an established business tycoon and a lawyer managed to produce him was a wonder even to himself.

He watched the world blur by from the window. It was the same as every other day, boring and predictable. Something he wouldn't have minded as much before, but that coupled with the insomnia was almost unbearable. He dug his phone out of his briefcase. The light flashed, letting him know that he had two new messages. One from his mother and the other from an old friend. He deleted both without reading the contents.

The bus rolled slowly to a stop in front of the company building. Lauren, the receptionist shot him an inquisitive look as he entered the office, but he

ignored it. Despite his best efforts to fix his appearance earlier, it would never have escaped her notice. She liked to make everyone's business her own, but her caring nature was probably why she was the closest thing he had to a friend in the whole company. Tyler promised himself that he would make it up to her later.

He made his way to the president's office to deliver the papers he'd finished sorting through the night before. He could feel the exhaustion settling in again as he relaxed against the uncomfortable office chair. Digging out the rest of his papers, he started working through the day's banal tasks.

\*\*\*\*

Sunday. The day everyone should be out enjoying themselves, but instead, he was stuck with the appointment from hell. Tyler hated the cursory weekly visit to Kenaston's office with a burning passion, the guy was a condescending asshole, but he provided the pills. They might not help with the nightmares, but they did at least make sleeping slightly more tolerable. He was willing to face the guy once a week if it meant some relief.

Plus, he was willing to bet the asshole would call up his parents if he dared to so much as be late for an appointment. The man supposedly knew his father, something he hadn't been aware of until his first visit all those weeks ago.

The receptionist greeted him cheerfully as he entered the small clinic. He returned her greeting and took his usual seat by the wall, waiting to be called inside. It was an unassuming little space off the side of a plaza near his apartment. One of the bonuses of living in the sketchy part of the city, he assumed. Questionable businesses, cheap restaurants, and odd establishments all within walking distance.

Tyler was called in not five minutes later. Dr. Kenaston studied him silently as he entered the small white office. The walls were bare and painted in a glaring white. He sat down on the worn leather seat facing the oak table and the man who sat behind it. Kenaston looked to be in his fifties, and what little hair he did have was a dusty gray. Tyler could also swear that the man grew rounder each time he set eyes on him. Not a good look even on someone who sat in a stuffy office all day. They stared at each other for a few moments, as though facing off, neither willing to make the first move.

Finally, with a heavy sigh, his psychiatrist pulled out a file, his, and set his pen on top. Tyler mentally ticked off a win for himself. "How have you been this week, Tyler?"

“Fine.”

“And?”

He knew he was being difficult, but constant repetition did not make the exercise less awkward. Or humiliating. He decided to take a leap of faith anyway. “It’s not working. The nightmares are just getting worse. More gruesome, I guess. I don’t know.”

“And you’re still feeling the same symptoms? Chronic exhaustion, low energy, sudden onset of anxiety, and mild panic attacks?”

“Yeah, I guess. It’s not even just that, It just feels... weird. Like I’m conscious even when I’m dreaming. It’s like I know I’m dreaming. Sort of. Is that normal?”

“Lucid dreams are fairly common and widely documented. It’s a very normal occurrence.”

“Even if it doesn’t feel like I’m dreaming?”

“It’s possible. I’m afraid I can’t answer more specifically.” Kenaston jotted down a quick note before continuing, “Rather than looking at the dreams as the end cause, it may be more beneficial for you to analyze the possible causes.” He paused and scrutinized his notes. “Has anything happened recently that had a major impact on your life?”

“No. Like I said before, I’ve been living on my own, in the same apartment, since college. I’ve worked the same goddamned job since graduation. And my family’s the same as they’ve always been. Literally nothing’s changed since the last time you asked me.”

“What about friends? Activities you engage in outside of work?”

“Like I said, the same.”

Kenaston gave him a hard look, but didn’t push any further. He turned to his papers and scribbled a few more lines. “Putting the contents aside for the time being, has there been any changes in the frequency of these dreams?”

“Yes! God. Some aren’t as bad as others, but yeah, it’s all been nightmares. Every single Godforsaken night. And the last one—”

“I see.” Kenaston cut him off. Tyler fought the urge to physically get up and smack the man. “And you’ve been keeping a record of these dreams like I instructed?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Good. Bring them in next week and we’ll go through it together.” He shuffled through his papers, probably checking through his records. “Book a full visit with Liana for next weekend, and I’ll see you then.”

Tyler left without a word of good-bye, too pissed off to bother playing nice. Not that the man deserved it even on his best days. He would have stormed out of the office with a few choice words if the man hadn’t been a friend of his father’s.

Liana, he never could remember her name for some reason, gave him a knowing look as he walked over. “Appointment for the same time next week?”

“Yeah, but Dr. Kenaston wants me to book a full appointment.”

“Let me just check... yes. That’s fine.” She grabbed one of the business cards and quickly wrote down the time and date before handing it over.

Tyler nodded his thanks and left the clinic. He didn’t know why she bothered writing it down for him every time since it was the same each week. It wasn’t like people were clamoring for appointments. Even on a weekend, the place was practically deserted.

He checked his phone, it was five in the afternoon. That left him with enough time to drop by the grocery store and stock up on food. It wasn’t like he had anything else to do.

By the time he managed to find everything he wanted, it was already dark outside. He stopped by a mom-and-pop place that served the best fried foods he had ever tasted for dinner before calling it a night. He’d been productive. And he had everything he needed to face the coming week.

Sighing, he headed home. Turning the corner, he was jolted out of his thoughts by a completely dark and empty street.

“Brilliant. Just, brilliant,” he mumbled angrily under his breath. Blackouts might happen with a disturbing level of frequency in this neighborhood, but they did not get more tolerable the more he experienced them.

Especially not when he was outside the safety of locked doors.

Rationally, he knew that the street was usually deserted, but somehow, that failed to fill him with any confidence. Tyler took a deep breath and simply made a run for it. He chided himself under his breath. This was reality, there’s nothing lying in wait in the shadows to violently mutilate him. This was *not* one

of his deranged dreams. He ignored the niggling voice that insisted that violent crimes occurred in this particular neighborhood all the time.

Tyler made it through his front door with his heart pounding out a mad rhythm and on the verge of panic. He'd always hated the dark.

So much for a relaxing night in. He paced in the front hall until he'd managed to get his heartbeat under some control. Enough that it didn't feel like it was trying to slam out of his chest and make a run for it.

He stuffed his groceries in the fridge quickly and fumbled his way around the kitchen for some water. Adrenaline and bone weary exhaustion did not go well together.

With nothing better left to do, he contemplated his bottle of sleeping pills. He felt ridiculous doing it, but he couldn't help it either. It was like his salvation and condemnation all rolled up into one convenient package.

Tyler shook his head violently to rid himself of the remnants of an overactive imagination and the images from the last nightmare. It was like the world itself was out to screw with him. At least the last few nights had been relatively bearable, at least compared to the one a several nights back.

*Okay. Stop.*

"They're just dreams. No matter how deranged and horrible. They're. Just. Dreams." Tyler willed himself to believe those words as he swallowed the pill with a swig of water.

\*\*\*\*\*

The next thing he knew, he was standing in the middle of another empty street. The place was devoid of life and the only thing that stirred was the wind. It was strong and constant, picking up and dropping litter as it blew by. Tyler surveyed his surroundings nervously. On one hand, there was light. On the other hand, it was flickering sporadically and made the shadows dance wildly. The lampposts looked ancient and the bulbs were evidently on their last legs.

He steeled himself and walked to the nearest building. It was old and run-down, the stone walls were overtaken by vines. He didn't know what he was expecting, but the door was locked. The whole thing had an air of desolation. It was lifeless and abandoned like the streets.

Tyler looked around anxiously, but the rest of the buildings appeared to be in a similar, if not entirely same state. The streets looked about the same in

either direction so he simply picked one at random. Choosing left and walking toward the moon. Having that piece of normality in his view at all times somewhat calmed his fraying nerves.

The lights flickered ominously as he walked by. Tyler gulped nervously. The dream was nothing out of the ordinary, he'd even call it normal. Except it wasn't. In the back of his mind, Tyler knew that something was off, and it made his skin crawl. The more time he spent in the open streets, the more unreasonably jumpy he became. The barest rustle of wind would startle him.

An empty city, a dirty street, a ton of litter, but not much else. Even after what seemed like hours, he still hadn't encountered anything worse than dust storms and city fumes. Maybe it wasn't one of those screwed-up nightmares. Maybe he was just dreaming. Normal people dreamed about empty cities right?

*Or not.*

He froze as realization hit. Under the dim, dying lights, he hadn't noticed. Not until now. Not when it was staring straight at him in dead-eyed silence. The head, *human head*, was resting on the side of the road, its eyes staring straight at him. He jerked away to avoid looking at it only to realize he was surrounded. Mutilated heads complete with decaying flesh covered the street, and they were staring at him.

Tyler turned around in a slow circle to see just how many there were. He really must be certifiably insane to even consider doing that, let alone actually going through with it. Hundreds, if not more, sat on the street, crowding around him and disappearing off into the distance.

The air grew oppressive as a thick fog settled in around him. Tyler choked as he struggled to breathe. It was like the fog was filled with something other than air. Something poisonous and *alive*. He could feel tendrils of smoke coiling around his body, forcing its way down his throat, squirming into his lungs, twisting around his heart, and killing him from the inside out.

Pain flared up from every part of his body. He groaned in agony as the tendrils dug into his flesh, pulled at his limbs, and ripped through his gut. His joints ached, his lungs burned, and his head pounded in a brutal rhythm. Terror and agony mingled as he watched his skin bubble and burst, releasing the rotten stench of death into the air.

He tried to scream, to run, to do anything to make it stop, but he was immobilized. Powerless. The fog and smoke held him prisoner as they slowly tore through his body.

The world tipped and spun and for a moment, Tyler thought he'd been freed and had fallen to the ground. His vision was blurred and tinged in red and black, but he was facing up, looking up at the buildings and streetlamps. *And his own body.*

He shot out of bed with a wretched cry and immediately started choking, spraying blood everywhere and creating a huge mess. His mind was reeling from the afterimages of his dream as it fought to process what had happened. What was happening. His mouth was filled with blood from where he'd bitten himself in his sleep. He untangled himself from his sheets as quickly as he could manage and stumbled to the bathroom through a haze of panic. He fought the urge to cough or swallow. He just wanted to be rid of the nauseating taste.

It took much too long to stop the bleeding, but even after all that, it was still dark outside. It was early in the morning, too early for any reasonable human being to be awake, but there he was. Pacing around the kitchen and doing his best to avoid thinking about the carnage in his bedroom. There was no way in hell he was going to be writing that down. Not now. It's not like he could forget the damned nightmare even if he tried.

By seven in the morning, he knew he couldn't put it off anymore. He needed to do something about the blood on his bed. Better to get the worst part of the day over and done with before heading to work. He had no interest in coming home to it after.

He dragged himself back to his room slowly and cringed at the sight. His pillow looked like something had died on it. The sheets weren't in much better shape. It could've ended much worse, all things considered. He tossed the bedding into the tub to soak in soapy water, hoping desperately that the blood would come out easier when it came time to actually wash the things.

It was barely Monday and he still had the rest of the week to survive through. Maybe he'd even splurge and get a new pillow and bed sheets. An option that was sounding more and more enticing the longer he stared at the bloodstained mess in his tub.

\*\*\*\*

*'Twas the night before the new moon, when all thro' the world, not a creature was stirring, not even a ghost...* Adrian huffed a dry laugh. There was nothing amusing about the new moon, it was the busiest night of any given month for him. And not in a good way.

It was also rare for the nights leading up to it to be so... peaceful. He couldn't help but think of it as the calm before the storm. It made him especially tense. It was like everything was watching, waiting for something, anything, to happen. The streets he patrolled down were littered with people, but he didn't concern himself with them. Tonight, it was just him, Halle, and the Riverside District. If he concentrated hard enough, he could almost make out the sound of the crashing waves over the hum of the busy streets.

He watched the shadows that rose and fell in waves between them, the illogical and immaterial beings that walked amongst men. He was on the watch for any new untethered sources of power. They popped up from time to time, and unlike the creatures of magic that occasionally crossed over the edge into the *physical* world, they had no way of predicting when an untethered source would show up. Unfortunately, the waters surrounding their city were notorious as a giant untethered source, spewing out massive quantities of unstable magic whenever it pleased.

It was rare, but when it happened... it was literally hailstorm and hellfire. He couldn't feel anything right now, but he reached out toward the edge just in case. *Good, still dormant.* The last time it happened and caught them unaware, they'd had to take the entire city and surrounding area off the grid just to contain the building panic and avoid even more damage to the surrounding areas. Or so he'd heard. The whole thing had occurred well before his time.

Still, better one city than the entire country seized by hysteria. And for something of that magnitude, it was much safer to leave it be than attempt to move it.

Adrian was so engrossed in his task that he jerked back in shock as a hand landed on his shoulder. He whipped around, ready to strike.

"I appreciate your dedication to the job and all that, but seriously, it ain't worth dying for. Well, not like this anyway."

For the first time, Adrian realized he was standing at a busy intersection getting gawked at by a throng of pedestrians. The light was red and he'd come within two steps of turning into a statistic. His partner, Halle, was watching him expectantly, hand still on his shoulder like he thought Adrian would make a run across the street. He glared at the people still watching until they turned away, pretending not to see the spectacle unfolding in front of them. "Yeah, thanks. I guess I zoned out for a bit there."

Halle gave him a funny look, but was cut off when the light changed and Adrian took off at a brisk pace. “I know it’s weird and all, but the night’s still young. You *know* that we don’t usually get into the full swing of things till the kids go to bed. And me? I’m just glad for a bit of peace and quiet before all hell breaks loose.”

“I do know that, but doesn’t something feel *off* to you?”

They walked in silence for a few minutes, Halle refused to rise to the bait. As they neared the pleasure center located in the downtown core, bright lights shone down at him from the looming buildings all around. So far as Adrian cared, the place was nothing more than a mockery of humanity. Rather than providing warmth, it was a cold, uncaring, steel deathtrap hastily swept under the rug of a cheerful façade.

Adrian could never feel comfortable in the city center. Never mind that counting his training, he’d been stationed at the Riverside District for nearly a decade. And he’d been partnered with Halle almost the entire time. How anyone could think they’d make good partners was beyond him, but somehow, they were still together. Halle was as carefree as one could get and still be functional. Adrian halted instantly when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Okay. How about this? We take a breather, you stop watching so closely, and I’ll go take a proper look at the other side?”

Adrian opened his mouth to argue, but Halle cut him off by shoving his hand in his face.

“No. You don’t get to argue about this. You just proved once again that you’re incapable of walking and watching at the same damned time.” Halle rolled his eyes skyward.

Begrudgingly, Adrian had to admit that it made sense. He wouldn’t be much help to anyone if Halle had to constantly keep him from accidentally killing himself. It didn’t mean he didn’t resent the man for it.

“Fine. There’s an alley leading into a deserted compound up ahead,” Adrian finally said as he led the way. He loved and hated Halle’s natural ability to *see*. But he consoled himself with the fact that what he lacked in that particular field, he more than made up for in others.

Halle chuckled. “Of course you’d know where all the abandoned spots are in the busiest area in the whole city.”

Adrian ignored the jab, he'd get Halle back for it later. He could wreck subtle havoc with the guy's house and there wasn't a damned thing Halle could do to stop him. The man was hopeless at unweaving spells.

The bustle of nightlife started petering out as they neared the abandoned alley. After the original owner of the building packed up and left town, no one else had offered to buy the lot. The neighborhood had been abandoned by all but vagrants and petty criminals. The municipal government being what it was, never bothered to do a damned thing about it. Which led to its current state as one of the major landmarks to be avoided at all costs by the average passerby. And that suited their purpose perfectly.

They left the cheap façade of the city and turned onto a narrow alley. Adrian led the way through a maze of side streets. With no artificial lights and the moon hidden behind a veil of clouds, they had to resort to feeling their way forward.

After a quick check to ensure they were completely alone save for the rats that ruled like kings here, Adrian lit a mage light with a wave of his hand. The tiny open space they arrived at could have been a small courtyard at one point. There were still traces of what might have once been bushes and vegetation. All that remained of them now were dried out husks embracing the concrete walls that still propped them up.

Halle shuddered in disdain, but didn't bother complaining. Good. Adrian would not have hesitated to take him somewhere even worse if he had.

He left the mage light hovering above his partner as he took up watch at the sole entryway into their little spot. In case anyone was unfortunate enough to stumble onto them. "Ready?" he asked as he motioned the all clear.

A low grunt and a soft thud were his only answer. Halle had sat down in the very middle of the cramped space and stopped moving altogether. It still unnerved Adrian to see anyone in that state. To efficiently move on the other side, Halle had left the empty husk that was his physical body behind. On the other side, his consciousness and power returned to inhabit his source, giving him a different kind of form. Adrian scowled and gently tugged on his own source just to feel its closeness. As beings tethered to a source in a different plane of existence, they were always leaving one or the other piece of their very selves behind.

Seconds dragged into minutes and the only sound to be heard was the low breathing of both men.

He studied his partner carefully. Halle was a year older than him, but Adrian had been an Enforcer for longer, and therefore, was the leader of their little team. Halle was also physically larger than him, standing half a head taller than his own five foot eight. Aside from that, they were about evenly matched in terms of physical appearance. As for magic, they were too different to really compare anything.

Adrian turned his attention back to his surroundings as the shadows lurched into life around Halle. They were small and harmless. The things skittered round, chasing and batting at the mage light he created. Some coming close enough to the edge that he could almost make out what they were. Way too close for comfort. But the waves ebbed and flowed, nothing ever made it close enough to tumble over into their side. He was prepared nonetheless.

Everything was going as expected until an unholy screech broke the stillness of the night and Adrian jumped into full alert, power ready to attack and maim at a moment's notice. "What the hell was that?"

Halle lurched back into awareness with so much force that he nearly fell over. Would have too if he hadn't been sitting. He shrugged sheepishly. "Oops?"

"What do you mean 'oops'?"

"I may have accidentally stepped on something on the other side..." Halle grimaced. Quickly he added, "It's fine, it was just a mandrake."

"Just a mandrake."

"I promise nothing followed me back." He shrugged again, not looking worried at all. "Come on, it'll be fine."

"You said you were going to take a look and went for a stroll instead. We're lucky that all you did *was* step on a mandrake."

Halle waved a hand dismissively through the air and started onto the small winding streets leading back into civilization. Adrian followed without comment and they walked in silence until the blaring lights and sounds of the busy downtown surrounded them once more.

"See anything interesting?"

"The usual. There were a few small spots of untethered power scattered around, but nothing dangerous. Cleaners can deal with them. 'Sides, there's no one in need of rescuing."

“I see...” Untethered and unchained. Without a conscious mind to give them shape, they had a tendency to cling onto anything and everything, mangling and destroying all that they touched. “You’re sure they’re not active?”

“No. Even you’d pick up on them if they were active. So come on, either lighten up or shut up. It’s almost three, if anything’s going to happen, it’s going to be starting in less than fifteen minutes.”

Adrian snorted. “Fine. Let’s get back to our post then.”

\*\*\*\*

Adrian passed the next day by pacing anxiously through his house, stepping out only when it came time to leave for the headquarters. The Enforcers’ building was crowded with all the units that gathered in preparation for the night. Thank God it only happened once a month. Adrian could almost imagine the ancient building collapsing under the weight of all the people and gear crammed into it. They were only barely getting by as it was.

Overhead a bell chimed out a clear, dry note. The place used to be some sort of medieval church before it was gutted by a fire. No one wanted anything to do with the remains so their previous director got it on the cheap. Under the condition that he would restore it and keep the bell tower. The only place that sort of survived intact.

He followed the flow of people as everyone made their way to the central halls. Like most others, he hadn’t been back here since the previous month. Only the division heads had any real need to report in on a regular basis. The rest of the team just followed orders, took assignments, and patrolled the streets until they were actually needed.

Adrian had always been in awe of the structure, something he would never willingly disclose to anyone. He’d always assumed the old director felt the same since the place obviously wasn’t chosen for its practical uses. The walls were covered in rough brick, the ceiling hung low and the doorways even lower. Anyone who was even mildly claustrophobic would never make it through the halls without an attack. People crowded all around him trying to squeeze through the narrow halls with as little bloodshed as possible.

The pushing and shoving died out suddenly as he managed to squeeze through the ornate double doors leading to the gathering space. It was the only place that they really got any use out of. Except maybe the offices on the higher floors and the division rooms underground.

He heard someone scream his name and point wildly to the far side of the dimly lit space. Catching the other man's eyes, he waved in acknowledgment and quickly made his way to the rest of his team.

The members mingled and gossiped as they waited for everyone to arrive and the director to give his obligatory speech. He'd heard it so many times now that he could recite it from memory. It was amazing that the man hadn't gotten tired of spewing out the same lines month after month.

*Stay in constant contact with the rest of your division.*

*Efficiency is key when taking out targets.*

*Take every precaution necessary when dismantling and returning untethered sources.*

*Be conscious of your surroundings.*

*Keep an eye out for civilian stragglers.*

The whole meeting took over an hour from arrival to finish. He was glad that Lynna had finally learned her lesson, and waited until most of the others had already pushed their way out before leading them out. He studied her out of the corner of his eyes as he waited. He had known her since he was a child, and she had been something of a surrogate mother to him through the years. During the wait, she had pulled her long platinum-blonde waves into a tight ponytail, her pale-blue eyes darted restlessly over the thinning crowd.

She wasn't quite known for her integrity or patience either, but she'd calmed down a bit after taking a dive off an eight-story building the month before. All because she couldn't be bothered to wait for her partner to finish combing through the area for threats before jumping in.

Lynna glared at him as though she knew exactly what he was thinking. She probably did. But he hadn't made his fear of her recklessness a secret either. "Your assignments are all here," she said as she pulled a stack of paper out of her bag.

Each team member picked out the sheets embossed with their names. The place was nearly deserted by the time they filed out into the dreaded night. Adrian glanced at his watch, it was ten past nine.

"Let's head to my place for the rest of the briefing. We're not due at our posts until midnight anyway." Lynna took off in the direction of her house without pausing to wait for an answer. Gathering at her place for a bite to eat

during briefing had been a tradition for as long as Adrian had been a part of her team. If nothing else, the woman was an amazing cook.

They went their separate ways hours later to take up watch over the city. Untethered power and sources were drifting so close to the edge by that point that even Adrian could pick them up without effort. A wisp of ghostly light here, a shift of something sinister there, the city lights casting darker and harsher shadows than ever.

Halle clapped him on the back before heading off to his own post. Adrian sighed dramatically and prepared himself for what was going to be the longest night in a month.

\*\*\*\*

Tyler couldn't believe that he'd let his coworkers guilt him into agreeing to a night out in town. He had barely been able to make it through the week with his wits intact and now this. Barhopping? What in the fucking world had he been thinking? Right. He hadn't thought. His foul mood had only worsened in the last week and he'd devoted all his efforts to appearing as normal as possible. And if hanging out with half his coworkers was what it took to get them off his back, well, it wasn't the worst possible way to pass the time.

Besides which, he owed it to Lauren, who he'd given the cold shoulder earlier in the week, to make an effort. Especially when he'd been avoiding her and her inquisitive glances throughout the week. He felt bad, guilty even, but that was still better than having to spill his guts to her.

So far as everyone knew, he'd been going through a bad bout of insomnia and they were somewhat sympathetic. He'd take pity over joblessness any day.

As the group made their way down the street illuminated by billboards and flashing lights, Tyler couldn't help but shudder. The sky was overcast and looked like it could rain at any moment, even though the weather report had declared no such thing. The streets were oddly empty when they entered the first bar at nearly midnight.

Fortunately, no one really seemed to expect much in terms of company from him. He had decided early on that they only invited him out as a personal busser for drinks. Lauren had been apologetic about it, but he didn't mind. It saved him the effort of trying to make small talk with people he had nothing in common with.

They left for the next location as the bar filled up with too many barely legal teens for their tastes. Calvin, his manager, chose the next location. With the promise that it was a hidden gem with good drinks and good ambiance, they set off.

“You don’t think it’s going to rain do you?” Lauren fell into step beside Tyler and whispered softly to him. Not that the others could hear her through their enthusiasm to make a good impression on the president.

“Don’t know. I doubt it.” Tyler managed a half smile, half grimace. “It’s the twenty-first century, I’d like to think that I could at least trust the forecast by now.”

Lauren snorted and quickly covered her mouth in embarrassment. She could pretend to be hip and trendy all she liked, but there’s no denying that she was one of the older generation. Not that it was easily apparent with her brown hair streaked in fiery red and the crazy pieces of jewelry he’d seen her sprout over the years. She didn’t look a day over thirty, and he knew for a fact that she was almost twice that age. She sighed dramatically. “All the same, I wish I’d brought my car.”

“You didn’t?”

“No, it’s hard to find parking on these streets and it’s close enough to my place to walk from here,” she remarked offhandedly. “Although, if you’re wrong, I’ll have to call a taxi instead.”

Their easy conversation tapered off into an awkward silence as they rounded a corner and started down a side street.

“Are you sure this is the right way?” Lauren called out uneasily.

“I was just telling the boss, the only way to get any peace around here is in places like these. It’s not one of those trendy places with overpriced drinks. It’s good old-fashioned, good food and better drink,” Calvin replied, tossing a plastered-on smile their way.

Lauren sighed again and shrugged. There was no getting out of it unless they wanted to leave early and that would not look good. Left with little to no choice, they followed the rest of the group to the hole-in-the-wall.

It wasn’t until the pub was closing nearly two hours later that they decided to call it a night. Lauren looked like she was about to pass out on the spot as did two others. Tyler was glad that the president had only tried to chat him up once during the whole night.

Calvin had probably saved him from making a complete fool out of himself when he forced his way into the conversation. Tyler excused himself to grab more drinks and stayed out of sight after. *Out of sight, out of mind.*

He bid Lauren and the others good night before heading home himself. He loved that the buses ran through the night. He would never run the risk of ending up stranded somewhere.

The streets were eerily quiet for a Friday night in the city center, even if it was past two in the morning. Actually, it was only two in the morning, the place should be bursting with life. But instead, the neon lights shone over lifeless pavement and a few lonely drunks. He barely saw anyone on the way to the bus stop and only one that looked even remotely sober and sane. Tyler didn't pay the man going in the opposite direction much mind as he hurried on his way.

By the time he arrived home, it was past three in the morning. Thank God he didn't have to work the next day. There was no way he would have been able to make it through with how hungover he was going to be. Alcohol hated him almost as much as he hated it. Especially now since he was fairly certain he wasn't supposed to mix the stuff with his sleeping pills.

He kicked himself mentally. Right. Because now he was going to be hungover *and* sleep deprived. *Even more sleep deprived.* Like his fucked up dreams had allowed for any real rest in a long time, Tyler thought bitterly.

An hour hopelessly tossing and turning in bed later, he figured he might as well do something productive. Or try and tire himself out enough that he'd just pass out. The latter won out and Tyler was out the door within a minute. He lost patience waiting for the elevator to arrive almost immediately. He was too high-strung and anxious to stand still. He made for the stairway instead.

The corridor was dark, the single light that illuminated the narrow steps was at the end of its life. He shuddered, but continued on, he was more than a little acquainted with the place given how often the power went out and how notoriously unreliable the elevators were.

Four flights of almost pitch-black steps later and Tyler could finally see light below. At least the superintendent made sure the light at the lobby was always in working condition.

Turning toward what should be the door to the lobby, he noticed another flight of stairs leading downward from the wall on his left. He stared at it hard,

he didn't remember there ever being a basement. He peered down the steps, but saw only darkness. Tyler decided to check it out, he had nothing better to do anyway. A few minutes later, lights blinked into existence from below. The steps led down into a giant hole crammed to the brim with a disturbing mixture of industrial and gothic buildings. A city spiraled upward from deep below, so far down that it faded once again into blackness.

He considered his options for a minute, but decided to continue on. He was going to go for a walk anyway, exploring the underground city would work just as well as jogging around his neighborhood. As he descended, he could make out more and more detail, it seemed to be inhabited, if the lights and hum of white noise were anything to go by. Black smoke bellowed out from the tops of some buildings and red light flickered in the shadows. *Probably windows*, Tyler mused to himself as he studied the sprawling city.

There wasn't anything particularly creepy about the underground city, but at the same time, he *knew* it was wrong. Twisted and distorted in ways he couldn't understand. And despite the hot air that wafted upward, he felt chilled to the bones.

The stairs ended on a ledge, the building beside him was dark, complete with an iron door and barred up windows that let no light in or out. From a few steps away, another set of stairs led even further down.

Tyler hesitated.

He couldn't see where he had come from, blackness swallowed the steps above him. Better to walk around where there's light than no light, he decided. The superintendent really should fix the damned lights in the building. He moved to the next set of stairs with a renewed air of determination.

The air grew hotter the lower he went. The structures were built closer together, almost like the builders were trying to cram as many separate buildings into as little space as possible. Many of them were connected as well. They spiraled off the ground in twisted spires and tangled flying buttresses.

All of them were built of stone and brick, dark and dirty. As though they hadn't been cleaned in centuries. Not that there would have been much point, as far as Tyler could tell, there wasn't enough light to even see clearly and no one else walked the streets. Everything was colored in a mangled gray and black, punctuated by the occasional glowing red.

Four more flights of stairs later, he arrived at another protrusion off the wall at the edge of the city. The only thing there was a massive rust-eaten iron door.

A bright flare of glowing red peaked out through the slits between it and the wall.

Tyler gulped nervously. There weren't any other staircases leading off that ledge. There was nowhere else for him to go. There had always only been one set of stairs leading off each area, he couldn't have taken the wrong path. None of the other buildings and doors he had passed had been like this one.

Open. Inviting.

He looked around helplessly and steeled what little of his nerves were still intact. He really didn't have much choice in the matter. He wedged the door open with as much grace as a lamb to the slaughter.

A huff of searing hot air wafted past him. What greeted him was a dusty hallway that was bare save for the single rug that laid on the floor. A bare light bulb hung from the low ceiling. Another door faced him at the end of the long passage with nothing on either side. He stepped hesitantly into the hall and felt more than heard the iron door slam closed behind him. Trapping him.

He walked toward the next door and pulled unceremoniously at the handle.

Hell. He was in hell. Literally. Tyler didn't even have the energy left to be shocked or afraid. The sight that greeted him left him stunned and numb. Cold and removed from what he was seeing. It was almost like his brain had decided enough was enough and simply shut down.

Minutes passed by in silence as he slowly took in the contents of the room. One wall was covered in what appeared to be tanks filled to the brim with a grotesque yellow liquid. He could barely make out the dark shapes that hung suspended in the liquid. Pieces of mutilated body parts and misshapen cancerous flesh dangled from hooks coming off the ceiling. On the other side, neatly labeled jars filled the shelves. It took him a moment to realize that the pieces of flesh contained within them made up a single human. With the brain taking center stage on the middle shelf.

A sleek metal table took up most of the floor space in the middle of the room. A large, bloody, saw laid on its otherwise pristine surface. An open cabinet at the side held what looked to be medical tools and instruments of torture.

And against the wall farthest from the door, was a couch occupied by a headless figure. Tyler stared at it impassively for a moment before moving on to the doorway beside it.

From room to room, Tyler explored the demented excuse for a medical office. A surreal and twisted mockery of one. Or maybe it was just a torturer's chamber, he couldn't really tell and didn't care much for the answer. As he ventured deeper into the building, he began to notice sounds that could almost be voices. As he continued onward, he could almost make out what they were murmuring about.

He knew he was on the right path when he came face-to-face with an ornate door. It was the same as all the others, except for the carvings it sported. They weren't anything special, not much different from the generic, fancy, doors he'd seen in hardware stores. Despite the normality of it, he felt icy dread prickling up his neck. The voices were louder, almost clear, but he still couldn't make out the words.

Tyler rested a hand on the door handle, the familiar fear was bubbling up to the surface again. Funny how it took one simple door to send him back into a wicked spiral of terror when all the atrocities he'd seen so far had failed to produce any emotion in him.

Several deep breaths later, he finally felt prepared for what was to come. Or as prepared as he was ever going to be. He pushed down on the handle lightly and felt it give almost immediately. The door swung inward to reveal a pitch-black room and stone dead silence. He grappled with himself; it would be easy to turn away now. He'd explored the damned place, saw things that he wouldn't wish on his worst enemies. What more did his subconscious want from him?

Just as he was about to call it quits and turn back, the room flared to life. Flames and tortured screams filled the air. The stench of sulfur, decay, and charred flesh assaulted him as metal clanged loudly and a blood-curdling scream pierced the air. Bones shattered and blood dripped to the ground, sizzling the moment it made contact. The flames were even brighter now, flickering and flaring as though it had a mind of its own.

He stood rooted to the spot as the white-hot flames reached out and pulled him into the room. He went without a fight. The flames licked at his skin, tasting and teasing, exploring without harming. Tyler stood entranced, staring wide-eyed into the depth of the flames.

The light drew him in like a moth. He couldn't resist as it coerced him to his death. *Condemned by the flames of hell*, Tyler thought numbly. He could barely make out figures in the flaming depths of the fire, distorted and perverted beyond recognition. Monsters and demons danced and shrieked as helpless forms struggled at their feet.

One of the twisted forms turned to him and grinned maniacally.

That was the last thing he saw before the flames finished its job of blinding him, melting his eyes right out of their sockets. He burst out in a fit of hysterical laughter as blackness descended. He laughed even as the fire seared his skin and burned his throat. Blood, tears, and boiling flesh mingled and ran down his face unchecked. His skin bubbled and gave way where the fiery demons pulled at him. Dragging him into the belly of the flames.

His vision was tinged in yellow when he opened his eyes again. He felt leaden, groggy, and exhausted. He couldn't even turn his head or move an arm. It didn't feel like morning, but he couldn't tell for sure. It was dark and bright at the same time with flickers of light glittering through the muddy darkness.

He wasn't in his room. Or anywhere he recognized at all. His vision focused as the thought registered in his confused brain. The fear and panic slammed into him all at once. Whatever had kept him entranced and numb had subsided, and he was left to deal with his mounting terror on his own.

\*\*\*\*

By the ninth call within two hours, Adrian was ready to scream. Mostly at himself, because he'd known about those untethered powers. Halle had picked up on them the day before. If they'd just put in a little work the night before, they wouldn't be running around like chickens with their heads cut off today. So much for the Cleaners doing their jobs.

At least the veil was working. The streets were mostly cleared out, and if nothing else, it at least allowed them to move around a little easier. He'd only come across one person who looked *awake*, but he'd been heading away from the city center. Away from the waters and Adrian's next target.

"No, no, no, no, no..." Adrian cursed as the mass began to solidify and take form. He was still too far away. He put the man out of his mind, if he hadn't been influenced by the veil, well, that was the Cleaners' problem, not his.

Adrian drew as much power to himself as he could while he ran. There wasn't enough time to take proper precautions. He prayed the veil was strong because he was about to blow up the source into a billion pieces and likely send fragments flying everywhere. He cringed at what he knew was going to be Lynna's reaction to his solution, but he was simply out of time.

With a final muttered word, he launched himself into the air, high enough to clear the tops of nearby buildings, and have a clear shot at the untethered

source. It was already at the edge and strong enough that he didn't even need to concentrate to *see* it. He aimed carefully into the center of the grotesque mass of writhing black and green smoke and let the spell fly.

A soft whistle followed by a booming explosion, deafeningly loud, as the two powers collided. He ducked for cover without waiting to see the result. Adrian groaned loudly as the air around him rippled. The backlash was straining on the fragile edge of the two sides and he could feel the veil being torn open. Lynna was going to kill him.

He peeked out from behind the building he was poised behind when the ripples finally settled. Nothing remained of the untethered source save for a few tendrils of power now swirling around the newly blurred edge. *At least those are easy to fix.*

Adrian allowed himself thirty seconds to catch his breath before calling in the new development. All the while, thankful that Lynna was wrapped up in too much trouble of her own to rip him a new asshole on the spot.

"You stupid, reckless, son of a bitch," she growled at him through the phone. Adrian was pretty sure that if she had been there with him, she would've glared a hole through him.

"Sorry, Lynna." He tried to sound remorseful. He waited through a few moments of silence followed by a loud blast. Adrian jerked his head up in time to catch the aftershocks of another powerful spell. More than likely Lynna's judging by the timing.

"Arg, you know how much paperwork this is going to be? I swear—" Another bang, more muffled this time, cut her off. "I'll send someone to patch up the holes so leave a marking on all of them."

"Roger that, boss."

"Now get on with it. You're behind schedule," she snapped at him impatiently. "And you're *not* off the hook for this mess!"

She snapped the phone shut with a loud click. Adrian was pretty sure she kept that ancient piece of technology for that single reason alone.

He moved quickly, stamping a mark next to all the rips and tying them into place with a chain strong enough to keep everything at their current location. The last thing he needed was the rips drifting off and possibly inviting more unwelcome guests to the party.

Thankfully, that source proved to be the highlight of his night as nothing else came even remotely close to the kind of power it had held. By the time Adrian finished his last assignment and headed back to headquarters, he was shaking from exhaustion. Weaving magic took a ton of concentration, even if it wasn't a lot of power.

As it was, he was one of the last to report in. Men and women milled around the central hall as reports were made and gossip passed between the different divisions. He'd gotten a few funny looks and half-muffled snickers as he made his way to his division. He fought the urge to bury his face in his hands, reminding himself that he did technically deserve it.

Lynna was, thankfully, too tired herself to really put in the effort of lecturing him. Something Halle was not above doing.

"You know, I really can't decide if I'm more impressed or annoyed by you right now," he remarked offhandedly as he claimed the chair next to Adrian.

"Shut it." He heaved a weary sigh and collapsed dramatically into his hands. Halle was never going to let him live this down. "Let me guess, Lynna called you to patch up the holes."

"You know it," came the chirpy reply. "But seriously, how much power did you throw at the thing that the collision managed to rip open a dozen holes across two entire blocks?"

"A lot. That thing was active and five seconds away from stepping over the edge onto this side."

"What. Seriously?"

"Yeah. I could see it without even trying." Adrian and Halle looked at each other uncertainly. Now that he'd had time to process it, it really didn't make any sense. It was in the city center, but not close enough to the waters to be drawing power from it. And he'd have felt it if it had been.

"Any idea what it was? There wasn't anything even approaching dangerous yesterday night. For an untethered source to approach that quickly..."

"Would require deliberate interference." He'd come to the same conclusion. "And no, it didn't look like anything I've seen before."

"Have you told Lynna yet?"

Adrian stole a glance at their boss, now busy dealing with two of their newer members. "No. I need some time to think it through before putting in the official report."

“That’s a good idea.”

“Yeah. And?”

“And what?”

“Anything else interesting happen tonight?” Adrian quirked an eyebrow to emphasize the question.

“Nope. Adrian, my friend, you win Biggest Cockup of the Month.”

Adrian snorted and flipped him the bird before getting up to leave. Halle’s laughter followed him out.

\*\*\*\*

By the time Tyler made it back to his room, he was so weak from fear that he collapsed right onto his doormat. He was glad the poor lady who’d found him hadn’t insisted on calling the paramedics. Or police. He chuckled humorlessly, wouldn’t that be the perfect ending to the night. He wouldn’t be surprised if she thought he was crazy or high. Or both.

He made an effort to heave himself off the floor. Thankfully, he’d had the peace of mind to turn the lights on before collapsing, it was almost enough to remind himself that he wasn’t actually in hell. *Hell*.

Adrenaline and renewed panic gave him the boost he needed to make it to the sink before the dry heaves started again. The nightmare, *or had they been hallucinations?* roiled through his mind. He broke out in a cold sweat as another wave of dizziness took hold. He clawed desperately at the edge of the sink while his stomach tried its best to escape through his throat.

He’d emptied the contents of his stomach in the bottom of the stairwell already, but that didn’t seem to deter his traitorous body. He couldn’t banish the images that flitted through his mind if he tried. He was never going to be able to forget what he’d seen in that *room*.

*He’d woken up in one of those tanks.* The ones he’d seen *before* he entered the room with the demons and hellfire. *Before* waking up as a disembodied head...

A shudder ripped its way across his body and his knees buckled. He’d only barely managed to not bash his head against the side of the sink on his way down.

The *other* heads. *Other* decapitated heads floated aimlessly in that vile liquid. He’d wanted to flail and scream, but couldn’t do a thing. He had been completely helpless.

They'd been *staring* at him. Even as they floated by, unable to do a thing, their dead and unseeing eyes were trained on him.

He clutched helplessly at his head as he gasped for breath. He was seized by panic, his heart beating a mile a minute. So painful and loud that he hoped it would burst and kill him. Maybe end the nightmare right then and there.

*And...*

*And that hadn't been the worst of it.*

*No...* He could still see the demented forms and hear the voices of the demons that filed into the room. Tyler choked back a strangled sob at the memory. *Nightmare... no...*

He'd recognized some of those faces. Twisted and deformed as they were. The flaming claws boiled the liquid as they'd reached into the tank to prod at the heads. One of them reached for him. It seared what remained of his flesh as it fished him out.

Tyler did cry out this time. A vain attempt to drown out the memory in thoughtless noise. He screamed himself hoarse, not caring if he woke up all his neighbors in the process.

"I'm losing my fucking mind..." he whispered to himself. The soft words echoed louder in his ears than the piercing screams that came before them. Tyler felt the same numbness he had experienced in the dream consume him once more.

\*\*\*\*\*

He walked into his psychiatrist's office with all the enthusiasm of a prisoner to jail. It was practically the same thing as far as Tyler could tell. He'd been a prisoner of his own mind for too long, for once, actually glad for the stupid diary he was forced to keep.

He'd spent the last day and a half pouring his heart, soul, and crazed ramblings into the thing. He knew he was screwed when he'd nearly given that lady a heart attack on Friday night. She'd walked in on him having a full-blown mental breakdown. He had been irrational with fear and panic, he vaguely remembered both screaming at her and begging her for help. *And the look of wild fear in her eyes...* He was damned lucky she hadn't called the cops on him.

The perky receptionist waved at him as he entered as always, but he ignored her. And then ignored the worried glance she shot him. He clutched the

documented proof of his insanity tightly. Maybe the guy was right, maybe it would offer some insight into the whole crazy mess and he'd be able to fix it.

Dr. Kenaston called him into the office after a twenty-minute wait. The place looked the same as always, but at the same time, foreign. Different. Maybe he was so far gone that he couldn't even tell what was real and what wasn't anymore. *Focus*... He willed himself to concentrate on the man who had yet to look at him since his arrival.

"How are you today, Tyler?" Dr. Kenaston asked as he fished out a file from his desk drawer.

"I don't know. I think I'm going crazy," he blurted out in one breath. No need to sugarcoat it.

Dr. Kenaston scrutinized him from behind his glasses. *Had he always had those?* To his credit, he did look slightly worried. "Oh? What's wrong?"

"I—here." Tyler waved the notebook in front of him before tossing it down onto the desk. He clarified, "I think I'm losing my goddamned mind. Those dreams, or nightmares, or whatever the hell they are... I don't know. I was going out for a walk and then—God... one minute I was walking down the steps of my apartment and the next, I was walking down the stairs into hell. Literally. And then this poor lady finds me having a breakdown and nearly calls the ambulance. Or cops. I don't know anymore. I—what the hell is wrong with me?"

"That's... difficult to say at the moment," Dr. Kenaston said slowly, his eyes crossed in concentration. "So if I'm understanding you correctly, this happened two days ago, and it was the first time something of the sort occurred?"

"Yes."

Dr. Kenaston was silent as he flipped through the notebook. "Why didn't you go?"

"Go? Go where?"

"To the hospital," he clarified. "You wrote here that she offered to call the ambulance for you because you looked like you were sick."

"Because—" *Because I'm not crazy.* "Because I didn't want to make a big deal out of it."

"Even though the experience left you incapacitated, and for all intents and purposes, physically ill."

“I... if you put it like that... I guess I wasn’t thinking clearly?” Tyler felt like kicking himself the moment the words left his mouth. *Obviously, genius.*

“I see.” He nodded, glasses slipping a little as he did. “Now, I know how much you’re going to hate the next part, but tell me, what else has been going on in your life aside from the dreams?”

Tyler clenched his jaw tight. He should’ve known the question was coming, actually, did know it was coming. But it didn’t make it any less insulting. He glared menacingly at the floor.

Dr. Kenaston said nothing as usual, simply waited until he cracked under the oppressive silence of the dull office. Tyler ran his hands through his hair in annoyance. He knew it was his loss the moment he opened his mouth to spill his life’s story. Not that there was really anything to spill. The doctor made no comment aside from the occasional noise and encouragement to continue on.

He nodded slowly when Tyler finished, the scowl never leaving his face the whole time.

“I understand. Let’s do things this way. We won’t jump to any conclusions for the time being, but I’m going to have a more detailed look through your journal. I’ll have Liana call you to book the next appointment once I have a course of action planned out. In the meantime, feel free to drop in anytime if you need to.”

Tyler nodded stiffly. “Sure.” He got up to leave, but hesitated by the door. “You’re not going to tell my father right?”

Dr. Kenaston replied without looking up from his notes, “No. Medical confidentiality prevents me from doing so, but that doesn’t mean I don’t think you should.”

He walked out after hearing the “no” and pretended not to hear the words that followed.

\*\*\*\*

The sign read, *Mediator: We deal with ghosts, spirits, and all things supernatural.*

Tyler stopped and stared at it for several long moments. Around him, people glared and grumbled as they were forced to circle around him on the narrow sidewalk. He’d decided to go on a walk downtown after leaving the office. He’d wanted fresh air with enough sights and sounds to distract him from his own mind. *Of course I’d end up at a place like this.*

He chuckled ruefully under his breath. He really must be desperate if he was even considering going into that kind of establishment. Maybe, just, maybe, there was a tiny chance. It couldn't be any worse than the only other explanation for what was happening to him. *Pick a poison, any poison...* He moved to lean against the store wall, out of the way of the human traffic.

Minutes ticked by as he debated his options. Figuring that he didn't have much else to lose, he entered the store. A bell tinkled overhead, but there was no one behind the counter. The whole inside seemed to be built and furnished in wood. It wasn't exactly what he had expected. The place was clean and devoid of questionable clutter. It was nothing like what the shows on TV had led him to believe an occult store to be like.

Tyler heard soft footsteps from the back before a short woman entered through the back door. She looked to be in her sixties with a head of white hair. She was slim and short, her hunched posture making her appear even smaller than she was.

"How can I help you, young man?" She took up her position from behind the counter as she spoke, her eyes never straying from him. Her eyes glittered gold, a trick of the lighting or contacts, Tyler couldn't tell which.

"I—" he stammered awkwardly as he tried to collect his thoughts. What the store lacked in gimmicks, the woman more than made up for. And being there was officially amongst the most humiliating things he'd ever had to do. Twice now, he'd had to spill his guts to people who probably thought he was a raving lunatic. Maybe he was one. "There's these dreams, nightmares, that I've been having..." He trailed off uneasily, it sounded crazy even to himself.

"Hmm." She studied him closely, her hand tapping out an unsteady rhythm on the wooden counter. "Come here. Let me get a better look at you."

"Umm..."

The woman waved at him impatiently and Tyler walked unsteadily toward the counter, stopping when she motioned him to. She scowled in concentration and hovered her left hand over his chest, making small circular gestures. "Interesting... interesting indeed." She poked a bony finger at the center of his torso, right below where the rib cage ended. "There's definitely something there, but it's faint. Do you want me to take a proper look into this?"

"I—look. I really don't know what's going on, and I don't really believe in this whole supernatural stuff either," he said softly, unsure of what he wanted at

all. *There's no such thing as ghosts and nightmares are just nightmares.* He opted for honesty. "Look. I'm exhausted, I haven't slept for four days, my psychiatrist probably thinks I should be locked up, and I really don't know what to think anymore."

"Ah, a nonbeliever. Or perhaps it's just denial, yes? Well, you really wouldn't be the first, but I assure you, what I do is completely real." She hopped off the stool she'd been sitting on and motioned for him to follow her into the back of the shop. "And besides, you're already here. Why not give this a chance, dear child?"

Tyler hesitated. Was he really desperate enough to go through with this? The old woman had gone on with no regard to whether he was actually following her or not. Making a quick decision, he went after her through the back door. Normal, sane, people did not stand gawking in someone else's store, after all.

Past the door and up the stairs, the woman was waiting for him at a small wooden round table. The upstairs room looked much like the shop below, everything was made of wood of one kind or another. And like before, the space was clean and bare, devoid of trinkets and amulets and whatnot like he had been expecting. The only other furniture adorning the space were some shelves and cabinets against one wall and a series of trunks stacked up at the back.

He took the seat facing her.

"Let's get started shall we?" the woman asked with a wide smile. "My name is Evelyn, and you? Just your first name will be enough."

He nodded carefully, not entirely sure what she meant by that. "Tyler."

"Good..." Evelyn paused as though waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. "Good."

She placed a rough cut stone on the table between them. It flared a luminescent purple for a second before resuming a more natural pale gray. Tyler stared at it in shock, not willing to believe his eyes. It had to have been a parlor trick just like her eyes.

"Believe what you will, dear." She cast him a knowing look. Tyler didn't know if she'd read his mind or just the disbelief etched onto his face. She waved a hand over the stone and produced four more stones. They were smaller than the first and she placed them evenly spaced apart around the table, an inch

from the edge. “Place your hands on the table and close your eyes. I will talk you through the process.”

Tyler nodded tiredly. He knew it was stupid and reeked of desperation, but pushed the thought away for the time being and complied.

After that, he followed every softly murmured instruction that she gave. After the first few minutes, it became a simple task, almost reflex, to do what she said. And for the most part, she simply asked him generic questions about his life and the nightmares he’d been having. It was surprisingly easy to tell her about the demented dreams.

“This is... interesting,” she spoke softly, a note of uncertainty creeping into what had been a soothing drone until that point.

Tyler tried his best not to flinch. Oddly, she made him feel more grounded even as his mind drifted further away. Suspended and carried on the sound of her voice.

“It seems like—yes. Yes, it is. Amazing...” Evelyn whispered excitedly, her voice growing louder with each word. Tyler tried to ask her what she was mumbling to herself about, but could not form the words on his lips. “I don’t believe it... well then.”

She fell back into the soothing chant she was murmuring before breaking into actual words. He felt himself once again swept away by the wave of peaceful calm.

“You can open your eyes now, dear.” She’d placed a cool hand on top of his at some point. He noted with some surprise that the small stones had been moved at some point, three of them formed a triangle pointing away from him with the fourth held in place between her hand and his.

“I... that was... strange.” Tyler struggled to find the right words to describe the sensation he’d felt during the whole ritual. She hadn’t said what it was, but that had been his take on it. A weird occult ritual of some sort.

She nodded with a knowing smile. She’d probably heard the same thing from every customer who walked through those doors. “Stay there for a minute and let me go find something for you.”

“No, there’s really no need,” Tyler objected.

“Nonsense, it’ll do you a lot more good than it will sitting here.”

“No, I mean—”

She stopped fussing around the cabinet long enough to pin him with a harsh stare. She may have been half his size and a quarter his weight, but at that moment, he felt a prickling of fear at her warning glare. “I don’t think you understand the situation you’re in right now. What I’m doing now, I am doing for your own good. Remember that. And if it’s money you’re worried about, I don’t intend to charge you anything.”

“Wha—why?” Tyler started in surprise.

“Because I can’t help you. Not really. The talisman will do you some good, but it’s not a solution to your little... problem.” She stooped to pull a small box out from one of the drawers before continuing softly, “I can only wish you the best of luck. Keep this close by when you sleep.”

She handed him a small brooch-like object, the stone set in its center shone a similar color to the ones on the table before fading into a transparent pink. Tyler took the object wordlessly. He couldn’t bring himself to say no to her, no matter how crazy the whole conversation had become.

Out of curiosity, he asked her, “What do you think I should do then?”

“I assume you’ve already done the usual.” She smiled dryly and patted his arm. “Believe me, I know what people think of my line of work. But I’m going to see if I can find someone willing to take you on as an assignment. Someone that specializes in... your kind of *problem*.”

She didn’t specify any further and Tyler couldn’t bring himself to ask. The whole crazy talk was really screwing with his mind, and he felt like he had to get out before it went any further.

He took the talisman and bid the old woman a hasty farewell.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 2

Adrian had mulled and fussed over his report for three days straight. Repeatedly dodging and hiding from Lynna was hell on his nerves, but he wasn't willing to turn it in until he was sure. Even if it meant holding everything else up. That she wasn't going to be happy to see him was the understatement of the month.

He gulped in one last breath outside the heavy doors leading into the basement. He'd finished the report the day before and spent the remainder of the time readying himself to defend it. He had run many scenarios through his head and could only pray that Lynna wouldn't ask anything he hadn't already thought of.

He pushed the doors open soundlessly, the wide staircase was illuminated on both sides by antique wall sconces. He'd always wondered why the general offices were upstairs and the division rooms were hidden deep belowground.

At the bottom, a short corridor led to a wide, circular, open space that had been converted to a lounge of sorts. It was huge and doors stretched around the whole parameter. He knew that there were forty-eight doors in total, he'd counted them at some point, and most were marked with a division emblem. He went straight for the one branded with the Mmere Dane.

"So you finally decided to show up here." He could feel Lynna's piercing glare before he had even opened the door.

Adrian shrugged sheepishly as he handed her the report. The room was stuffed to the brim with books and paper, he was almost surprised it hadn't exploded out into the lounge. Something that's been known to happen and to which everyone else just turned a blind eye to. It was no secret that Lynna kept records of everything obsessively. It's one of the main reasons why they meet at her house instead of trying to cram the entire division into their designated room at headquarters.

"Well?"

"Well, what?" he stalled. Prepared or not, his gut still twisted in anxiety. She'd always had that effect on him, never mind that he had worked for her for years and known her much longer. Or maybe that was exactly why. He wished she'd just read the report and dismiss him, but knew it wasn't going to happen.

“What had you so obsessed that it took you not one, not two, not even three, but four whole days to straighten up?” He couldn’t quite hide the cringe as her voice grew flatter with every word. He knew exactly what that voice intoned.

He shuffled awkwardly before giving in and taking a seat on the chair across from her desk. It was one of the only two pieces of furniture that weren’t hidden under massive piles of books and loose paper. He took a deep breath before speaking, “That untethered ball of power that took one of my strongest spells to destroy? It wasn’t an accident. I know what it must have looked like, but I swear to God I didn’t miscalculate. There wasn’t enough time to weave a net first or I would have done that. Whatever it was, it was growing in power fast and crossing over even faster. And whatever *it* was, it *was* sentient.”

Lynna’s look of disbelief had slowly morphed into one of contemplation as he continued.

“Come on, you know me better than that. A net would’ve been no trouble. Except, if I had done that and taken too long, it would’ve crossed over onto this side.” He paused for breath before continuing, “Lynna. I could *see* it.”

“You mean—”

“Yes! That’s exactly what I mean. You heard the orders when they came in, it was supposed to have been an untethered source of power like all the others that crop up during the new moon. Mostly dormant or just beginning to wake, but it wasn’t. By the time I made it close enough to do anything it was already... God... if I knew what it was...”

“You and Halle were in charge of combing that area the night before right? Did you pick up on anything unusual from the waters?”

“No. I looked hard enough to almost get run over by a car,” he deadpanned. More than likely, she’d already heard that bit of news from Halle. “And then we went to a secluded area so Halle could take a proper look at everything in the area. The most dangerous thing was the mandrake he stepped on while he was coming back.”

She ignored the jibe he made at Halle’s screwup. “And neither of you picked up on anything that could have turned into... *that*.”

“No. And if you think about it, something must have happened between the time the order came in and my arrival at the scene. I’m pretty sure someone would’ve put out a warning if something that powerful was straddling the edge.”

“I know.” She sighed wearily. “I’m just thinking out loud. Let’s suppose for the moment that you’re right.” She put up a hand to silence his retort before continuing, “I assume this is what you were agonizing over in your report so let’s hear it now. What’s the conclusion you’ve come to?”

Adrian looked down at his hands, this was what he had rehearsed so meticulously for, he was not going to chicken out now. “There are really only two possibilities. But the most likely, given the circumstances, was deliberate interference. Someone fed a massive amount of power to it or agitated it in some way so that it woke, and woke up fast.

“If it had siphoned the power from other nearby sources, I would’ve felt it. Besides, everyone had their orders, someone would’ve known something was off if other untethered sources started disappearing before they got there.”

“So the question now becomes, why would anyone want to do that?”

“Renegades would be the most plausible answer, but they would never take a risk like that. Why pick a time when the streets were filled with Enforcers when they could have messed with it at any time and watched the ensuing chaos under relative safety? They wouldn’t. So someone with only their personal interests in mind set up an unrelated spell and the untethered source got mixed up into it. An unexpected and unfortunate development for everyone involved.”

“Deliberate, but unintentional.” She studied him carefully. “Well, it’s not the most far-fetched theory I’ve ever heard.”

Adrian nodded, he was well aware of how crazy the theory was too.

“However. If you’ve given it this much thought, I’m sure you’ve also realized where your theory falls apart.”

“Yes. That’s why I…” He gestured guiltily toward the report. “I honestly don’t know what to think. Something’s off no matter how we go about it. We combed the city for any abnormalities that might’ve been missed during the chaos afterward. It’s the cleanest the city has ever been, there’s no way we could’ve missed what caused that…” He trailed off helplessly. He hated being unsure. He hated not knowing. He hated the whole damned situation.

To his surprise, Lynna broke out in a smug grin. “You’ll be happy to know then, that we have just such an anomaly.”

“W-what?”

She rummaged through her top drawer where she kept all the requests that went through their division and pulled out a single sheet of paper. “Evelyn met a man on Sunday who was going through an extraordinary set of events and personally gave me the request yesterday. To my knowledge, no Enforcer had made contact with the man from her request.”

“So we missed a source of power?” he asked, incredulous.

“Don’t jump to any conclusions just yet. You know Evelyn just as well as I do. But if she’s right, we’ll have our answer to this mystery at least.”

*And the beginnings of another, bigger, crazier, mystery.* Adrian sat, slack-jawed. *No fucking way...* But his mind went immediately to the man he’d passed by on his way to the location. He’d been coming from the opposite direction. Which meant... what exactly? In all likelihood he had been leaving the city center under the veil’s influence. And he had most definitely been *normal*.

He took the sheet of paper from Lynna and left the room after a quick goodbye. He only made it a few steps before he collapsed onto one of the seats in the open lounge. He studied the sheet of paper, as expected, it consisted of a brief request and a detailed schedule of where he could find the man at various times throughout the week. He was thankful Evelyn was a friend, he would hate to cross her. The kind of things he and Halle did to each other would be child’s play compared to what she would be capable of...

Thinking back to the night of the new moon, the man on the street had obviously caught his attention. *Why?* It wasn’t just the passing attraction he felt, he had been attractive, but not to the point of distracting him from his job. And seeing humans on the streets even with the veil in place wasn’t out of the ordinary either. He wasn’t even the first he’d run into that night, but something...

*No point obsessing about it now,* he decided. He would have his answer soon enough. Adrian hurried to the location stated on the paper. *On Thursday, you can find him at Café Delmar from three o’clock to four twenty-eight.*

\*\*\*\*

Tyler wanted to strangle his boss when he got the call that the client he’d been scheduled to meet at the café had canceled. Of course, no one had thought it necessary to inform him until they remembered they needed him at the office for something else.

Calvin at least had the grace to allow him the rest of the afternoon off. The place wasn't particularly far from his home, but it would have taken over an hour for him to get back to the office. His manager probably decided that they were better off without him for an afternoon than endure a pissed off secretarial assistant.

He made a few more angry grumbling sounds before resigning himself to an afternoon of having nothing to do. He liked his life nicely organized and surprises like these annoyed him to no end.

Thankfully, a different aspect of his life was finally beginning to look up. Four days without a nightmare. No psychotic dreams and no insane hallucinations. It could just be a crazy coincidence, but he was willing to believe the mystic lady had powers if the talisman allowed him to function like a normal human being again.

*It's not a solution...*

Her parting words did make him a little uneasy, despite all the evidence pointing to the contrary. Come to think of it, she also mentioned something about finding someone who'd take care of the problem permanently. Not that he had any intention of setting foot in her shop again.

His life was finally back under control and he'll be damned if he let the whole psychic talk get to him. With nothing better to do, he decided to grab a bite to eat before heading home. He hadn't had much for lunch since he *was* supposed to treat the client at the café.

"One orange salad wrap and a medium coffee, no sugar, for here," he said to the girl working behind the counter when his turn to order arrived. He studied the glass display as she wrote down his order. "And a vanilla cupcake too."

Taking his food back to the booth he had occupied, he studied the other patrons there. Most had taken their food to go, having probably gone there during a break in their day at the office.

He looked up when the bell above the front door chimed, a habit he was never able to break himself out of. He tried not to stare too hard when a slim, handsome man entered. He was pale with ruffled blond hair and eyes as blue as the ocean. Tyler watched him from behind his coffee, trying not to be obvious. The man was looking around the small shop like he was trying to find someone and Tyler looked away quickly as their eyes met. He hadn't intended to get caught staring.

Adrian gawked at the man, he could not believe his eyes. He was exactly where Evelyn said he'd be, and more than that, he *was* the man Adrian had seen the night of the new moon. No way was that a coincidence. He'd never believed in that stuff in the first place, not when there could always be magic at play.

He broke out of his trance when the man glanced at him again. Right. Time to introduce himself properly. Hopefully, Evelyn had warmed the guy up to the basics already.

"Hi," Adrian said as he slid into the booth across from the tall, dark, and handsome, stranger. He noted with mild interest that he looked even nicer under the glare of day than he did illuminated by the streetlights at night. A purely professional observation.

The man stared at him in surprise. "And you are...?"

Adrian noted in amusement that the man looked like he was ready to bolt for the door. With or without his mostly untouched food. "Adrian. Evelyn sent me." And now he really looked like he was poised to run. Maybe he should've eased the guy into it after all... "She did tell you about me right?"

"She mentioned something about sending someone to help me," came the guarded reply.

"Great. So, what's your name? Just given name's fine." He'd spent the whole time getting to the café wondering who the guy was, so of course it would be the one he'd spotted on that night.

The man quirked an eyebrow and studied him carefully. Adrian preened a little for effect. He knew he wasn't too hard on the eyes, just, average. Blond hair, blue eyes, the whole generic good looks that no one remembered five seconds later. "Look, we need to talk."

"We do, do we? So tell me, then, what's with you guys and the first names only thing?"

Adrian was taken aback by the question. That was not the first thing he expected to be asked. "Because names hold power. And before you ask, yes, that's why Evelyn didn't tell me beforehand. But that's not important," Adrian added the last bit in quickly. *Remember, you're here to help, no need to jump off on a tangent right off the bat.* He continued on, "You went to Evelyn looking for help. Well, I'm here to help."

"So let's talk then."

Adrian snorted. “Seriously? You want to air out all your dirty laundry in the middle of a trendy café like this?”

“I—”

“And seriously. Your name? Or do you want me to just keep referring to you as *that guy*.”

“Tyler,” the man answered reluctantly. And judging by his expression, he had probably intended to lie, but thought better of it.

“Great. Let’s go then.” Adrian rolled his eyes at Tyler’s look of utter horror. He did not want to know what the guy just imagined. “There’s a park nearby. I passed it on the way here. We can have a nice leisurely stroll out in the bright outdoors where you can bolt at any time.”

That subtle insult did the trick, and Tyler glared at him, hard. He’d take angry over scared any time though. It meant that the guy would at least be willing to stick around for the explanation, if only to pummel him after. *Wouldn’t be the first time either...* He’d wound up helping more than one ungrateful asshole in his time. Tyler regarded his order for a moment, but decided to abandon it at the café.

Outside, it was a bright sunny day with fluffy white clouds and a gentle breeze. Spring was officially in full swing. Adrian loved the outdoors. He could feel the familiar buzz of power that hummed through the air around him. The park had been a lifesaver. He could walk around and *watch* all he wanted with little risk of physical danger.

They didn’t speak a word after leaving the café, but Tyler was following him obediently. He checked through the park quickly and was happy to see that there was nothing out of the ordinary and no other power to interfere with his work. Adrian turned his attention back to Tyler. Now for the hard part, explaining things without giving too much away.

He directed them to an empty bench by the side of the trail. He watched Tyler carefully as he began reciting the well-rehearsed speech.

“So, background information first. You might have already noticed, but there is more to this world, or reality, than meets the eye.” Adrian had to give Tyler credit for keeping his face neutral. It sounded ridiculous even to him and he *knew* it was true. “The easiest way to explain it is to think of the world as fragmented into different layers. Normally, humans exist in the layer that we refer to as *reality*. We call that the physical reality, where what you see is what

you get. But there's another layer below that. You can think of that as the *fantastical* side. Think, magic, mythical creatures, the whole works.

“The interesting thing is, the two sides aren't completely separated from each other. They never were. All it takes is for someone or something to cross over the edge. A boundary of sorts, and believe me, it's not hard to do. But even then, *humans*, with no innate ability to pick up magic, still wouldn't be able to *see* the power from the other side.

“Unfortunately, that doesn't mean they can't be affected by it. Humans place too much value on their eyes and undermine their other senses. It's lucky that you wound up at Evelyn's place when you did.” As he rambled off the speech, he watched the area around them carefully. He let his mind drift to the edge and combed along the divide, being careful not to cross over.

Tyler had nodded along with his brief explanation, but said nothing the whole time. *Seeing is believing*, as the humans liked to say.

“You remember the stones at Evelyn's place and the talisman she gave you? Those aren't petty tricks. Not in the sense you're thinking of it at least. Power can become visible in the *real* world if it's channeled through a medium that exists in the physical world. The magic in the stones is real, but the stones themselves serve no true purpose other than to wow her customers.”

“So you're telling me the whole thing with magic... and stuff, is all real. And you think what? That I'm cursed?”

Adrian eyed him carefully. The guy was flighty enough and he didn't want to make him any more anxious. “There's definitely something *wrong*, but there's no definitive source. I've been looking the whole time, but there's no tethered or untethered power clinging to you. The origin of the power isn't *you* or placed *on* you, but it's *affecting* you.” He continued on quickly before Tyler could get a word in, “I'll have my partner look into it, he can *see* a lot better than I can.”

*And what good would that do exactly?* They'd turned the city upside down looking for exactly that and found nothing. All he knew for sure at that point was that Tyler was damned lucky to have caught Evelyn's eye. Because even now, other than a general feeling of something being off, he still couldn't pick up anything definitive at all.

“Wait, hold on—Just, stop.” Tyler looked like he was struggling hard to say what he wanted. He stood up stiffly and began pacing in front of the bench.

“You’re not kidding. Or insane. God. You’re telling me that there’s a whole other magical world out there and what? Expect me to just believe it?”

Tyler stopped long enough to gape openmouthed at him. Adrian just shrugged. “Well, that’s the gist of it. There’s really not much I can do to make you believe me except... I’ll show you this if you promise me not to freak the shit out?”

Tyler nodded his head once slowly, like he was agreeing purely because he knew he had to. Adrian handed him the paper with Evelyn’s request and watched as the man’s eyes practically bulged out of their sockets.

“W-what. The fuck?” he spluttered between shocked gasps.

“That’s Evelyn’s power. A bit of it anyway. Once she’s put a mark on someone, she can find them. And I don’t mean after the fact, she’s got premonition down stronger than anyone I’ve ever met.” Adrian pointed to the center of Tyler’s chest. “It’s still there, by the way. You might want to go back and have her remove it.”

“She... this is insane. This is off-the-wall, batshit crazy.”

Adrian shrugged again. “Well, it is what it is. I’ll give you some time to process things. You’re not in any immediate danger if the talisman is still intact. It is still intact, right?”

Tyler nodded jerkily.

“Good. Meet me at Evelyn’s on... let’s say, this Saturday at two?”

\*\*\*\*

He wasn’t going to go. There was no way he was going to go. Tyler paced around the lobby like a caged bull. He was just having nightmares. And had a little too much to drink that night. There were perfectly rational explanations for what happened.

Except that sheet of paper.

Except that there’s no way this was a coincidence.

He shuddered violently as he waited to be seated. *He* didn’t even know he was going to be having dinner at Lago’s Kitchen until it had happened. *He* hadn’t even known the place existed till an hour ago. Lauren had caught him on his way out of the office and decided that they just had to have dinner together.

Because they were friends and not because her husband had to cancel the dinner reservation on her.

Even with the reservation, they had to wait nearly ten minutes for the hostess to take them to their seats. The restaurant was crowded, but the ambiance was nice. Intimate without all the fancy schmancy bull slathered on top. It was the kind of place his mother would have loved. And despite the low light and general air of relaxed calm, there were quite a few families around that he could see.

He tried to focus on what Lauren was saying, but his mind kept wandering back to the stranger Evelyn had sent. He was good looking, Tyler'd give him that. He might not have been the textbook definition of handsome, but he was pretty. Or maybe it was just the spark of innocence he exuded in excess.

Tyler was sure the man was younger than him. Crazy talk of fantasy worlds notwithstanding.

He started guiltily when the waiter arrived at their table to take their orders. He realized he'd been staring at the menu without really seeing any of it. Across the table, Lauren snorted and ordered first, giving him precious few seconds to make his own selection.

"I'll have the same," he said quickly when the waiter turned to him. He was too flustered to really think of what he wanted. The waiter jolted it down before walking away with the promise of food to be brought out soon.

"Really now. I would never have guessed you'd be interested in their vegan sandwich and fruit platter too." Lauren raised one eyebrow in a perfect arch.

"What?" Tyler blanched.

"Jesus, you're out of it. Calm down, I got the veal parmigiana, their signature dish."

"Sorry, I guess I've been a little distracted..."

"Right." She pinned him with a hard stare. "Okay, out with it."

"Huh?"

Lauren rolled her eyes in mock annoyance. "I mean, what's been eating at you tonight. Or just lately? You've been completely out of it these days."

Tyler gaped at her like a fish out of water. "I—"

"Will tell me the truth." She cut him off with a wave of her hand and waited expectantly.

He sighed in defeat. There really was no way out when he still had to sit through the rest of dinner with her. "I guess... I told you about the crazy

dreams I've been having right? It's wreaking havoc with my sleep so I've been exhausted lately."

Her expression immediately turned to one of concern. "Have you gone to see someone about it?"

"Yeah. A psychiatrist. I'm getting a prescription of sleeping pills from him, but it only sort of helps." He looked away, trying to hide his discomfort under a façade of indifference.

"So you have nightmares when you sleep?"

"Sort of, not really. They're night terrors, according to him. Brought on by stress and lack of decent sleep."

She cocked her head to the side. "That's... a little paradoxical isn't it?"

"Yeah. Hence the sleeping pills."

"But you know they're just bad dreams right? They can't really hurt you or anything. There's nothing to be afraid of."

He tamped down the swell of irritation. *Of course he knew.* She was just worried about him. He knew that too. Tyler spoke carefully. "I know that. But sometimes, just knowing isn't enough."

"Oh..." Lauren flushed beet red. "Oh dear, I'm sorry. Of course you knew."

Thankfully, the waiter arrived with their food soon after, saving them from the awkward turn their conversation had taken. To Lauren's credit, it really was veal parmigiana, and it was amazing. The combination of good food and attempts to put the uncomfortable conversation behind them had Lauren sticking to lighter topics for the remainder of the night.

She even offered to drive him home by the end of it. Probably to make up for prying so much into his personal affairs.

They didn't speak much on the way to his apartment and he bid her goodnight at the door. The elevator took forever and then some to arrive, but he waited diligently. No way was the alternative even an option. *Don't think about it...*

Tyler made his way back to his apartment quickly and triple checked that he'd locked the door. His mind continued to wander back to Adrian and the conversation in the park. He snorted softly, even a false sense of security was better than nothing. Besides, he didn't have anything to lose by going there did he?

He studied his reflection in the bathroom mirror. Talking to Lauren hadn't really helped his mood, but it did help him clear up his feelings a little more. *And that blasted piece of paper...* He had shredded it the moment he arrived back home, but the words mocked him in his mind's eye. He only remembered it because it was completely insane. Places he would be, or have been at, for varying amounts of time. All detailed out perfectly. His first thought had been to accuse the guy of stalking him. But the schedule went on for the rest of the week.

And despite everything else, Friday, tonight, had caught his attention. He'd never even heard of Lago's Kitchen, had no reason to be there for dinner. And yet... Lauren had dragged him there, albeit without telling him where they were headed to. It wasn't his fault he'd been too creeped out to focus on dinner. It couldn't have been a lucky guess, he decided.

Had that paper said that he'd be back in that shop tomorrow? He tried to think back, but the memory eluded him. Who was he kidding? He knew he was going to go there. Crazy things had been known to happen right? Maybe those guys were onto something after all...

\*\*\*\*

Tyler got out of bed and brushed a hand over the talisman he kept beside his alarm clock. It was probably a good thing he'd made up his mind the night before because in the light of day... It was insane. The whole thing was insane. Night terrors had nothing to do with magic. *Then explain why they're gone the moment you got that talisman.* He glared at the offending object. Because it was a coincidence. Maybe he wasn't that stressed out anymore.

*Truth is stranger than fiction,* he remembered his father saying before. He groaned loudly and flopped back onto the bed. Arguing with himself wasn't going to solve anything. He'd play nice and go. And he'd have his answers then. If they're just a bunch of psychotic stalkers or con men... well. That's for the law to deal with.

As he was leaving the house, he got a call from Kenaston's receptionist to remind him he didn't have an appointment the next day. Tyler thanked her and hung up. He stared at his phone strangely. How long had he been going there regularly that the receptionist felt inclined to remind him that he *didn't* have an appointment? Maybe it was time to look into some alternative solutions. Starting with the one he was headed to right then.

The bus into the city center arrived quickly, and he spent the entire ride fidgeting with the talisman. He had grabbed it as an afterthought, in case they wanted it back or something. He studied the center stone the whole way there. In the daylight, it looked different from how he remembered it. It looked cloudier, dirtier somehow. He slipped the brooch back into his pocket as the bus pulled into his stop.

He was not looking forward to the meeting, but forced himself to focus on the end goal. He arrived at the shop at ten past two, half hoping that the place was closed, or that no one was there, or anything. *No such luck*. He sighed as he pushed open the door.

A man he'd never seen before waved and greeted him. "I'm Halle, a pleasure."

Tyler stared at him blankly. For a moment, he thought he'd walked into the wrong shop. *Welcome to Crazyville*. He was two seconds from backing out the door again when he caught sight of Adrian as he walked by the back door. Halle, who had been watching him expectantly, also seemed to realize what, or rather who, he was staring after.

He half yelled toward the general direction of the door, "Adrian! He's here." Turning back to Tyler, he cheerfully informed him, "Don't worry, you're right on time."

"One sec!" came the reply from somewhere in the back. Adrian had continued on his way without so much as a pause or a greeting.

"Come on, let's go up. We'll have Evelyn take her mark off while he finishes getting ready." Halle made a come-hither gesture as he got up from the stool behind the counter.

Tyler backed away at the movement. "Wait, what are you going to do to me?"

"Hmm? Nothing much. We're just gonna take a nice close look at you," Halle said slowly, drawing out each syllable, a wide wolfish grin plastered his face the whole time.

"Stop trying to scare him, you ass." Adrian rolled his eyes as he entered the room. Tyler watched in a mixture of irritation and amusement as the two men faced off, ignoring him entirely.

"Says the one who needs to set up a spell." If at all possible, Halle's grin grew even wider at Adrian's annoyance.

“Ignore him,” Adrian gritted out and grabbed Tyler by the arm, dragging him bodily toward the back. Halle just continued to grin at him as they filed up the stairs.

Evelyn was sitting in the same spot as before when they arrived. Tyler eyed her warily. The table was set up with some ritualistic circle drawn on and accentuated with a whole collection of stones. As he walked closer, he realized that the center stone was the same as the one he’d seen the week before.

Halle took the seat on her right with Adrian on his other side. Tyler hesitantly took the final remaining seat between them. There was a plain white stone in front of each seat.

Wordlessly, Evelyn reached across the table to him and pressed a finger to the same spot on his chest. He fought the urge to cringe away from her. *Better to not show any fear.* He took some comfort from the fact that Adrian seemed to be watching her carefully too. Whatever she had done, or was doing, wasn’t something he could see or feel. He could only pray that the other two could tell and would let him know if she was up to something dubious.

With that done, Halle handed him a rough, antique, bronze coin. He held it awkwardly until Adrian physically rearranged his hands to hold the coin against the table. He then placed the white stone onto the back of Tyler’s hands.

“Stay like that and don’t move,” Adrian said quietly. Evelyn sat back against the chair with her hands folded in front of her chest. Tyler briefly wondered if she wasn’t participating in whatever spell they were making.

Halle looked just as relaxed as her as he handed a similar coin to Adrian. No one made a sound as Adrian fussed over the stones once more. Evelyn picked up her stone and clutched it tightly in her left hand, but otherwise, remained as she was. Halle didn’t touch his stone at all. When Adrian was satisfied that everything was laid out properly, he ticked off one final mark into the center of the design and dropped the marker back into his jacket pocket.

He picked up his stone and coin and Tyler watched in mild interest as Evelyn pushed her chair back ever so slightly, seemingly removing herself from the goings-on even further. Halle, on the other hand, seemed to come alive again, the grin back in place once more.

Tyler finally worked up the nerve to ask, “Umm... what is this supposed to be?”

“It’s going to let us *look*. To see what’s effecting you,” Adrian replied.

Halle smirked smugly at Adrian. “To be more precise, it’s going to let *him* look.”

“Like hell I’m trusting you with delicate work like this,” came the annoyed response.

“Hey! I do just fine.”

“Really now.”

“All right boys, let’s get back on track shall we?” Evelyn broke up the argument before things got really heated. “I would like to be able to open my shop again sometime today.”

“Sorry,” both men grumbled quietly before resuming their proper positions.

“That’s better.” She nodded approvingly. Tyler was almost grateful when she sent him a reassuring smile. The whole, not understanding what was going on at all, was starting to really get to him. “Don’t mind them, they’re always like that.”

One by one, the others closed their eyes and fell quiet. Tyler did his best to imitate their actions. No one had bothered to tell him what he was supposed to be doing. Another moment of still silence later, soft whispered words began to fill the air. Too quiet for him to make out, but even then, he was fairly sure they weren’t in any language he had ever heard before.

The soft chanting grew louder and Tyler was startled to realize the coin under his hand was steadily heating up. Not from the warmth of his body, but emitting an almost unbearable amount of heat on its own.

He screwed his eyes shut tight. The coin was starting to burn his hand, but he couldn’t let go. He couldn’t move at all for that matter. A wave of fear shot through him.

*I’m awake. This is real. This isn’t a dream. I’m not...*

Tyler snapped his eyes open when someone forcibly ripped his hands away from the burning coin. The white stone tumbled to the ground with a loud clack. He looked up to see wide blue eyes staring worriedly into his own.

“Okay.” Halle paused before continuing, “What the fuck just happened?”

Evelyn was up before Halle even finished his sentence. She went to rummage through the trunks at the back of the room without a word.

Tyler’s attention flickered from one of them to the next. Looking down, he wasn’t particularly surprised to see that the coin had left angry red blisters on

the palm of his left hand. The one that was placed directly on top of it. The coin itself was glowing a searingly hot red. The wood under it had been burnt black and was starting to smoke.

Adrian turned to the coin, glaring, and it cooled down to a charred black. The look of worry was back on his face as he turned his attention back to Tyler, he studied his hand without trying to cause him too much discomfort.

“It doesn’t... hurt?” Tyler offered, surprised to realize that it was the truth. He felt faint, drained of energy. He moved his right hand a little to make sure that he was no longer paralyzed.

“You’re in shock,” Adrian replied matter-of-factly. “Halle.”

“I didn’t even get to the edge before... whatever it was happened. You?”

“Well...” Adrian scrunched up his face in thought. “There was some kind of resistance. I tried to cross to the other side to get a better look, but...” His eyes settled on Tyler’s guiltily before looking down again.

“Well, that would explain the coin, I guess?” Halle shrugged, all traces of humor had left him. “Hey, what do you think would’ve happened if I’d tried pushing past?”

“Don’t even think about it.”

“No, but, the backlash hit the spell. I don’t need a spell. No tether and nothing to trace back to me.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Evelyn had returned, another odd trinket in her hands. “It’s unfortunate that Tyler was hurt, but we’re lucky that there was something between that power and Adrian. If you’d walked up to it, there would’ve been nothing to stop it from getting to you directly.”

“You’re wasting your breath. Halle doesn’t understand destructive spells.”

“I do so!”

“In theory.” Adrian glared at him. “The practical applications and ways it can be altered and used are... forget it.”

Tyler listened to the whole exchange impassively. He was more in awe of his hand, which at the moment was healing at an alarming rate. He was willing to bet it had something to do with Adrian. He was currently holding Tyler’s left hand in his right, the fingertips of the other brushing absently over his palm. Tyler did his best to ignore the tingling warmth that spread out from that innocent point of contact.

“Well, we’ve definitely found our anomaly.”

That got Tyler’s attention. “What?”

“It’s nothing to do with you. Well, it does, but not directly.” Tyler was beginning to realize the implications of what he’d come to assume was Adrian’s expression of guilt. The man really did have the most expressive eyes of anyone he’d ever met. Open and innocent.

“There was a little incident a while back and long story short, we really need to figure out what the power affecting you is.”

“And you needed... this.” Tyler gestured toward the setup with his free hand.

“Yeah.”

“Let me see the talisman I gave you last week.” Evelyn pointed at the pocket where Tyler had put the thing. He’d all but forgotten he’d brought it with him. He fished it out of his pocket and handed it to her, not even bothering to question how she’d even known.

“It’s corrupted,” Halle said in surprise.

“Yeah...” Evelyn laid it down on the table carefully.

Everyone stared at the brooch uneasily. The tension in the air was thick enough to cut with a knife and Tyler wasn’t even sure what it was about. He knew he should be nervous or even scared, but after what had happened earlier, everything just felt so unreal. *Like a dream, except it’s real*, he reminded himself again.

“For the time being, we should report to Lynna,” Adrian spoke up suddenly and Halle nodded absently in reply. Tyler was pretty sure it was purely reflexive. Silence fell over the group again.

“If you boys don’t mind, I’d like to make a suggestion.” Evelyn paused as all three men nodded their consent. She turned to Tyler before speaking, “Seeing as the warding talismans don’t have nearly enough power to stop what’s trying to harm you, it would be much safer if you were to stay with Adrian.”

Tyler bristled at hearing the suggestion. “What? I can’t do that! That’s—”

“No, I agree. I don’t feel right leaving you on your own. You live by yourself too right?” Adrian asked. “If you have another episode where your dream bleeds into reality...”

Halle broke into the conversation, eyes locking onto Adrian's anxiously. "Wait, it's blurring the boundaries between the two sides? How much power would it take to pull off something like that remotely?"

"I don't know. We can't tell anything from looking on this side."

Tyler tuned out the rest of their discussion in favor of trying to come up with some excuse. He appreciated their help, or attempt to help, but there was no way he was going to be spending an indefinite amount of time with a stranger he didn't know or trust. He'd gone so far as living in the dumps instead of having to get a roommate and had no intention of changing that.

But in the end, he couldn't think of anything suitable. His mind decided to occupy itself with other details instead. He was honestly still struggling to come to terms with the whole magic-is-real thing. And to be caught up in the dead center of it was... disturbing.

He'd been going through the same routine for the last few years and all of a sudden, pure mayhem. It had taken years for him to get to where he was now and only a few weeks for it to all crumble apart. He was reminded once again why he preferred to have order in his life. He turned his attention back to Adrian. The guy was earnest, even he could tell that the guy only wanted to help, but something still nagged at him.

"I've been meaning to ask for a while, but you guys..." Tyler struggled to form a question he didn't quite understand himself. He gave up and just gestured between them. "You all have different powers?"

The three of them looked to each other.

Adrian answered him after a moment's hesitation. "The three of us just all happen to have different affiliations. I told you a little bit about how the world was really structured last time, right? We, Magicals—that's what we call ourselves—are people that have the ability to freely walk across the edge, from one side to the other. Of course, I use the term *walk* relatively.

"We are all tethered to different sources on the other side, and it's from those sources of power that we draw our magic. Depending on the source, or affiliation, the kind of magic we're capable of differs. Of course, one person could have access to multiple sources of power too, but that's extremely rare."

"Case and point, I'm a Traveler, I can walk across the edge with no effort, and *seeing* comes naturally to me. But Adrian there can't do that to save his life," Halle informed him.

“Because I’m a Weaver, I specialize in weaving and dismantling spells which *he* is crap at,” Adrian shot back.

“So you guys are born with this power?” Tyler asked quickly, not wanting to give them the time to descend into another petty argument.

“It is inherited, yes.”

“What about...” Tyler eyed Evelyn uneasily. Her power was the thing that was bothering him the most.

“Ah. Yes. I seem to have a natural knack for tracking. It’s really just a specific spell. In more general terms, I’m the same as Adrian, someone who specializes in weaving spells.”

“And you guys are helping me. Why? Who are you exactly?”

“Well, I’m just a humble Mediator.” At Tyler’s blank expression, Evelyn continued, “Rather than trying to hide our existence, don’t you agree that it’s so much easier to simply misdirect humans? And on occasion, I meet people like you that genuinely need help from us.”

Adrian continued, “Halle and I are Enforcers. Like the police, except we mostly make sure no Magicals are abusing their power on this side. We also patrol and keep an eye on the edge to make sure nothing crosses over from the other. Essentially, our objective is to keep the two sides from ever meeting.”

“I see... and there are others like you?”

“Plenty. We just do a good job of staying under the radar,” Halle answered. “I mean, can you imagine what would happen if the government found out we’re out there?”

He gave a dramatic shudder, but Tyler could tell that it wasn’t just an act. The idea of it really did unnerve him, and the others, if the mutual dark looks were anything to go by. He decided not to press any further. He really didn’t need, or want, to know anymore than that.

Evelyn handed him the new talisman she’d dug out earlier. It was similar to the one she’d given him before, but rather than a brooch-like object, the stone was set on a rectangular frame. It looked like a small mirror and the stone was a reflective silver.

“Still, now that that’s settled, isn’t it about time you kids left?” Evelyn tapped her bare wrist, as if to indicate the time.

“Hey! It’s not decided,” Tyler protested.

“Yes, it is. I mean, I’m not gonna be much help so you’ll have to settle for Adrian.” Halle chuckled.

Tyler gave up trying to press the point, they obviously had their minds made up already. The idea was also sounding more and more enticing by the minute. If being stuck with Adrian could absolve him of the bigger problem, well, he’d just have to deal. *It’ll all be worth it.*

When they got up to leave, Evelyn simply waved them on their way instead of seeing them out. Tyler suspected that she was going to be attempting to clean up the table Adrian had defaced. He was also relatively sure the other man had used a permanent marker.

The streets were crowded with shoppers and families alike. Everyone seemed to be out and about, taking advantage of the mild weather. They made their way down the street together. Tyler followed Adrian’s lead without question, he had no idea where they were headed.

After a few minutes of silence, Adrian whispered under his breath, “Understatement.”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. Let’s see how far you get without me around.” Halle chuckled, challenge written all over his face.

Adrian pointedly ignored him and turned to Tyler instead. “Right. So, how do you want to do this?”

“Fine. Ignore me,” Halle called after them.

“Yes, do that.” Adrian rolled his eyes at his partner before turning to Tyler again. “Do you mind if I have a look at your home? I want to sweep it for any potential danger.”

\*\*\*\*

Adrian was only mildly surprised when Tyler actually agreed. Considering the horrified expression he’d seen when Evelyn first made her suggestion, he’d thought he’d pushed his luck a little too far. Apparently not. *Or maybe he’d agree to anything if he thought it would put an end to his problem.*

It wasn’t Adrian’s place to judge. They’d parted ways with Halle soon after leaving the shop. The bus ride had been spent in pleasant conversation. They’d exchanged interests, favorite foods, taste in music, and other safe topics. He

noticed early on that Tyler avoided anything personal like the plague, stepping around questions about his family and friends. He hadn't pushed, he was a professional, he didn't need to know those things to do his job. But that didn't stop the twinge of disappointment.

"I want to have a look at the staircase you had the waking dream in." Adrian paused outside the building's main door. He watched Tyler's reaction carefully.

Tyler nodded stiffly, but said nothing. He waved the electronic key against the reader without looking and pointed to a white door on the other side of the lobby. He made no move to follow Adrian to the staircase.

The door opened with a heavy push. The lighting was dim, the steps were covered in grime and dirt, all of it adding to the ominous feeling growing in his gut. Something was *off*.

Adrian waited a few moments, but he heard no sound. No footsteps indicating other people were using the stairs at the moment. Leaning against the door, he closed his eyes and let himself drift. It was hard to find the edge without a guide, even if he didn't need to devote any attention to the goings-on around him.

He deepened his breath and when he opened his eyes once more, his vision was tinted in a deep violet. He was standing right at the edge between the two worlds. The physical world took on a dream like quality, made even more prominent by the liquid shadows that flowed in and out of existence. If there had been any source there before, it wasn't there anymore.

He concentrated hard at the walls. From what Evelyn had told him, Tyler had walked down the stairs of his building and continued down into ones that didn't exist. Shouldn't exist.

*There.*

Adrian pushed off the doorway and leaped toward the far wall in four steps, crossing over the edge in the process. He'd caught a glimpse of something. He could *see* clearer now, the once insubstantial forms solidifying into more solid and defined shapes. He concentrated hard at the point where he'd seen the flare of power, but it was gone again.

The shadows gathered around him in thicker masses as he stood watching. He knew he had to leave, soon. He reached out toward the wall, intending to look for the source by touch, but his hand passed right through. Okay, *now*. He had to go back. *Now*.

He had gone too far into the other side without tethering himself to the edge. He cursed at his own carelessness. Not only had he lost track of the power he'd been looking for, he was also at a risk of not being able to go back. The world was filled with luminescent purple hues and pitch-black shadows. *Demons and monsters.* The stuff of legends and stories were circling around, checking him out and deciding if he was worth a meal. Adrian tensed.

Ignoring the creatures bearing down on him, he searched carefully for the edge. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the ebb and flow of power around him.

That had been reckless and stupid. He knew how notoriously unreliable his sight was, and yet, he'd still let himself get distracted by what he saw. A little further and he could've wound up an easy snack. *And no one would ever know what happened.*

He took in a few shuddering breaths as he waited for the adrenaline to fade. His heart hammered in his chest as he opened his eyes again. The world was as it should be once more. He was back, relatively safe and still in one piece.

Whatever had happened there, Tyler had not simply imagined it. Lynna was going to have a field day with this. At least, it proved the incident during the new moon hadn't been his fault alone. Adrian decided just as quickly that he'd keep his findings mostly to himself for the time being. No need to freak Tyler out anymore than he already was.

Adrian returned to the lobby to find Tyler studying the bulletin board next to the elevator shaft. "The good news is, you're not going crazy," he remarked as he walked up to him.

"Gee, thanks," Tyler said sarcastically.

"No, I'm serious," Adrian said with an exaggerated cringe.

That got a snort of amusement out of Tyler so Adrian let it go. The elevator took what felt like forever to arrive and the ascent was so bumpy, Adrian half expected the cables to just give out and send them plummeting to their unfortunate deaths. Luckily, that didn't happen.

Their arrival on the fourth floor was marked with a soft chime as the doors opened. Adrian vowed he'd never get on the thing again.

He followed Tyler down the dusty corridor. The doors on both sides were painted a crazy assortment of colors.

“Interesting interior design you’ve got here...” Adrian couldn’t help but remark.

“Yeah, apparently the tenants are referred to by their door color more than the number. Or name for that matter.” Tyler motioned toward a door while digging in his pocket for his keys. “I’ve got the gray room.”

Adrian studied the front hall while removing his shoes. Tyler led him through a fast tour of the space. The hall opened into a cozy living room, a modestly furnished kitchen and small dining space stood on the other side. Turning around the corner, there was a washroom and closet. Another door opened into what looked like an office with a bed crammed against one wall. The whole apartment was tiny as far as Adrian could tell, but it was homey.

After the quick tour, Adrian returned to the living room. He was marveling at the collection of miniature glasswork figures occupying the shelf next to the TV when Tyler returned with two glasses of water.

He handed one glass to Adrian. “Sorry, I’d offer you a beer, but I’ve stopped keeping alcohol on hand.”

“It’s fine, I probably shouldn’t drink on the job anyway.” Adrian grinned sheepishly. “What are these guys? They’re gorgeous.”

“Venetian glass. One of the few perks of my job.”

“Right, you work for an import company.”

“Yeah. The company raffles off samples and prototypes that they don’t need anymore.” Tyler sat down on the couch, glass still in hand. “Hey, about what you said before?”

Adrian shook his head slowly. “Later. I want to do a sweep of your apartment first.” He placed his glass down on the kitchen counter before continuing, “Guess now’s a good time as any to start.”

He didn’t wait to see if Tyler said anything before he made his way to the bedroom. Tyler had been asleep in bed most of the times the nightmares surfaced, if there was going to be any residual power left behind, it would be there.

He pushed the desk chair out of the way to clear up a decent sized area on the floor and fished out his marker. He wasn’t going to take his chances again. He felt a lot better about his chances with a guiding spell in place.

After drafting the spell on the floor, he plopped down onto the office chair, he let himself wander, searching out the edge between the worlds once more. He couldn't find it. Adrian blinked in surprise. The edge between the two sides were so muddled that he *literally* could not find the dividing line. *How in the world...*

Icy realization dawned on him. The shock of it made Adrian's blood freeze. It made sense. It was insane and impossible, but it made *sense*. What had Evelyn said? That the nightmares were leaving physical marks. And that last one, the glimpse of power in the staircase...

*If the dreams weren't just dreams...*

This was beyond the scale of a simple spell or curse. The power affecting Tyler wasn't placed on him directly. It was linking the two sides. It was more than likely that something was trying to drag Tyler to the *other* side and it was succeeding every night. It was trying to harm, but not kill. It was toying with him.

Rather than checking out Tyler, he should've dragged Halle to this place instead. Or even better, Lynna. Because seriously, the scale of what was happening was actually beginning to scare him.

Adrian ran back into the living room and turned the corner with enough speed to almost collide with the doorframe.

"We're leaving here. Now." Adrian disregarded the flash of panic that passed over Tyler's face. "And no, you don't get a choice."

"What?" came the startled reply.

Adrian tried to remain as calm as he could, calling forth all the confidence he could muster. *Don't panic*. "You can't stay here so grab whatever you need for a week or three and let's go. We'll figure something out along the way."

"Are you at least going to tell me what's going on?" Adrian could practically see the wariness and mistrust in him turn to fear of the unknown. He was doing a terrible job of feigning calm.

"Later, we need to get you somewhere safe first."

\*\*\*\*

### Chapter 3

Tyler waited numbly on a couch in a disturbing circular room. The lounge, according to Adrian. It was nothing like any place he'd ever been forced to spend an extended amount of time in. He had followed Adrian without question. In hindsight, it was a pretty stupid move. What did he know about the man anyway? He'd been swept up in the growing terror that had obviously seized him. The guy had gone to work his magic in the bedroom and ran back out in a fit of panic. He'd tried to not stare at the mark on his floor while he packed up two duffle bags worth of stuff.

Adrian then hustled him onto the bus and dragged him into what looked like an old church. Except, it was obviously no longer that. He studied the large open room more carefully. Dozens of doors decorated the walls, couches and plush chairs dotted the center space, and the tiled floor depicted some kind of ornate scrolling pattern. The ceiling though, was covered in rings of arcane markings and lights that looked suspiciously like they weren't attached to anything.

He'd been left there with an order to stay put while Adrian had gone into one of the rooms. How he knew which door led where was beyond him. Tyler felt like he was going crazy just looking at the space with no beginning or end.

He must have dozed off at some point because the next thing he knew, Adrian was shaking him awake.

"I just talked things over with my boss, it's decided. It's safer if we're together twenty-four seven until we have the situation under control. You're now my current and only assignment," Adrian informed him. Tyler stared at him in stunned silence. "Umm, I guess you could come stay with me, I've got a spare bedroom and everything. Or we could find a hotel somewhere, if you're more comfortable with that?"

"I can't just stay with you! That's just—" *weird, wrong, depraved*. He cut himself off short. "Besides, I've got work."

"We don't have to physically be together every minute of the day. I'll just be close by, in case anything were to happen."

"Watching?" Tyler thought back to the time at Evelyn's shop with the other Enforcer. "What about Halle?"

“You’d rather have Halle?” Adrian looked taken aback.

His hurt expression had Tyler feeling like he just kicked a puppy. “No. I just meant—I thought—I mean, you two are partners right?”

“Oh. That. No, we only partner for patrol since... you know. There aren’t enough personnel for us to move in pairs all the time,” Adrian answered. “Halle has his own assignments.”

“Fine. I guess I don’t really have any choice.” He sighed, resigned. *Let’s just get this over with.* “Your place’s fine. I can survive sleeping in a spare room for a few days.”

“All right.”

\*\*\*\*

Adrian showed Tyler around his house quickly, there wasn’t much to see. He barely spent any time there and the bare, neglected rooms reflected that. It was nothing like the cozy space Tyler had made for himself.

He left Tyler to unpack and get acquainted with his new room before returning to the big, open concept living space and opening all the windows. Aside from the washroom, bedrooms, and storage spaces, the rest of the house was devoid of dividing walls. He’d chosen it for that very reason, with all the windows open in the kitchen, dining, and living rooms, he had enough access to the flow of power from outside.

It sucked to live in the city when his affiliation was with air. The flow of wind to be more precise, not the stagnant stuff found in enclosed spaces. He drew several deep breaths and drew the power to him, wrapping it around his house like a blanket. It was a simple protective spell, used to isolate a space, but would be enough to protect Tyler while he was out.

He resigned himself to needing Halle’s help if he wanted any chance of figuring out what to do with Tyler’s room.

Adrian dug his phone out of his pocket and scrolled until he found Halle’s number. “How busy are you right now?”

“At this very moment, I’m holding up. Why? Lover’s spat already?”

“Ha. Ha. Funny.” Adrian rolled his eyes even though he knew the gesture would be lost over the phone. “I think we wasted our time looking at Tyler at Evelyn’s place.”

“Huh? What happened?”

“His place... it’s... I don’t even know how to describe it. The boundary between the two sides is completely gone. I couldn’t even find the edge.”

“You’re kidding me.” Halle chuckled and immediately sobered up. “You’re not kidding. That’s... well. That’s definitely bad.”

“You don’t say. So if you’ve got some time, I want you to do a sweep of his place.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. Give me five minutes to finish up here and I’ll meet you there? What’s the address?”

“It’s 2780 Aliquay St. I’ll meet you outside in...” He glanced at the clock on his wall. “An hour. I think I’m going to put up another field first.”

“Got it. See you soon.” He disconnected the call.

Adrian sighed wearily. Of course a simple isolation spell wouldn’t be enough, whatever was trying to get to Tyler was... powerful. If nothing else. He closed his eyes again and let himself wander to the edge. He needed to be closer to the other side if he wanted to weave a stronger spell.

Twenty minutes later, Adrian opened his eyes to see Tyler staring at him from the hall. He stood awkwardly, like he wasn’t sure if he should join Adrian in the living room or retreat back to the guestroom.

“Sorry, must’ve dozed off there.” Adrian cursed himself silently, he hadn’t intended to be caught off guard like that. *Time to diffuse the tension.*

He waved to Tyler to come over, and Tyler joined him on the couch after a moment’s hesitation. Adrian could practically see the gears turning in the other man’s head. “I’m done unpacking. I guess.”

“Oh good. Make yourself at home and relax. The place is safe, I’ve put up a few shields and wards and stuff, nothing dangerous is gonna get in.” He smiled comfortingly.

“I—what should we...” Tyler glanced at him furtively before going back to staring at his hands.

“Right now? There’s not much to be done. You get some rest, I’ve got a few errands to run first.” Adrian squeezed Tyler’s shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring gesture. The awkward tension in the room was starting to get to him.

“Alone?” Tyler asked in surprise.

“Trust me. You’re going to be safer here than with me right now,” he said softly, trying not to sound guilty. “Tyler. It’s been a rough day. Go have a shower and sleep, you look like you’re ready to crash. I’ll bring some food home for dinner and we’ll work out the details then.”

In the end, Adrian didn’t leave until Tyler had gone back to his room with the promise to get some shuteye. Satisfied that he wasn’t likely to make a run for it while he was out, he shut the windows and made the long journey back to Tyler’s apartment.

It hadn’t even been a day and he was already exhausted. The job had derailed so far off the tracks that he didn’t even know how to go about it anymore. *Swoop in, unravel the spell, get paid, get out*, he chuckled ruefully. Instead, he was now stuck sharing his home with Tyler. He hadn’t so much as dated in three years and all of a sudden, he was living with another man.

“Yeah, what’s the worst that could ever possibly happen,” he whispered to himself, voice dripping with sarcasm. He ignored the weird looks from the other passengers on the bus.

He arrived outside of Tyler’s apartment ten minutes late, but still ahead of Halle. Thank God for small favors. He was never going to hear the end of it, what with all the favors he was calling in.

Halle arrived five minutes later, the black Mustang he drove screeching to a shuddering stop in the parking lot out front. Adrian cringed, he never knew it was even possible to feel sorry for inanimate objects until he saw the abuse his partner put his car through on a daily basis. It was also no secret that Halle’s inability to drive like a sane person was a major factor in why he himself refused to drive. Who knew how many other psychotic drivers occupied the roads.

“You know, I’m amazed that car is still chugging along after everything you’ve put it through,” Adrian remarked as his partner walked up.

“What’re you talking about? Ross’s doing just fine.”

“You named your car *Ross*?”

“Rosslyn. And you don’t care two shits about my car.” Halle rolled his eyes and chided him mockingly. “Now, tell me what’s the deal with this place?”

Adrian filled him in as they made their way up to Tyler’s room by way of the staircase. The convenient thing about magic, is that it’s impossible to keep a

Magical out by physical means alone. A few muttered words and the locks disengaged themselves with no trouble.

Tyler's place was exactly as Adrian had left it earlier that day. He led Halle into the bedroom. The guiding spell he'd drawn onto the floor was still there, as was the marker he'd left behind in his haste to get out. He retrieved his marker as casually as he could and ignored Halle's snickering.

Getting down to business, Adrian watched Halle as he sat down in the same chair he'd used earlier. Watching Halle was about as anticlimactic as it could get, until he crossed over at least. Physically, he never showed any sign of what he was really doing. Adrian had been careful to use spells that required things Tyler could physically see and touch when he was around. If for no other reason than to alert him as to when he was doing something otherworldly.

He could almost imagine Tyler's look of horror if he ever realized that Adrian could weave spells with no indication that he was doing so. Well, indications that a human could see or feel at least.

Adrian was tempted to look for the edge again, but decided against it. He'd tried and failed earlier and he had Halle now. He was more useful on this side than stumbling along the other.

He ticked off the minutes impatiently. Halle had been gone for almost forty-five minutes. Long enough that he was starting to get nervous. Halle wasn't crossing over the edge, if he had, Adrian would have known. With no indication of what's going on, he wouldn't even know if something happened to Halle.

Luckily, Halle returned before the hour was up. Any longer and Adrian was ready to send an SOS to Lynna.

"That was... weird. To put it mildly."

"Did you find the edge?"

"Yes and no." He raised his hands defensively before Adrian could object. "Yes, I found the actual divide between the two sides. And no, because it no longer exists."

"W-what?"

"Oh yeah, it's gone. Blended together into one twisted mess. Essentially, it's a good thing you were looking for the edge when you tried to cross instead of just... wandering around. You could've gotten lost on the other side and not even realize you were there till a gryphon tried to have you for dinner."

“Great. Well, did you find anything useful?”

“Nothing like a source or even a sliver of power. I didn’t find anything like the power you saw in the staircase here either. Whatever caused this is gone. There’s really nothing left here to salvage.”

“I see. I guess I’ll call Kay to come and patch this place back up before something accidentally wanders over to this side.” Adrian rubbed tiredly at his temples. It was pretty much what he had expected, but hearing it in words was still annoying. He was back to square one with no leads at all. “Thanks. I appreciate the help.”

“I know. I’ll call it even if you treat me to pizza sometime.” Halle grinned as he left. “And tell Kay I said hi.”

Adrian waved him off with a tolerant smile. “Deal.”

He dug out his phone as he closed the door behind Halle. Less than an hour later, Kay was knocking on the front door. They chatted briefly and after a quick discussion of the job and payment, Adrian left him to do his thing.

He’d only dealt with Kay a few times before, having only been introduced to the man recently. Adrian had decided early on that he was definitely one of the easier Cleaners to work with. The last one he’d used had an unhealthy addiction to gossip, something that made him extremely uncomfortable. Adrian had heard more things he had no business knowing about than he cared to let anyone know. It was a mystery how the other Cleaner would have even come across half the information she did.

Kay, on the other hand, didn’t ask any unnecessary questions, and just did whatever job was requested of him. An extremely useful trait as far as Adrian was concerned.

He was also one of the few people Adrian trusted, outside of his team. Eleven years and he still felt uncomfortable in the presence of other Magicals. If he could kick his own ass, he would. It really was ridiculous. Sighing, he headed back to the bus stop.

After a quick debate, he ended up dropping by Lind’s Bakery to pick up dinner, even if it was a little out of the way. They served the best sandwiches in the world as far as he was concerned. And chocolate cake, but he would let his new housemate be the judge of that.

Tyler passed the hours alternately in front of the TV and sorting through paperwork for his job. Neither were things he wanted to be doing at that time. He was still fuming about being left on his own in Adrian's house. *What the hell was the point of all this?* At least he'd remembered to bring his work bag and laptop.

Hadn't the whole point of their arrangement been so that Tyler would be safer with him? It almost felt redundant somehow, being forced out of his own home now. He sat down heavily on the couch and flipped through the channels available to him again, not really caring about what was happening on screen.

He hated being caged in like this too. Just when he thought he was going to go crazy from boredom, his phone rang, snapping him out of his thoughts. He had all of ten seconds to decide whether he should answer the call from his mother or not. He hit answer in the end. He wouldn't put it past her to drop in for an impromptu visit only to find him cleared out of his apartment.

"Hi, Mom," he answered the phone with as much good will as he could muster.

"Finally. I was beginning to wonder if I needed to send out a search team to find you." She heaved an exaggerated sigh into the receiver.

"Yeah, sorry. I've been busy lately. How have you guys been?" he asked politely.

"We're fine, thank you. What's been keeping you so busy? Is it your job? Are they trying to shove more responsibility onto you again?"

"Uh, no. It's not that. Just, other stuff in my life I guess."

"Oh, my, don't tell me you finally—"

"No! No. It's just—I've had to leave my apartment on short notice this week." He cut her reply off short. He hated the shock and excitement in her voice almost as much as he hated having to ruin it with the harsh truth. There was no one in his life, and more than likely wouldn't be. *Not even him.* He pushed the image of Adrian out of his mind. *Especially not him.*

*Don't even think about going there,* he chastised himself.

She made a disappointed sounding huff and he almost felt bad. He decided that a little white lie on the subject would do more good than harm at the moment. "There's, uh, pests... they're getting cleared out right now."

"Oh my gosh, that's terrible!" She paused, Tyler waited for the inevitable question. "Are you sure you don't want to come home?"

“I’m sure, Mother. Besides, I like my job and you’re hours away.”

“I know. It’s just that your father and I worry about you. And now pests...?”

“Harmless. But annoying. I’ll be fine, I’m... staying with a friend for the time being.” He had to wince at how pathetically unconvincing that sounded even to his own ears.

He was about a hundred percent sure that she didn’t buy that, but grateful that she didn’t bother calling him out on it. After that, they only made small talk that was both awkward and stilted. It wasn’t that their relationship was bad, he simply didn’t know what to say to her. After another five minutes of trying, she either gave up or got tired of him.

They said their good-byes and Tyler quickly hung up his phone. He stared blankly at the black screen for a few minutes, contemplating the unexpected distraction. He had been actively ignoring calls from his parents as he’d gotten tired of the same questions years ago. *At least that point didn’t come up again...*

If only he had been able to live up to his parents’ expectations. Or at the very least, be normal enough to pass by unnoticed. Although these days, he had fallen so far off the bandwagon of normality that he doubted he would ever manage to get back on again. He was still pondering that point when he heard the clink of keys against the lock announcing Adrian’s return.

“Hey,” Adrian called from the doorway and Tyler decided that it was only polite to greet the man.

He joined Adrian in the kitchen only to see the man’s arms laden down with a box and bags of food. “Wow... overkill much?”

“I see you haven’t had a chance to go through my kitchen yet. You’re going to be very grateful to me very soon,” he said as he sorted out his purchases and put them away in the fridge.

“There’s what, a dozen sandwiches...? And is that a cake?” Tyler’s bewilderment was quickly morphing into amusement. Adrian had mentioned getting some food on the way back, sandwiches and cake was not what he had been expecting.

“Close, ten, actually. And yes, cake. Chocolate espresso to be exact.” He grinned widely as he proudly displayed the box to Tyler. “Hands off, it’s dessert.”

“You don’t cook do you,” Tyler stated blandly, but he couldn’t keep the amusement off his face. The glimpses he got of the state of the kitchen more than proved his point. The cupboards were stocked with various colored cans and the fridge was nearly empty. He made a mental note to buy some proper food and cook himself.

“I do,” Adrian huffed indignantly. “But this is more convenient.”

“Right.”

“Hey! I do!”

“I believe you.” Tyler smirked, the whole argument was ridiculous, but that was also what made it so amusing. He hadn’t expected Adrian to be so much fun to rile up.

“You’re lying.” Adrian made an irritated noise. “Fine. I’ll make *proper* food next time.”

Tyler decided to drop the debate after that. He had his fun teasing and more than likely used up all his good will at the moment.

They ate in silence after putting things away and cleaning up. Adrian was pointedly ignoring him, something Tyler shamelessly took advantage of. He spent the whole dinner watching the other man. Adrian ate slowly, savoring each bite. As hard of a time as Tyler gave him earlier about it, he had to admit that the sandwich was amazing. Nothing like the convenience store stuff he got on occasion.

Adrian brought out the cake after they polished off three sandwiches between them.

“Okay, I’ll admit it, this stuff is amazing.” Tyler grinned, silently admitting defeat.

“Lind’s Bakery. Be grateful, I went there just for you.” Adrian smirked around another forkful of cake. The unexpected childishness he displayed didn’t so much worry Tyler as pique his interest.

He realized with a start that he’d barely thought about the whole magic thing since Adrian got back, distracted as he’d been with the man himself.

Adrian must have caught his change in mood because he said, “We should probably talk about how the upcoming week is going to go, huh.”

“Yeah. I guess the sooner we have it figured out, the better,” Tyler replied, staring intently at his plate. The light atmosphere died in an instant.

“Well, I’ll tell you now that I’ll be literally following you everywhere. More or less. I might leave you home once in a while if something else comes up with my job, but other than that, I’m all yours.”

Tyler mulled over the unintended implications of Adrian’s words. He knew he didn’t mean it in those terms, but it still made him pause. “Yeah, that’s fine. I guess. There’s a café down the street from the office that you can kill time in if you want. Other than that, I’m not really sure how you want to go about this...”

“A café’s great. I had to sit in the back alleys the last time I did this.” He chuckled at the memory although the humor failed to reach his eyes.

“What about tomorrow? I don’t need to go in on the weekends.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday right? I don’t have anything in particular I need to do, you?”

“Nah, no plans here either.”

“Good, that’s good. We can figure it out when we get bored then. I don’t mind if you want to meet up with your family or friends, but I’m going to need a heads up. Especially if you intend to go somewhere with lots of people.”

Tyler bit back the cynical reply he reserved for these annoying assumptions and went with a simple “Got it.”

After that, they washed the dishes together and went off to their respective rooms. Tyler went straight for the new talisman he’d hidden under the pillow and traced its design absently. The room was bare, containing only a lamp, a twin bed, and a small table that acted as a nightstand. He’d left his bags in the corner along with his laptop.

It was meant for work, but he wasn’t above using it for personal means if he had nothing else to kill time with. He called it a night by ten o’clock, he had been taking full advantage of being rid of the nightmares.

\*\*\*\*

Adrian was more than a little grateful by the time Monday morning rolled around. Yesterday would go down in history as the most awkward and needlessly stressful day of his life. *You’d think two grown men could find some middle ground when it came to filling in free time.*

Apparently not.

They'd spent most of the morning tiptoeing around each other and trying their hardest to ignore the strange tension in the air. The whole thing had been so foreign to Adrian that he really didn't know how to deal with it. Every tentative conversation was forced and stilted, but the tense silence was even worse. Not that it was really Tyler's fault or anything.

He couldn't even remember the last time he'd felt that awkward around another person. Probably not since he was a child who didn't know what to do with himself and everything felt *wrong*. And lunch had only been slightly more bearable compared to the morning. Once more, he was glad he made the effort to grab food from Lind's. *If it made Tyler happy...* He sighed and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. A quick rummage through his kitchen revealed that there was still enough food left over to tie them over for another day or two, but he was struck with the sudden craving for proper home-cooked meals. Something he hadn't cared to do anything about for years.

Not since he started living on his own. Cooking for one just didn't appeal to him. If he was lucky, his skills in the kitchen might not have deteriorated into nonexistence.

"We'll know soon enough," he muttered determinedly to himself.

With his mind made up, he pushed the thoughts out of his mind as he made the coffee and pulled out some leftovers they could have for breakfast and lunch. Tyler was still in the shower, but Adrian was ready to head out whenever. He'd realized much too late that he'd forgotten to ask when Tyler needed to head to work.

He was more than a little grateful that Lynna had allowed this to become an exclusive assignment because he was pretty sure he'd never be able to patrol at night and keep to Tyler's work schedule at the same time. Halle might not need to sleep, but he sure damned well did.

Tyler stumbled his way to the coffeemaker as Adrian was warming up what was to be their breakfast.

"Good morning to you too," Adrian said with as much false cheer as he could muster.

"Ah, morning," Tyler mumbled in reply. At closer inspection, Tyler looked exhausted.

"Did you not sleep well?"

"No, sorry. Slept fine, it's just too early in the morning for me." He waved off Adrian's concern absently. All his attention was on the coffeepot.

Adrian blinked at him in surprise.

Tyler caught his eyes and half smirked. “Yeah, some things, you just never get accustomed to. No matter how long you’ve done the same goddamned thing.”

“I guess I got lucky there, then. I’m too much of a night owl to function in a normal working day schedule.”

“You look like you’re functioning fine to me.”

“Nervous energy. Always happens when I change up my routine.”

“Huh. Makes sense.”

Despite what Tyler had said, he wasn’t nearly as grouchy as he made himself out to be. Mostly, they just ate in silence. Well, Tyler ate as Adrian tried his best to not get caught studying him around bites of food. Tyler had done the same to him the first night so he couldn’t complain. Thankfully, by the time they parted ways the night before, they’d finally managed to move past some of the awkwardness. The odd companionship they’d forged was holding.

They left the dishes where they were as they polished off their food and headed out of the house at a quarter to eight. Tyler showed Adrian where the café was located before the two walked down the street to the building that his company was in. It wasn’t anything impressive and didn’t stand out at all amongst the many other office buildings around it.

Silently, Adrian tugged on Tyler’s sleeve and headed to the nearest alley. When he was sure they were out of plain sight, he took out a notepad and his marker.

“Here.” He scribbled a quick mark onto the paper and handed it to Tyler. “It’s a guidepost. Rip it if there’s any trouble or you need me and it’ll lead me straight to you.”

“Do you—is there—?” Tyler eyed the paper suspiciously before reluctantly taking it.

“Don’t know, but I’d rather cover all my bases while I can.” Adrian smiled ruefully. It was the best he could do until he had the chance to check out and secure the location. And after all that, he still had the actual issue to deal with.

After a few more reassurances from Adrian that everything was going to work out, they parted ways. He watched as Tyler entered the building before he

returned to the café at a slow stroll. *This was going to be a long week.* He could feel it already.

\*\*\*\*

In the days that followed, they hashed out something of a routine in and out of the house. They realized pretty quickly that they both functioned better with a clear schedule to follow. Tyler did not like surprises because it threw him off-balance, and Adrian hated them because they made keeping track of Tyler impossibly difficult.

Ironically, it turned out that they got along pretty well once they got comfortable around each other. Adrian grinned to himself. It all started with their mutual appreciation for good food. It had taken an entire day of slaving away in the kitchen to convince Tyler of his skill, but the payoff had been worth every ounce of effort. After three days of trying to one up each other, they had finally called it a truce and wound up cooking most meals together. Adrian didn't even mind that Tyler would kick him out of the kitchen once in a while to make something particularly interesting. He smiled softly at the memory. Having Tyler around had really changed things up for him, but in good ways. It had been a long time since he'd looked forward to going home and just spending time relaxing.

They even had a dinner course planned for that night, something Adrian was determined to see happen with or without Tyler's unexpected appointment. Tyler had gotten the phone call from his psychiatrist's receptionist right before they were about to head out the door.

The call nearly had them missing the bus, but after a mad sprint, they managed to make it to the stop right as the bus pulled up. After that, it was business as usual. Adrian dropped Tyler off in front of his office before walking down the street and into the small café. He flashed a quick smile at the woman behind the counter when he got to the front of the line and signaled for his usual double shot latte. Thankfully, the place was fairly empty, it allowed him ample space to hang around without the guilt of needing to buy a mass of food and coffee to justify occupying a table for hours on end. Another bonus came in the form of patio seats out front, complete with umbrellas to keep patrons from frying in the bright afternoon sun.

The only time it got busy was during the lunch hour when the offices let out, but people rarely lingered. Tyler did make a habit of dropping by to visit him at lunch when he wasn't bogged down by work, a sentiment Adrian really appreciated. It got lonely sitting by himself day in and day out.

Not to mention that there was very little for him to do by that point. He'd spent the first two days scouting the area and setting up fields and protective spells from inside the café. Wednesday was spent weaving the most intricate trap he knew of to encompass the entire block. He knew it was more effort than it was worth, but he had plenty of time to kill. And a comfortable patio chair to sprawl out on.

Yesterday, he'd been bored enough to roam the whole area, keeping tab on the close by powers as he went. Not that there was much he could pick up on in the middle of the day when the edge was at its thickest and most creatures from the other side were hidden away.

By this point, he had all the back streets memorized, investigated each nook and cranny, and set up markers where they might come in use in the future.

Which brought him back to the present. He took his latte to what had quickly become his favorite table by the large bay window. The weather was deteriorating fast, where it had been bright and sunny less than an hour ago, it looked like rain was going to fall at any moment now. He half contemplated getting something stronger on the side, but decided that if two cups of coffee and a double latte couldn't keep him alert, nothing else was going to help. The adrenaline rush of starting something new had worn off days ago and the early mornings were starting to catch up with him.

*Last day before the weekend*, he reminded himself. He didn't know how tired out Tyler was going to be, but there was no way he was getting up before noon tomorrow. They could just go out somewhere nice for lunch. He sipped his drink slowly and let his mind drift as the rain started coming down.

He wouldn't go to the edge, there was no need for that, but he intended to watch Tyler. He knew from experience that all the spells in the world couldn't replace having a weaver on hand to deal with the situation as it unfolded.

The bigger problem at the moment was the lack of progress he was having at finding the source of power that was affecting Tyler. He'd been *watching* the man obsessively, only taking breaks to actually get some sleep.

His house was so saturated in magic that he'd gotten an unexpected visit from a fellow team of Enforcers who'd come to investigate. A quick confirmation from Lynna had cleared up the misunderstanding, but that didn't change the fact that he was probably pushing it with the layers of spells. The lack of progress was also grating on his nerves.

He sighed and shook his head violently in an effort to invigorate himself. *That's not important right now.* He drew on the power of a marker he'd set up before and used it as a guide to find the edge. From there, he watched Tyler for the rest of the day.

At five, he went to wait for Tyler outside his company. So maybe he was more than just a little bored. He'd been content to wait outside, but by five fifteen, he was at the end of his limited patience.

Unfortunately, he'd forgotten that normal companies had receptionists who watched the door. He stared awkwardly at the woman as she watched him warily.

"Hi, umm, I'm looking for Tyler?" he asked the question as casually as he could.

She studied him carefully. "Tyler is in a meeting right now. Is he expecting you?"

"No, not really. I, uh, was going to surprise him." The conversation was growing more strained by the second and every fiber of Adrian's being was telling him to hightail it out of there before he said something particularly stupid. Except that would probably be even worse.

"Right. You must be Adrian then," she remarked with a smirk.

"Yes. Wait, how did you..."

"I guess you can say we're friends. I'm Lauren by the way. He's mentioned you in passing. And between the two of us, I'm glad he's found someone like you." Adrian had to bite his tongue to not refute the point. He wasn't really sure what she was basing her judgment on, but better to let her believe what she wanted than try to cover it up with more lies.

"I didn't know that... so, do you know how much longer he'll be?"

She shrugged with an apologetic smile on her face. The scowl disappeared the moment she was able to place him. "Should've wrapped up forty-five minutes ago so who knows."

"I see, thank you."

"No problem. Should I let him know you dropped by?"

"Sure. Tell him I'll be waiting at the usual place." He wasn't sure what had possessed him to do so, but he winked suggestively as he waved good-bye and left.

*Right, because this couldn't possibly get any more humiliating...* He had a sinking feeling that Tyler wasn't going to appreciate his unannounced visit, but the damage had already been done. He didn't know whether she had thought they'd been friends or lovers, but after that visit, he was pretty sure he'd made the choice for her.

\*\*\*\*

Tyler stalked the short distance from his company to the café where he knew Adrian was waiting.

“You're an idiot.” He glared at Adrian the moment he spotted him.

“What did I do?” Adrian tried, and failed, to pull off the innocent look.

“I would apologize for being late, but after what I had to do to get Lauren off my case, you don't deserve it anymore.”

“That's fine, but you still need to thank me. I called your psych clinic for you to tell them you're going to be late.”

Tyler grumbled something that was somewhere between a curse and a thank you.

It took them a full hour to get to the clinic, the roads were in full rush hour mode. By the time they finally arrived, they were both haggard and annoyed by the crowds of people.

“Sorry, we're so late,” Tyler said in lieu of a greeting as they stepped through the door.

The receptionist smiled and waved him toward Kenaston's office. “It's no problem, you can go in now, Dr. Kenaston has been waiting for you.”

“Thanks.”

Tyler wasn't sure if it was just his imagination or if his file had more than doubled in size. He sat down carefully, it felt weird to be in the clinic on a Friday night instead of the usual Sunday afternoon.

Kenaston inclined his head slightly in greeting, but was otherwise occupied by the file. Definitely his, if the name he could barely make out on the folder was any indication. He was sure now that it had expanded in size.

“Thank you for coming in on such short notice.”

“No problem. Can I ask why?” Tyler asked casually. He already knew the reason, but wanted confirmation just in case.

“I’m going to be completely honest with you Tyler. I’ve finished going through your journal and I’m worried about the state of your mind.” Kenaston wiped a hand across his brow. Tyler took some comfort in the fact that the man looked as uncomfortable as he felt. “Tell me, have the nightmares and hallucinations been progressing since?”

“Right.” It was now or never, Tyler decided. “I wanted to talk to you about that. The nightmares are pretty much gone. And nothing like what happened *that* time has occurred again.”

He tried not to laugh as Kenaston’s face twitched and the man gaped comically. That was obviously not the answer he was expecting. Eventually, Kenaston managed to school his features to vaguely resemble forced calm, but looked more like he was trying too hard to keep his eyes from popping right out of their sockets.

“W-what? H-has something happened?”

A single day wasn’t very long notice, but it was enough for them to come up with an interesting story. Mostly it was Tyler’s idea, but he had let Adrian in on his plan. It started off as a bit of a joke, but they realized soon enough that it would work well as a cover. “I guess you were right. I just needed a lifestyle change. Open myself up again. You know, I came with my boyfriend today.”

Tyler plastered on what he hoped looked like a warm smile, like he was reminiscing. The discomfort pouring off Kenaston was palpable. He would have felt sorry for the man if he wasn’t such a bigot and intending to use him as the subject of some medical study. Not that his parents would have stood for it if they’d known. *Too bad.*

“I see” was all Kenaston said. He looked much too pale under the florescent light, all the color had drained from his face. “I didn’t realize...”

“It’s fine. I don’t believe it’s the kind of thing my father enjoys discussing.” Tyler tried for mock sympathy.

“No, I’d think not. Well, is there anything else...” Kenaston was looking everywhere except where Tyler sat. Currently, his eyes were fixated on the papers strewn around his desk. He almost felt sorry for all the work the guy must have gone through with the stupid journal.

“I mean, I’ve been getting out more recently. Going shopping, hanging out with people outside of work, going for walks in the park, all that. He’s been very good about getting me to be more social too.” Tyler decided to spare the

man any more discomfort and left out most of the details he had originally planned on slathering on. Just in case he did break medical confidentiality laws and discuss him with his father. Plus, Kenaston looked like he was about to faint. “Look. I appreciate your help, but things are finally looking better for me.”

“I see... I see. That’s amazing. Wonderful. Really. I’m sure your parents would be happy to hear that.” He wiped at his brow again and fidgeted with the papers. “I’m glad for you. Truly.”

“Thanks. I guess I’ll call again if something else comes up.”

“Yes, please do.”

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, my boyfriend is waiting.”

They shook hands briefly before Tyler left. He’d been feeling charitable when he said the last bit, he had no intention of ever returning to the clinic again. And the parting jab was purely for his own amusement. *If only it was true.* Tyler stopped abruptly in the hall, the stray thought having caught him completely unprepared. He remembered Adrian’s reaction to his suggestion clearly and Adrian had not been revolted. If anything, he had been surprised and amused by the idea.

“You’re just living with the man, it doesn’t mean anything.” He hissed under his breath. *But that doesn’t mean I can’t have any fun right?* Especially after the little stunt Adrian pulled at his office.

\*\*\*\*

Adrian had gotten up early that morning to get ready. It was Sunday now, Tyler didn’t have work and he needed to go see Lynna and update her on the situation. Preferably without having to drag Tyler all the way there with him. The place was intimidating and Tyler had made no secret of hating the strange architecture. Admittedly, it was disorienting to be there for any amount of time when you weren’t used to it.

He tried not to wince as he ticked another day off the calendar. It had been one hell of a peaceful week. Broken only by his growing impatience at the lack of results. Well, that and the unspoken competition between them. *Let’s see who can fluster the other more in public.* Tyler was still complaining about his meeting with Lauren so he assumed he was still winning. He was just counting his lucky stars that they hadn’t had a chance to meet up with Halle. The last thing he wanted was to end up as the center of gossip at headquarters.

After that fateful Friday two days ago, any unease they still felt around each other dissipated completely. *Nothing kills awkwardness like publically humiliating yourself.* It was nice that the strange air of forced politeness had died, to be replaced by friendly banter. Adrian didn't mind his company either, he had grown to appreciate it over the last week. He hadn't even realized how lonely his life had been up until that point.

But fun and games aside, Adrian was past the point of restlessness. He didn't want anything to happen to Tyler, but that nothing was happening at all wasn't helping the cause either.

He opened all the windows quickly, letting in the fresh air and the sun's rays. And more importantly, to let in the flow of power. He'd need to work quickly if he wanted to be done before Tyler woke up.

After drawing twelve marks on paper, he laid them out in their respective places on and around the furniture. He stood in the center of the circle, letting the flow of power wash over him and directed what he needed to the marked points. Carefully, he waited as the boundaries between the worlds thinned before reaching out.

He wove the protective field slowly, feeding and filtering the power through his own body to weed out anything even remotely suspicious. Afterward, he checked multiple times that the bonds would hold properly before stretching it around the house like a giant net. From the edge where he stood, everything in the net took on the characteristic violet hue. There wasn't an ounce of anything foreign left within the field by the time he was done. The house was completely isolated on both sides from outside powers. He circled around the whole perimeter once more before stepping back from the edge, satisfied.

Everything looked completely normal, the papers with the markings were woven into the spell and hidden on the other side. When he was all done, not a trace of the spell could be seen.

It was nearly nine in the morning by the time he finished tidying up and started on breakfast. He rummaged through his fridge and cupboards, but all that remained were a bit of milk, a few eggs, and yesterday's leftovers. They ate out on Saturday and skipped grocery shopping in favor of staying in and getting some well-deserved rest. Adrian contemplated the situation seriously. *Accidentally starved to death while under the care of an Enforcer.* Yeah, not a comforting thought. He made a quick note to grab some groceries after his meeting as he hastily closed all the windows again.

Salvaging what he could of the leftover meat and vegetables, he whipped up the eggs and milk to make a quick frittata. Not the best dish in his repertoire, but decent enough with what he had on hand.

Tyler entered the kitchen just as Adrian began plating the food, mumbling as he collapsed groggily onto a chair.

“Good morning to you too.” Adrian beamed happily, only because he knew it annoyed Tyler, and earned himself an irritated grunt.

Adrian snorted as he handed a big slice of the frittata to Tyler. He’d make it up to him with some of the coffee that was currently brewing away in his coffee maker.

They ate in silence, Adrian bided his time until it looked like Tyler was awake enough to reason with. Tyler wasn’t going to be happy with his plans for the day, but well, he was going to like the alternative even less. Not to mention he’d already put in the effort to weave that elaborate field.

“I need to go in to give my boss an update in a bit. Do me a favor and stay put in the house until I get back?”

“So, what, I get to go unsupervised again?” Tyler inquired with a snort.

“Pretty much. Don’t worry, I’ve got a field up. Nothing, and no one, with an ounce of power is getting in. No Magicals and nothing from the other side, you’re going to be perfectly safe in here.” At the confused look Tyler was giving him, he added, “It’s my spell, I left myself a way in and out.”

They cleaned up as they chatted, Adrian got the distinct feeling that Tyler was sulking, but doing his best to not let it show. He’d make it up to him later, there wasn’t much he could do about it right now.

He made Tyler promise not to leave the house no matter what a few times over just in case. Tyler looked ready to shove him out the door if only to shut him up by the time Adrian was convinced of his sincerity.

He also made sure not to let slip that he’d asked Halle to keep an eye out for him as an extra precaution. With a parting promise of bringing fresh groceries, Adrian left.

\*\*\*\*

Two Enforcers greeted Adrian as he entered the building. He noted with interest that there were quite a few people milling about.

“The Cray Well Division ran into a little problem yesterday night.” A short woman he only knew by sight informed him as he walked past.

“Eh? What happened?”

“Not sure yet. That’s what I’m here to find out.” She studied him curiously. “You’re from the Mmere Dane Division right?”

“Yeah, Adrian. I’m afraid I don’t know you though,” he admitted apologetically.

“No, I suppose we were never properly introduced. I’m Seare. Of Terra Noda.” She beamed up at him, her short black and gold hair bobbing as she spoke.

“A pleasure. But I’m afraid I need to go. Lynna’s expecting me.”

“Ah, of course. Sorry to keep you. Let me know if you find out what happened with Cray Well!” she called after him.

He gave her a thumbs-up in acknowledgment and descended into the basement. He did a double take at the entryway, the lounge was also filled with people. That was, by far, the most people he’d ever seen gathered at headquarters outside of an obligatory meeting. No one seemed to notice him as he walked past. Everyone seemed to be absorbed in deep conversation.

Here and there, he caught mention of Cray Well, but more interestingly, there was talk of the council as well. He rapped on his division’s door and waited until he heard a faint “come in” from the other side.

Lynna was perched precariously on the top step of a small ladder, trying to reach for something piled onto the top of one of the wall shelves.

“Do you need help?” he asked, more out of obligation than anything else.

“No, I’ve got it,” she grunted in reply. Adrian sat and waited while she carefully pulled a few pieces of yellowing paper loose.

“Hey, Lynna? Do you know what’s going on outside with Cray Well?”

“Oh, that. Nothing big. I swear, some of these people really need better hobbies than... whatever they’ve got.” She hopped off the ladder gracefully with the papers tucked under her arm. “Jackal fucked up a spell and ended up getting caught up in it himself. He’s in the hospital now, to the surprise of utterly no one.”

He bit his cheek to keep from commenting on her little accident. “Except the gathering hoard outside.”

“Right, to the surprise of utterly no one with half a brain.” She tucked the pieces of paper away under a binder on her desk before continuing, “But I’m sure you’re here for more than just gossip. What have you got for me?”

“Nothing,” Adrian mumbled, suddenly finding her shelves to be of great interest.

She arched an eyebrow at him in disbelief. Adrian knew that look and it took all his willpower to not hide behind her desk or something equally silly.

“That’s the problem. I’ve got nothing,” he clarified. “It’s been exactly one week and I’ve tried every kind of tracing and trapping spell I know of and... nothing. I haven’t gotten a whiff of power. Whatever was trying to get at Tyler just... stopped.

“Halle and I both combed through his apartment, but even he didn’t find anything other than the muddled edge that Kay fixed up. The glimpse of power I found was long gone. I haven’t got a clue on how to proceed, I’m out of ideas,” Adrian admitted miserably.

“I see...” She paused, emotions flickered quickly across her face. “Does he still have Evelyn’s talisman? The one that’s keeping him from dreaming.”

“Yes, why?”

“Well, that presents one other option,” Lynna said slowly. “Let the power take him and follow it back to the source.”

Adrian nearly choked at the suggestion. It was all he could do to keep from spluttering all over her table. “W-what? That’s insane! We can’t do that! That power is... it’s—”

“I know what it’s doing. I read your update.” She sighed. “I don’t like it either, but given what we know, it’s likely the power can only take effect on the other side.”

“I...”

“Just consider it for now, but I need results, Adrian.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t. The new moon’s fast approaching, not to mention that the case has gained the attention of some pretty powerful people.”

“What?” Adrian stiffened at her words. This was news to him.

“I’ve gotten a visit from not one, but two council members regarding the assignment already. Admittedly, Mackenzie heard about the case from me personally, but how Christopher found out is beyond me.”

“What did they want?” Each member of the council was the director of their own field and rarely interfered with the goings-on of the others. Their director, Leander, held the fifth seat on the council. Mackenzie held the third and headed the Cleaners whereas Christopher held the sixth seat and headed the Overseers. Neither of them had any reason to show an interest in his work.

“Well, long story short, they both want to pull you from the assignment. Mackie’s worried it’s too dangerous for a single Enforcer to deal with alone. It’s a high-profile assignment that’s gaining notoriety as we speak and Christopher wants to hijack the case for himself.” She sounded nonchalant, but the tense set of her shoulders belied the seriousness of the situation. Adrian grew more anxious with each word, he wasn’t going to give up the assignment without a fight. Not now. “So to sum up, don’t you dare screw this up.”

“You’ll let me keep the assignment?” Adrian tried to hide his shock after the news about the council’s interest.

“What did I just say?”

“Right. Got it, boss.” Adrian was still trying to digest the news when he left the office.

The council weren’t people grunts like him ever ran across. Even Leander rarely got involved with the lower members unless his presence was absolutely necessary. Adrian had only met Mackenzie a handful of times and that was purely because Lynna and she were friends. They knew each other as kids growing up and had stayed in touch over the years. But for Christopher to show an interest in his assignment as well... That alone was more than proof of how serious the situation had become.

\*\*\*\*

Adrian churned over all the facts that he did have on the case as he walked through the aisles of the local grocery store. By his estimation, it was more likely than not that the magic placed on Tyler had been woven during the new moon one and a half months ago, the last time it had caused an untethered source to run rampant. Adrian didn’t even want to think about what would happen this month. They needed to take down the spell, and soon. For Tyler’s safety and his sanity.

He was too distracted to put much thought into what to buy. It was Tyler's turn to cook today and he could whip up anything as far as Adrian could tell.

All told, he wound up hauling five bags of groceries home. Tyler greeted him at the door with an amused chuckle and relieved him of two particularly heavy bags. Hopefully, it would be enough to last them the whole week this time around.

After dinner that night, he sat Tyler down for a long talk. They'd been avoiding the topic lately, but that was merely shoveling dirt on top of an empty grave, it could hide the issue, but it wasn't a solution.

Tyler, for his part, seemed to know exactly what was coming. He didn't fight Adrian on the point as they dissected and discussed everything that had happened to him for the nth time. Even with the events of the past weeks added in and the two of them analyzing it from every possible angle, they were stuck.

Adrian buried his face in his arms and mumbled around a mouthful of fabric, "I can't even pick up a hint of power. There's nothing coming off you, not with—"

"The talisman." Tyler finished off for him.

He nodded without looking up. He didn't want to see the hurt and betrayal on Tyler's face. Logical or not, it was way too much to ask of him. Silence stretched over them, Adrian didn't know what he wanted to say or even what he wanted Tyler to say.

Tyler spoke up suddenly, "Let's do it."

Adrian shot upright and stared at him in surprise. "What?"

"I said, let's do it. If you've already tried everything else you can think of, that really doesn't leave us with much choice."

"You realize what this would mean right?"

"Yeah. Look. Don't get me wrong, I really don't want to, but it's already been a week and we're getting nowhere."

Adrian looked away from Tyler, he couldn't quite keep the guilt from slipping through. "Okay. Let's do it then."

"Tonight?"

Adrian shrugged. "If you're up for it."

They stared at each other for a moment before breaking into halfhearted smiles. Tyler nodded once in agreement. Adrian tried to look reassuring, but Tyler didn't seem to notice. He was probably terrified.

"I can't do anything about the dream itself, but I won't let anything bad happen to you. I promise."

"Yeah. I'll trust you on that then."

Tyler walked back to his room and Adrian could do nothing but follow in heavy silence. *If there was any other way...* but there wasn't, he reminded himself.

"Open the window for me," Adrian said as he fished the talisman out from under the pillow.

Tyler did as he was told, but stared at him the whole time. "How'd you know that's where I keep it?"

"There's power in it."

"Oh." He didn't look convinced, but Adrian wasn't in the mood to elaborate. He highly doubted Tyler cared for a rundown on the mechanics of how magic worked either.

"Get comfortable, I'm going to find a chair."

"All right."

Adrian returned to see Tyler lying in bed, curled up on his side with the blankets cocooned around him. He wanted to reassure him, tell him that everything was going to be okay, but he didn't. Because no matter what happened, he knew Tyler wouldn't be getting out of this unscathed. There was little he could do to shield him from the mental anguish. Not until it was all over.

He shuffled the chair around so that it sat between the window and the bed. Tyler turned, watching him with interest. Adrian smiled sheepishly and pointed to the nightstand, it flared to life with a series of lights before returning to how it was before, the only indication of magic were the drawn lines that now adorned it.

"When'd you do that?"

"Don't remember, I drew them up ages ago, they're all over the house. Can't do it out in the city since others would complain, but in my own house..." He shrugged. "It's more convenient this way."

“I see...”

“Try and get some sleep.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m more nervous than I thought.”

*Or afraid.* Not that Adrian would ever dream of blaming him for it. From what he’d only heard, those nightmares sounded like hell. When a breeze blew through the window, Adrian drew it toward the bed and wrapped it around Tyler gently, to calm and comfort.

“Thanks,” Tyler said softly, voice muffled by the sheets. “Not sure what you did, but it feels nice.”

Adrian smiled at him and waited until he finally closed his eyes. Drawing a little more power, he made sure Tyler was fully under before diving toward the edge himself. He’d been careless the last time, but he knew better now.

He watched carefully, letting the world fragment and rebuild itself around him. He checked each fragmented piece, looking for residual power and spells around the edge. Nothing. Carefully, he stepped up right next to it and reached out slowly. If anything attacked, it would hit his marker first.

Still, nothing happened and Adrian stepped through to the other side. Tyler looked insubstantial under the pale purple glow. Adrian wove and walked until he was far enough away from the edge that he couldn’t see it anymore. He was going to have to rely on the silver chain he’d tethered to his guide to find his way back.

But now he could *see*. Not the room he was in, not Tyler’s sleeping form, but the distorted shadowy world that offered up everything that does not exist in the physical realm.

\*\*\*\*

The room was crumbling into pieces, disintegrating into dust and nothingness. Tyler sat watching on the bed, both horrified and mesmerized by the sight. Soon, there was nothing left save for himself and the bed that was somehow still intact. The world outside the room was strangely light.

Bright-blue sky and fluffy white clouds. And just to screw with him, the ground was a field of dead roses. If the dream was trying to tell him something, he had no idea what it could be. *Don’t over think it.* Two weeks of peace and the *dreams* were getting to him again.

Tyler got out of the bed and immediately yelped with pain as something sharp sliced through his feet. *Glass.* Small shards littered the field. Tyler looked around in alarm. The field of dead roses and glass shards was all he could see in any direction, he was screwed. The glass glittered in the bright sunlight, mocking and taunting him. The fact that he had gone to bed with clothes on didn't seem to make a difference, he was butt-ass naked in the field.

He could swear the glass wasn't there a moment ago. Or had he really just not noticed until he stepped on it? He shuddered, five minutes in and he was already starting to lose it. *Don't panic, you're going to make it through this...*

Adrian was *watching*, he had to be. Tyler had no other hope than that.

He shuffled off awkwardly with the sheets under his feet and wrapped around his legs. Dead or not, the rose thorns still cut viciously into his flesh. He stared despondently over the field with no end in sight and kept moving.

The blanket tore and shredded under the abuse and jagged edges. Soon, Tyler had nothing to hold onto as he continued the slow trek to nowhere. His feet were a swollen mess of blood and ragged tissue. Deep cuts ran up his legs and torso, rose thorns stuck to his body where he had been unlucky enough to have them break off. He gave up trying to pick them out. It was a losing battle, but at least he had lost the ability to feel. Everything bled together into a numbing ache.

Halfheartedly, he wondered if it would've been smarter to wait out the dream on the bed. He glanced behind him, a trail of blood pointed out the direction he'd come, but the bed was no longer in sight. Where his blood had soaked into the glass and earth, the dead roses had come back to life, bearing deep-crimson flowers.

He continued on his way. Going back would be pointless, he was at the mercy of the strange pull that guided him forward, toward the horizon where the sky and field met.

Tyler screamed as a large, jagged piece of glass stabbed through his foot. He stumbled and pitched forward, crashing hard onto the ground. Pain flared up all over his body, he tried not to worsen the situation by moving. He lay helplessly on the ground, whimpering, and trying to block out the agony. It was nothing like he had ever felt before, the pain scorched and lingered, breaking through the layers of walls he built around his mind.

He didn't know how long he'd stayed in that position, but at some point, the sharp hiss of pain had faded into the same dull ache that ate away at his body.

He picked himself up slowly, careful of where he placed his hands, and tried not to look at the deep gashes and bloody gouges that decorated his flesh.

He tried his best to bite back the cries as he pulled out a few larger pieces that had embedded themselves in him. His feet were on fire again, blood trickled out from all the open wounds, and still he continued forward.

The sun had risen even higher now. The clouds that dotted the sky had dissipated. He stumbled along, barely able to keep upright. Nothing else had changed, there was no end to the field as far as he could tell. And every stem and rose he held onto for support siphoned his blood and returned to life.

“Adrian...” he called out meekly, his throat was raw, he’d screamed himself hoarse hours ago. *Please... make this stop.*

The next time he tripped, he didn’t even try to break his fall. His hands were a bloody mess, no better than his feet. He had no will or sense of self-preservation left.

Vaguely, Tyler got a feeling like he was floating through space, drifting in a haze of agony. He didn’t hit the ground. He blinked slowly, he really was drifting, free falling through nothingness. It was almost enough to make him give up, forget, and give himself over.

But just as quickly as the fall began, it ended when he smashed into the solid ground below. He screamed, pain shot through his right shoulder and migrated outward to consume his whole body. He could still hear the echoes of it by the time he’d managed to form coherent thoughts again.

Slowly, he moved each limb to check that they were, in fact, still functioning. *At all.* They did, albeit painfully. Looking around with as little movement as possible, he noted dully that he was in some small room with mirrors that covered each surface. He had no choice but to stare at the broken remains of his barely held together body.

His stomach rebelled violently as a wave of nausea washed over him. He barely recognized himself through the blood and grime that covered him from head to toe. His eyes stung as tears threatened to fall. *It’s not real,* he chanted silently to himself as he tried to calm down.

When he opened his eyes again, the reflections stretched and twisted into monstrous apparitions. Demons with rotten flesh that stared back at him as he struggled to right himself.

“It’s not real, they’re not real, none of this is *real*,” he said the words out loud this time, hoping to make them more solid, more believable. It didn’t work.

He made his way around the small space, the demons moved in sync with him. He tried not to see as he pushed and prodded at the smooth surfaces. There had to be a way out. There always was.

He was ready to scream and give up when one of the walls finally gave way under a hard shove. Tyler fell forward as it swung back, but caught himself at the last moment. All he could see was plain, black, darkness, but between that and spending more time with the grotesque mutated forms, he chose the former.

He felt his way along what he hoped was a wall. It was solid under his hands and felt relatively flat. He got the vague feeling that he was climbing upward, but couldn’t be sure. After a while, he found what was likely to be another door.

The only indication of it were four thin strips of light that formed a glowing rectangle in the darkness. Tyler went for it, the black center disappeared the moment he laid his hands on it. He walked through cautiously.

Tyler froze as the sense of *déjà vu* slammed through him. The walls of the room were lined with glass displays. Blind terror had him frozen to the spot and he stood rooted, staring. His mind tried to catch up with what his eyes were seeing. The cases displayed sections of machinery, bits and pieces of gears and levers, joints and parts. And more importantly, no flesh and blood. He swallowed around his sense of dread and slowly moved past them to the glass sliding door on the other end of the room.

He was back outside, complete with the disturbingly cheery sunlight and clear skies. And nothing to maim him on the ground. He stepped out cautiously.

It looked like he was standing at the bottom of a giant concrete stadium. Huge pillars rose into the sky, supporting ring after ring of gray walls. The ground was covered in gravel, he circled around the perimeter of the stadium. There were square indents cut into the concrete, but no indication of what was, or used to be, in them.

A strange clicking sound had him whipping around in a whirl of panic. In the center of the structure stood a large human. He was clad from head to toe in black, complete with a tall hat and cloak. Tyler stared at him in shock. He had never, in all the times he had dreamed, encountered another person.

At least that's what he assumed. *Hoped*. The man looked human enough, nothing like the demons and monsters that plagued his other dreams. *Don't let your guard down*, he warned himself.

For a time, neither of them moved, then the black figure took one stumbling step after another toward him. Tyler's senses went into overdrive, his instincts screamed out to run the hell away. He tried to obey, but found that he was paralyzed. His legs felt leaden and glued to the ground.

There was nothing under the mass of black clothing. As the creature, monster, apparition, raised what appeared to be a hand, the stadium was flooded with the overloud clanking of metal on metal.

Tyler slumped against the wall. The whirring of gears and sharp metallic wails grew louder by the second. His eyes darted from the black thing in front of him to the door where he had just come from. *Where the noise was coming from. Where he'd seen the displays.*

At some point, he'd broken out in a cold sweat. He was shivering violently, his anxiety levels seemingly tied to the volume of noise.

He didn't have long to wait. Small floating shapes drifted from within, Tyler stared at them in mounting horror. It was an army of what appeared to be disfigured baby dolls with fluttering misshapen wings. *Cherubs*. Or at least a demented mockery of them. They twitched with each movement, slowly floating toward the center of the wide-open space.

Adrenaline masked the aches and pains of his body and he bolted. He had no idea where he was going to go, there had been no way out when he checked earlier, but he knew he couldn't stay there.

With an earsplitting screech, the mechanical dolls were upon him. Once again, Tyler found himself staring into lifeless eyes. Faintly, he felt his knees buckle as the will to fight or run bled out of him.

He was mesmerized by the sight of them. The broken dolls were wearing torn off human faces like masks. He barely registered the pain as their tiny hands and sharp claws dug into his arms, holding him up and immobile. He didn't even try to get away as the black apparition ambled slowly toward him. He had no strength left to scream as an unseen object cut through the flesh of his face.

*Please...*

He simply closed his eyes and waited for it to all end.

\*\*\*\*

Adrian pulled Tyler out of the nightmare as quickly as he could. He had been a little rough with him, but anything was preferable to leaving him for a second longer in that woven hell. He cursed himself viciously, he had made another mistake. He'd been distracted by the sliver of power that peeked through the fragments of Tyler's dream. And on reflex, he tried to catch hold of it.

And subsequently lost sight of Tyler. He'd been swallowed up by the spell and hidden away under layers and layers of complex illusions. It took Adrian much too long to unravel everything and find him again. He barely managed to strip away the fragments of the nightmare from Tyler before... God, he didn't want to even think about what was about to happen.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid..." he continued to curse as he pulled Tyler's body to his protectively. Tyler was unconscious, lost somewhere in the limbo of dreamless sleep. When he was sure that the only power left was his own, he carried Tyler slowly back toward the edge. Whatever the spell was, it didn't even touch his chain, or him, it only wanted Tyler. And it had nearly succeeded.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he also knew for certain that it wasn't all his fault. Just like the night of the new moon, the scale of the power at work... He shook his head viciously to clear it. *Think...* It had taken him precious few seconds to weave the spell to try and catch the bit of power, but that had still been too long. He could count the number of Magicals capable of that kind of feat on one hand. The thought made him sick to his stomach.

For the moment, he busied himself with getting Tyler back to safety. Nothing tried to stop him from pulling Tyler back over the edge. *Back to the real world where he would be safe for the moment*, Adrian thought grimly. At some point, Tyler woke up and attempted to stumble to the bed on his own. He didn't get far and eventually allowed Adrian to help.

They were both shaking by the time Adrian had Tyler back in bed, exhausted, and in more pain than anyone should have to bear. His body was covered in wounds, cuts, and bruises. Not as bad as it had been in the dream, but enough that it made Adrian cringe. Adrian didn't waste time staring though, he gathered power in his hands before turning it loose on Tyler. Healing really wasn't his forte, but it would have to do. At least Tyler was awake. Even if he was staring at Adrian with an unreadable expression on his face.

"It's going to be okay," Adrian murmured softly. He was about to get up to close the window when Tyler jerked, reaching out to him with fear in his eyes.

“Don’t go,” Tyler said, his voice raspy from overuse.

Two simple words. But the weight of the emotion behind them nearly crushed Adrian as he pushed himself onto the bed to lie beside Tyler. He had a feeling they both could do with some comfort of the physical kind.

Tyler was still shaking violently when Adrian wrapped his arms around him. As an afterthought, Adrian wriggled until he could get a hold of the blanket without letting go and pulled it over them. Tyler sighed softly at the contact. They could both do with some warmth.

Anger coiled in Adrian’s belly as he held Tyler, now limp in his arms. Awake or not, his eyes were still cloudy, unfocused. *How could anyone do this to him?* Cruel was an understatement. He’d only caught glimpses of the dream, but he’d felt Tyler’s fear and anguish clear as day. Adrian clenched his jaw shut to keep from shouting.

*And Tyler’s been living through it for weeks...*

“Don’t leave me,” Tyler whispered softly.

“I’m not going anywhere, I promise,” Adrian replied gently.

All he got in reply was a strangled sound. Adrian stroked his hair, smoothing the disheveled strands into some sort of order. His hair was really too short for that, but Tyler seemed to draw comfort from the gesture so he continued.

An eternity later, Tyler finally stopped shivering. The vice like grip he had on Adrian loosened as well. They stayed like that a little longer, neither willing nor wanting to move or think. They simply were, drawing warmth and comfort from one another.

When Adrian was sure he could leave Tyler alone for a few minutes without doing irreparable damage, he went to make some coffee.

He sighed wearily and shook his head. The rational voice in him was screaming its disapproval. He was getting too close to Tyler to be making clearheaded decisions, but he couldn’t help it. The night only demonstrated, all too clearly, that the attraction he’d felt wasn’t a figment of his imagination. He wasn’t blind, he’d seen the way Tyler would look at him at times.

And he only aggravated the situation by flirting back. The game they played had become all too real. It might have started as a little something to help break the tension, but now... Now he didn’t know what he wanted anymore.

He also hated himself for getting distracted by such things when Tyler was suffering. Desperation and fear did not make coming up with a solution any easier either.

He heaved another sigh.

It was a stupid idea, knowing what he already did and still suggesting that. What he had discovered didn't even begin to make up for what he put Tyler through. *But now you have a starting point*, he focused on that thought.

The tendril of power had been too faint for him to follow, but he got a good grasp of it before he returned to Tyler. *One problem down, a million more to go*.

Grabbing two mugs, he filled them with coffee and doctored them to their liking. He returned to the bedroom to see Tyler staring vacantly at the wall. He handed a cup to him in a silent offering.

"It's coffee, I figure you probably wouldn't want to try sleeping again tonight."

"No... no. Thanks." Tyler gulped down half his cup in one go, taking no notice of the scalding liquid. Adrian winced on his behalf.

"I'm sorry I had to put you through that." Adrian felt that familiar stab of guilt. "How're you holding up?"

"It's fine, I'm still alive." Tyler paused to down the rest of his coffee. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound so bitter about it."

"No, it's fine. I understand."

"So, did you find anything useful?"

"Ah, yes. I did find a trace of the power..."

"So we know what's doing this to me?" Tyler paused when he glanced at him. "That's a good thing right?"

Adrian didn't say anything for a time, he studied Tyler silently. He looked wrecked, but calm at the same time. Was he numb or putting on a brave front? "Are you sure you want to have this conversation right now?"

Tyler shrugged, he looked ten years older than he had earlier that day. "Might as well. Will you tell me the truth?"

"It is a good thing. We have a starting point now..." Adrian trailed off, uncertain. He was exhausted and still reeling from what he'd learned.

“But...” Tyler sat down across from him, arms crossed nervously in front of him.

He sighed. No point in dragging out the inevitable. Tyler had a right to know the truth. “But I don’t know what the spell is. I tried to follow it back to the source, but...” He sighed, too tired to think of a good excuse. “I nearly lost sight of you in the process, I had to pull back and pull you out of that *dream* of yours.”

“You say it like it could be something else.” Tyler stared at him, eyes full of anticipation and confusion.

“They’re not nightmares, Tyler. Not really. God, I wish I didn’t need to tell you this. The spell, whatever it is, is pulling you across the edge to the other side. It’s dragging you somewhere each night and it’s having a physical effect on you. If I hadn’t... I don’t know what’s going to happen to you.” Adrian had to look away, Tyler was staring at him in slack-jawed horror, and the news was about to get a lot worse. “My power... remember what happened in Evelyn’s shop? We couldn’t even get past the edge when it didn’t want us there. I don’t know if I can undo the spell even if I manage to figure out what it is...”

Tyler stayed silent as he rambled on. Eventually, he said, “So, what? We bring in another Enforcer that can undo it?” He looked up all of a sudden, startled. “Wait, don’t tell me that it’s extremely difficult or something.”

Adrian rubbed his face with his hands, he tried to hide his unease, but gave it up as hopeless. “It’s not that. Well, not *just* that.” He paused. “I’m sorry. I need to make sure, but if I’m right...”

“You’re not giving up on me are you?” he asked. He looked impassive, but Adrian could see the fear and hurt in his eyes.

“I won’t lie to you. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I swear, I will do whatever I can to help you.” That was a promise Adrian had every intention of keeping. He’d find a way, come hell or high water.

He had already opened Pandora’s Box, there was no going back anymore.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 4

Adrian glared at his reflection in the mirror, he'd been doing that more and more recently. Despite the promise he'd made to Tyler and himself, he had no idea what he was going to do. He already spent the last two days dodging the question from Tyler and couldn't keep it up much longer. But if he was right...

He sighed as he crumbled against the sink. He had to talk to Lynna. Or even Halle. Because if he was right, he's going to need all the help he could get to finish the job.

The tiny bit of power he'd picked up had left a print. It wasn't enough for him to glean any information on the weaver, but he did pick up on one extremely important hint. Whoever it was, had woven a spell he'd never seen before. Never even knew existed. *Didn't exist*. His last two days had been spent pouring through every record and book in the Grand Histories and found absolutely nothing on the spell. Someone had crafted a new one by stringing together dozens of others.

That along with the circumstantial evidence meant... He wanted to dig a hole and just bury himself in it. There were only a few notable Magicals who would be capable of such a feat. None of them would make this easy.

And to make things even more complicated, he knew Tyler's irritation had to do with much more than just the job. Now that both of their feelings had bubbled to the surface, it was no longer possible to simply ignore. Or chalk up to harmless fun. He was never the best at understanding his own feelings, but when he had seen the state Tyler was in, he *knew*. The assignment was already a mess and with human emotions getting in the way now too... Adrian sighed miserably. He could feel the beginnings of a headache starting to set in. *How did things get so out of hand?*

He showered quickly and sucked in a deep breath to steel his resolve before slipping out of the bathroom. His plan to hide away in his room until it was time to leave for work with Tyler went out the window when he saw Tyler standing in the hall.

"You said you wouldn't hide anything from me anymore," Tyler accused flatly.

"I know. I... that's not my intention." Adrian glanced away, but he could still feel Tyler's glare on him. Tyler was also blocking the way from the

washroom to his room, forcing Adrian to stand in the hall with nothing but a towel to hide his modesty. “I can’t just make accusations without proof. Let me talk to Lynna first.”

“You’ve been saying that for the last two days! If you have to go talk to her, go talk to her.” Tyler dragged his hands down his face tiredly. Adrian turned to him sadly, the wounds from the dream had healed, but scars remained as undeniable proof of the ordeal. “You’ve had Halle watch me the last two days while I was at work while you disappeared off to somewhere. What am I supposed to think?”

Adrian looked him in the eyes and silently pleaded with him to understand. There wasn’t anything he could say to justify his actions without disclosing everything. He noted with a pang of guilt that Tyler’s once-bright eyes were sunken and his face was uncharacteristically pale. There were also dark smudges under his eyes like he hadn’t slept in days. Adrian stiffened in alarm. “Don’t tell me the talisman isn’t—”

“It’s fine. It’s still working. But we both know that’s not the problem.”

“No,” he admitted softly. He’d been dreading seeing Lynna again. He could barely bring himself to look at the evidence he’d dug up. “I’ve let her know that I’m dropping by to visit tonight.”

Tyler studied him suspiciously, but seemed satisfied by whatever he saw. “Good.” And as an afterthought, asked, “Are you coming with me today?”

“Yeah, I’ve done what I could at the library.” Adrian smiled ruefully as Tyler allowed him into his room.

They set off as they usually did and on the surface, it looked like everything was normal. Underneath though, nothing remained the same. The strain of the new revelation weighed heavily on both of them.

The rest of the morning passed at a snail’s pace as Adrian counted off the minutes as he waited. He might have liked routine, but he liked his routines spiced up by lots of action. Not sitting around twiddling his thumbs and staring off into nothing. He felt like he was going to crawl out of his skin. The anxiety coupled with the inability to act was driving him insane. By noon, he was so grateful to see Tyler that he almost hugged the man. He noted belatedly that there were two others with him.

“Adrian, this is Cazz and Theo. They’re both new and I’m showing them around and getting them familiar with the general procedures.” Tyler pointed to each of them in turn and they waved politely. Adrian shook their hands in turn.

“And you felt inclined to show me off to them?” Adrian flushed. The words tumbled out of his mouth before his brain even registered what he had said. Wonderful, he really wasn’t helping.

A matching flush appeared on Tyler’s face, and he gaped at Adrian like a beached fish. But before he managed to work any words past his lips, one of the others spoke up, “Oh, you must be Tyler’s boyfriend.”

“Yes,” Adrian answered. Despite the awkwardness, a smile tugged on his lips.

Tyler growled, “No.” And while glaring at all of them, added, “This conversation is officially over.”

“Don’t mind him, he’s just shy.” Adrian had taken the pause to recollect himself. Better to play along than create contradictions.

He waved innocently as Tyler ushered his two charges out of the café while glaring daggers at him. He’d never live this down. *And maybe it’ll keep his mind off some other things.*

Thankfully, the little fun he got to have at Tyler’s expense was enough to tide him over the rest of the afternoon until Tyler got off work. The unexpected call he got from Lynna helped too. The meeting point had changed to her house instead of headquarters and he had every intention of bringing Tyler along. He never got a chance to meet Lynna the first time and he’d vehemently refused to set foot in their headquarters again.

Adrian waited patiently until Tyler arrived at the café after work. Presumably still irritated by the expression he wore.

“For your information, I was just going to show them the café because the management team likes to have them cater meetings.”

“And?” Adrian couldn’t help but ask.

“What?”

“Oh come on, you know what. I’m not above dropping by to visit Lauren again.”

Tyler glowered at him, finally catching onto what he was asking. “The whole office *knows* I have a boyfriend now.”

Adrian laughed. “Hey, you didn’t really deny it.”

“And say what? It’s not like I had a choice in the matter,” Tyler replied in exasperation.

“You always have a choice,” Adrian said softly, all signs of mirth gone. The atmosphere shifted instantly and an oppressive silence settled over them. He fumbled to find the right words to lighten the mood, but failed.

Tyler looked like he was about to say something, but stopped short. Adrian glanced away quickly.

“No, nothing. Let’s go,” Adrian said as he stood.

“Hey—”

He cut Tyler off short, not wanting to continue on that particular topic any further. He opted to deflect his attention. “I know, I’m going to see Lynna now.” Adrian turned to grin at him. “And you’re coming with me.”

“I am not going to your headquarters,” Tyler stated stubbornly even as he followed Adrian out the café doors.

“Relax, we’re going to her place. Something’s come up and long story short, she’s not going in to headquarters today. So now you’ll finally get a chance to meet her,” Adrian remarked lightly. On the one hand, he was half dreading the two of them meeting. There was no way that he could lie to Lynna if she realized what was going on between them.

“Wonderful.”

“I know. Now let’s go before it gets too late. She’s an amazing cook and if you believe anything I ever say, it should be this.” And more importantly, he needed her to take a look at Tyler. *Maybe she’d gleam some information that he and Halle had missed.*

Tyler snorted and shook his head in exasperation.

They arrived outside of Lynna’s door just after six. The aroma that greeted them when she let them in was heavenly. Adrian loved her cooking and judging by the medley of spices scenting the air, they were getting treated to Italian tonight.

“Make yourselves at home. Dinner will be done shortly and we can have our little chat after.” She directed them both toward the dining room and left for the kitchen without another word.

Adrian motioned for Tyler to follow after they took off their shoes. Tyler turned questioning eyes on him, but he shook his head. He knew by now not to offer to help. “The kitchen’s her baby so let’s leave her to tend to it.”

“Uh...”

“It’s fine, relax.” Adrian demonstrated his point by grabbing the nearest chair and plopping down on it. “She’ll ask for help when she wants it.”

Tyler followed suit after a moment’s hesitation.

Adrian watched as he quietly studied what he could see of the house. The place wasn’t big, but meticulously put together. The walls were a pale yellow, accentuated by mahogany trim. She’d chosen each piece of her dining room set to match the décor.

For someone with little to no patience for even the most basic things, she poured a huge amount of time and attention into making her home stunningly beautiful. There was no hint of the clutter that took up the better part of their division room to be seen here. From the way Tyler was glancing around the room, Adrian was sure that he agreed.

Lynna was still in the middle of cooking if the sounds of pots and pans was anything to go by. He hadn’t had much for lunch, having been anticipating dinner too much, and was beginning to regret that choice. The combination of anticipation and hunger was turning him impatient. Thankfully, they didn’t have long to wait, she entered with two heaping plates of food.

“Adrian, help me set the table while I get the rest of the food ready.” She offered Tyler a quick smile before turning away again. Adrian shot him a sympathetic look before following her. Tyler looked like a deer caught in headlights, he sat rigidly, and the tension pouring off of him was palpable.

In the safety of the kitchen and carefully out of sight and hearing of Tyler, Adrian couldn’t keep his own nervousness down. She made a point of not saying a word to him. After five minutes of fidgeting and dancing around each other as they grabbed their things, he was sure that she was purposely ignoring him. And just because it was Lynna, he was pretty sure that she was trying to make a point about dragging things out.

He gave up and returned to the dining room with napkins, cups, bowls, plates, and utensils. After dividing them into neat sets, he took a seat beside Tyler and waited for Lynna to bring the rest of the food.

By the time she had brought everything out, the table was crammed full. A beet salad, a plateful of bruschetta, spiced minestrone soup, a whole roasted chicken, two different pastas, baked spring vegetables, focaccia, pizzelles, and mini tiramisus. Not to mention the pitchers of sangria and mango smoothie.

There was enough to feed twenty, let alone three. It was more food than she made for the whole division when they dropped by for the monthly briefing.

Tyler's eyes had grown wider and wider with every new dish she brought out. Adrian couldn't blame him, he was a little shocked himself.

"So, to what do we owe this honor?" Adrian asked as he piled pasta onto his plate.

"Nothing much, just felt like cooking."

"Lynna. Seriously. This is more food than you make when the entire division is over." Adrian raised an eyebrow at her incredulously.

"Maybe I'm trying to entice your new friend into staying with me instead."

Tyler choked on the soup he'd just taken a sip of and spluttered, "W-what?"

"Are you insulting my cooking?" Adrian accused.

"By God, you made actual food?" Lynna stared at him in mock shock, a hand covering her mouth as though she couldn't believe her ears.

"He... sort of did?" Tyler offered.

"Hey!" Adrian cut in, offended. "Don't lie. I cooked."

Tyler studied the spread on the table. "Not like this, though."

"Well, I'm happy to see my lessons haven't gone completely to waste," she said as she helped herself to some focaccia and soup.

"Lynna taught me to cook," Adrian clarified when he noticed Tyler's confusion.

"So back to the point, I'm Lynna." She offered her hand to Tyler. He fumbled to put down his spoon before shaking her hand.

"Tyler."

"And Adrian, you've met."

"Yes, we have," Adrian deadpanned.

They chatted pleasantly throughout dinner. Mostly, Lynna asked about Tyler's background and interests, the same details Adrian had filled her in on before. Unfortunately for Adrian, she also insisted on adding in bits and pieces about his life that he didn't particularly want to remember. He almost felt betrayed by how amused Tyler seemed to find all of it.

By the time they all set down their utensils, Lynna and Tyler were practically friends. A part of him felt unreasonably jealous. By all means, he should be glad that they got along, but it had taken him days to get this comfortable with Tyler.

They sat in comfortable silence as Lynna took away the dirty dishes, and what remained of the feast. Once again, she refused their help. A few minutes later, she returned with three steaming mugs on a tray. The scent of cinnamon, spiced rum, and espresso gave away the contents.

“That smells heavenly. The whole dinner has been wonderful,” Tyler said earnestly.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” Lynna sat down and crossed her arms over her chest. Adrian recognized the signs, she was all business now. “Onto the more serious things. I’m going to be frank with you two, there’s a lot of pressure on me in regards to the strange things surrounding your case.”

Adrian watched Tyler out of the corner of his eye, but kept his gaze steadily on his boss.

“I seriously considered pulling you from the case.” Lynna looked at Adrian, hard. “No, not because of Mackenzie’s warning, but the sum of it all, I’ve got a really bad feeling about this.”

Adrian felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. “What’re you trying to say?”

“I wasn’t entirely joking about taking Tyler.”

“This is my assignment!” Adrian gritted out between clenched teeth, he could feel Tyler stiffening beside him as well.

“And I’m your boss. More importantly, I worry about your safety. This whole thing *feels* wrong.”

Tyler looked back and forth between them before sinking into his seat, looking miserable and defeated. Adrian turned to him in alarm as he interrupted them softly, “There’s more.”

“More,” Lynna repeated the word slowly, as though it was foreign to her. Adrian buried his face in his hands.

“I found something, I spent the last few days looking for information and cross-checking sources,” Adrian mumbled reluctantly. “Long story short, I’ve nailed potential suspects down to just a handful. Literally.”

“Let’s hear it then.” Lynna picked up her mug to sip at her drink as Adrian regarded her carefully.

“No, alone.”

“Wha—why?” Tyler asked, indignant.

“Because it’s confidential and just because it pertains to you doesn’t give me the right to disclose its contents.” Adrian sighed. While Tyler wouldn’t really understand what they talked about, that wouldn’t make a difference to their enemy. He couldn’t risk Tyler knowing too much.

“Very well. Let’s go to the study then.” Lynna took her coffee as she left the table, Adrian followed suit, shooting Tyler an apologetic look before leaving him.

The study was the only room in the whole house that hinted at the way Lynna liked to work. The walls were lined with shelves and each of them were filled to the brim with books. They were mostly beautiful leather-bound editions of rare or valuable texts. He wished he could browse through it at some point. It wasn’t often that she allowed anyone into the room and never when the whole division was together.

They sat down on the plush leather seats in the corner, a small wooden table between them where they set their drinks down. She motioned for him to continue after a moment and Adrian had the distinctive feeling that she had set up an isolation spell. The room felt oppressive and cut off, he couldn’t *see*, but was just as sensitive to feel as anyone else. He threw up another shield of his own as an extra precaution and to silently let her know the nature of what he was about to disclose.

“I took your advice, had a look while Tyler was sleeping, dreaming.” He glanced away furtively, feeling the ball of anxiety in his belly grow larger. It had been mostly dormant throughout dinner, but now that they were alone and about to discuss his findings, Adrian could barely sit still. “It’s not like any spell I’ve ever seen before in my life. Whatever it is, it’s dragging Tyler to the edge and showing him fragments of nightmarish scenes from the other side. I’ve checked the archives, libraries, histories, every record I could get my hands on and nothing. Whoever wove the spell, created something completely new.

“Essentially, it stitched together dozens of pre-existing spells to create something original. I got a glimpse into those nightmares too... they’re... God. They’re twisted. And it’s all real. Whatever’s happening, is real, I had to literally carry him back to this side and patch him up.

“Lynna, you understand what I’m trying to get at right? This isn’t something just anyone is capable of.” He was pleading with her by that point. He didn’t know what he’d do if she didn’t believe him.

“No. It isn’t. If what you’re saying is true then...” She drifted off, deep in thought. Lynna had a great poker face, but Adrian had thrown her completely off-balance. He could see the twinges of emotion as they flitted across her features. Shock, denial, contemplation, more denial, horror, and finally, what he’d been waiting for, understanding.

“That gives us four possibilities and no solid motive from this city,” Adrian finished.

“Six, if we’re being objective. More to the point, what do you mean no motive?”

“Objective, right. Fine. But seriously, what would any of them want with Tyler? They’d have to be nursing a lot of anger and hate to do something like this.”

“Our very own director, Leander, council members Everett, Christopher, and Mackenzie, fourth division head Avery, and that prodigy kid, Keith.”

“I can’t imagine the director or the others from the council being involved... and Avery...”

“It’s never easy when you need to suspect a comrade or friend,” she stated plainly. Belatedly, he realized that she had named Mackenzie and Leander as suspects without missing a beat. *Was it really that easy to turn off your emotions?* He doubted he could ever do that.

“I know.” He paused, lost for words. “It’s just...”

“And this is all based on probability and precedence. It could just as easily be someone who’s been hiding the true extent of their powers.” She gave him a hard look. Adrian deciphered it as *any powerful weaver with enough incentive could potentially be a suspect*. Something he had been trying his best to not consider.

“I—” *Don’t know what to say, what to do, what you want me to do, what I should do*. He stared down at his hands as if they held all the answers to the world’s problems.

“I meant what I said at dinner. I’ll take Tyler’s case if this is getting to be too much. If it isn’t already too much.” She reached over and patted the back of

his hand gently. “Mackenzie called again to see how the case is progressing and to report some more bad news.”

He tensed and waited for her to continue.

“One of her Cleaners picked up an anomaly with the flow of power across the edge. Something’s up and your Tyler might be caught up in the dead center of it. There’s more, but we don’t need to get into that just yet.”

“Oh.”

“Adrian, you realize how dangerous this has gotten don’t you?” She squeezed his hand again before letting go. “You’re like a son to me. I can’t just stand by and watch this spiral out of control any longer. I should never have put you alone on this assignment in the first place.”

The problem was that he did know. And the guilt of his selfish request weighed down on him. “Lynna, please. Let me keep this assignment.”

“Why?”

“Because I *care*. I can’t just watch this happen. This is why I joined the Enforcers, to prevent things like this from happening to someone else! I have to—”

Dead silence greeted his words. Adrian hadn’t meant to lose his cool like that. Not around Lynna especially. He knew better than anyone else that she did know. She was staring at him with an unreadable expression, studying him. To his surprise, she smiled.

“I knew you were going to say that. Well, I know your reasons better than anyone. I’ve already given the orders. Halle will be working with you on the case from now on. Luke and Sia will be your backup, exclusively. No, that’s not up for discussion.” She cut him off before he could even get a word out. “Go get Tyler, it’s time we talked about possible motives.”

Lynna picked up her coffee for the first time since they entered the study. He eyed his regretfully, it had cooled considerably and he hadn’t had a chance to enjoy it. He stood up with an apologetic bow and left to get Tyler.

\*\*\*\*

Tyler was studying the glass display in the dining room when Adrian came back. With nothing better to do and too much anxious energy, he’d been prowling around the room, studying the furniture and trinkets that adorned the displays. In a way, it reminded him of his own apartment, which he hadn’t been

to in too long. At least with his story, his parents had no excuse to check in on him unannounced.

“Come on, Lynna wants to pick your brain to see if we can figure out why you’re a target,” Adrian said as he motioned for Tyler to follow.

Tyler nodded and followed him without a word. He paused in the doorway as he took in the room in front of him. It was nothing like the rest of the house so far as he had seen. It was still elegant, but looked like something from a completely different era.

“I apologize, I haven’t been the most gracious of hosts today.” Lynna smiled, her eyes reflecting none of the sincerity in her words.

Tyler decided it was best not to say anything as he sat down on the chair Adrian dragged over from the desk.

“Now then, do you have any idea why anyone would want to target you?”

“No. If I did, don’t you think I would’ve said something already?”

“Honestly? No. You wouldn’t believe how many victims choose to protect their assailant.” She shrugged and crossed her arms again. It was obvious to him that she meant it was a challenge, but the gesture just annoyed him.

He stared at her and was sorely tempted to say something cutting, but stopped short when he caught Adrian’s eyes. She was Adrian’s boss and was kind enough to offer them an amazing dinner, the least he could do was cooperate and answer some questions.

Tyler shook his head again. “I’m sure that there are people that don’t like me, maybe even hate me, but to this extent? No.”

“Very well. Tell me about your history. Adrian told me you’re not on particularly good terms with your family.”

This time, he glared at Adrian who was busy studying his hands. “No, we get along fine. It’s just that they weren’t thrilled when I decided to move out and away from them.”

“Oh? Did you move from out of town?”

“Yeah, from Marshlain, four hours south of here.”

“Any particular reason you chose this city?”

“No, I was going to go all the way to the capital, but after stopping here for a few days, I grew attached. It’s a nice place and the sea’s gorgeous. It’s not like I had any real reason to go all the way to Shalandra either.”

“I see. What about friends? Acquaintances?”

“No real friends in this city and my only acquaintances are from work. Somehow, I highly doubt that I’ve trampled on any of their toes hard enough to earn this.”

Lynna continued with the questions, and Adrian stayed as he was, staring blankly at his hands. They tackled everything from his personal history to private life to work and nothing he said seemed to satisfy her. *She’s hoping for a clue and you’re not giving it to her.* But there wasn’t anything to give either.

“Look, I’ve been thinking about all this myself, and I really can’t think of one reason why one of you guys would want to kill me.”

“You’re wrong,” Adrian spoke up for the first time. “They’re not trying to *kill* you, they want to *hurt* you, whoever’s doing this wants you to suffer.”

“It’s like he said. This isn’t a random act of violence, and we’ve already established that the perpetrator is powerful.”

“Thanks, that really adds to my confidence,” Tyler spat out.

“I fail to see the point of misleading you. Besides, I don’t want you to think that Adrian, or any member of my team for that matter, is incompetent.” Lynna shrugged. “That said, go and enjoy your last night alone together. From tomorrow onward, you boys are under twenty-four-hour surveillance.”

\*\*\*\*

Vaguely, Tyler knew he was still in shock. What little privacy he had while he’d been living with Adrian was now completely gone. And Halle didn’t seem even remotely perturbed by his annoyance. It almost looked like he took pleasure from his suffering. The other two, who introduced themselves as Sia and Luke, were twins, but easy enough to tell apart. Sia had left his hair a natural black while Luke bleached his platinum blond. Aside from that, they shared the same black eyes and average looks.

Granted that beside Adrian, he found everyone to be average these days. That only served to annoy him further as his frustration built. He wanted the whole ordeal to be over, but at the same time, he was enjoying Adrian’s company. There was no denying that they’d grown closer since the night of his latest nightmare. He suppressed the shudder that ran up his spine and tried to concentrate on the issues at hand. Tyler didn’t know what to make of Adrian anymore. It was obvious that Adrian wanted him just as badly as Tyler wanted him, but it never felt like the right moment to make a move.

The meeting with Lynna the night before hadn't made things any easier either. It seemed like they were at a standstill, but at the same time, not. He got the distinctive feeling that things were happening around him without his knowledge.

Currently, they were all gathered around Adrian's living room with papers scattered all around. They had been together since noon and tried to sort out a plan of attack. And now, six hours later, the only thing they all agreed on was how to divide up the responsibilities. Tyler was getting more and more frustrated by the second. He had to call in sick today just so they could all meet up and get up to speed. But to have so little sorted out after so much time...

"We need to take another look into these dreams," Sia insisted.

"No. I already said that wasn't an option," Adrian gritted out.

"If you've got another idea, feel free to speak up. Until then, this is the only way we're going to get anywhere," came the cold reply.

Halle had shaken his head discreetly when Tyler was about to agree. He almost felt guilty over how murderous Adrian looked on his behalf. The bottom line though, was that they really couldn't think of a second option. Increasing the number of people involved didn't increase the probability of them finding the source by looking as they'd hoped.

"I don't. But I also know that getting Tyler killed would not reflect well on us," Adrian managed to spit out between tightly clenched teeth. Even to Tyler, it sounded like a desperate attempt at appealing to their sensibilities.

Unlike Adrian and Halle, the other two were much more interested in getting the job done fast rather than thoroughly. At least Sia was, Luke hadn't said or done a thing since he walked through the door.

"I agree with Adrian. I refuse to chalk up a life to collateral damage," Halle chimed in. "And I do have a theory we could test out first."

The argument died down immediately. The entire room waited silently for Halle to share his miraculous plan with the rest of them.

"Adrian was able to go through to the other side and essentially keep an eye on Tyler during the dream. And there was no attack. The talisman prevents the power from acting, but I highly doubt that it's *inactive*. More likely than not, it's trying and failing to do anything."

"Meaning..."

“That the source was there.”

“Except you’re forgetting something important, genius. Adrian had been looking when the talisman was active and couldn’t find a thing at all.”

“Have you already forgotten that Adrian’s certifiably blind?” The smirk on Halle’s face was making Tyler extremely nervous. “I’ll do it this time. If I can’t find anything, we’ll come up with something else tomorrow.”

“Fine. We’re not getting anywhere arguing between ourselves anyway.” Sia made to leave and Luke followed wordlessly behind.

Tyler stole a glance at Halle who was busy mumbling to himself with a wolfish grin set firmly in place. Adrian glared at the pair as they left and was still fuming while he gathered the scattered papers. Tyler decided to stay put until one or both of them decided their next course of action.

He lost his patience as the silence stretched on. “I take it neither of those two are... what you said Halle was?” Tyler asked.

“No way. Sia’s about as good as Adrian and Luke’s only slightly better.” Halle stopped his quiet mumbling long enough to answer.

“Why did Lynna put them on the case then?” Tyler asked in surprise.

Adrian glared at Halle before dropping the thick stack of paper on the table and sat down on the far end of the couch. “Because while they might be insufferable bastards, they’re also useful. They specialize in dismantling spells. And even more important is that they specialize in dealing with curses.”

“I thought you said that this wasn’t—”

“It’s not. But their expertise is in the field and the spell works in a similar way,” Adrian replied before turning to Halle with a suspicious glint in his eyes. “About what you said, was that true or were you just trying to get rid of them?”

Halle continued muttering for a few seconds longer before answering, “Won’t know till I try, but I am pretty confident. If there’s even a fragment of power trying to get in, I’ll find it.” He mumbled a few more lines under his breath before turning his attention back to them. “Now that that’s decided, I need you to make a few spells.”

“Make spells?” Tyler repeated, something about the way Halle said it nagged at him.

“Yup. Ain’t no rule that says we have to use spells as soon as they’re woven. Like that talisman Evelyn gave you, spells can be stored in a physical

object and activated anytime.” Halle took a few antique coins out of his pocket and showed them to Tyler. They were the same ones he had used in Evelyn’s shop.

“What do you need?” Adrian asked as he stood up and stretched. Halle followed suit and the two started to leave.

Tyler bristled in alarm. “You’re leaving?” *Me here alone?* He left the rest unsaid. He might not have minded it as much the week before, but now, the thought genuinely unnerved him.

“Nah, just going outside for a bit. This guy’s notoriously useless indoors.” Halle waved without turning around. Adrian turned to him long enough to roll his eyes in Halle’s direction.

Tyler watched the other two as they stepped out through the backdoor before returning to his own room. The whole day had been unreasonably stressful. Adding on to it the events of yesterday, he was ready to crash.

“And I still have work tomorrow,” he growled in frustration. Before he could talk himself out of it, he picked up his phone to leave another message at the office calling in sick. He barely touched his sick days in the years he’d worked there, a few days wouldn’t matter now.

While he waited, he pulled out his laptop to check his e-mail. When he was sure that nothing urgent needed his attention, he flopped back down on his bed and waited in silence. It was like the more he learned of the magical side of the world, the less everything else made sense. It was like they were following rules that he couldn’t wrap his head around. Or maybe he was just being kept in the dark on purpose.

He gave up thinking on it and rolled over. Reaching under the pillow, he grabbed the talisman. Its color had changed, like the last one had, but it was still functioning. He made a mental note to ask them about it later and closed his eyes.

Tyler jolted awake to the sounds of bickering drifting in from outside his room. He hadn’t realized he’d actually fallen asleep, he was still lying on top of the bed, fully clothed. The bedside clock proclaimed the time to be nearly nine. He only meant to rest his eyes a bit before going to make dinner.

He stretched to work out the kinks in his neck and back. It was not the most comfortable position he’d ever fallen asleep in. He picked himself up slowly, his joints protested at the movement and he ignored the aches. They’d work

themselves out in a minute and more pressingly, he needed to investigate the source of the argument going on. He listened for a time in the hallway, trying to make out the words, but realized he had no idea what they were talking about.

“What are you two arguing about?” He asked as he stepped through the door. Halle and Adrian both froze at the sound of his voice.

“Nothing,” they replied at the same time before turning to glare at each other.

Tyler slowly took in the sight before him. Halle looked more like he was pouting than actually angry and Adrian just looked irritated as usual. When he was sure the two men weren’t going to make nice by themselves, he decided it was time to change the subject, whatever it may have been.

“Right. What do you guys want for dinner?”

“Huh?” Adrian blinked in surprise before glancing at the clock. “Fuck...”

“Wh—Oh.” Halle had moved in beside Adrian to look too. “How about we do the logical thing and go out to find something?”

“Yeah, sure,” Adrian replied distractedly.

Another short lived argument later and they all piled into Halle’s car. Adrian dragged Tyler to the backseat where he got in himself. “Trust me, you don’t want to be riding shotgun with him driving. And for the love of God, put on your seat belt.”

“Why—”

Tyler didn’t get a chance to finish the question before Halle slammed on the pedal. The car took off in a high-pitched screech, and he found himself alternately clinging to the handle and to Adrian. More than once, he was sure he’d seen bits of his life flash before his eyes.

By the time they arrived at the small restaurant where Halle decided they were going to have dinner, Tyler was sure any appetite he might have had before was completely gone. He was still shaking when Adrian helped him out of the car. He didn’t look much better himself. Halle took no notice of them and hummed as he entered the restaurant.

“Is it—does he always...” Tyler muttered the question between gasped breaths.

“Drive like a complete maniac? Yeah. I swear, the only reason he still has his license is because the police are too scared to actually chase him down,”

Adrian answered as they went in to find Halle already seated in one of the stalls. The smell of foreign spices and strange music greeted them inside.

“What is this place?” Tyler asked as he looked around.

“Slavic food. Trust me, it’s good.” Halle grinned as the waiter handed each of them a menu.

“I think I’m going to order mine to go,” Adrian said as he studied the menu.

“I second that.” Tyler looked over the plastic covered sheet carefully, but none of the names made any sense to him. He doubted he would know what it was anyway. And hungry as he was, he highly doubted he could keep any of the food down now.

“Hey! Why?” Halle asked, his voice dripping with mock hurt.

“Because I doubt you’d appreciate me throwing up in your car,” Adrian stated flatly.

Halle snorted at the words. “Fine.”

Thirty minutes later, they piled back into Halle’s car with bags of takeout. Tyler had a white-knuckled grip on the handle before Halle even started the engine. He vowed he was never going to get in the same car with Halle ever again. It was probably a good thing that Adrian held onto the food because he didn’t have a hand or care to spare for anything else as Halle raced out of the parking lot.

They ate the food as a movie played on the TV. Tyler was too busy concentrating on keeping the food down to really pay attention to the movie. He was also pretty sure by that point that Halle was going to conduct his experiment that night.

“You ready?” Adrian asked Tyler as the credits rolled.

“As I’ll ever be, I guess,” he replied automatically. “I guess, just let me go shower, get ready for bed, and whatnot.”

“Sure,” Adrian agreed before he turned to Halle. “Put the food away and I’ll get the things set up.”

Tyler grabbed something to change into quickly and ran for the bathroom. *You can do this, you’ve already done this*, he reminded himself. And he didn’t even need to go through with the nightmare portion of it this time around. There was no conceivable reason he should be nervous, but he still was.

It was hard to tell if it was the car ride, the food, or the anxiety that was twisting his stomach into painful knots. He showered quickly and went through his routine on autopilot, his mind elsewhere. It was finally going to end, Halle's going to figure out who's doing this to him and it'll all be over.

*And if he couldn't...* They'd cross that bridge when they got there. If nothing else, Tyler was confident that they wouldn't abandon him or leave him to those twins. He didn't know much about them, but found that he already disliked both.

He stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. Adrian had proven time and again that he was on his side, but Tyler couldn't ignore the niggling feeling of something simmering underneath the surface. He had no right to want *more* from him, but he did. And somehow, he knew that Adrian felt the same.

He heaved a heavy sigh. Now was not the time to think about that. Especially with Halle around and another long night ahead of them. Tyler returned to the room to see everything set up the way it was the last time Adrian had used the same spell.

Except it was Halle in the chair now and Adrian stood by the open window. Tyler felt the same familiar calm of Adrian's spell wash over him as he lay down in the bed.

\*\*\*\*

"He's asleep," Adrian announced once he was sure Tyler wasn't going to wake up accidentally.

Halle nodded as he closed his eyes and slumped over in the chair. Adrian waited a minute before uncovering his guide and sitting down on the floor to join Halle at the edge. He wasn't going to cross, he knew he'd just get in the way if he went, but he wanted to watch nonetheless.

It was much easier to find the edge this time. With Halle already there and lighting the whole area up in bright hues of fuchsia and violet. Everything was crisper and brighter and even he could see clearly. He watched as Halle prowled along the edge, not quite crossing over to the other side.

After a few minutes or a few hours, Halle motioned to him to go back as he began to pull himself away. Adrian followed and the world returned to how it should be.

He found Halle staring at him when he opened his eyes. "You trust me right?"

“Yeah?” Adrian asked, confused.

“Then stop hovering.”

“What?”

“*I’m* not going to hurt him. I swear. Seriously, stop it. You’re worse than a mother hen. Besides, I need you to watch things on this side. You know what happens when I go over deep.”

Adrian glowered at him, but said nothing. He knew Halle was right, he couldn’t help but worry. Finally, he nodded reluctantly.

Halle stared at him for a few more seconds before he pulled out the four coins that Adrian had woven spells onto. He turned them over in his hands a few times before clasping them tightly between both palms. Without warning, he slumped over again. Adrian watched him carefully the whole time. Last time, he’d been checking the edge, this time he was going to cross.

He knew Halle could secure the edge, but didn’t like to. Adrian always took watch over the creatures and sources that gathered close to their side when Halle was wandering through the other.

He drew power through the window and gathered them around the room to form another barrier. There was little else he could do and he hated to sit idle. As the minutes ticked by, Adrian grew more and more uncomfortable. *Something’s wrong*. The air in the room grew thick and oppressive, despite the power he was drawing in from outside.

At the two hour mark, Adrian couldn’t keep his agitation at bay. His heart hammered madly in his chest and each breath was a challenge. He had woven several traps in anticipation of the creatures coming close, but still nothing approached. Nothing he could *see* anyway. But with Halle around, that shouldn’t be an issue.

Was something powerful lurking close by? The idea of it made him shudder. If it was powerful enough to keep everything else away, its power would have to be immense. He was going to need a lot more than an open window to deal with it.

Another half hour passed and still nothing. Whatever it was, it wasn’t crossing over, but its presence made Adrian’s hair stand on end. He stood poised to blow out the wall of the room.

Without warning, the oppressive air dissipated. Adrian blinked in surprise and turned to Halle. Halle stirred slightly in the chair and Adrian abandoned his post by the window.

Halle turned unsteady eyes on him. His eyes were blown wide and his pupils glowed an otherworldly purple. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, but no sound came out.

Adrian gasped at his appearance. “Halle?”

“I have a name,” Halle said slowly, dragging out each syllable.

“And?” Adrian asked, worry and impatience marred his voice.

“I think I’m about to pass out...” Halle’s voice grew fainter with each word.

“Wha—Halle!” Adrian barely had time to catch him before he toppled over completely. They both wound up sprawled on the floor. Halle was still conscious, but pale, almost gray under the harsh glare of light. His eyes looked haunted. More disturbingly, he was shaking. In all the years they’d worked together, he’d never seen his partner so worn out from crossing the edge.

“I think I know who is targeting Tyler,” he gasped out between ragged breaths as he struggled into a sitting position.

Adrian looked at him hard. Whatever it was, it was bad. “And?”

He turned to Adrian then, his eyes blown wide in panic and fear. Adrian could still see the lingering effects of his magic in the faint, otherworldly spark of his irises. “It’s Mackenzie.”

“Mackenzie—you can’t mean—”

“I do. It’s her. I’m either going crazy or I’m right,” he gasped painfully. “Adrian. I’ve seen her power before.”

“I—I know... I—” Adrian was stunned into silence. For a time, the only sound in the room was their heavy breathing. “Fuck. You’re sure?”

“Yes! God. I wish I wasn’t...” Halle dragged his hands down his face and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. He wasn’t shaking as violently anymore, but his pallor did not improve.

“What would she want with Tyler?” Adrian asked numbly.

“How the hell am I supposed to know? Get Lynna.”

“Right. Okay. We need to stay calm.” Adrian began to pace the room, his heart beat violently in his chest. All signs of exhaustion from overusing his powers forgotten as adrenaline pumped through his veins. He mumbled quietly under his breath, “Just let me—wait... Tyler. I need to wake Tyler first.”

“Adrian?”

He paused when Halle’s voice registered in his brain. “Yeah?”

“Call. Lynna. Stop stalling before I hit you.”

“I—right. Right.” Thankfully, Halle didn’t say anything as Adrian stalled for a few extra seconds as he carefully untangled the spell around Tyler.

Adrian didn’t wait for Tyler to actually wake up before he left the room in search of a phone. All of a sudden, he couldn’t remember where the house phones were or where he’d left his cell. *Calm down... Deep breaths. In, out...* He repeated as he tried to gather his thoughts into some sort of order. It felt much too long before he finally managed to locate a phone and dialed her number.

Four rings. He counted each excruciating second until Lynna’s voice sounded on the other end.

Adrian wasn’t sure how coherent he managed to sound on the phone, but he was fairly certain that Lynna had gotten the gist of what he was trying to say. His doorbell rang thirty minutes later and he let her in. Her face was drawn tight, impassive, but her eyes spoke volumes.

“You’re sure,” she said to Halle as soon as she located him. At some point, Tyler must have helped move him from the floor onto the chair because he was propped up limply on it again. Tyler was sitting on the bed, looking as lost as Adrian felt.

“I wish I wasn’t,” he mumbled, not even glancing in Lynna’s direction. Adrian hovered near the door, not sure where he should stand or what he should do.

“Why would—” she started to demand.

“I don’t know!” Halle snapped. Everyone stared at him in shock. He sighed before running his hands through his hair. “I-I’m sorry. I’m just... I need to process all this. What the hell did we get ourselves into?”

Adrian watched the scene unfold in front of him without an ounce of feeling. The shock of the revelation still hadn’t worn off. Dully, he noted that Lynna looked completely wrecked. She strode over to him and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. Halle glanced at her, misery written all over his face.

“I didn’t think—Oh God.” Lynna turned to Adrian with a look of utter horror. It took him a moment to catch up with her train of thought and the realization hit him like a ton of bricks.

“Those warnings...” Adrian whispered softly.

“The what?” Halle looked up at him.

“It’s... not important right now. It’s too late for that.” Lynna looked like she was about to collapse herself.

“I just, I can’t believe...” Adrian said slowly.

“I know she has her issues, but—” Lynna closed her mouth so suddenly that there was an audible click of her teeth.

“What is it?” Halle asked tiredly, but she didn’t say anything. She drew back, away from both of them. Her face scrunched up in concentration.

“Lynna?” Adrian asked as he took a tentative step toward her.

“I need to talk to her,” she declared.

“No!” Adrian and Halle yelled together, but it was too late.

Lynna had disappeared in a flash of fire and light. Adrian barely caught the movement of power before she was simply gone. He blinked in shock, it was a spell he had only heard of in theory and never in practice. Never even imagined that it was actually possible. And she’d woven it in mere seconds.

“Okay, what just happened?” Halle turned to him, pointing at the empty space where Lynna was only a second ago.

“A mage door. No, I don’t know how to weave one. I didn’t think it was even possible to just—”

“Adrian! Focus. You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I—I know. I...” Adrian started to pace around the room once more, head down and deep in thought.

He tuned the other two out. His mind was in turmoil, racing a mile a minute, nothing made sense anymore. Lynna had realized something. *If it had something to do with Mackenzie...* He went through everything he’d learned in the last few days. Something was bugging him, trying to grab his attention, but he couldn’t figure out what it was.

Something was off. Something. A name. A connection. *Marshlain*. “Oh God.”

“What?” Halle stared at him, but he zoned in on Tyler.

“Tyler. I need you to be completely honest with me. Were you, in any way, involved in the Marshal Quay accident?”

The look on the other man's face was all the answer he needed. Slowly, Adrian slumped against the far wall and slid to the floor. He could faintly hear Halle's voice over the pounding in his ears, but he couldn't focus. *Marshal Quay, the disaster that left nearly fifty dead. And one single survivor.*

"Fuck..."

\*\*\*\*

Tyler stared at Adrian in shock. *How did he...?* He'd come this far and left everything he'd known behind to escape that. To leave it behind and try to move on.

"What's he talking about?" Halle turned to Tyler once he realized that Adrian wasn't going to say anything else.

"I don't—what does that have to do with anything?" Tyler asked.

"Well, something if Adrian's bringing it up now."

They both turned to Adrian, but he didn't move or say a thing. Tyler clamped his jaw shut, he was not going to dig through that particular grave again. *Ever.* Minutes passed like hours and they were at a stalemate.

"Tyler, please..." Adrian murmured softly.

"Why?" Tyler countered. He couldn't help the defensive note that crept into his voice. *There's no getting out of this now,* he realized.

"Because this is, could be, why... the answer we were looking for. Why Mackenzie..." He looked up slowly, his eyes shone with unshed tears. Tyler felt his chest clench uncomfortably at the sight. He had never seen Adrian so lost before and he hated it. "Tell me how you were involved."

He considered not saying anything and just playing dumb, but realized that wouldn't do any of them any good. Adrian and the rest of them were risking their lives for him, the least he could do to repay them was by being honest. And there's no sweeping this under the rug anyway. He sat down with his back to the headboard and drew up his knees. "Three years ago, there was an accident near Marshlain, but I guess you already knew that."

Tyler paused and stole a glance at the other two. They were studying him soundlessly.

"An hour out, there's a small port village called Marshal Quay. They'd just finished building a small luxury cruise ship and there was a celebration for the

first launch. They invited a bunch of people onto the ship. My parents were supposed to go, but my mother was tied down by her job and dad didn't want to leave her alone so they sent me instead. Things didn't go as expected, to put it mildly. The party was held on the ship and it stayed near the shore, but..."

"There was an electrical fire that sparked an explosion. They said that the ship must've hit something when it entered the waters, something stupid like that. By the time anyone noticed anything, it was already too late. Lots of finger pointing and blame getting passed around, but bottom line was a lot of people died that night," Adrian finished for him.

"I see you've seen the news," Tyler said blandly. Now that the shock had worn away, he was left feeling drained.

"They did say there was a survivor, but never disclosed the name," Halle added.

"Yeah, that would be my mother's doing. I went under right away, but didn't get caught by the current or the rudder. I was lucky apparently." He paused long enough to collect himself. "Not like it made a difference. I should've just died like everyone else."

"Wha—Why would you say that?" Adrian's eyes snapped to his.

Tyler slumped over and closed his eyes to avoid looking at either of them. He was sick of the looks, the pity, the forced sympathy, the people telling him it was all going to be okay when it wasn't. That it wasn't his fault, but still resented him for being alive. "Because why me? Why not anyone else? I shouldn't—"

"Don't say that," Adrian whispered.

Soft footsteps rang out loudly in the silence and the bed dipped where someone sat down. A finger prodded at Tyler until he gave up and opened his eyes again to find himself staring straight into Adrian's.

"It might just be luck that you're alive, but don't insult the ones that died by belittling your life," Adrian murmured quietly. Despite the harsh words, Tyler found his voice to be soothing, comforting.

"Adrian, are you gonna..." Halle asked carefully.

Adrian glanced at him briefly before turning back to Tyler. "I don't know. It's not really our place to—you know."

“Well, I guess I’ll leave that choice to you.” Halle looked at him strangely before heading to the door. “My liqueur cabinet and I have got a long night ahead of us.” Halle waved as he left the room.

A minute later, the click of the front door lock could be heard as Halle left the house. Adrian hadn’t moved from his position in all that time, he was still leaning over Tyler, his lips not even five inches away. He couldn’t read Adrian’s expression at all and it was making him more than a little uncomfortable. Tyler scrambled for something to say to break the tension that threatened to crush them.

Even after spending so much time together, he still couldn’t understand Adrian. But even so, staring up at him at that moment, he was certain that the spark of attraction he felt between them wasn’t in his mind. Wasn’t just wishful thinking on his part. All that senseless flirting had some substance behind them.

But Adrian surprised him again by pulling away to close the window before taking the seat Halle had vacated. “I’m sorry you had to live through that.”

Tyler blinked and looked at him, unsure what to make of the sudden change and avoidance. “Doesn’t matter.” He settled for turning away to face the wall.

“I’m surprised your parents let you go off so far on your own. After almost losing you like that...”

Tyler shrugged one shoulder, feigning nonchalance. It was easier not to see, to simply ignore the gaze that bore into his back, to pretend the air didn’t crackle with pent up tension. “I didn’t leave them much choice.”

“Eh?”

“I just packed up and left. I-I couldn’t stay there anymore. Marshlain isn’t a small city, but word travels fast. Even with the media blackout... well, everyone who knew me or my parents knew exactly what had happened.” He had to pause to get his emotions under control. “I couldn’t take it anymore. The stares and whispers behind my back... The way the family of the other victims looked at me. It was driving me crazy.” And despite his best efforts, his voice still cracked. He swallowed, fighting for control. “I resented myself for being alive.”

Adrian was silent for a time before he asked, “Do you still feel that way?”

“Sometimes. It’s not as bad these days, just—I’ll never stop hating what happened.”

“I’m glad you’re alive,” Adrian whispered gently. The words shocked Tyler enough that he almost turned around to face him again. “I’m happy to have gotten the chance to meet you.”

“Even with the situation being what it is?” Tyler asked, teasing, as he bit back the unshed tears. He needed to lighten the atmosphere and give Adrian a way out. The conversation was too intimate, too personal, and far too close to the truth they were both trying to ignore.

“Well, it’s not the best of circumstances, I admit,” Adrian replied just as softly. His voice was heavy with the emotion Tyler didn’t need to hear to know he felt.

Tyler was sick of sidestepping the issue. Throwing all caution to the wind, he sat up, and turned to stare straight at the other man. “Adrian.”

“No, I’m sorry.” He looked away quickly.

“Stop doing that! Stop trying to pretend you don’t feel it too.” What little remained of his patience was gone. If this was about honesty, he would be honest. “You asked if I still felt the same way right? These last few days? No. Adrian, look at me. The insanity and danger aside, I haven’t felt this happy and alive in years. Not since before that accident.”

“Oh.” Slowly, almost cautiously, Adrian turned to face him again. His eyes were unreadable, but Tyler was pretty sure he knew what was going through his head.

Minutes turned to eternity as neither of them made a move. They stared into the other’s eyes, Tyler could clearly make out the fire that burned behind them. He could practically see Adrian struggling to come to terms with his confession. He didn’t care how ridiculously sappy he looked or sounded. He needed Adrian to know what he couldn’t say with words alone.

Just as suddenly as it had set in, the stillness was broken as Adrian stood up abruptly and walked toward the bed. Tyler didn’t give him time to change his mind as he tugged hard on Adrian’s arm and pulled him down against him. They fell against the mattress in a heap of tangled limbs. Tyler held onto him tightly and relished the comfort and heat he radiated. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been with someone and felt this at ease. They kissed, hard, with their bodies pressed tightly together.

Tyler rolled them over and pressed Adrian against the mattress. Adrian, for his part, was compliant and more than willing to cuddle. They were too tired for

anything more, and for now, it was enough to simply be. They finally settled down for the night after what felt like hours of light teasing and stolen kisses.

“Do you need help going to sleep?” Adrian mumbled sleepily against Tyler’s neck. They were curled comfortably against each other.

Tyler snorted at the double entendre. Adrian looked up at him quizzically and Tyler barely managed to stifle the laugh that bubbled up his chest. His amusement compounded by the fact that Adrian had no idea what he’d said. “You wouldn’t happen to have a liquor cabinet of your own would you?”

“Unfortunately, no. But I do have a bottle of bourbon, somewhere, courtesy of Halle.”

“I can live with that.” Tyler grinned against his hair.

“You sure that’s a good idea?”

“I’m not taking the sleeping pills anymore, and I don’t have work tomorrow. I figured that after tonight, I wouldn’t have much energy left for work anyway and called in sick again. I’d say we deserve a drink.”

Adrian nodded and made to get up, but Tyler grabbed his arm, stopping him just as he was about to leave. A thought just occurred to him. “Is it going to take long to find?”

“Uh... maybe?” Adrian shrugged.

“Forget it then. Stay with me.” Tyler tugged on his arm to emphasize the point.

It was Adrian’s turn to laugh now, but he snuggled down against Tyler nonetheless. It was so easy now, that they’d finally laid it out in plain sight. To just let things unfold, to just touch and feel and not have to think.

But Tyler found that he couldn’t just turn his brain off, no matter how much he wanted to just enjoy the moment.

“Adrian?” he whispered on the off chance that Adrian was actually asleep. Unlike him.

“Yeah?”

“Who’s Mackenzie?”

Tyler felt more than heard Adrian’s breath hitch, but there was no reply. He waited, leaving the choice to answer up to him. Eventually, Adrian spoke up, “A good friend of Lynna’s.”

“Oh,” Tyler said in surprise. “And you know why she’s got a grudge against me?”

“It’s—I’ll let Lynna tell you.” Adrian looked at him sadly. “It’s not my place to disclose that to you. I’m sorry.”

Tyler shrugged off his apology. He’d gathered that much from what Halle had said earlier. And he didn’t need Adrian to say anything to confirm his suspicions. He had a sinking feeling he knew exactly why she hated him so vehemently. If it had anything to do with *that*, it wouldn’t be the first time someone poured their hatred onto him.

The only difference was that she was a Magical.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 5

Adrian woke up to someone pounding violently at his front door. He groaned in annoyance and snuggled against Tyler, trying his very best to ignore the incessant noise. He gave up when Tyler stirred awake.

“I’ll get the door.” He rolled away from Tyler reluctantly and stretched before getting up. Despite the events of the night before, he felt oddly refreshed. Even though he knew what he allowed to transpire would bring dire consequences, he didn’t feel any of the shame or guilt he had expected.

“I’m coming already!” he called out as the pounding grew in volume.

He pulled the door open and nearly ended up with a fist in his face. He glared at Halle who was grinning widely at him and stepped aside reluctantly to let him in. Belatedly, he realized there was a plastic bag full of takeout and a tray of coffee at his feet.

“I brought breakfast and coffee.” Halle grinned wider when he saw Adrian looking.

Adrian only grunted in acknowledgment. Normally, he didn’t mind early mornings, but considering how late he’d gone to sleep, he was not ready to face the day yet. Or ever. Seeing Halle in front of his door brought reality crashing down around him. Even the promise of food wasn’t enough to brighten his disposition.

He left Halle in the dining room as he went to warn Tyler that they had company. That done, he picked up some fresh clothes and went to the bathroom to clean up. The hot shower did wonders to soothe his body, but did nothing to calm his mind. He should’ve known that Halle would come by after the shock of their findings had worn off.

What was he going to tell Halle? Would Halle accept his actions or condemn them? Would he even understand? Adrian stalked back to his room silently, he needed a moment to recollect his thoughts. He had no idea if he should think up some excuse or just be truthful.

Silently, he prayed that Halle wouldn’t ask any questions. Adrian definitely was not up for discussing last night and he did not need Halle to tell him just how stupid of a decision it was. He hadn’t actually *slept* with Tyler, but he doubted his partner would care for the technicalities of the matter. A Magical

and a Human, he was just asking for trouble. About the only thing he wasn't weighed down by was regret.

Adrian stared silently out his bedroom window. *How easy would it be if there were no rules*, he wondered. But no. He, better than anyone, knew exactly why those rules needed to exist. Needed to be enforced no matter the cost. What Tyler didn't know couldn't hurt him right? No, he didn't feel guilty about acting on his feelings, for being *with* Tyler. The only guilt he felt was for hiding the truth from him. He disliked lying on principal and to do so to Tyler... it only added to the chasm that separated their worlds.

A light knock on the door startled him out of his reverie. Halle was watching him with an unreadable expression on his face.

"How're you holding up?" Halle asked quietly.

"Fine. Why?"

Halle looked at him pointedly and pointed silently toward the kitchen. Adrian got the hint and put up a quick barrier. "We've been partners for what? Eight years?"

Adrian nodded even though it was a redundant question.

"You do realize that I'm not as oblivious to what goes on around me as you like to make me out to be right?" Another redundant question, this time, Adrian made no move to answer. "This has blown way past the level of a professional relationship hasn't it."

*Not a question*, Adrian noted. There was no denying it, at best, he would just piss off Halle. He searched his partner's eyes for some indication on his bias on the subject and came up blank. Halle wasn't giving anything away. Adrian heaved a heavy sigh and looked away, nodding reluctantly.

"Fuck. Adrian—" He sounded like he was going to say more, but cut himself off.

For a time, they stood in complete silence.

"Well, you don't need me to lecture you on the subject. But, God, you of all people... Just—I don't know. Normally I'd say to tell Lynna before this gets any more out of hand, but now..."

They stared at each other tensely. *Lynna*. With everything else that had happened, Adrian almost managed to keep that particular worry at bay and now it was back with a vengeance. *Crap*.

“Breakfast, then talk. Sia and Luke should be over in another hour or so,” Halle informed him before he turned on his heels and walked away.

“Wonderful.” Adrian glared out the window at the sunny weather outside. The morning was looking better and better. At least Halle seemed to be okay with what happened. When he was sure that he could keep his feelings in check, he joined his companions at the table.

They spent the next thirty minutes eating in heavy silence. The tension between himself and Halle wasn't volatile, but still noticeable. It was obviously making Tyler uncomfortable, not that he could do anything about it. He was fairly sure that this was one of those times where ignoring the problem actually was the better option. He just had to give Halle the time and space to come to terms with it.

As soon as he was done, Adrian went to grab his marker, a few sheets of blank paper, and set up shop in the living room. He glanced at the clock, there was enough time to weave a deafening labyrinth. They were going to need it if they were going to be discussing what he hoped they were. He had no idea how much good it would do, but at least it offered a sense of security. Once he opened all the windows, he sat down on the floor, and concentrated on the task at hand.

Adrian was startled back into alertness when the doorbell rang. True to Halle's words, Sia and Luke arrived just after ten in the morning.

“Okay, what in the fucking hell happened yesterday night?” Sia asked before the door even closed behind him. He glared murderously at Halle as he removed his shoes and joined him in the kitchen. Luke followed wordlessly behind and Adrian trailed in at the very back. “What do you mean Lynna's gone? What the hell did you two do?”

“How much did he tell you?” Adrian asked.

Halle ignored his question and donned his most annoying grin before answering, “We figured out *who* we're up against.”

“Great. And *who* might that be?” Sia poked at one of the two remaining breakfast sandwiches skeptically as he sat.

“Mackenzie,” Halle and Adrian answered together.

Sia instantly froze, stopping mid-motion to turn and stare at them open jawed. “You can't mean—”

“Oh, we do.” Halle shrugged like it was no big deal. Adrian rounded the table to smack him on the arm. Now was not the time to be messing around.

“Mackenzie. Council and director of Cleaners Mackenzie,” Sia grew paler with each word.

“The one and only,” Halle agreed.

“And Lynna—”

“Disappeared to go speak to see her.” Halle shrugged again. “Well, that’s what she said before she was gone.”

“Are you two fucking insane? You let her—” Sia looked like he was two seconds away from blowing up completely. Dots of red colored his otherwise ghostly white cheeks.

Halle shrugged again. “Disappeared. As in, poof. It’s not like she even gave us a chance to try and talk her out of it.”

“Okay. Just calm down and we’ll start at the beginning,” Adrian broke in before a melee could break out in his kitchen. He knew Halle was aggravating the situation on purpose out of spite and it was getting out of hand. They were all wound up, it was no excuse to act like a complete asshole. Thankfully, Tyler had been smart enough to sneak out of the room while the twins were distracted.

Sia looked like he was going to continue to argue, but thought better of it in the end. Good. Now they could talk it out like professionals. Luke gaped at them, but Adrian couldn’t tell if he understood the situation or was just reflecting his brother’s emotional state.

“I repeat, what in God’s name happened yesterday night?” Sia managed to spit out. He was so tense that the muscles of his jaw twitched with every word.

Adrian looked sideways at his partner, pinning him with a glare of his own. If Halle had the audacity to crack a joke now, Adrian just might let Sia have his way.

Halle looked at each of them in turn before speaking, no trace of the earlier blitheness remained. “Right, I took a look at Tyler from the other side with the talisman still there. Everything was fine, the edge was nicely intact, nothing strange at all. But when I dug in deeper... let’s just say that nothing was what it appeared to be. There wasn’t a trace of power at all.” They all gaped at him, but he continued before the curses could start flying. “No, seriously. There was

*nothing*. Not a trace of residual magic, no source of power, not even a hint of magic. And most importantly, there wasn't a trace of something that was right in front of me."

"What are you trying to say?" Sia asked carefully.

"That it wasn't Adrian's fault that he couldn't find anything. He doesn't attract the things from the other side like I do, it's no wonder he didn't realize it." Halle paused, obviously waiting for them to catch on. A wave of panic crashed over Adrian as the events of the previous night played out in his mind. "Really? Do I need to spell it out for you people? There wasn't a trace of power from things that were standing right in front of me." He waved his arms animatedly to indicate the creatures.

"You're saying the creatures were there, but we just couldn't see them," Adrian blurted out. "Oh God." He slumped in the chair. "If you were even a minute later coming back..."

"What happened when I was gone?" Halle asked in alarm.

"I knew something was wrong, but I didn't think—I felt the presence of something powerful, but couldn't see a damned thing. And nothing tripped any of my traps either..." He trailed off. *How close had he come to letting something cross over?*

"Well, given that we're all alive and the neighborhood hadn't been flattened, I assume we're safe for the time being," Halle said carefully. "More importantly, how many people do you think would be capable of that kind of feat?"

"But that's all circumstantial!" Sia replied.

Halle shot him a don't-screw-with-me look. "I went digging. I had to strip away layer after layer of illusions to get at... whatever was buried under all that. Adrian fragmented the nightmare Tyler was having to find the bit of power. I did pretty much the same thing and it was there. Under the layers, hidden away in labyrinths, shielded behind illusions. It. Was. There." He glared at Sia, challenging him to say something else.

"And you're sure it was Mackenzie's spell," Adrian said cautiously.

"Yeah. Dunno if you were there, but she demoed her power for us before." Halle looked at him pointedly. "It ain't the kind of thing you ever forget. Besides, everything else adds up too.

“The first time, the source attacked when we tried to interfere. The times after that, it didn’t, it was trying to get at Tyler, but what it didn’t do was harm *us*. Think about it.” Halle looked at each of them in turn. “Seriously. *Think* about it. The easiest way to stop us from interfering was to take us out. With the kind of power our attacker obviously had, it should’ve been easy. You were a sitting duck on the other side and it didn’t so much as poke at you.”

Adrian buried his face in his hands and groaned. What Halle said, now that he had a chance to really analyze what had happened, it all made sense. *In hindsight...* The signs had been there since the beginning and he hadn’t had a clue. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*, he cursed at himself. He had been too distracted, too worried, too afraid for Tyler, to think clearly. To think properly. He didn’t know what to do anymore.

“Don’t beat yourself up too hard. Like I said, you couldn’t’ve known. And it really didn’t occur to me till I figured out it was Mackenzie anyway.” Halle reached over to pat him on the shoulder. “Now that that’s out of the way, any suggestions on what our next move should be?”

There was a moment of silence as they churned over Halle’s words. Eventually, Sia asked, “What do you think are Lynna’s chances against her?”

“Better question is, should we even let others know that Mackenzie turned Renegade and that Lynna’s gone to confront her alone,” Adrian muttered.

Sia slammed his fist against the table hard, frustration evident on his face. “Crap.”

“Yeah.”

“For the time being, we need to operate under the assumption that Mackenzie knows we know. I say Adrian should take Tyler and disappear,” Halle suggested.

Adrian glanced at Halle suspiciously. “Disappear how?”

“Like, go somewhere far away and cover your tracks,” he clarified.

“I—”

Halle cut him off. “You don’t get to argue this point either.”

Adrian glared at him indignantly. “This is about me just as much as it is about Tyler. What makes you think—”

Luke reached over and patted his arm gently, cutting him off from what he was about to say. Adrian jumped in surprise, Luke almost never made a sound

or took action without being told to. To see the man do anything of his own volition never failed to shock him to some degree.

Ignoring Halle's triumphant smirk, Sia added "Given the few facts we do have, I will have to agree with Halle. We know that Mackenzie won't hurt you, but it'll be easier for the rest of us to move if we don't have to constantly look over our shoulder to make sure the human's safe."

Adrian gritted his teeth at the subtle insult. It wouldn't do to lose his temper now.

Ten minutes of futile protests later, Adrian was left with no choice but to agree to their plan. He blamed the shock of Sia and Halle ganging up on him for the lapse in judgement. Luke's silent support of the opposition wasn't lost on him either.

\*\*\*\*

Tyler was only mildly surprised when he heard the others leaving without a huge fuss. He also caught the sound of things getting shuffled around before a knock sounded at his door and Adrian poked his head in.

"They left already?" Tyler asked.

"Yeah. We sort of managed to reach a consensus." Adrian glanced around nervously, never actually looking at him. "Hey, do you think you can get out of work for a week or so?"

Tyler regarded Adrian carefully. "Why?"

"Because. You know how Lynna went to see Mackenzie right?" Adrian stole a glance at Tyler and waited for him to nod before continuing, "So now Lynna's as good as missing and Mackenzie knows that we're on to her."

Tyler nodded. It wasn't even work that he cared about anymore. He didn't need to know who Mackenzie was to get that the prospect of facing her scared the shit out of Adrian and Halle.

"It's too dangerous to stay here. Mackenzie knows exactly where we are and if she really wanted to, she could attack whenever she wants." Adrian sighed and sat down heavily on the bed making the mattress jolt. "The decision was that we erase all traces of where we are and disappear until the others deal with her."

Tyler didn't miss the way his eyes were pleading with him to understand even if he didn't say those words out loud. It was impossible to ignore, even if he didn't believe for a second that plan would work. "This is our best option?"

“Honestly? No.” Adrian slumped forward and Tyler pulled him into a protective embrace. He couldn’t tell which of them was the one that needed to be comforted anymore. “But you have to understand, she isn’t just a powerful Magical, she’s also one of the most influential. We can’t just accuse her without solid evidence. We believe Halle, but chances are, no one else will.”

“So we’re basically on our own,” Tyler finished for him.

“Halle and Sia are going to talk to the rest of the team and if that goes well, they’ll try to talk to our director as well. Lynna’s missing anyway so it’s not like we can keep this under wraps.”

“Can I just ask one thing?”

“Yeah?”

“From what I can understand, you guys can track each other by your magic right? How’re we going to disappear if you...”

“It’s not that simple. Tracking a source is notoriously difficult and dangerous for travelers and impossible for everyone else. We just need to be careful about not drawing any attention to us with the kind of spells I use. We’re still gambling, but chances are, she can only find us by physically finding us.”

Tyler struggled to wrap his head around that and failed. *More importantly...* “So she can’t do what Evelyn—”

“God. No. Evelyn’s the only one that can do that.”

At that point, Tyler decided not to ask the remaining questions buzzing around in his head. Just trying to understand the logistics of how their powers worked was giving him a massive headache. What he did understand, was that nothing was definitive. What it came down to, was that they were betting everything on Mackenzie not having any powers they weren’t already aware of.

“Fine, I’ll call the office later to let them know,” he whispered softly. Lauren might wonder what was going on with him, but he doubted the rest of the company would miss him.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. Adrian had gotten comfortable on the bed and was now lying half on top of him and half on the mussed sheets. Tyler wished he could say the same for himself, but didn’t bother doing anything about it. He was lying in an awkward position and already lost feeling in his left arm. He was pretty sure he’d be regretting the decision soon enough.

Aside from the physical discomfort, he felt unusually calm inside. At last, they were getting somewhere. To finally have an idea of what's going on lifted a huge load off his shoulders. He closed his eyes and simply soaked in Adrian's warmth. Even the bright glare of sunlight couldn't keep him from dozing off.

Tyler made a groggy sound as he drifted back into consciousness. It was greeted by a soft chuckle and the bed creaked softly. Blindly, he rolled onto his stomach and reached out for Adrian.

"Time to get up. I don't know about you, but personally, I'm starving," Adrian whispered as he ran a hand down Tyler's back.

Tyler made an effort to open his eyes and glanced at the bedside clock. It was nearly three in the afternoon. They'd slept right through lunch.

After a quick debate, they decided to head out to find a bite to eat. Adrian had insisted there was a nice Chinese restaurant that served afternoon specials nearby so that's where they headed.

The place was packed considering it was a weekday afternoon. They grabbed a number and waited by the entrance. Adrian had drifted off into a world of his own and Tyler found himself studying the walls. After fifteen minutes, their number was finally called and a waitress led them to a table near the back.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked worriedly. Adrian still hadn't spoken a word and it didn't look like he was paying the menu any attention either.

"Huh?" He looked up, startled. "Yeah. Sorry. Just a lot on my mind I guess."

"I know" was all Tyler could say in reply.

They descended back into silence after the waitress reappeared and took their orders. The food came quickly, but he barely noticed. Tyler found his attention drifting to Adrian more and more as the silence dragged on. The tension radiating off of him was like a solid wall and he had no idea how to break through.

Adrian spoke up suddenly, "Honestly, I think I'm still in shock. I mean—" He paused, and looked around distractedly before continuing, "You know she tried to get me off the assignment? And the whole time..."

"Tell me about her?" Tyler asked quietly. He didn't like to pry into other people's sordid histories, having known how awful it was to be on the receiving end of it, but if he didn't get his answer now, he knew he never would.

“I—” Adrian looked startled for a second, but it faded quickly. He smiled humorlessly. “I guess there’s no reason to keep quiet at this point.” He sighed and looked out the window wistfully. “Her family was there. Husband and two daughters. It was hard... I knew them you know. Lynna’s something of a mother to me so I was on pretty good terms with Mackenzie. She took their deaths hard. I mean we all thought she was better, that she got over it, accepted it, moved on... well, I guess not.”

“She wasn’t there?” It was a stupid question, but he couldn’t help but ask.

“No, like your mother, she was too busy with work to go herself.”

They sat through the rest of the meal silently. Tyler went through the motions on autopilot, his mind elsewhere. He’d almost asked about their magic, but it obviously didn’t make a difference. *Magical or not, they were still flesh and blood and they still died that night.* And he had survived. It was no wonder that she hated him.

*Don’t go there.*

He promised Adrian that he wouldn’t, hadn’t he?

\*\*\*\*

Somehow or other, rather than returning home after getting some food like they had planned, they wound up taking a stroll by the waterside. Normally, Tyler wouldn’t have minded it much, but it’d literally been hours. The heaviness that that settled around them during dinner had cleared up a bit, but Adrian was still lost in his own world, staring out at the crashing waves.

Tyler felt the urge to sigh. He understood, really. But he hated seeing Adrian so torn up over it. *It’s never easy to have your trust betrayed like that.*

It was close to midnight by the time they finally returned home. They were both exhausted, but decided to pack up a duffle and make themselves scarce that very night.

The hotel room they chose looked decent enough. It was like most others Tyler had seen before. Two twin beds occupied most of the space, a small coffee table with two hard backed chairs took up one corner while a cabinet topped with a TV sat in the other. The bathroom was modest in comparison, it was all white tiles and only held a shower.

Tyler was wide awake, the exhaustion pushed aside by adrenaline. His mind didn’t seem to care that it was two in the morning and he had grown used to sleeping by eleven. There was way too much running through his head.

*But first things first.*

He dropped his bag onto the floor and made himself comfortable on the bed. “Tell me a story.”

It was Adrian’s turn to be caught off guard. He stopped rummaging around the room long enough to turn and stare. He repeated incredulously, “A story.”

Tyler shrugged like it was no big deal. “Tell me about yourself.”

Adrian stared at him like he’d suddenly grown another head.

“Well, you know pretty much everything there is to know about me. Fair’s fair, don’t you think?” He grinned and patted the mattress beside him in invitation.

“I—” Adrian stayed unmoving for a few long seconds before shrugging and joining him on the bed. But instead of sitting down like Tyler had thought he would, Adrian pushed him down on the mattress and curled against him. “Fine. What do you want to know?”

Tyler chuckled softly. “I haven’t even said anything and you’re already trying to distract me?”

“Mmm, is it working?”

“Hah, no. Not letting this chance go to waste. Let’s see.” Tyler let the words hang as he thought. “What’s it like to use magic?”

Adrian shifted so he could look up at him. “That’s... specific. If you mean weaving spells, I guess it’s a little like trying to mold something fluid into a solid shape and making it stay. Well, it’s not as convoluted as it sounds when you have the right tools to actually do the job. Things like *seeing* is... it’s like straining your eyes to concentrate on something you know should be there, but you can’t actually *see*. Well, that’s what it’s like for me most of the time, I have to borrow power to see power. I’m sure Halle would have a different answer for you.”

He made a face as he said the last part and Tyler couldn’t help but laugh at his expression. Adrian gave a soft smile in response, and they fell into a companionable silence.

It was nice, Tyler decided. He couldn’t remember the last time that he was so relaxed around another person, to just enjoy their presence without having to worry about anything. Unfortunately, it was short lived as another question pushed itself to the forefront.

“I know you said that your powers are inherited, but when’d you find out you were a weaver and not something else?” Tyler realized he’d hit a nerve when he felt Adrian stiffen. It was quickly replaced by a mask of indifference, but underneath was something Tyler couldn’t make out. He was going to tell him that he didn’t need to answer, but Adrian stopped him with a light shake of his head.

“It’s fine. I’ve made you spill all the dirt on your past so, fair’s fair...” Adrian fell silent and for a while, Tyler thought he’d had zoned out completely, lost in his memories, when he spoke up again. “I’ve heard that experimenting under parental guidance is how most kids find out. But for a long time, I didn’t know. My dad’s human. So it’s my mom who was a Magical, but she died in childbirth.

“I don’t think she’d planned on having me or if anyone from the Magical side even knew she was married, let alone—I’ve never met anyone from her side of the family you know. I mean, growing up, it was always just Dad and me. And for years, it was fine. But I didn’t know I had power and Dad had no idea... and it was bad. The first time something happened...” Adrian paused, visibly shaken by the memory. “I’d hurt someone, a kid on the playground that was messing with me.

“Dad was convinced I was possessed by the devil. Kind of ironic, considering he’d always gone on about how God and religion was a sham. But, well, long story short, the more out of control my powers grew, the worse things got. He tried a whole bunch of things to try and *fix* me. It eventually escalated to violent beatings, he said it was to get rid of the devil in me.

“And well, back then, I had no idea what was wrong with me either and things just happened.” He sighed heavily. “Lynna and Lier, a Cleaner, posed as social workers and got me out of there. I haven’t seen my dad since, but, well, that’s probably for the best.”

Tyler stayed completely still and silent the whole time Adrian was speaking. More out of shock than anything else, but it also felt like the right thing to do. To just let Adrian go at his own pace and get the words off his chest. He’d had a feeling that there was a lot more to Adrian’s past than he let on, but he hadn’t been expecting anything that dark. He pulled Adrian closer to him, eliciting a soft sigh.

Adrian didn’t let it show, that was for certain. *Not like me*. Side by side, his problems didn’t seem nearly as bad. At least he still had his parents when the world was against him. Adrian didn’t even have that.

“Lynna, taught me everything about the world, about magic, about myself. Hell, she practically raised me till I was old enough to strike out on my own. Not that I went far... She’s the reason I joined the Enforcers. I mean, cases like mine don’t happen often, but it wasn’t a freak accident either. Sometimes, mix bloods like me slip through the net.”

Adrian pushed up on his elbows and looked down at Tyler with a strange expression on his face. Tyler spoke the only words that came to mind, “And you wanted to keep anyone else from going through what you did.”

“Yeah. God. You have no idea what it was like. Being caught up in the middle of all that and having no idea—No. No, I guess you would.” He smiled wryly and leaned back down, forehead resting against the side of Tyler’s neck.

“It’s not the same. I’m an adult and I know how to take care of myself,” he murmured softly and wrapped his arms around Adrian again, coaxing him to relax.

“Bullshit. You were terrified when you thought you were going crazy. It’s the same. It doesn’t matter how old you are, going through that...” Adrian paused.

“But that’s what I’ve got you for right?” Tyler tried for cheerful, but knew it came out forced.

“Right.” Adrian shifted, finding a more comfortable position. “You think you’ll be okay to sleep?”

Tyler stilled at the reminder. They’d agreed to leave the talisman behind, it was a unique spell and there was a small chance that Mackenzie could track them down through it. He had been trying very hard to forget that little fact. “I guess, yeah...”

“I’ll keep watch, just in case,” Adrian assured him.

The truth was, he knew Adrian was only putting on a brave front for him and wished that he could offer him the same comfort he got. He closed his eyes, letting the warmth and comfort of Adrian’s presence lull him into sleep.

\*\*\*\*

Adrian had woken him up before the sun had risen and dragged him across town to a small diner by the side of the highway.

“Technically, the two sides, Human and Magical, are never supposed to meet. Well, that’s the idea anyway. In practice, that’s not really possible.” Now that the walls were down, Adrian had become much more open about how the

Magical society functioned. “You’ve probably heard that saying about power and responsibility and all that. It’s true you know... most of our laws center around keeping humans in the dark about our existence. For the sake of both sides.

“Unfortunately, not everyone agrees with that. The whole mixing of blood is more of a gray area than anything else, but it’s highly frowned upon. I’m pretty sure my mom’s side of the family didn’t agree with her choice in men.”

Adrian laughed bitterly. Tyler watched him carefully from across the table. Their breakfast laid out untouched between them.

“In any case, you sometimes get Magicals that want to use humans as target practice too. That. We do not take kindly to. Mackenzie will be brought to justice, that much I can promise you,” Adrian said with finality.

Tyler nodded in affirmation.

It had been two days since they left the city. Adrian had been silent and brooding since the beginning, but just as suddenly as it begun, the silence ended. They spent most of their time talking about everything and nothing. Surprisingly, Adrian had offered up information without Tyler having to pry. Tyler had almost regretted asking about his past, but seeing him now, he realized just how much Adrian had been dying to get the words off his chest. That he trusted Tyler enough to share such intimate details warmed him like nothing else.

Just thinking about how much they had bonded over the last few days made Tyler giddy. He didn’t think he would ever feel so happy, passionate, alive, again. He smiled. The way he was feeling was completely out of sync with their situation, but suspected it was the same for Adrian. Just concentrating on the here and now was enough.

It was even enough to make up for the ridiculously early hours Adrian had insisted they got up at.

They hadn’t heard from Halle or even the twins, but Adrian assured him that it was early. More likely than not, they would try to keep contact to an absolute minimum. Just because they couldn’t be traced by their magic didn’t mean they couldn’t be found through good old vigilance.

Just in case, they spent most of their time on the move, going from place to place around the general vicinity of the city in no discernible pattern. Adrian had been careful about that, they took whatever train or bus arrived first, or

fourth, or whatnot, leaving everything to chance. And without the talisman, there was nothing for Mackenzie to track them by.

Tyler pulled another pancake onto his plate. Between them, they had everything from a pancake mountain, to a loaded omelet, to a country breakfast, with a side of coffee.

At first, he had been a little nervous when Adrian brought up the discussion, but it became obvious that no one was paying them any mind. Despite the early hours, the place was packed. Mostly by truckers and road trippers passing through, if the vehicles parked outside were anything to go by. The weather had been very cooperative as well. Crisp spring air coupled with bright sunshine. No wonder the place was filled to the brim.

“This stuff is actually really good,” Adrian said in surprise as he dug into the omelet.

Tyler couldn’t help but chuckle. Adrian had an undeniable soft spot for diner fare. “With you growing up on Lynna’s food, I’m honestly surprised you love fast food so much.”

“Humph. Trust me, Lynna might’ve taught me to cook, but it was nothing like the stuff she made for you. That was her showing off, pure and simple. She only makes food like that during the holidays. And even then, only if she actually had time for it,” he said with a wince.

“Oh? And do you like this more than my cooking?” Tyler teased.

Adrian looked at him like a deer caught in headlights. He struggled for a moment, but said, “I refuse to comment.”

Tyler broke into a laugh first, and Adrian joined him soon after.

Despite the hard time he was giving Adrian, the food really wasn’t all that bad. Bad for you, but not *bad* tasting. Around them, lively conversation droned on, the waiter dropped by several times to refill their coffee as well. After they polished off most of their food, Adrian wandered off to speak with the waiter. Tyler watched them curiously. He assumed Adrian had gone to pay the bill, but apparently, that wasn’t it. He returned to their seats a few minutes later with a mischievous spark in his eyes.

“What?” Tyler asked suspiciously.

“There’s a train station two hours out from here and we can buy tickets in town,” he said in an excited rush.

Tyler had a sinking feeling he knew where this was going. “Seriously?”

“Yup.” Adrian shrugged, the grin never leaving his face. “I mean, we might as well.”

He sighed in resignation, he really didn’t want to, but he wasn’t going to ruin Adrian’s fun. If he had his bearings right, it was probably the very same train he had arrived in the city on. *It’ll be different this time. It’s going to be okay*, he assured himself.

Three hours later, they were waiting for it to arrive off to the side of nowhere. After a two hour bus ride, they were forced to wait on the hot platform. Adrian was nearly asleep by the time the train finally came into view.

They chose a seat at random, sitting facing each other with a small table between them. For the second time in his life, Tyler watched the world pass by through the dusty little window aboard the Seaside. They had been the only passengers waiting at the platform and two of the few scattered within the cart. There was more than enough room for them to stretch out if they wanted to.

Within a few minutes, he grew tired of the bland scenery and focused on Adrian instead. He had his face plastered against the glass, eyes fixated on the view. To Tyler, the look of childish glee on Adrian’s face was much more fascinating than whatever went on outside.

He couldn’t tell if it was because they were traveling in a different direction or because he was with Adrian. The haunting memories he had expected didn’t rear their ugly heads. The circumstances were so different that Tyler found that he didn’t even mind that it was the exact same train. Still, he didn’t try to think too hard on it.

An hour later, Tyler couldn’t keep the question down anymore and broke the silence, “Can I ask you something?”

Adrian caught his eye and comprehension dawned on his face. Tyler waited as Adrian pulled a small piece of paper out of his pocket and placed it on the table. His eyes turned vacant for a brief second before returning to normal. He nodded for Tyler to continue.

Tyler sighed, he wished he didn’t have to destroy the peaceful atmosphere. “Be honest with me. How worried are you about Lynna and them?”

Adrian didn’t answer right away and Tyler let the silence drag on between them. “It’s... weird. I really don’t think Mackenzie’s going to fight Lynna. She’ll keep her out of the way, but I don’t think she’ll harm her. She didn’t even hurt me.”

Tyler made a noncommittal sound in the back of his throat. Somehow, he couldn't bring himself to buy that.

"Look. I can't say I know what's going through Mackenzie's head, but if she wanted to use force, we'd all be dead already. She's... God. She's not a bad person. Just..." He looked at Tyler, lost for words. A million things flickered through his expressive eyes and Tyler wished the answer didn't matter, but it did.

"You think she'd be that considerate toward Halle and them too?"

"I don't know. But she could've killed me a thousand times over if she really wanted to. She had her chance with Halle too and never did anything. It almost felt like—" Adrian stopped midsentence, a look of comprehension settled over his features.

"Like?"

Adrian grew silent as he turned to glare out the window. Eventually, he said, "Like she was trying to hide. Like she was just trying to get it over with without drawing any more attention. Like she was *ashamed* of what she was doing."

"Adrian..." Tyler wanted to say more, but didn't know how to continue. Adrian had shut down, all his attention fixated on the window. No doubt trying to hold back from smashing it out and letting in some fresh air.

Tyler dropped the subject then and opted to watch the world blur by outside the window as well.

When the thoughts whirling around his mind refused to quiet down, he tried for a different topic. "Hey, what's up with that twin? The one that never speaks?"

"You mean Luke?" Adrian turned to him in surprise. The question had caught him so off guard that he replied, "He's... like a radio, a communication device. And he can't really turn it off. His consciousness is intertwined with the other side so he's never all here or there."

"Oh." He had no idea what Adrian meant by that.

"Sia's the only one that can sort of ground him to this side, but even then... Well. It's not really anything to worry about either. Luke's caught on the precipice, but he's survived this long, he'll be fine. And Sia, well, he is what he is, but he does what he can for Luke."

Tyler nodded. He got the gist of their situation at least. What it came down to, he realized, was that there were a lot more than meets the eye with all of them. Briefly, he wondered if Halle had a dark past too. He made a mental note to ask Halle sometime when he got the chance. *That really would make everyone...*

\*\*\*\*

Adrian froze where he stood at the sound of fluttering feathers. Out of the motel window, he glimpsed a dark shape take flight.

“Stay here!” he called out to Tyler as he raced out of the room, barely pausing long enough to shut the door behind him.

He was positive it was a raven, one of Halle’s favorite tricks for contacting other Magicals. As he cleared the front door, he prayed that his partner had the sense to send off decoys as well. There was no way that kind of spell would go unnoticed if Mackenzie was keeping a watchful eye over him.

Adrian followed the sound of wings and feathers down the road and onto a dirt path. Thankfully, the motel they wound up at was secluded. It was close enough to the town that they could get supplies, but far enough to cater mostly to travelers passing by. It was literally next to the train station and absolutely nothing else.

The moon floated high above the clouds, it had been a nice sunny day, but the clouds settled in as night fell. There were a few lamps near the station and motel, but most of the road and all of the surrounding area remained in the dark. He contemplated summoning a mage light, but decided against it. A quick spell to enhance his senses was enough for him to get his footing and while he didn’t know *where* he was headed, he was sure Halle wouldn’t leave him stranded.

With a final ruffle of feathers, the sound died down overhead. Adrian looked around him carefully. As far as he could tell, he was still on the dirt trail.

“Halle?” he whispered into the trees.

*God, how far did you go? You have any idea how long it took me to find you?* Halle’s disembodied voice whispered back harshly from above. It was marred and distorted, the bird’s vocal cords unaccustomed to mimicking human speech.

“Far enough. What’s going on?” he asked without preamble.

*We're screwed is what's going on. A rustle sounded from above and the voice was closer when it continued, You know the new moon's two nights away right? Everything's going crazy. The water's spewing out power like there's no tomorrow and the edge isn't even at its thinnest yet.*

“You can't seriously mean—”

*Oh, believe me, I wish I was joking too. Someone's aggravating it and my money's on our dear friend, Mackenzie. Leander knows that Lynna's missing and what's going on, but we're not getting any help. I'm honestly surprised he even listened to the whole story instead of throwing me out halfway through. Anyway, the best our great director was able to manage was to free up our team from the usual Enforcer duties.*

“Crap... we're not getting any other help at all are we,” Adrian stated rather than asked.

*Yeah, no. We're swamped in the city. Everyone that can weave or support or do anything at all has been forcefully enlisted to help deal with the untethered sources running amok. And before you ask, yes, that means we've got Cleaners milling about headquarters. Mackenzie's nowhere in sight though, but I'd be extra careful if I were you. It's lucky you're so far from the city, a pain for me, but good for you.*

“God, this is bad.” Adrian paced along the trail as he thought. He was strung tighter than a bow, and he felt like all his control was going to snap at the slightest disturbance. “Well, at least Tyler's doing okay even without the talisman. You think she's coming after Tyler herself?”

*She's not sitting on her ass is all I can tell you. I've got Sia and Luke on the lookout for her, but we ain't picking up a thing. If we lost her... Anyway, the trainees are helping the other divisions deal with all the powers overflowing from the edge, but the rest of the team's on standby.*

Adrian paused, surprised by how different Halle was from his normal self. “I see you've really taken to your new role as the leader.”

*Ha. Not like I've got a choice. Seniority and all that, besides, no one trusts Sia to lead and Charr would sooner shoot herself than do it.*

“Good point.” He rubbed tiredly at his face. “Well, in the meantime, keep me updated on what's going on.” As an afterthought, he added, “And for the love of God, use a damned cell phone next time.”

*Too unreliable. It's fine. I told you before, these guys don't leave a trail. And it's not like Mackenzie doesn't already know you're holed up somewhere away from the city. 'Sides, I sent out a bunch of 'em. Everyone's using these guys to communicate tonight. They're faster and more convenient than cells.*

“Fine, got it. We’ll just have to hold out until the new moon has passed.”

*Basically, yeah.* Another rustle and the flutter of wings made the raven’s position known. The dark shape landed a few feet away. *Adrian. Good luck. And make sure you stay alive.*

“You too.”

\*\*\*\*

It took him nearly an hour to find his way back to the motel. Halle had freed the raven the moment their conversation ended, leaving Adrian lost in the forest. The front desk was empty when he walked in which worked in his favor, and he snuck upstairs to his room.

Tyler yanked open the door before he even managed to pull the key card out of his pocket. “What the hell was that about?”

“Halle,” Adrian replied, still seething about being abandoned. Luckily, he’d noted the moon’s position beforehand and somehow managed with a mage light.

Tyler seemed to catch onto his mood quickly and let him into the room without further question. Adrian stumbled wearily to the foot of the bed where they’d dumped their bag and rummaged through it for some clean clothes. He sighed, exhaustion crashing through his body as the adrenaline started to fade.

“Let me just get cleaned up and we’ll talk.” He tried for a reassuring smile before disappearing behind the bathroom door.

He couldn’t face Tyler. Their whole plan had been hinging on getting help from people more powerful than themselves. People who could actually stand a chance against Mackenzie. And it wasn’t going to happen. They were alone in the middle of absolutely nowhere and their plan was in tatters.

Adrian bit back a groan as he started the shower. Telling Halle that they were going to hold out until the new moon ended was one thing, but actually managing that was something altogether different. *Impossible.*

He sighed again as he let the water cascade over his tired body. There were a million things that needed to be done, issues that demanded his attention,

problems that needed answers, and he had two days to come up with the perfect solution. *What would Lynna do?*

This time, he did groan. *Not get so deeply involved that he couldn't think straight.* He could practically hear her reprimanding him. If she wasn't convinced of the truth, she at least suspected it. He thought back to the night they had dinner at her house. *It can't happen,* he imagined her say.

The water had begun cooling by the time he turned off the tap and stepped out into the steaming room. If at all possible, he was even more confused than he had been before. He pushed all thoughts of Tyler out of his mind.

*Stay professional,* he repeated to himself as he quickly dressed. Nothing else would matter if they didn't manage to survive past the new moon. He reentered the room to see Tyler sprawled out on the far bed, eyes fixed on him despite the TV being on.

"You got an update on the situation from Halle?" Tyler asked, his eyes nearly glowing with hope.

"Yeah." He winced inwardly, he hated being the bringer of bad news, but like always, he didn't bother sugarcoating the truth either. "It's not good."

Adrian saw uncertainty flicker across Tyler's face briefly before he hid it. Tyler cocked his head to the side, silently waiting for him to continue. He did.

"I told you about the untethered sources of power and all that right? Well, Mackenzie's stirring up the biggest one in the city, probably the whole country, and doing a damned good job of it. She's practically jabbing at the beast and it's losing its temper," Adrian muttered darkly.

"Wha—why would she do that?"

"As a distraction, I'm guessing. More importantly, it means that no one's going to have time to spare for us. Or her."

Tyler caught on quickly. "We're on our own."

"Yes. We are." Adrian sank onto the other bed, not bothering to pull the sheets out from under him. A moment later, he felt the side dip where Tyler had joined him. "But Halle spoke with our boss, the head of the Enforcers, and he managed to free up our team from normal duties... We've got them as backup if nothing else."

"Your face is telling me that isn't going to be enough." Adrian closed his eyes as Tyler brushed a hand gently against his cheek. He stayed still and tried to enjoy the sensation.

Finally, when he couldn't allow the subject to go unaddressed any longer, he answered, "It's not."

He looked up sadly at Tyler. There wasn't anything else he could say and certainly nothing that would make a difference. He refused to make any false promises, Tyler deserved his honesty, even if it only brought pain.

\*\*\*\*

"Let's forget all that for now. We'll take it one step at a time..." Tyler murmured softly.

Adrian turned to him, fear and anticipation etched onto his face as plain as day. Tyler didn't give him time to reply before leaning down and taking a kiss. It was nothing like the quick kisses they shared in the past. It wasn't about comfort and affection this time. It was pure raw emotion, primal and instinctive.

Tyler grinned and pinned Adrian down against the bed with the weight of his body. He needed to feel, to stop thinking, and just *be*. He ground down hard against Adrian. Matching gasps sounded out at the same time. It was so much more than he could ever have hoped, yet not enough.

Adrian must have thought the same because he nipped hard at his lower lip. Tyler pulled back in surprise.

"Off, now." Whatever restraint Adrian had shown before was completely gone. He tugged at Tyler's shirt with one hand as he attempted to wriggle out of his own.

Grinning, he complied before ridding Adrian of his shirt and the rest of his clothes. He almost couldn't believe he had Adrian laid out naked in front of him. Not even his wildest fantasies could compare with reality. He ignored Adrian's obvious discomfort as he took his time memorizing every inch of skin. Adrian was a study in grace and power. He was all soft pale skin, strong lean muscles, and clean, sharp features. There was little doubt that he got a workout from his job. That was not the kind of definition one could build from going to the gym.

He'd know.

He wasn't shy by any means, but looking at Adrian, he couldn't help but feel lacking. There was only so much time he could put in at the gym in a week and working a desk job did not help matters.

“Tyler?”

“Yeah?” Tyler was startled out of his thoughts by Adrian’s voice.

Adrian reached up and rested a hand at the back of his neck. Without taking his eyes off Tyler’s, he ran his other hand teasingly down his bared chest, coming to rest against the waistband of his jeans. “Less thinking, more doing.”

Tyler groaned loudly. “You sure about that?” He couldn’t stop himself from asking. This was the furthest they had ever gone, further than he thought they’d ever get.

“Yeah” Adrian flushed as he replied. A small smile tugged at the edges of his lips and Tyler knew he was telling the truth. That he wasn’t being indulgent.

*He wants this as much as I do,* Tyler realized.

Quickly, he rid himself of what remained of his clothes. Hands roamed over his chest and drifted lower with each pass. Tyler gasped as Adrian closed his hand over his aching erection. The feel of Adrian’s hand made his head spin.

Tyler pressed one final kiss to Adrian’s lips before drifting lower to tease at the sensitive skin of his neck. He was rewarded with soft murmurs of approval. He kissed his way down Adrian’s chest, paying extra attention to his nipples. Below him, Adrian was writhing restlessly. If he wanted, Tyler was sure that he could pull out of the loose grip he had on him. He took the lack of fight as permission to continue what he was doing.

He traced the hard planes of Adrian’s toned stomach with his tongue. That Adrian was nearly hairless didn’t escape his notice either.

Catching Adrian’s eye, he licked his lips and smiled wolfishly.

He flicked his tongue out to lick at the tip of Adrian’s leaking cock. Adrian gasped and arched off the bed, his hands twined into Tyler’s hair almost immediately. He didn’t push or tug, simply rested them in place. The occasional flexing of his fingers gave away how tense he really was as Tyler swallowed the length and sucked hard.

After a few minutes of alternating between light brushes to draw out the anticipation, and hard sucks designed to wring out pleasure, he had Adrian bucking and thrashing wildly.

“Stop...” Adrian practically begged. Tyler paused what he was doing and studied him. Adrian was panting and breathless, chest undulating with the effort of dragging air into his lungs.

“You liked that?”

“Yes. And I’m going to come if you keep doing it.”

Tyler quirked an eyebrow. “And that’s a bad thing?”

“Don’t want to come yet.” Adrian struggled for a moment before propping himself up on one elbow. With a mischievous smirk, he pushed Tyler away and rolled over onto his stomach. There was no mistaking the invitation there. Tyler gulped audibly.

“Adrian—”

“If you ask me one more time if I’m sure or not, I will just tie you up and take what I want.”

Tyler couldn’t help but chuckle despite Adrian’s threatening tone. Trust him to get worked up over that of all things.

Reaching forward, Tyler ran a finger across Adrian’s lips and nearly swallowed his tongue when Adrian demonstrated his skill by laving and sucking at the digit. He almost regretted having to pull away, but the gleam of anticipation in Adrian’s eyes made it more bearable.

Unable to resist, he trailed his hand slowly down Adrian’s back and down to his ass, drawing out an irritated growl. Finally, he brushed the pad of his finger over the sensitive ring of muscle before putting any pressure into it. He’d managed to work his finger into Adrian before he realized what they forgot.

“Crap...” Tyler stopped what he was doing, unsure of how to proceed. Forget Mackenzie, Adrian might just kill him instead.

“What? You started this, don’t you dare stop,” Adrian practically whined.

“We don’t have condoms. Or lube,” Tyler mumbled awkwardly.

Adrian turned a murderous glare on him. Tyler suppressed a shiver, if looks could kill, he’d probably be dead by now. Adrian growled menacingly before pushing off the bed and stomping into the bathroom.

Tyler considered following him, but decided to stay put. The sound of things being shuffled around and drawers being opened and shut filtered into the room. Tyler didn’t know if he’d be grateful or scared if Adrian found what he thought he was looking for.

Another muffled bang later and Adrian emerged from the bathroom with a triumphant smirk. He held up two sealed condoms and a small bottle of lotion for Tyler to see.

Tyler gaped at him. “Seriously?”

“What? It’s a motel. Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve found stuff like this.” Adrian shrugged and tossed his found treasure onto the bed beside Tyler.

“Again, seriously?”

“Take it or leave it. It’s a one off deal.” Adrian stuck out his tongue mischievously. Tyler didn’t buy it for a second, but knew he’d never get to live it down either.

“Fine, you win. Now come here.”

Laughing, Adrian tackled Tyler onto the bed. It didn’t take long before Tyler had Adrian pinned again. They’d spent a long time on foreplay, and Adrian was eager to move things along.

He made a mental note to see just how far he could push the other man next time. *I’ll definitely make him beg*, Tyler promised himself with a smirk. But for now, he was more than willing to comply.

He prepped them quickly before pressing himself against Adrian. He felt more than heard Adrian sigh in contentment. Tyler reveled in the sensations, chest to back, hip to hip, with his cock resting against Adrian’s hole.

It was only when Adrian ground back against him that he finally conceded and pushed slowly into the tight heat. They both cried out in pleasure as Tyler seated himself.

“Yes…” Adrian hissed as he turned around as far as he could to look back at Tyler.

“So good,” he murmured in reply.

Slowly, they built up a rhythm and pushed closer to release. Tyler’s heart pounded in time with each thrust, every fiber of his being was vibrating with excitement. The sounds of their pleasure filled the room.

“I’m close, so close,” Adrian whispered breathlessly.

“Come for me,” Tyler growled, he had been waiting for those words. Bracing all of his weight on one arm, he reached around Adrian’s body to take hold of his leaking cock.

Adrian whimpered, “Yes. Oh God, yes.”

It didn’t take more than five seconds for Adrian to spill his seed over the bed and Tyler’s hand. With one final thrust, Tyler joined him in the abyss of

pleasure. They lay in a pile with Tyler on top until their breathing steadied to what could pass for normal.

“Amazing,” Adrian murmured with a sated smile on his face.

When they had both recovered, they went to clean up a little before collapsing in the unsullied bed. Tyler shifted onto his side and pulled Adrian against him. He loved that he’d reduced the normally composed man to this.

A part of him still couldn’t believe it. What had started as a simple game, a fun pastime, had turned out to be so much more. There was no denying that they connected. It was so much more, deeper, and more meaningful, than simple physical attraction. Tyler nuzzled Adrian’s neck, drawing a contented sigh from his lips.

He knew he’d fallen for Adrian.

No way in hell was he going to let anything happen to him. Tyler would never be able to live with himself. He was having a hard enough time swallowing the guilt of getting him involved in this mess already.

Assuming they got out of this alive, there was no way he was letting him go.

\*\*\*\*

Adrian had allowed Tyler to talk him into showering together the next morning in spite of the fact that the two of them could barely fit into the tiny shower stall.

“You know it sort of defeats the point if we can’t actually be in there at the same time,” Adrian said bemusedly as the hot water cascaded over his body. Tyler just shrugged as he lathered up Adrian’s hair. They had to settle for leaving the shower door open and angling the spray toward the wall to avoid flooding the room.

“We’ll manage,” Tyler insisted. They spent so much time working out the logistics that it was a wonder they had enough hot water left to actually wash up.

Adrian was lost in a world of his own as he packed their stuff, leaving only his marker and a few pieces of paper out. He was sore, but in all the right places. The night had been amazing and he had no idea how he was going to cope after it all ended.

All of a sudden, thunder crashed through the room. The rain that had pelted steadily against their window for the better part of the night had turned into a

full-blown storm. It looked like the world outside was drowning. *Not ominous at all*, he thought sarcastically.

Lightning flashed outside the window, much too close for comfort, and the lights flickered. Tyler poked his head out of the bathroom and looked at him worriedly. “You think the train is still running?”

“God, I hope so.” Adrian scrubbed at his face before walking to the window. He could barely make out the streetlights in the gloom let alone the train station down the road.

“Maybe we should just stay put. Or move to the town,” Tyler suggested softly.

Adrian glanced at him and thought through his options. He knew that when it came down to it, whether they switched locations or not really didn't matter anymore, but the thought of being trapped here made his stomach churn. He tried to settle his thoughts as best as he could before replying. “Let's check the station first. If we're stuck, the town might be a better option.”

“Fair enough. Not like we could get any food out here.”

Adrian couldn't help but smile at the comment. Tyler responded with a grin as they left the motel room behind. They approached the front desk just as another flash of lightning struck. He couldn't help but feel sorry for the poor woman half cowering behind the counter. She jumped noticeably as the boom of thunder followed close behind. So far as he had seen, they were the only ones staying there and she worked alone.

“Hi, we'd like to check out today,” Adrian spoke up as they stopped in front of her. She looked utterly terrified and glanced nervously between them and the door. For a second, he thought she was going to try and plead with them to stay.

“Ah, yes. Right away. J-just give me one moment,” she stuttered as she turned to her computer.

“Awful weather we've got going on here, don't you think?”

“Y-yeah. I don't think I've seen a storm this bad since I was a little girl. Business was bad enough as it was, this being a small stop and all, and now this. Gosh, sorry, I shouldn't be complaining like this.” She sighed dramatically, but continued on. “Never liked storms you know, the thunder especially... I hate the thunder.”

Adrian couldn't think of what to say to calm the poor woman so he opted for silence.

“There, all done.” She glanced at him with a nervous smile. “Well, I say that, but you know the train’s delayed indefinitely right? The bus might still be running, but you’ll have to get into town first. Should I call a cab for you?”

“Yes, that would be great.” Tyler cut in before Adrian could say anything. He glared at his companion, but Tyler refused to meet his eyes.

“Oh gr-great.” She tried and failed to hide a wince as the wind whipped the tree branches against the building. The sounds of the storm was only increasing in volume.

Adrian didn’t want to admit it, but it was probably a good idea to grab a cab into town. He wandered over to the front door as Tyler chatted with the woman to pass the time. From the snippets of the conversation he could pick up, two cabs were on their way. One for them and one for her.

Adrian closed his eyes and let his other senses loose. Power vibrated through the air and wound around him. It was normal for the power in the air to rise during the phase of the new moon, but this was on a whole different scale. Even indoors, the air was electric. He shuddered involuntarily and quickly opened his eyes again. Most of it was pulsing off in waves from the direction of the city and the waters.

Absently, he traced a finger against the marker he had tucked into his pocket. A little insurance was better than nothing at all. He wished he could forget about all the darkness that loomed outside. It wasn’t safe, but it had been serene. *The calm before the storm, literally.*

Tyler joined him a little later.

“Find out anything interesting?” Adrian asked.

“Not much. At least she didn’t try to gloss things over or recommend places we could go sightsee.”

“In this weather? She’d be insane if she thinks anyone would go out willingly.”

“Exactly...” Tyler agreed. “Is it me or is the rain coming down even stronger?”

“It’s the waters, it’s throwing everything off-balance.”

Tyler turned to him with a look of surprise. “That’s possible?”

“Stronger sources can interfere with weaker ones, but not the other way around. The rules that apply to us are the same ones that had always applied to the sources.”

Tyler nodded at his answer, but made no comment.

Adrian didn't spare it any more thought and returned to staring out the door. The unnaturally high level of power that coursed through the air was making him edgy. Even as his source filtered through his body, he couldn't help but pick up the undercurrents of something so much bigger, stronger, untouchable. How was it even possible to feel so powerful and helpless at the same time?

"Think the cab will take long to arrive?" Tyler asked, cutting off his train of thought.

Adrian blinked slowly as he turned his focus back onto the real world. He grinned as he caught the pale glare of lights through the gloom. "Nope."

As if on cue, two cabs pulled into view almost simultaneously. Grabbing their stuff, they made their way to the first. Despite their best efforts, by the time they were seated safely inside, they were both soaked through.

\*\*\*\*

Adrian was utterly exhausted. What should have been a thirty-minute car ride had turned into a three hour long ordeal. It had gotten so bad at one point that the driver gave up and turned off the counter. *Better safe than sorry*. The car crawled along the road for fear of getting caught in something unexpected. A thick layer of water was already pooling on the ground. The driver let them off in front of a hotel at the center of the town. Adrian paid him triple the amount that was last displayed.

The building was an old wooden structure, rustic without looking dated. The inside was furnished like every other place, but with more wood. They stayed in the room long enough to change into something dry. After that, it had been straight to lunch. Taking the advice of an employee, they made a run for the small restaurant across the street.

Surprisingly, the place was packed with people. It felt like the entire town was gathered there to chat and gossip. The waitress found them a small table near the back and left them with two glasses of water, a single menu, and an apologetic smile as she rushed off to serve others.

"With weather like this, you'd think this place would be empty," Tyler mused out loud as he scanned the crowd. The diner was filled with local families and what appeared to be a large gathering of elderly women by the front windows.

“I’d say the owner was thinking the same.” Adrian glanced at the lone waitress, she was obviously struggling to keep up. He had been just as surprised as Tyler when they first walked in, but the conversations surrounding them sounded normal enough. Parents chatted and children weaved between tables. Laughter filled the air and drove out the dark gloom outside. “School’s probably closed. You have to admit, it’s got a nice atmosphere.”

“Yeah. Homey. You know, I always wondered if I’d like small towns like this more than the city,” Tyler remarked.

“Oh? And do you?”

“Too soon to decide. There’s a sense of community here you don’t get in the big cities... But for an outsider to fit in, that’s a whole different matter.” He smiled dryly as he snatched up the menu.

Adrian cocked his head to the side in question, but Tyler didn’t seem to notice. “Personally I like the convenience of large cities.”

Tyler snorted at his response. Adrian was about to retort when the waitress returned with a notepad.

“What can I get for you?” she asked in a cheery tone.

Tyler ordered for the two of them. “He’ll have the club sandwich, and I’ll have the Reuben.” Tyler grinned as he handed the menu back to her. “Oh, and a garden salad and water for both of us.”

“Seriously?” Adrian asked as she left. He was sorely tempted to roll his eyes at the choices Tyler made.

“Oh come on, it doesn’t hurt to eat properly once in a while.”

“We were eating properly,” he huffed, indignant. He had gone out of his way to dig out the recipes from Lynna that he hadn’t bothered with for years. It wasn’t his fault that places like these served the best burgers and fries. He made a mental note to not let Tyler order at the next place.

Grudgingly, they called a truce when the waitress returned with their food. Adrian stared out the window for most of the meal. He had no idea if birds could even fly around in pouring rain, but he needed to contact Halle again.

*Human technology it is,* he decided.

With nothing else to do, they returned to their lodgings. Adrian tried to relax, but a combination of pent up energy and nerves was making it impossible to stay still.

He studied Tyler out of the corner of his eye. He was lying in bed and staring at the TV. Some drama or other was playing, but Adrian couldn't focus on it. Too many things vied for attention in his mind. At the foremost was the fact that he'd slept with Tyler.

Adrian swallowed loudly. *Did it even matter that Tyler had been the one to make the first move?* Probably not. He hadn't done anything to discourage him. He shut his eyes as flashes of the night before played out in his mind's eye. He was more than aware of the stinging charge in the air and was certain it wasn't from the power coursing through the air. He knew he couldn't stay in that room any longer without it ending up as a repeat of the night before.

"I'm going to try and call Halle," he declared as he stood and stretched.

"In this weather?" Tyler asked, surprised.

"Not the way he contacted me," he smiled halfheartedly and pointed to his cell phone. "Hopefully, he has the damn thing on him."

Adrian slumped against the door as soon as it shut behind him. Luckily, the hallway was devoid of people. He needed the extra few minutes to collect his thoughts. Tyler was an assignment and a human, he'd broken at least two laws so far, not counting the liberties he'd taken with the case.

So far, Halle knew and Lynna at least suspected. *Two too many.* He shuddered as he forced his body to obey and move. He had to work off the excess energy, the stress of the job, the not knowing what was happening in the city. The uncertainty of their situation, was making it impossible to think straight. Too many things were going on at the same time and Adrian found it impossible to focus on any one thing.

*One thing at a time, start with what you can do,* he replayed Lynna's advice in his mind.

He dialed Halle's number and waited impatiently. After the fifth ring, it clicked over to voice mail and Adrian hung up with a frustrated growl. He paced the short length of the hallway as he contemplated his choices, not that he had many.

After another few seconds of indecision, he dialed Sia's number. He didn't need to like the man to still trust him. Where the job was concerned anyway. Adrian counted off each ring of the phone before the call was cut off and left unanswered. He studied the signal on his cell, but found no problems there. At that point, he knew that the best case scenario was that they were both too busy to answer his calls. He refused to consider the alternative.

With a final resigned sigh, he put the phone away and stalked to the window at the end of the hall. The four-story building offered a clear view into the town, not that he could see far with the rain. Even with the streetlamps on, the fog that had descended swallowed most of the light.

He didn't need to see into the real world or the other side to know the location of the waters. Waves of power pulsed and crashed against the shore, aggravating and driving mad the sources on land. He was sure the crazed weather was a result of the building power looking for an outlet.

Thunder and lightning broke through the gloom once in a while, but there didn't seem to be any danger to the town. Adrian alternated between watching and pacing the hall for what felt like hours, but was probably no more than one.

*Focus on the now and worry about the consequences later.* With the decision made, he returned to their room. For now, they just needed to make it through the next day and a half.

\*\*\*\*

He flopped down onto the empty bed, not bothering to pull the blanket free before turning off the lights. Tyler was out cold and Adrian had nothing more than his own thoughts for company. It was the first time since they'd gotten together that Adrian chose to sleep alone. The recent events bounced around his head, refusing to quiet down and let him rest.

He had tried contacting Halle and Sia twice more throughout the day, and both times, had gotten no answer. He was at his wits' end and would have called Leander if he had the man's number.

And in spite of the rain, the two of them had wound up taking a stroll through the town before dinner. The workers there had been kind enough to lend them an umbrella each. Being confined to a minuscule room for hours on end had frayed both of their nerves to the breaking point.

While that had been enough for Tyler, the surplus of power flowing through the air only made it worse for him. He parted ways with Tyler again at the hotel room to wander the town. He took all the precautions he dared to and left specific instructions for Tyler to follow in case anything were to happen.

He tugged at the blanket in frustration before turning on his side so he could see Tyler's sleeping form. In the darkness of the night, it was impossible to *not* think of the future. Something he had vehemently refused to do the whole day.

*Too close.* He was way, way too close. And it was much too late to do anything about it now. Not without doing a ton more damage than good. *No matter how much more it'll hurt later on,* he decided.

His mind kept drifting to the conversation they'd had the first night. Adrian still couldn't believe he'd spilled his guts out like that. He never said a word about it to anyone before, not even Halle knew how he wound up in Lynna's care before joining up with the Enforcers himself. Just that his past had played a direct part in his choice. It was almost like an out-of-body experience, like he was watching it happen to someone else. But he had to admit, if only to himself, that it did feel nice to finally tell someone. Even if he'd left out the most important part. *Tyler doesn't need to know,* Adrian reminded himself once more. He prayed to God that it was true.

He buried his face into the pillow. He couldn't even blame stress for his lapse in judgment. The Magicals would do whatever it took to keep their existence a secret, for good reason too. He, of all people, would know. He knew down in his bones that he didn't resent his father, but there was no way he would ever have been able to forgive him either. The status quo really was the best choice. His father didn't even know he existed anymore, and he never had to see the man again. It was a win-win situation.

*And once this was over, Tyler wouldn't remember any of it either.*

He curled up, hugging his legs tightly to his chest. He gritted his teeth against the stab of pain that shot through his chest and bit back the tears that threatened to fall. Regardless of what happened, there wasn't going to be a future. *Not for them.*

Once again, he wondered just how things had spiraled so out of control. First, the update from Halle with nothing but bad news. Then the waters going out of control and spewing power everywhere. Not to mention that Mackenzie was out there hunting for Tyler. And yet, all he could focus on was the fact that he was going to lose Tyler regardless of the outcome.

And all the while, his mind taunted him with the knowledge that the joke was once again on him.

\*\*\*\*\*

He woke up the next morning with a startled cry. Adrian almost never dreamt, and when he did, it always threw him off. Instinctively, he turned toward the other bed, but Tyler wasn't there. His heart beat out a mad rhythm

as he tried to locate him. It took less than five minutes for him to confirm that he wasn't in the bathroom or anywhere else in the hotel.

*He wouldn't leave without saying anything...* Adrian had to sit down before he fell down. Horror and fear twisted in his gut. He scrambled to dig out his marker as years of experience took over. The need to take action was the only thing keeping him from panicking completely.

*No, no, no, no, no...*

Adrian dove for the edge as soon as the last line was made, not even bothering to struggle with the locked window. There was more than enough power cackling through the stale air of the room. Soon, it fell away as he combed along the other side. A small tendril of power was all the confirmation he needed. There was no labyrinth, no attempt to hide, no nothing.

Mackenzie had come for Tyler, and he had slept right through it. Tyler had needed him and he'd let him down. He had let his emotions get in the way, and Tyler had paid for it.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 6

Tyler woke up with a start as the bed beneath him lurched and the smell of sulfur invaded his nose. He gagged involuntarily, but managed not to choke too badly. *No, not a bed.* Tyler's blood ran cold as he took in the sight before him. He was on a small wooden boat of some sort with two cloaked men holding oars and rowing slowly. It took him a few seconds to realize they weren't men so much as the remains of men. One was in front and the other behind, but neither showed any signs of noticing his wakened state. He stared at the one standing at the back as his guts twisted in disgust. It was mostly rotted to the bone, more skeleton than anything else. Their oars cut through the waters roughly, sending up a spray with each swipe.

The skies and the waters were both pitch-black. The only sliver of light, if it could even be called that, came from the four lanterns sitting on the sides of the boat. The more Tyler looked, the more horrifically *wrong* they appeared. Rather than a typical glass lantern, they appeared to be brass cages, each holding a small black figure prisoner. The creatures struggled and crawled around the base and bars, looking for a way out. Their eyes glowed an incandescent purple and cast writhing black shadows all around. Aside from the glowing eyes and soot black skin, they looked like small humanoids with sickening protrusions on their backs and sides.

It was another dream. Only, it wasn't. He knew that now. Tyler looked over the water and tried to see into the distance, but there was nothing but blackness. He was a prisoner on the boat and unless he planned on drowning himself, there was no way out. The boat rocked along silently, carrying him to some unknown destination.

Regret and despair threatened to overtake him. Despite everything Adrian had given up for him, he still gotten himself captured. *Maybe it was meant to be*, he thought in resignation. Had it been hopeless from the start? Maybe if he died, Mackenzie would spare everyone else. *Better than nothing right?* He almost laughed at the thought. Him, a martyr, it was a ridiculous notion.

*And what about Adrian?*

He winced at the reminder. He had finally found something, someone worth living for, and now he was going to die. He almost wished that she'd found him sooner, killed him sooner, before he'd gone to that shop and found out a whole

other world existed. Maybe then he wouldn't have to live with the guilt of leaving Adrian behind. He knew what guilt could do and wished he could have spared Adrian from it.

Sighing, he turned his attention back to the imprisoned creatures. Half-formed thoughts and ideas whirled in his mind. The whole time he was taking in his situation, the skeletons never so much as glanced at him. *Maybe...*

He grabbed the nearest cage and smashed it against the bottom of the boat. He was just as surprised as the small creature inside when the bars bent enough to allow the thing to twist its way out. The rowers had turned black unseeing eyes to him, but it was already too late. The thing was free and after a tense moment of it staring blindingly into his eyes, it made its way to the first skeleton. It clawed its way up the tattered cloak as the skeleton stared on and Tyler had to turn away as it began burrowing into its chest. He couldn't quite tune out the sounds of it tearing through rotted flesh and weakened bones.

If he was going to die anyway, he would do it on his own terms.

\*\*\*\*

Adrian knew exactly what it meant for Tyler to have disappeared last night. He cursed himself as he waited, he should've known, should've expected it even, but didn't. Somewhere deep inside, a little part of him somehow expected that everything would work out. They'd made it this far and only had one more day to go.

Mackenzie hadn't even tried to hide her presence. She didn't need to. She had what she wanted, and he'd been stupid enough not to even notice.

At least the storm had let up enough that the train was back on schedule. He bought the first ticket back to the city and tried to come up with some semblance of a plan. He had two hours to kill before the train arrived and that still left him with an hour-and-a-half ride. The waiting nearly killed him. At that moment, he would've given anything to have Lynna's spell at his disposal.

Any attempt he made at contacting his team had been in vain. He abandoned all efforts to stay hidden and walked the edge trying to find Halle. Or anyone. Dread pooled like acid in his stomach as the minutes dragged by. Was Lynna really all right? Would Mackenzie kill his teammates? Would Leander stand by and let her do whatever she wanted?

*No.* He had to believe or there would be no hope left for any of them.

He took only what he needed and abandoned the rest of their stuff at the hotel after tipping the clerk to keep it for a few days. He could only pray that he would have the chance to come back for it later.

By the time he arrived at his stop on the outskirts of the city, it was nearing one in the afternoon. His stomach protested at the prospect of food, but the last thing he needed was to collapse from hunger. His pockets were filled with prepared spells, none of which he actually expected to get any use out of. Still, it had given him something to do and kept his thoughts away from the inevitable. He swore as he waited for the bus to take him to the city center, two weeks of careful watch, and for what? It was obvious now that his success had been due entirely to her lack of action.

*She could have done this at any time, but didn't.* She had been biding her time and he'd grown careless. That they had no idea who they had been up against was no excuse.

He made sure to stay hidden as he arrived near the waters. Even if the power was more or less dormant during the day, Enforcers milled about in disguise, keeping watch over it just in case. He scanned the shoreline carefully, but saw no one from his team or any others that he was willing to trust.

Halle had said that they were exempt from their duties, but going there had been worth a try. The waters had been his only lead. He turned away, muttering and swearing the whole time. His options were looking grimmer by the second.

Even if Leander knew the situation, he doubted the other Enforcers had been informed. And Halle had said there were Cleaners at the headquarters. Going there was out of the question.

*So where?*

\*\*\*\*\*

Tyler had no idea what was going on anymore. He sat with his back against one side of the boat and simply waited for something to happen. The possessed skeleton had dumped its oar in the boat before prying open the remaining cages and freeing its kin. The first one freed had burrowed into the other skeleton while the remaining two poked and prodded at him with tiny claws. The boat continued on its way to an unknown location. He really had no idea if freeing the things had been his best bet, but at least they didn't seem to want to do him any immediate harm.

He studied the one that was clambering all over his legs. The things had leathery skin, but otherwise felt insubstantial. They weren't trying to hurt him

that much he realized early on, but they also refused to leave him alone. The light of their eyes was even more disturbing now that they appeared to be brighter than they had before. It probably didn't help that the two skeletons now had glowing eyes where no eyes had been before. Just thinking about the logistics of what was going on was making him queasy.

Where they had been silent before, they now chattered between themselves in some language that sounded like radio static mixed with clattering teeth and ringing bells. All said, nothing had changed, he was still surrounded by darkness.

All of a sudden, he felt a sharp tug on his right hand. One of the creatures was trying to pull his arm behind him, and he had no choice but to twist around to avoid damage to his shoulder. It was a lot stronger than he had expected given the state he had found it in. Seemingly satisfied with his change in position, it let go and hopped onto the side of the boat and gestured toward the surface of the water. Tyler stared at it for a moment before leaning cautiously over the side and peering down.

He gasped in shock at what he saw. An entire city sprawled beneath the surface, mostly hidden by the black water, but occasionally illuminated by the same otherworldly purple as the glow of the creatures' eyes. Belatedly, he realized that the boat was no longer moving.

For a moment, nothing happened, but all at once, the city below came to life. Shades of purple bloomed in the darkness, twisting and moving, and dark shapes followed close behind. The creature beside him poked him again before jumping into the water and sinking below the surface.

"You want me to..." Tyler trailed off. The other tugged at his arm as well before jumping in. He was pretty sure that he would drown even if they didn't. He continued to stare, unsure of what he should do, when hands pulled and heaved him onto his feet.

Fear slammed through him and he barely had time to gasp a final breath before he was thrown overboard. Panic and adrenaline flooded his body as the icy waters entombed him, forcing the air from his lungs. The skeletons let go at the same moment as the small creatures crawled out of their hosts' eye socket. Tyler gasped involuntarily and precious air escaped his lungs. He struggled blindly, expecting to drown there and then, but instead of water, breathable air entered his lungs. He looked around wildly, but could barely see a thing aside from the streaking glows of purple.

Vaguely, he got the sense that he was sinking, but it was impossible to tell in the darkness. He stilled once he was finally out of energy, unsure of what to do. Had he broken out of the confines of Mackenzie's spell only to be lost forever in the bottom of the ocean?

"Adrian..." he called out, his voice thick with despair and desperation. He knew there wouldn't be a response, but the ensuing silence still made his heart ache. He was well and truly alone.

Another sharp tug pulled him out of his stupor. Another small creature, or was it the same one as before, was looking at him. The glare of light from its eyes blinded him before it turned its gaze downward. It tugged at his arm again, trying to pull him down toward the city below. With no other options in sight, Tyler swam in the direction it indicated. He studied the small creature as he swam after it. Its eyes illuminated the black waters much better than it did the boat. It was obvious now that the things were meant for water, the protrusions on its back and sides acted like fins as it sliced through the murky depths. And if his eyes weren't playing tricks on him, they were also bigger now than they were on land, as though they had expanded after soaking up water.

The city itself was more like blocks of stone stacked on top of one another. What purpose they really served, he couldn't tell, but the creatures swam around the structures and gathered around him. Tyler could barely keep his eyes open now with the intensity of light surrounding him on all sides. The further down he went, the brighter the light became as the creatures amassed to watch him.

He felt like an animal on display. *Great, out of the pot and into the fire*, he thought dryly. At least the things didn't look like they intended to kill him. Yet. And the one that had been pulling him along had let go of his arm, only looking behind it once in a while to make sure he was still following. He made a mental note to ask Adrian what the things were. Assuming he made it out of there alive.

He followed it until it stopped in front of a particularly large block. Three other creatures swam around while one stopped to *speak* with the one leading him. Tyler took the time to examine his new surroundings. He was deep underwater, but didn't feel any crushing pressure. There was also the disturbing fact that he was alive and *breathing* at all.

Down here, there was enough purple light for him to see clearly, especially since most of the things seemed to have lost interest in watching him. The

blocks were perfectly geometrical, he couldn't help but wonder how the little things were able to make them. *Like that was the weirdest thing about this whole situation*, he thought.

Just as the conversation going on in front of him seemed to be drawing to a close, violent clattering and screeching static rose up from above. He looked up in time to see a caped monstrosity gliding through the water toward him. He stayed frozen to the spot even as the two small creatures tugged sharply on his arms.

The thing coming for him bore a multitude of heads, all of which seemed to be connected to the body by long cable like necks. It was nothing like the skeletal creatures on the boat, but somehow, the resemblance was there. He gaped openmouthed at the thing barreling down toward him in mounting terror as he realized that what he had initially thought of as a cape were billowing flaps of rotting flesh. The last he saw of the demonic form was a whiplike arm extended toward him as the lights blinked out of existence, plunging his world back into darkness just as a vicelike grip closed on his throat.

\*\*\*\*

He swore as he ran, it was still early in the night. Barely seven, but the untethered powers were already overflowing from the edge. Somehow, Adrian doubted the edge meant anything anymore, seeing as the divide was worn to the breaking point. Uncontrollable waves of power crashed over the city in time with the stormy waves of the waters. No doubt every Magical was gathered there to try and contain it. At this rate, they were going to see a disaster that could potentially wipe the city off the map.

He had no choice but to swallow his guilt. *They don't need me*, he repeated to himself as he made his way across town while avoiding every Magical in sight. There was no telling who was friend or foe anymore, and he didn't have the time to check. He was cut off from Lynna, from his team, from everyone he could rely on for help, but one. It was a long shot, but he was desperate enough to try.

*Mackenzie wouldn't risk making an enemy out of her, and she wouldn't have enlisted his help if she was on Mackenzie's side*, he reasoned. She was the only hope he had left. He'd already wasted the day trying to locate Mackenzie and Tyler on his own and found nothing at all. And most importantly, he knew where Evelyn would be.

He made a quick stop to prepare for the inevitable fight before working his way to her shop. He turned to the sky mournfully, he had no chance of fighting Mackenzie fair and square. Even with the power thrumming through the air, he still wouldn't stand a chance. As much as he hated it, he wasn't above using whatever tricks he could employ if it gave him even the slightest chance of saving Tyler.

With that decided, he hid himself in an alley while he gathered up power. He was a long way off and had no time or patience to wait for the stupid bus. He wrapped the gathered power around him and took to the skies. He just had to pray no humans saw him flying through the air. Or Magicals for that matter.

It was a disorienting flight with all the distortions caused by the massive amount of power saturating the city. *At least there's no need to worry about running out of power*, he thought grimly. He dropped onto the ground as he neared his destination, the landing was less than graceful, and ended with him crashing into an alley. It took him a minute to get his bearings again and detach himself from the rough brick wall. Another minute wasted on surveying his surroundings revealed that he wasn't where he expected to be.

"Come on, Adrian," he mumbled, concentrating hard. He wished Halle was with him. This did *not* come naturally to him. Trying to pick out a single source of power in a massive cauldron like this took more out of him than he would ever willingly admit. Finally, he managed to locate Evelyn and ran toward her location.

At least he crashed close to his destination.

The streets were dark and there wasn't a person in sight. The veil was much stronger than the one erected last month, its influence more of a compulsion this time. Adrian skidded to a stop in the middle of a lifeless street and banged loudly on the door of the shop. The windows were dark, but Adrian *knew* she was inside.

A soft click rang out in the silent air and the handle gave way. Adrian entered the shop without ceremony and went straight for the stairs without bothering to turn on the lights. The sight that greeted him left him stunned at the top of the steps. Evelyn was waiting for him. There was no other way to describe the scene laid out before him.

Twelve candles flickered on the floor, each casting glows in varying shades of purple over the wooden surfaces. The room had been emptied out, the entirety of the floor taken over by glowing silver markings that shivered and

danced in the uneven light. She was sitting on the floor in the very center of the room, dressed in a rich purple gown with brilliant silver trim. It took a moment for Adrian to realize that the markings were drifting freely from her gown to the floor and back again.

The sheer amount of power gathered around her made his hackles rise. He broke out of his trance when she turned unseeing eyes to him. They were the color of liquid silver, only reflecting the otherworldly candlelight.

“You know I do not make a habit of involving myself with matters of the other side.” She turned her eyes away from him and placed her palms on the floor. The silver markings immediately began to gather around, forming into strings of unintelligible writing.

Adrian could only nod. Her presence was overwhelming, hidden from the outside by a powerful field, but inside, he was at its mercy. With her day to day mannerism and strange quirks, he had almost forgotten her standing in the Magical world. Facing her now, he realized once more what it meant to hold rank as a member of the council.

“Good. Because this is the first and last time I will ever do this for you,” she stated matter-of-factly. He shivered at her icy tone.

Once all the markings that littered the floor were gathered beneath her hands, she jerked her head slightly, silently commanding him to step closer. He did so without word or question. Adrian stood stock-still five paces from her, the markings were vibrating with barely contained power. Her gown was more silver than purple now.

With a single uttered word, the flames flared up brilliantly before going out completely. In that moment, the silver markings were freed from their confinements and exploded out into the world. He only caught brief glimpses as they wove across the edge, leaving marks and drawing boundaries as they went.

“Follow them, they will be your guide to her.”

“Thank you, Evelyn.” Adrian inclined his head slightly in a show of appreciation.

“Do not thank me yet, child. Not until this is over.” She smiled sadly, the silver bled out of her eyes slowly along with the residual magic clinging onto her robe.

“No, you’ve done more for me than I had any right to ask for.”

“All I have done, was bring this disaster down onto you.” She sighed, pain, regret, and unspoken words weighed heavily on her voice. “Go. Stop her before it’s too late.”

With a final nod of acknowledgement, he raced down the stairs and out the door, he barely caught her whispered parting words and a final “For everyone’s sake.”

It took all of thirty seconds for Adrian to work out how the guides worked. And what he actually had to do in order to keep up with them, even if they left traces for him to follow and doubled back for him if he fell too far behind.

They didn’t move in a straight line, rather, they were searching as they went. Worse, they didn’t stay on either side, but preferred to cross over whenever they found it convenient. Which was rarely when he would consider it such.

He clung desperately to the roof of the building he’d just walked off of and hauled himself back on top of it, swearing the whole time. He’d crossed back from the other side just in time to step onto thin air. His silvery guide didn’t even pause. He was beginning to think that he did thank Evelyn a little too soon.

Despite what she had said, he didn’t begrudge her for involving him in the assignment. *It wouldn’t be right.*

*More importantly...*

She had been wearing a mage robe, a piece of clothing woven from, and containing a tethered source of power, usually the owner’s. As if he hadn’t been painfully aware of just how powerless he was already. That thing was the only known way for a source to be brought over into the physical world, and even then, it was purely lore. It was supposed to have been nothing more than a legend. And now he’d not only seen one for himself, he’d seen its power used right before his eyes.

For the second time in as many weeks, Adrian realized just how lacking he was in his knowledge. The robe meant that Evelyn had been able to draw the power she needed to weave her spell without having to cross over the edge. It had been amazing to behold.

He shook his head viciously as he continued on his way. This was no time to be awestruck. *Concentrate.* He had already spent more than fifteen minutes traversing through the city. If her spell was having this much trouble finding Mackenzie, he would have had no chance on his own.

Eventually, he crossed over the edge and arrived at the outskirts of the city. Wherever he was now, the streets were as dark and lifeless as the city center. Except, the veil's influence didn't reach this far out. He barely had time to get his bearings before the silvery strands shot off again.

He was close. He could feel it. The air was oppressive and overladen, almost crushing with unrestrained power of a single source. *And something else.* Neither of which was related to the water. He didn't have the time or the inclination to figure out what at that moment.

He closed his eyes to help himself focus. This was it. The guide was leading him deeper and deeper into the other side. A protective labyrinth to keep the uninvited out of the way had spanned the entire length of the edge there. Luckily, it didn't even seem to faze Evelyn's spell as it flew through the twists and turns. For once, he was glad the edge was worn as thin as it was because he had no time to weave something to tether himself to it.

The labyrinth had exited into an open area. A giant room of sorts with no way out, or he had assumed until the guide unraveled an entire section to reveal a wrought iron gate.

The only piece of normality in the twisted domain of magic.

The room was pulsating like it was alive the whole time he stood there. Actually, he was fairly sure it *was* alive because the walls bled, oozing deep-purple liquid and puffs of musky air. He did not want to know where he was and couldn't have been more grateful when his guide unraveled the spell.

He stepped through the gate behind his guide, it was obvious where to go by that point. Mackenzie was emitting so much hostility and power that he could feel her from the other side.

\*\*\*\*

Tyler pushed himself off the ground slowly. His whole body ached and his stiff joints protested loudly as he tried to stand. Tall trees and wild undergrowth flanked the two sides of the dirt path he was lying on. Whatever that monstrosity was, it had brought and left him there. He took in the sight before him slowly as he brushed as much dirt off of himself as he could.

The place looked almost normal, but *off*. It could pass for reality as he knew it, if not for the subtle wrongness that he couldn't define. Trees and shrubs flanked both sides of the road and the sun shone down from high up in the sky. Despite the normality of the scene, the place creeped him out immensely. *And*

*that's why I know this wasn't real.* He shuddered. His gaze swept over his surroundings one last time before he set off down the path.

After an hour or so, he was certain that he was in some sort of maze. There were way too many twists and turns to be normal and the paths branched out and reconnected at arbitrary intervals. Trying to walk off the path had proven to be impossible, whatever the shrubs were, he'd found out the hard way that they were covered in sharp barb thorns. The trees also prevented him from seeing anything other than the path in front and the sky above.

Was he supposed to find his way out? He had no idea, the place was so completely different from any of the others. *She's toying with me*, he thought angrily. *Maybe this was her way of showing him that she was the one in control.*

"What do you want with me?" he screamed up to the sky in the hopes that she was watching his struggle. Minutes passed and the silence stayed unbroken. Tyler kicked at the ground, sending up a cloud of dust and loose pebbles. He wanted out, he wanted something to happen, he just wanted it to end.

"Do what you want, but I'm not just going to roll over and die! Not anymore!" He punctuated his point by hurling a rock against the nearest tree. "They'll stop you, you know. You're not getting away."

He desperately hoped it was true. Failing that, he prayed that she would let it end with just his death and leave the others unharmed.

Tyler seethed as he took off down the path again. He felt like a fool screaming at nothing, but on the off chance that she was secretly there, well, he'd make his last stand. He finally found some purpose to live for and he'd be damned if he let her end it all now.

The world around him grew more twisted the further he walked. What had started off ordinary had taken on a familiar, gruesome sheen. The trees twitched, grunted and groaned, as though they were alive and in pain. Dark shapes flitted and slithered from shadow to shadow. He would catch glimpses of them out of the corner of his eye, but he could never get a good look at them.

Overhead, dark-violet clouds blocked out any natural light and cast dark-crimson shadows. The longer he watched, the surer he was that the shadows were alive. Where the crimson coiled up the trunks of the trees, the latter emitted sounds of agony.

The canopy of sounds alone was enough to make him shake. He shook his head violently to clear it and concentrated on what was in front of him. There

was no point in getting distracted by the things going on around him. Ironically, the dirt path was the only thing that appeared to be untouched by the twisted horror. Ignoring the screaming vegetation the best he could, he powered on.

Time dragged on, but since the initial shift, nothing else seemed to change. He was no closer to finding the exit to the maze than he was hours ago, but aside from that, everything was going reasonably well.

“Don’t think about it...” he whispered under his breath. *Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.*

\*\*\*\*

Adrian followed the guide through one final jump and wound up face-to-face with Mackenzie. She took a surprised step back, shock evident on her face. The two of them stood staring at one another in tense silence. He did his best to think of some plan or other without taking his attention off her.

Evelyn’s guide had bled away like quicksilver after they circled around her in three circular turns, leaving the two of them alone in the middle of a graveyard. Overhead, ancient lamps cast a dim dirty-yellow light over everything. It was barely enough to offer him a rough visual of his immediate surroundings. They were on a paved pathway with gravestones on both sides. Adrian was relatively certain that he’d caught her on the way to somewhere.

She hadn’t changed at all since the last time they’d met. She wore her pale-brown hair in a bun and her clothes were dark, made for blending into the night. In the distorted light, her eyes shone like gold with a light of their own.

As they stood studying each other warily, Evelyn’s parting words ricocheted around Adrian’s mind. *For we shall hear as the angels sing and watch as the devils dance, but once the bell chimes three...* He forced the words out of his mind, he couldn’t afford to be distracted by them.

This was by far, *the* most surreal situation he had ever been faced with. He couldn’t believe that he was facing down one of the most powerful Magicals to grace his time. And in a cemetery of all places. If that wasn’t an omen, he didn’t know what was.

*One breath, focus...*

“Don’t even think about it,” she whispered softly.

Mackenzie didn’t make any move as far as he could tell, but all of a sudden, his knees buckled and he collapsed into a heap on the gravelly floor. Searing pain boiled through his blood, making him gasp.

“Please don’t get in my way. I really don’t want to hurt you,” she said gently. Her tone gave him pause, it almost sounded like she was pleading with him.

“What did you do to Lynna?” Adrian asked hoarsely as he tried to coordinate his limbs enough to stand again.

She walked toward him as she spoke, “I assure you, she’s completely fine.”

“What do you mean fine? Where is she?” The mounting fear gave him the last boost of energy he needed. He pushed off his knees and stood with one hand braced against his thigh, glaring at her the whole while.

As if a switch had been triggered, her entire demeanor changed. Adrian took an involuntary step back. Gone was the remorse, only to be replaced by indignant anger.

“Really now, do you mean to accuse me of harming her? No, she’s perfectly well. She’s resting in my home as we speak.” She shrugged nonchalantly, as though her words made perfect sense.

“And the rest of the team?”

“None the worse for wear.” She paused and the air around them shifted again. “Well, except for that pair of twins. It was truly unfortunate. You have to believe me, I really didn’t realize there were two before the spell swallowed one.”

Adrian felt the blood drain from his face at the words. Sia and Luke, she’d killed one of them. He lunged at her, blinded by helpless rage. Another sharp stab of pain raced through his veins, boiling through his blood and sending him crumbling to the ground once more. She looked down at him, her face twisted by misery, and unshed tears made her gold eyes glow.

Somewhere far away, a clock chimed, Adrian counted eleven gongs in total. *One hour till midnight.* He was running out of time and options. Not that he had much of either to begin with. He ground his teeth to keep from crying out in pain as he tried to get off the ground. This spell was different from the last, more than pain itself, there was something else laced into it. The more he struggled, the harder it constricted him, keeping him in place.

“I really don’t want to have to do this to you.” Mackenzie shook her head morosely. As if the whole thing wasn’t screwed up enough, she looked genuinely regretful. “Oh Adrian, I really didn’t want things to come to this.

You were her favorite you know. I begged Lynna to take you off this case, but you just wouldn't give up. And when she showed up all of a sudden, raging and yelling... I really was hoping to end this quietly."

"Mackenzie, please. Stop this insanity. Let Lynna and Tyler go!" Adrian pleaded. He had to talk reason into her.

"No, I would never hurt Lynna or the others, not more than necessary, but Tyler..." She shook her head again. "It's too late for that now."

"Why are you doing this?" Adrian asked desperately. "I know what that accident took from you, but it was just an accident! It had nothing to do with Tyler."

Minutes ticked by and for a painful moment, Adrian thought that she was simply going to walk away and leave him sprawled on the ground. And there wouldn't be a thing he could do to stop her. Whatever spell she used, it had been woven into his very flesh.

Slowly, in the unnatural silence, he realized the air was growing colder by the second. Icy cold terror overtook him as he looked up at her in abject horror. It was the thing he noticed earlier. A massive ball of power was approaching the edge. A separate entity from the waters and just as powerful, she had the thing tethered to her and was guiding it toward the edge.

He trembled helplessly as realization dawned. *She was drawing her source to her.*

If she saw the shift in him, she made no mention of it. "Let me ask you something Adrian. Do you think this world is just?"

Adrian knew that he had to distract her. *Maybe someone would notice what was going on and raise the alarm.* God, he hoped so. "No, I never did. We make do with what we can. You two taught me that."

"That's right. I'm just making do. If there's no grand design, it's up to us to fend for ourselves. We are our own justice."

"No, you're just twisting the words to suit yourself. You know this is wrong!"

"And who decided what is right or wrong? Or the laws? Why must we obey them?" she asked as she raised her face and her arms to the sky, as if begging the heavens for an answer.

"Why blame Tyler?" Adrian whispered quietly. A small voice in the back of his mind screamed for him to stop, that he was better off not knowing.

“Because he’s guilty,” she said with finality. Adrian couldn’t look away from her shining eyes. Gone was the sadness and anger, all that remained now was the certainty of someone who truly believed that their actions were righteous.

“He just happened to survive the accident! There’s no guilt in that, just coincidence,” he tried again. Maybe his words would sink in if he repeated them enough. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the fluxing, immaterial shape approaching as clear as day. The chain glinted ominously with every movement it made.

“No. He is guilty. Perhaps I had gone about this whole thing wrong.” To his surprise, she knelt on the gravel floor in front of him. “Let me tell you a story.”

\*\*\*\*

Tyler studied the large open courtyard. He was more shocked by his own lack of surprise than the sight itself. A castle-like structure loomed close by, just past the huge garden that spanned out from the gate where he stood. It was tall with sharp spires that seemed to pierce the clouds. The walls were completely black save for the occasional shot of crimson that twisted its way up and back into the skies.

All around the premises, a huge stone wall enclosed everything within. Everything looked safe enough, all except the violet hue now reflected by the plants in front of him. He was really starting to hate that color.

Somehow, he’d found his way out of the increasingly crazy maze and through the front gates of a twisted medieval compound. He took one cautious step after another and braced himself for what might pop up.

The moment he stepped through the dividing wall and into the garden, the ground beneath his feet fell apart. Tyler reeled back and nearly fell over, expecting to plunge into oblivion, but that didn’t happen. He stood gulping madly as his heart beat out a wild rhythm. He stared uncomprehendingly at the ground beneath his feet. Where he stood, the ground would fragment and break into pieces, shuffle around, and rearrange itself into malformed monstrosities. Some unseen force kept him from falling into the gaps between pieces of supposedly solid ground, but he couldn’t tell if that was a blessing or a curse.

Willing himself to look away, he took a tentative step forward. The ground and his immediate surroundings fell apart and reappeared in warped mockeries of its original form. With no idea what was going on or what to do about it,

Tyler simply walked toward the castle. *So far, so good*, he concentrated on taking steady breaths and ignored the dizzying changes around him.

When he made it to the castle gates, he paused. Up close, the structure was as imposing as it was beautiful. Upon closer inspection, the stone walls were a deep burgundy and decorated with vibrant blue carvings. Dark enough to appear as black in the horrid lighting.

He braced himself as he took the first step up the steep stone stairway and waited. And waited. And nothing happened. Tyler risked a glance back, a trail of gruesome twisted horrors marked the way he'd come, but the castle itself seemed to be immune to the distortion. He walked up the rest of the steps and trailed a hand along the smooth door. He pushed at it, but it didn't budge. There was no handle for him to pull on either.

*Of course it wouldn't be that easy*, he thought bitterly.

Compulsively, he glanced back. The twisted mass of distortions grew, cannibalizing the untouched parts around it. With a shudder, he redoubled his efforts to find a way into the castle.

Finally, he hit upon something that gave way and the door swung open. The interior was unlit, but Tyler entered it none the less. He took a small step forward and whirled around when the door slammed shut behind him, sealing him inside. Without warning, flames ignited all around him. Every candle and wall torch had come to life with a wailing screech that made his ears ring.

Rather than casting a flickering light to illuminate their surroundings, the flames shot straight up. They were tall pillars of unsteady crimson light that barely reached the wall and floor around them, but scorched the high ceiling above. Unnatural black spots flickered in and out of existence. Tyler watched, mesmerized by the sight. With each passing second, he became surer of what they were. He *wasn't* imagining it. There were faces in the flames. Their expressions twisted into openmouthed screams as they spiraled upward only to be crushed against the stone ceiling.

It took all of his willpower to tear his eyes away from the flames. He needed to figure out a plan to get out of there. Somehow, he doubted that *dying* was the correct answer anymore. He had broken out of the confines of her spell once, he could do it again.

*He had to.*

Unfortunately, every door he tried had been locked save for a select few. He shuddered at the similarity between this dream and the one of hell. *No, they're not the same*, he assured himself. He needed to find differences, not similarities.

He ran through each detail he knew. She didn't intend for him to explore the place and was guiding him somewhere. The castle held large open rooms and halls covered in doors. So far, the whole place had been utterly deserted. And despite the overwhelming feeling of being isolated, lost in the massive structure forever, nothing really happened.

After walking for what felt like hours, he had explored up to the third floor before being forced downward again.

Tyler stared into the darkness helplessly. The only door that opened now led into a spiral stairwell leading into the basement. With no other options in sight, he began his descent. As he neared the bottom of the steps, the stench of rot and decay wafted up from below. The stink was overpowering and wrapped around him like viscous sludge. He stood rooted to the spot, propped up against the wall by one hand. Wave upon wave of nausea roiled through him.

"Fuck..." he cursed under his breath. He did not want to know what Mackenzie had planned for him this time, but he knew he was going to find out soon.

He had come too far to go back the way he'd come. Not to mention that the torches that illuminated his path had been steadily going out behind him with wails of anguish that made him cringe no matter how many times he's heard them. No, he had no choice but to continue forward.

Tyler strained to see into the darkness, for some sign, any sign, of what was giving off the smell. The flames gave nothing away. All he could make out was that the steps ended in a long stone hallway that continued on forever.

Each step was agony, he choked on each breath, unable to take in the sickening stench. As he arrived at the very bottom, he realized the hall was covered with doors, one set between each torch.

He fought hard against the mounting frustration. He really didn't want to test each door. *Was there really no way out?* The only thing he was going to accomplish was delivering himself to her on a silver platter. *There had to be another loophole.* He just had to find it.

Overhead, something with more legs than he was comfortable with scuttled across the wall, mostly hidden in darkness between two flaming torches. He

shuddered violently. For the first time since setting foot in the basement, he noticed that it wasn't nearly as abandoned as the higher levels. The inhabitants of the castle seemed to prefer the damp basement and its revolting stench.

"Big surprise there," he mumbled. At least he was growing numb toward the smell now. It still made him sick, but it wasn't overpowering his ability to think. He rubbed tiredly at his eyes. Standing there like an idiot wasn't going to accomplish anything. Choking in a few more breaths, he tried the doors closest to him.

They didn't budge. Before long, he found himself back on the task of trying every door in sight.

At the seventy-eighth door, he noticed that the design had changed. The smooth stone was replaced by jagged unpolished rock. The eighty-fourth door was the one that opened. Tyler wished he hadn't found it the moment it swung inward. The rancid stench of decay permeated the air, smothering him with brutal intensity. Through the disorienting haze of revulsion, he realized that this was where the smell was coming from.

Like before, flames flared into life in front of him and died out behind. With a horrified jolt, he realized that the walls weren't walls. Or at least not of stone like the rest of the castle. Mangled and mutilated human bodies were piled and smashed together, the torches stuck into crevices between various body parts. Only the ceiling remained unchanged. Most of the bodies were still intact, and most of them still had flesh attached to the bones. He stared between the walls and the torches. *No... God no.*

He broke down in tears right there and then. If it was mind games Mackenzie wanted to play, she was winning.

*No, don't give up,* some inner voice screamed at him.

He owed it to Adrian to try. He owed it to all of them to survive the night.

Tyler gagged and emptied his stomach onto the floor between choked gasps and wretched sobs. His stomach continued to spasm and revolt even when there was nothing left. Before long, he was only spitting out blood. He clutched at his abdomen, the dry heaves sending shocks of pain throughout his body.

*Adrian...* When he had no feeling and no tears left, he risked glancing around. It wasn't a room like he originally thought, but another hallway. *I'm sorry...* He stood up despondently and walked while doing his best not to look at the walls or think about the torches.

Another door stood at the end. Tyler checked it impassively. It opened without a sound and he stepped through. He stared at the new area with a renewed sense of disgusted horror. He clutched at his stomach as he fought the nausea. He was sure that if he hadn't hurled in the last room, he would have just done it here instead. The walls were lined with cages and cells crammed full of mutilated corpses and the occasional living human.

At least that's what he assumed they were. He refused to look hard enough or close enough to tell for sure. Most were dressed in rags and covered in bandages. All of them had flesh torn out of parts of their bodies and bore angry scars and gaping wounds alike. They were also screaming at him in languages he couldn't understand.

He whirled around wildly, looking for what, he wasn't sure. The cages had no doors and the space between the metal bars was barely wide enough to fit an arm through. He stared on helplessly as they reached out toward him.

Fear and revulsion gave him the strength to continue forward. Logically, he knew the next area was going to be worse, but at the moment, he didn't care. He couldn't stay there. A jagged doorway half-hidden behind one of the cages was the only way out as far as he could tell. He steeled himself and braced against the groping hands and forced his way past.

His eyes darted from place to place, trying to take it all in. Instead of terror, he was seized by a growing numbness. It *was* worse. So much more that when feeling returned, he found himself clawing at the door that separated him from the previous room. He had been completely wrong when he thought he had run out of tears to cry.

Glass displays held his friends and acquaintances captive. From people he only knew in passing to ones that he had known for years. Some glared at him in silent accusation while others screamed and hurled insults his way. Most of it was jumbled together into incoherent slurs, but he couldn't tune it all out.

"This is all your fault!" His boss screamed at him while pounding on the glass to his left. He stared as others joined him at the front where he could see.

"None of this would be happening if you weren't here!" another coworker joined in.

"If only we never met, I wouldn't be here suffering like this..." someone sobbed.

"Die—I wish you had just died!" Lauren glared at him in accusation.

He staggered away from the door in defeat. His hands were bloody from his efforts, but the door didn't so much as budge. He stared intently at the floor. *It's not real, they're not real, they're not really here*, he willed himself to believe. And the absolute worst, the voices that made the accusations feel like simple words, were the ones begging for help.

"Please, do something!" His neighbor pleaded with him from farther ahead.

"Save us, help us!" A man cried out from his left.

"Let us go, please, please..."

"Please..." A mother and child huddled at the very back.

Tyler crumbled to the ground as his knees gave out. He didn't know how long he stayed kneeling in the center of that room, but it was long enough that they had grown mostly silent. Loud breathing, quiet sobs, and a wildly beating heart were all he could hear.

He chanced a look toward the other side, where the door to the next area stood. He wanted so much to be free of the room, but dreaded what lay beyond.

The yelling renewed when he attempted to stand. Tyler couldn't hear the words anymore, having grown numb all over again. The only thing he wasn't deaf to was the anger and pain, fear and desperation, hurt and suffering.

Tyler stumbled his way to the next door on unsteady legs. He was shaking violently. Their words wound around his heart and squeezed it to bursting. He couldn't look at any of them and like a coward, slipped by them. *Could this possibly be real?* Did Mackenzie steal them away just to place them in his wretched nightmare?

He didn't know. It didn't matter. He pushed open the door softly and left them behind.

And came face to face with Adrian. Tyler stared in wide-eyed horror. *Oh God, oh God, oh God.*

"Adrian!" he yelled out and ran toward the holding cell. He realized too late that his lover wasn't alone. *No, please...*

"Leave..." Adrian whispered softly. His arms were wrapped around Lynna's unmoving body. Blood soaked through her thin jacket, three deep gashes ran down the length of her chest. Scattered around the cell were Halle, Sia, Luke, and four others Tyler didn't recognize.

“No... Adrian.” He tugged violently at the iron bars, but they didn’t so much as rattle.

“Leave!” For the first time since he entered, Adrian looked up at him. His face was contorted into a vicious sneer. Blood was smeared on one side of his face, but Tyler could tell it wasn’t his.

“Adrian, please—” He was cut off when Adrian screamed. There were no words, only raw pain.

“Go away! It’s all your fault—Lynna—she’s...” Adrian cried, his whole body shook with his sobs. He pulled Lynna’s lifeless body tighter to him and in a desperate voice, he begged, “Please. Just, leave.”

“I’m sorry,” a soft voice answered from the cell on the adjacent wall. Tyler turned slowly, he knew that voice, and dreaded the words like nothing else. “It’s all my fault...”

He froze as he stared into the far cell. He hadn’t noticed at first, all his attention had been on Adrian alone. His parents sat huddled in the back corner. His father was watching him with pure hatred while his mother cried. A wave of dizziness had him collapsing onto the floor.

“If only he had never been born,” she wept. “We wouldn’t have had to suffer...”

“It doesn’t matter. They’re all dead now,” Adrian answered, voice hoarse and broken. He was speaking to Tyler, but kept his eyes on Lynna as he rocked her slowly. At that moment, Tyler knew that it really had been all his fault. *If only I’d died...*

Darkness swallowed everything until all that remained were Tyler and the occupants of the two cells.

“If only we’d never met... if only you’d died back then...” Adrian turned sad, lifeless eyes on him. The innocent spark Tyler had so loved was gone, shattered forever by the death that lay at his feet. “You took everything from me.”

Tyler turned away, unable to bear seeing the sadness that marred Adrian’s once brilliant eyes. Everything that had happened, everything they accused him of, it was all true. There was nothing he could say in his own defense.

“I’m sorry...”

Adrian shook his head gently. There wouldn’t be any forgiveness. Things were never going to be okay again.

Slowly, a serpentine shadow crept out of the ground and wound itself around Tyler's body. A million tiny claws dug into his skin and held him captive. He didn't fight or struggle. Adrian was right, it didn't matter anymore. He laughed, voice cracking with hysterics. Fighting was how he got them all into that situation in the first place.

He didn't make a sound as the claws dug under his skin and tore his flesh apart one tiny bit at a time. It was his fault for getting them involved in the first place, Adrian had every right to blame him for their deaths. The physical pain barely registered over the agony that crushed his heart.

\*\*\*\*

*She really is mad*, Adrian thought as she finished recounting the events to him. A litany of contradictions jumped out at him, each raising a warning flag, but she didn't seem to notice any of them.

"Mackenzie, please, I'm begging you to stop. This can't go on, you know that." He looked at her intently and let the truth of his feelings show through his eyes. *If only things had been different*. It was all too easy to relate to her pain.

Deep down, he knew exactly how much she hurt.

"I'm sorry, I can't have you getting in my way." She patted his arm gently before getting up. "I don't expect you to understand, but know that this is something I have to do."

Adrian wanted to cry. Whether it was to cry at her to stop or cry for her pain, he didn't know. Her voice was so laden with regret and sadness, it tore his heart apart. She was lost, and without any light or hope, began falling down a dark path.

*She's not evil.*

"I'm sorry..." he whispered to her retreating form.

He knew that going in. He had known her at her brightest, before the tragedy tore her family from her, before the grief had consumed her.

*She's just looking for an answer.*

He sagged onto the ground, the bonds that held him captive loosened with each step she took. He watched her walk away with tears running down his face. His vision blurred.

He knew what he had to do.

Swallowing the rest of his sobs, he bit his lips to help himself concentrate. Adrian directed all the power he could muster to one of his prepared spells when the binding was at its weakest. Her spell singed his bones and fell away.

Everything happened in a blur of motion. She wheeled around as she felt her spell break, eyes flashing angrily. But the moment of hesitation was all he needed. Adrian reached out toward her and three gunshots shattered the night air.

\*\*\*\*

Tyler bolted upright at the piercing sounds. A wave of dizziness and confusion washed over him as he tried to process what was going on. He had been in that dungeon with Adrian and his parents and now... he was somewhere else. *Was this a part of her plan?* He couldn't tell. There was grass under him and shapes darker than the moonless night scattered around. He clutched at his pounding head, the remnants of the nightmare ricocheted around in his mind.

*Adrian...*

"It's not real..." he whispered softly to himself. *It couldn't be.*

Carefully, he stood. The black shadows didn't stir and he risked a touch. His fingers connected with cold smooth stone. Tyler blinked rapidly, his eyes slowly adjusted to the lack of light.

It was a gravestone. Tyler yanked his hand back as if he had been burned. He looked around carefully, rows upon rows of headstones surrounded him. Off in the distance dim light shone through the dark. He had a sinking feeling that was where the explosive sound had come from.

Knowing he could not stay where he was, he picked his way through the cemetery toward it. Dread pooled in his stomach as he drew nearer.

His head still pounded, but he ignored it like he ignored the millions of tiny cuts that decorated his skin and the metallic taste of blood in his mouth. Yet more proof of the nightmare. *Just keep going.*

At least it gave him some goal to work toward.

As he neared, he caught the sound of muffled crying. He picked up his pace. *It can't be...* His legs shook with the effort, but he pushed on.

"Adrian?" Tyler yelled out. His breath caught when the sound of crying cut off abruptly and a shadowy figure shifted. If Lynna was dead, he'd let Adrian kill him himself.

“Tyler?” Adrian’s voice replied uncertainly.

Tyler broke out in a run, all the pain and discomfort forgotten the moment he heard Adrian’s voice. He needed to get to him. He forced the memories of the nightmare away. *It couldn’t be real.* He just needed some proof to verify what he *knew*.

He zoned in on Adrian’s form, he was facing him while leaning against a lamppost. He was alone. Relief shot through Tyler as he reached him.

They collapsed into each other’s arms.

“What happen—” The word died down in his throat as he looked over Adrian’s shoulder. All the blood drained from his face as he caught the sight of a figure lying on the ground with a pool of blood under them. “Who...”

*It can’t be.* It wasn’t.

Adrian shook his head gently without looking at him and spoke one simple word, “Mackenzie.”

Tyler didn’t know what to say. *Was it finally over? Was this real then?*

Silently, Adrian stood and tugged lightly on Tyler’s arm. Tyler let himself be led to where Mackenzie lay. He couldn’t quite stifle the gasp of shock that escaped him. Without a word, Adrian pulled out the gun and held it out for Tyler to see. All the while, he never looked up from the lifeless body at their feet.

“You mean you...” The body was blatant proof of what Adrian had done, and yet, the thought of Adrian having killed someone with a gun didn’t feel real. Tyler wrapped his arms around him gently.

Adrian broke down in another fit of sobs. “It’s so stupid. All the power in the world and she... God. It’s so unfair, but I couldn’t let her... I killed her like an animal.”

“You saved me.”

“I didn’t know what to do. I tried to, I really tried, but I-I couldn’t touch her with my magic and you were...” Adrian reached up to clutch desperately at Tyler, pressing their bodies together with all the force he could muster. “It was supposed to be a last resort. I—she... Halle was right you know. She could’ve killed me anytime she wanted. Just tonight—she could have... but she didn’t.”

Tyler eased them away from the body carefully. He let Adrian talk, cry, and mumble, through all the things he had to say. He listened quietly, knowing that it wasn’t his place to judge.

“She’s not—God... she was such a kind woman. And that accident—it all fell apart. I-I can’t—I never intended for things to end like this...”

Tyler held Adrian tightly as Adrian poured out his soul. He laughed humorlessly, his voice cracked and drifted toward hysterics. Tyler stroked his back soothingly and waited for him to compose himself again.

“What it came down to was that she hesitated and I didn’t.”

Tyler continued to hold him even as the final admission was put to words.

“I wanted to save her...”

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 7

*The witch's ball shall end.* Adrian glared at his reflection like it had wronged him in unforgiveable ways. Evelyn's words still haunted him. The look on Mackenzie's face as the bullets pierced her, he wasn't sure which of them had been more surprised. And he had stood by helplessly as she died.

It took all his willpower to not smash the bathroom mirror in disgust. His reflection sneered mockingly at him. He *tried*. He had gathered all the power around him and wove one spell after another, but nothing worked.

Just as he knew that his magic wouldn't have been able to harm her, it hadn't been able to save her either. There hadn't been a thing he could do as the life bled out of her. He clenched at his arms hard enough to bruise.

He bit at his lips hard, trying to suppress the pain and regret that threatened to consume him.

*She had smiled at him.*

He had to cash in two weeks' worth of vacation days to try and get himself back into some semblance of functional order.

Lucky for them all, the massive source she had bound to her obediently returned to the other side after her death. Adrian got the distinctive feeling that the thing had a will of its own and it had not wanted to be brought over. Even more amazing was that the water's agitation had faded with it.

*It had been a coincidence.* At least, that's what it read on the official file. Adrian didn't buy it for a second and neither did half the people who raised their hands in agreement. Mackenzie was dead and condemned, no one wanted to dredge up the full extent of her actions.

He shook his head and sat down heavily on the hard motel chair. Nothing had changed and the world continued to turn. The sunny weather clashed hard against his dark mood.

He sighed tiredly, he could only keep reality at bay for so long.

Charr was the first to find them. To her credit, she hadn't said a thing about the state they were in. Adrian didn't remember much over the haze of shock, but he did remember being held by Tyler. He hadn't done much at all to help, but she had been efficient even without him. By the time others arrived, she had gathered all the information she needed to accurately relay the situation.

Leander's arrival with a mass of Enforcers in tow was the last thing he remembered of the night.

He'd woken up on Lynna's couch with the whole division crowded around him. *All except Sia and Luke.*

Adrian hated himself for the relief he felt when it was confirmed that the only ones harmed had been the twins. Luke had tried to catch Mackenzie unaware while Sia distracted her, only to be crushed by her spell. And Sia landed himself in the hospital when he attacked her in a blind rage. He had paid for it with his left arm.

Everyone save Charr and Terra had been bound and out cold when they were found in Mackenzie's house. Leander had to personally unweave the spells she had cast over them. Adrian had snorted and laughed with Halle as his partner relayed the news to him, but it had sounded strained even to him.

He knew he wasn't at fault, but the guilt still ate away at him. As soon as the last report had been made, he'd made himself scarce. Only three people knew where he was and two of them knew better than to disturb him. The third, he almost wished would drop in unannounced. It had been almost two weeks since he'd last seen Tyler. They had been parted abruptly that night and hadn't had a chance to meet up since. He was certain that it was mostly his fault.

A week of justifying and defending himself to the council had been brutal on his nerves. Lynna had been sympathetic, even supportive, despite the fact that he had murdered her best friend. It was a kindness he was never going to forget and to which he had been infinitely grateful. He had been a gibbering mess on the verge of hysteria when he made his initial report. Their director had been stern, but no less supportive of his actions. And while Evelyn hadn't appeared to defend him in person, she had sent a lengthy letter to the council recounting what she had known of the situation and its inevitable resolution. With their backing and the mounting evidence against Mackenzie, there was little room left for argument.

For those that listened to reason anyway. The council had been divided on the case, some in favor of his actions and others critical. In the end, the consensus was that Adrian had taken necessary action to stop Mackenzie, even with the result as it was.

He laughed bitterly. The reminder of how utterly helpless he had been that night was like a punch to the gut, and the whole scene was stuck on repeat in his mind. She had become so unhinged by grief that she had turned Renegade,

and he hadn't so much as noticed. He had only thought of Tyler and left the rest of the team vulnerable in Lynna's absence. He had no doubt that Halle had done his best, but none of that changed the fact that Luke was dead and Sia maimed.

He forced himself back onto his legs and walked out of the room with all the determination he could muster. It was a stupid and impulsive, but somehow, he had wound up returning to the same hotel by the train station he and Tyler took refuge in just before the new moon.

*Because that had been where he and Tyler first...*

Adrian screwed his eyes shut tight. The memory warmed his heart, but at the same time, chilled his bones to ice. All too soon, he found himself in the lobby waiting for the taxi to arrive.

He sighed miserably and pretended not to notice the worried look from the woman behind the counter. She'd been more than a little surprised when he showed up again, but didn't ask any questions. He offered her a weak smile and went back to staring out the window.

There had been so much more to their world than even he was aware of. He'd taken pride in his source, his magic, his ability to weave spells, but when it really mattered, he hadn't been able to do a damned thing with it. All that power at their disposal and all it took was a simple human weapon.

*That's why there is no choice to make.*

He buried his face in his hands. *Not yet. Don't think about it yet. Let's take things one step at a time...* First, he was going to pick up the stuff he'd been forced to leave behind all those weeks ago. Then he would go back and speak with Lynna. About what, he wasn't sure, but he knew he had to see her and put that night to rest.

And only then, would he allow himself to think about the rest. To finish what he started over a month ago.

\*\*\*\*

Tyler paced anxiously through his apartment. Now that he was finally back in his own home, the whole thing felt like some crazed dream. *But it was all real*, he reminded himself. It didn't help that he hadn't seen Adrian since that night two excruciatingly long weeks ago.

Despite not having to worry about the threat to his life anymore, he had quietly stayed at Adrian's home until Halle cornered him outside his office one

day, and practically dragged him home. It was pathetic, but he couldn't reconcile being safe with never seeing Adrian again. *This can't be the end.* He wouldn't let it.

With a determined shake of his head, he dumped his stuff in his room and made his way to the kitchen. He knew where Adrian lived, and failing that, he could always go to that wretched building that was his headquarters.

Rummaging through the fridge and salvaging what he could while straightening out his pantry gave him something to do while his mind drifted.

Tyler was in the midst of cooking up dinner when his phone rang. His heart raced and he tore out of the kitchen and ran straight for the sound. It took him a few seconds to dig the thing out and the disappointment upon seeing the display was crushing. Against his better judgment, he answered the call anyway.

"Hi Mom," he said in greeting.

"Hello Tyler, how are you?" she asked in an unusually chipper tone.

"Good enough. How about you guys?" He made his way back to the kitchen with his cell held awkwardly between his shoulder and ear. Thankfully, nothing had burnt while he was away.

"Great. Are you still busy over there?"

*One guess what she wants.* "No, not too busy. I, uh, moved back into my apartment already. It wasn't as big of a deal as we all thought."

"My, that's great. And what about that *friend* of yours?"

Tyler snorted and nearly dropped the phone into his pasta. *Subtle Mom, real subtle.* "Fine."

The line went quiet for a few seconds and he hoped desperately that she wouldn't decide to pry. "So you're not living with your friend anymore? Would it be all right for your father and I to drop by for a few days to see you? It's been so long since we've all been together."

That had been the question he was expecting. "Yeah, sure. When did you want to come?"

"Oh, well, we'll be there around noon tomorrow."

This time, he did drop the phone. Luckily, it had bounced off the stove to land relatively unscathed on the tiled floor. He swore and scrabbled for his phone. "Mom!"

“I know it’s sudden, but we are heading to a conference in Shalandra anyway and this is on the way.”

He sighed. Five seconds in and he was already feeling the twinge of regret. “Fine.”

“Good. We’ll see you in... eighteen hours. Good night, sweetheart.”

“Good night, Mother.” He hung up the phone with another sigh and quickly fished his overcooked pasta out of the water. He fixed up the rest of his meal on autopilot, his mind occupied by other matters.

It was insane. He couldn’t believe that he willingly agreed to meet them. Except, he knew exactly why he’d done it. It was the loneliness talking. *You’ve only known the guy for a month and you’re already pining after him like a lovesick puppy.*

He stomped out the thought as soon as it had formed. *No, not the only reason.* He had to talk to his parents about the accident. He was through running away from the problem. It was time to come clean about the therapy, the guilt, and the nightmares. About everything that had happened except Adrian.

He was going to *live* his life on his own terms.

\*\*\*\*

“You’re being a complete fool,” Lynna stated matter-of-factly.

Adrian glanced at her in surprise, he barely had the door open before she spoke. He hadn’t even entered the room yet for God’s sake. “I don’t know what you mean.”

She didn’t reply and Adrian took it as an invitation to enter the room. He hovered behind the unoccupied chair for a few seconds before hesitantly taking a seat. Given the state of the room, it had to have been deliberate. She had been expecting him.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re letting the assignment hang unfinished, or do I have to beat it out of you?”

“I’m getting to it. I’m back now aren’t I?” he answered defiantly.

“You’re stalling,” she stared at him and he couldn’t help but look away. She was right and she knew it. Worse still, he had to confront it now.

“No! I’m—”

She cut him off with an impatient wave of her hand. “Why?”

He glared uselessly at the messy stacks of paper littering her desk. He couldn’t think of anything useful to say. “What do you mean *why*?”

Lynna leaned back, studying him with the kind of intensity that made hardened criminals sweat. The air grew thick and pulsed with each breath she took. He had been half expecting her to secure the room, but the sudden change still made him jump. “Adrian. Don’t play games with me. What do you want?”

“I don’t—”

“Answer me,” she snapped.

Adrian cringed, but quickly composed himself again. “I...” He struggled to keep his face impassive. It felt like even the tiniest flicker of emotion would crack his mask of calm open. He was not going to cry in front of her. “I’m sorry okay? I will finish the job. Just—just give me some time. Please.”

“Adrian. Look at me.”

He did.

The irritation from earlier was gone, only to be replaced by something else. It was foreign and altogether unexpected given their topic. She was the embodiment of sympathy, maybe even understanding. Adrian’s breath caught in his throat. “I asked what you wanted to do, not what you planned to do.”

The shock on his face must have been evident because she sighed and raked her fingers through her hair. His surprise doubled when he realized that she was just as nervous and uncomfortable as him. *She was the one who put up the field...*

“Listen to me. I know you’re scared, I know you want to do the right thing, but the truth is, there is no right answer. Not here at least. There’s just what you want and what they want.”

*They, not us. What did she want?* “I—”

“Quiet, I’m not done yet.” She motioned deliberately with her hands. “I mean, look at yourself. You’re more miserable now than you were during that whole damned affair. And don’t bother making excuses, I’ve seen the two of you together. So let me ask you again, what do you *want*?”

Maybe it was the confining field or maybe it was the question, but Adrian felt faint. As though all his blood was being drained out of his body. “You want me to choose like Mackenzie chose.”

“No. I want you to choose like your mother did.”

“This is different! My father didn’t know anything!”

“And because of that difference, we won’t have a repeat of what happened to you.”

“Lynna…”

“What are you more afraid of?” she asked softly.

“You asking me if I intend to turn Renegade,” Adrian deadpanned. He was pretty sure his composed appearance had more to do with numbness than actual calm.

“Do you want to hear an old story?”

Her abrupt change in topic had caught him completely off guard. “Huh?”

She continued on as though he had never spoken, “You probably thought that I’ve never been in love, never bothered to go looking for it. Well, it’s mostly true, nowadays it’s the complete truth, but it was different before. There’s a few of us and so many of them. Really, what are the chances that we wouldn’t find love with a human?” She smiled ruefully, almost self-deprecatingly. “I met Belle, Annabelle, nine months and twenty-seven days before you came into my life. I figured that even a life built on deceit would be worth it. That it was better than not having her at all. Then your case turned up.

“God, it was hell. It was a nightmare on all counts. Lier and I wound up stealing you away under some thin disguise before the council even came to a decision.

“And seeing what you had to live through before things got so out of hand that we finally found you… God… it broke my heart.” Lynna sighed. Adrian got the distinctive feeling that she wasn’t even speaking to him anymore. He shifted uncomfortably, he felt like a voyeur glancing into her memories. “After that, I decided that the rules weren’t completely pointless. I let her go. I let Belle go.”

They sat in silence as the minutes ticked by. Adrian stole quick glances at her, but she was still lost in her memories. He had to break the silence. “Why tell me this?”

She turned sad eyes on him once again. “Because it was an impulsive decision that I never stopped regretting.”

“Oh.”

Another pause followed, but finally, she spoke, “Years later, I had the luck of landing another wretched assignment. A Magical fell in love with a human, and through some slip, the human wife found out about us. The order came in for him to take away her memories, but instead of complying, they disappeared one night. Naturally, his family wanted them found and... Well, we found them.

“They begged and pleaded with us to leave them be, that they weren’t doing anyone any harm, and it was all true. They just wanted a quiet life together. He turned Renegade for her, threw away his family, and chose a life of living in the shadows over one built on deceit.”

Adrian swallowed. “What did you do?”

“We let them go. Forged a report, it was easy enough to do since we were in agreement. The look on their faces when we agreed to leave them be... That. Was happiness.”

“No...” he whispered. Lynna, who was renowned for her righteousness and loyalty to the Enforcers, had willingly... He shook his head in disbelief.

“Yes. Anyway, this isn’t about morality. I had a choice and a chance and I let it all go. Another chose love and happiness over duty. And now, it’s your turn to choose.”

\*\*\*\*

Despite the sun shining brightly down, the air was unseasonably crisp and cold. Adrian shielded his eyes as he glanced up at the skies. The headstones weren’t very large, but they commanded respect. The blue tinged stones were carved with intricately woven ivy and pine. Adrian placed a small bouquet of flowers in front of each stone. There were four where there used to only be three.

He had never been to the gravesite since the funeral itself. Not because he didn’t want to, but because Mackenzie had preferred to visit alone. Especially on the anniversary of their deaths. Thinking about it now, that couldn’t have been healthy. *And now they’re finally together.* In theory at least. He sighed and glanced upward again.

It had taken him a full four days to finally come to a decision. He had holed himself up in his house after that dizzying conversation with Lynna, unsure of what to do. *If only Halle knew...* but he didn’t. Couldn’t. The decision, and consequences, had to be his alone. *Assuming Tyler even wants the same thing...*

Adrian was jerked out of his thoughts by the sound of footsteps over granite steps. Tyler joined him in front of the graves a few moments later and placed down two bundles of flowers himself. They didn't speak for a time. Adrian didn't know how to break the oppressive silence. There was too much to say and too few words.

Tyler saved him by speaking up first. "I've been worried about you."

"I know. I just... needed some time alone. To think and stuff," he mumbled softly. "I'm sorry for disappearing like that. I'm sorry for what you had to go through. I'm sorry—"

"You don't need to apologize for her," Tyler cut him off sternly.

Adrian stole a glance at him, he looked exhausted, but his eyes shone with renewed strength. A kind of determination he'd never seen before. "Tyler?" Adrian reached out to take his hand. "Remember what I said about how I wished things had ended differently? About wanting to save her. I won't lie, I really do wish that night hadn't ended with casualties, but it's not your fault. I was the one who pulled the trigger."

"And saved me. I know you're not a killer."

He couldn't help but let out a bitter laugh. "You're only the tenth person to tell me that."

"It's true."

"It's really not. But I appreciate the sentiment."

They stood gazing silently at the headstones. Despite the horrible memories this place held for both of them, he knew he had to bring Tyler there. Mackenzie had been buried quickly and quietly, a feat made easier by the fact that she had prepared everything herself. Regardless of the outcome, she had never planned to live past that night.

Adrian ignored the ache threatening to consume him. This was no time for him to lose his composure, he'd cried and made peace with what happened. This was closure for Tyler. An assurance that the nightmare was finally over.

"Tyler, do you trust me?"

He turned surprised eyes onto Adrian. "Yes, of course."

"Thank you."

Adrian held a small glass vial up to the sunlight and studied the contents. No one on the busy streets of the downtown core seemed to notice or care about the object he held. No one that could possibly understand its significance. A multitude of small jeweled stones circled around a large central piece. They shone vibrantly in the bright light, a beautiful mix of green and blue. *The color of the residual soul.*

He hated that part of the system, always had. Probably because he had seen its effect firsthand when he was a child. *That's why Mediators exist. And failing that...* Adrian sighed and knocked softly on the shop door.

Evelyn's expression changed from mild shock to resigned sadness in an instant when she saw him standing outside. "You're really sure about this?"

"Yeah." Adrian handed the glowing vial to her with a shaking hand. She gazed at him with eyes that had seen too much in life.

"I'm sorry it had to come to this. If I'd known..."

"Sacrifices had to be made, it's not your fault, Evelyn. You wanted to help him and do your duty. If it hadn't been me, it would've been someone else."

"I just mean—well. It doesn't matter anymore." She ran her finger down the side of the glass, studying it sadly.

Even though she spoke the truth, he had a feeling that wasn't what she wanted to say. *Did she know? Could he trust her?*

Wordlessly, she turned toward the back of the store and he trailed after her silently. Instead of heading up the stairs, she touched the bottom most step. With a pale shimmer, four rings of light emerged from the point of contact and spiraled outward until it had risen up the walls and covered the whole stairwell.

A previously hidden latch became visible. After four flights of stairs straight down, they arrived at a plain hallway. A single door stood on the other end. He waited anxiously as she slowly unwove one protective spell after another. Two seals, one trap, and four guarding wards later, and the wooden door that simply read, Archive, could finally be opened.

Adrian couldn't stifle a gasp of awe as he laid eyes on the inside. It was both amazing and terrifying. Hundreds of shelves were lined up neatly against the walls, each labeled in fifty-year increments dating back to the fourteenth century. *The start of the witch hunts. The beginning of the bloodstained decades that marked the end of peaceful coexistence with humans.*

Under each date was inscribed the names of the Keepers for that period. *Lucas, Yieran, Rayle*. The shelves themselves held row upon row of glowing vials. They were all quite beautiful, if he ignored the implications of their contents. They walked solemnly to a nearly empty shelf at the back labeled two thousand–present. *Evelyn. Keeper of Memories*.

She glanced at him with an unreadable expression, but Adrian simply shook his head. He'd made his choice. She sighed and placed Adrian's vial into an empty slot.

"Take care," she said softly as he turned to leave. Adrian swallowed down his fear. Her eyes had shone with silver, she had seen, and she was letting him go.

\*\*\*\*

Tyler glanced at the wide expanse of wilderness surrounding them. He stole a quick glance at Adrian. *Back on the road and sitting around in the middle of nowhere with a duffle bag each*. He was honestly sick of it, but if it was the only way...

"Are you really okay with this?" Adrian asked again, the third time in as many minutes, and the hundredth in the past week.

Tyler fought the urge to roll his eyes. It was just like Adrian to obsess about something they had both agreed on already. He asked instead, "Are you?"

"Yes, I mean, I wanted to stay with you, be with you, but never thought I had a choice," he admitted guiltily. Tyler studied him carefully in the pale evening light. The day had gone by in a flash and already, they were contemplating what had transpired.

"Seriously? So you were just going to..." He stopped himself from finishing that sentence. It didn't happen so it doesn't matter. *Just focus on the good things*. "Wait, what *did* you do?"

"A diversion. An illusion. It wouldn't have fooled anyone who knows what to look for and it definitely didn't fool Evelyn..." He trailed off, a faraway look on his face.

Tyler tensed. "Then how—?"

"I don't know. Not how, not why. But she knew and she still..." Adrian shrugged. "I guess we won't have to worry about others finding out and coming after us later at least."

“Well, I’m glad it all worked out in the end. Seemed like we both needed to clear the score and start anew.”

“Eh?”

“I told my parents, no, not about *you*. Well, not about that side of you anyway,” he clarified at the look of abject horror on Adrian’s face. He would have laughed if the conversation weren’t so serious. “I just... After Mackenzie, after everything, I figured it was time to come clean about the past three years and stop hiding from it all.”

“Yeah,” Adrian sighed. “Tyler, I really don’t know how the future is going to unfold, I really don’t know if this is the right choice or even the better choice for us, but whatever happens, I’m willing to try.”

“I know. Like I said, I trust you. So please trust me as well. We’ll make this work.” He smiled. It was worth believing in. *Adrian*, was worth believing in.

“So I guess this is as good a time as any to make proper introductions.” Adrian smiled sincerely, his eyes dancing with mirth. “My name is Adrian Graeme.”

“Tyler Anderson.” He chuckled softly. “And I love you.”

Adrian smiled brightly as he took Tyler’s hand in his own. “I love you too.”

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*As an only child, Enne had grown up with nothing more for entertainment than her own wild imagination. Armed with an adoration for reading and visions of grandeur, she had always dreamed of weaving fantastical tales of her own.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

[Email](#) | [DeviantArt](#)