



“Has the jury reached a decision?”

“We have Your Honor.” A young juror with greasy blonde hair and hazel eyes rises from his seat. “In the case of the People vs. Isabella Hollow, we find the defendant guilty on all counts of murder in the second-degree.”

Fuck.

You kill fifty gang members in cold blood and they show you *mercy*? You’d think that would earn a girl a first-degree murder charge. Maybe a date with the syringes to put me in a long unawaking nap.

I’m a serial killer for crying out loud. But nope good old second-degree murder. I’ll be in prison for life, or—*he* finds me.

I twiddle my fingers in disgust, which my bozo of a public defender mistakes for anxiety. He rubs my arm in a clumsy attempt at comfort, and every muscle in my body stiffens. He’s only a few years older than me, but he’s spent the past several weeks trying to cram in a lifetime of teachable moments. He’s determined to find something redeemable in me.

I hope he lets me know when he does, ‘cause I haven’t had much luck.

“Would the defendant please rise.”

Judge Baldoe watches me over the rim of her glasses. She’s somewhere in her fifties, curls threaded with gray.

I slowly rise and crack the kinks from my neck courtesy of the metal cot in my holding cell.

“You are hereby sentenced to serve a term of life without possibility of parole.”

I look up, expecting the cold, harsh gavel to sign my life sentence, but instead I am met with warm eyes.

She stops the guards before they can apprehend me. “I will speak to the defendant, *alone*, in my chambers. Everyone else, you are dismissed.”

Well, this is not how they do it on Law & Order.

As Judge Baldoe pushes up from her chair, she gives a stern nod to the back of the room. I follow her gaze, catching a glimpse of a blonde-haired businessman adjusting his posture and stepping through the doors.

It doesn’t matter what she’s up to—I’m out of options, and she knows it.

I lock away the latest layer of pain, reinforce the stoic expression on my face, and follow the judge into her chambers.

Wood-paneled walls framed with carved roses surrounded the office. The old rug glitters with layers of dust that will never be removed, and her desk is overflowing with case files. I crinkle my nose and watch as she gracefully slides into her chair.

“Please take a seat,” she says kindly, pointing to the leather chairs in front of her desk.

“Don’t they normally offer a plea deal before the sentencing?”

Her lips curve upward, but something in her tone suggests it isn’t quite a smile. “Due to the nature of the crimes you committed, I doubt there is any sentence that would make you feel safe.”

“You’re concerned with my safety after I slaughtered four dozen people.” I scoff.

“I don’t consider the Blackhood people.” She speaks frankly, a quality I have come to appreciate after years of conniving and underhanded remarks.

The horrors that the Blackhood exposed everyone to were no secret: the sex trafficking, the cartel negotiations, and the human hunts. But it takes a monster to kill a monster. “I feel similarly.”

The silence hangs thickly in the air like mist on an autumn hunting trail, shielding prey from the inevitable spilled blood. “I saw you give a look to that man in the back of the room before everyone flooded out. I gather he has something to do with the uniqueness of this sentence.”

“The power and violence with which you eliminated those monsters makes it clear you are a danger to others and yourself. However, I do believe some sympathies are in order,” she pauses to clear a lump in her throat before continuing “and some training.”

“Training?” I repeat. *Is this some CIA recruitment bullshit?*

“As I stated you will be sentenced for life. A term you will serve within the confines of Ravensburg Institution.”

Ravenburg—might as well kill me now.

“It’s this or prison, Isabella,” the judge says, sensing my deliberation.

Prison would surely be worse. El Presidente has his connections in every jailhouse, penitentiary, and lockup on the east coast. But Ravensburg? Not even his men will risk infiltrating its walls.

Don’t even think of trying to hide from me.

I sigh, pushing one of the many gnawing voices away from me. “So, when am I being transported?”

“Immediately. The director has some openings he is desperate to fill.”

That explains the man, guess he just finished hosting another blood tournament.

The judge ushers me from her chambers into the empty courtroom. The jurors, the prosecutor, even my own lawyer have abandoned their stations. I’m sure if I could feel anything, my fight or flight instincts would be telling me to run. But I am burdened with no such urge.

I walk through the wooden double doors and find myself face to face with my new keeper. The man stands a few inches short of six feet with freshly trimmed combed blonde hair, and blue eyes. He wears a suit that was surely crafted by some children in a sweatshop, paired with black Italian leather shoes.

“Hello Claudia, it’s been a while since you’ve called.” He removes a small envelope from the inside of his jacket and hands it over to her.

“Yes, well you requested that I don’t send you gang members.” She looks down at me and manages a small wink, but my attention is locked onto that piece of manila. I can tell by the thickness that it must have cash inside.

She got her stipend. I got out of the Blackhood.

“She’s not quite what I expected, you promised she’d be the one we are looking for.” The disappointment in his tone is apparent, as he examines me.

“Isabella,” The judge offers sweetly, “this is Samuel Vanderbilt Revierie.”

He is quick to skip formalities, a behavior I’d almost appreciate if it weren’t out of malice against me. “Did you really kill fifty men?”

I wave away the inquiry. “Something of that number.”

Run.

Trying to escape, Doll?

You’re too weak.

I am out of cuffs, no cops have been assigned to restrain me. I steal a glance towards the door.

Vanderbilt looks up at the judge with consternation. Apparently I don’t hide my delusions as well as I thought.

“She doesn’t deserve the jail time Samuel.”

He reluctantly accepts my presence. “We will have to have you evaluated once you arrive at the institution.”

“Sounds riveting.” I roll my eyes and let out a breath.

He sighs. “And your surname? I do not believe I saw one in your file.”

A tense shock whips up my spine. My father’s last name is generic, sure, but the truth leaves me one hospital record away from being discovered. And no one would risk keeping El Presidente away from me, not with what I owe him. “Reid.” I offer my mother’s maiden name as a substitute.

He looks to the judge who gives him an encouraging nod. If he’s as strong as he carries himself, he must know it’s a lie. “Are you sure?” He asks her.

“You told me yourself,” the judge hums, “the deadline is approaching.”

He takes one final glance at me, before sealing my new fate. “Very well *Ms. Reid*, follow me.”

That’s your cue. Run.

As if they can hear the voices that aren’t really there, two burly men come to my side and take hold of my arms.

The director wears his kind tone like a mask as he whispers “just a precaution.”

I let out signs of compliance, relaxing my muscles against my captors, smiling at him in return, but we both know it’s all a face.

“Let us go.” he motions the guards with his fingers, and the men yank me forward into another inescapable future.



It is a four-hour drive to the institution. There are three sets of security gates along the pathway up and by the time we arrive the sun is setting behind the cold stonewall building. The one-way windows are covered in bars which sparkle with an iridescent hue.

Yep this is definitely still a jail sentence.

The car shakes as it pulls up the gravel pathway, and I shake away any of the horror stories that try to plant themselves in my mind. The moment we stop, a guard comes around to pull me from the car. I stand up and take a deep breath of air, this is the closest thing to freedom I'll ever experience.

"Welcome to Ravensburg, Ms. Reid. As you probably already know we have the highest rehabilitation rate for troubled Arcanes in the nation."

I roll my eyes and release a sharp exhale. We aren't free, we're prisoners and the only way anyone makes it out is in a body bag.

"We have a very strict schedule that we like to keep you to, as well as assigned jobs to help keep the facility running."

"And the costs down."

He disregards my jab. "Each patient has their own dormitory with a toilet and sink. You have been assigned to kitchen duty, which will severely limit free time."

Now, this is the best piece of news I've received all day. Less free time means I won't have to interact with as many people, which is good for me because I have no socialization skills and no desire to develop them. "Sounds fair."

"Excellent. As you imagine, you will not have access to your abilities."

The atmosphere is exactly as I expect upon walking through the entrance: harlequin flooring, dark gray walls, and the tangy must of mold inflaming my nose hairs. "After you Ms. Reid."

I nod politely and move forward. I need to come off as complicit and docile. He may have read my file but he doesn't know my personality. *Lay low, keep out of trouble, respect authority.* Do everything I can to make them trust me, avoid attracting attention.

We walk into a well lit small office with a bottle blonde woman sitting behind a secretary desk. She has what I can only assume are silicone breast implants, fake glasses that serve no purpose, and red smudged lipstick. "Director Samuel, it's always a pleasure to have you return to the building."

“A pleasure to be back. Can you call the guards and let them know I need an escort for the new patient.”

“Anything for you.” Her response is breathy as if she were a shifter going into heat.

Vanderbilt leads me into his office and has me sit facing his desk. “So your name is Isabella Reid Hollow correct?”

He studies me for a moment, paying extra attention to my countenance.

“Is something wrong?”

“You see Ms. Reid, I can usually spot an equivocator pretty well, I am after all a Reverie, but with you, I sense you are telling the truth.”

“Because I am.”

“I simply don’t see how someone such as yourself could kill that many innocent people.”

I feel a push against the steel armor in my head. The sound of my own screams as scars are carved across my back. Bitten back tears as I’m smacked, punched, and beat into the dirt walls of the hole. I force on my unfeeling expression and push down the disruption. “Honestly, I don’t remember much. There was a fire and then an explosion. My lawyers and doctors say I went into a state of psychosis.”

“Interesting.” He leans back in his chair, crosses one leg over the other, and rolls a gold coin across the desk with two fingers. I’d seen that gleam in his eyes before, moments before bloodshed.

“If you say so.” I speak dryly, not letting a sense of deception slip through.

His brow furrows as the coin stops between his middle and pointer finger. “Well, clearly you have no remorse, but I suppose it’s due to a lack of memory surrounding the crime. I will leave that diagnosis up to Dr. Charles.”

Great. Therapy.

“I will have your course schedule presented to you in the morning by your peer-guide.”

A loud knock promptly ends our discourse, and a large armored guard walks in. He's well over six feet tall and has fur peeking through spots of his uniform. *A shifter, who stays in the hybrid form. Guess that's one way to keep patients from running.*

"I believe that's your cue to go to bed. I hope to never see you in this office again, they only bring the riff-raff around here."

"I doubt I'll be that lucky."

A wicked grin flashes across his teeth, as if he is aching for an opportunity to enforce some real punishment.

The guard takes hold of my arm and the pressure of his paw presses through my skin, threatening to add to my collection of scars. I bite back the pain as he snatches me out of the office and pushes me through four sets of locked metal gates. We don't stop until we reach a room with a gray door reading 235. "When do I get to shower?" I ask the guard as the pad glows green.

"Tomorrow. Showers are closed." He tosses me forward and slams my door shut. A loud click echoes off the walls.

I try to take a look about my cell, but the lack of windows and the strict lights out policy leaves me engulfed in the darkness. My breath hitches at the uncertainty, and the dam in my mind begins to crack. A flash of memories threaten to slip through—memories of the hole. Umbramancers grabbing at me from the shadows, slashing my skin, muffling my mouth with their fists so I can't scream for help.

I feel my way around the room, accidentally stubbing my toe on what might be a dresser. Eventually I stumble onto a bed with an extremely lumpy mattress, and sink my face into it. I haven't slept on a real bed since I was 15 years old, right before I ran away for the first time. When El Presidente got his hands on me once more, he decided I had lost my bedroom privileges. I slept on the ground beside Vice every night.

If you're tired of the cold floor you could always come in bed with me.

I shudder, thankful that even with the looming threat, he never pulled me up there with him. But despite the small reprieve, my nightmares plague me once I finally lay to rest.

I shiver as the cold wind presses against my nipples. I am in the Louisiana Bayous chained to a large tree on the edge of the surrounding woods. Behind me, Bobby howls. I can hear his bones crack as he lets his hybrid form take over. “El Presidente found out that his bastard daughter had been taking the herbs we feed to the whores.” He declares looking around at the fellow gang members who gathered to witness my punishment. “Trying to poison her womb, preventing us from a rightful heir.”

“Traitor!” One member screams.

“Blasphemous!”

“Scourge!”

“And after he welcomed her back with open arms.”

“Open arms my ass.” I spit back at him.

“Shut up!” He slashes my back with his claws with a quick swoop.

I bite back the pain. *Don’t let them break you.*

You’re too weak to be my heir.

You can fight this.

I know exactly what I have to do. I refortify my mind by placing steel walls along its borders, keeping out anything that makes me weak.

I hear the cool liquid being poured onto his paws.

Kraken Ink.

Bobby claws at my back, carving a wound that will never heal. I can’t see what he writes, but the pressure allows me to read back the letters. M - y - D - o - l - l. I’d probably cry if I could, but I know that it will only make him feel like he’s finally won. I repeat the President’s creed. *Tears are the accessory of the weak. Pain is the strength of your foe. Love is the weapon you hand your enemies.* And maybe it’s true,

because with every scar they ever left in my skin, the numbness grew until I could flip it on with a simple switch. Only trouble is, I never learned to turn it back off.



I promptly rise from what I was hoping to be the sweet release of death to find myself exactly where I left off: hell. My bed is in the back right corner of the room with its frame bolted into the ground. The same precautions were taken with the desk beside me and the modestly sized mahogany dresser I had stubbed my toe on last night.

Talk about overkill.

I walk to the bathroom that is against the opposing wall, step inside, and find a medicine cabinet filled with herbs.

See, this is better than prison.

Yeah right, it's all a facade.

You need to look your best for me doll, put on a show.

I inspect the tiny apothecary. I've got herbs for soap, toothpaste, and healing gel. I remove my clothes and toss them in the corner behind the door before picking some herbs from the cabinet. I eagerly mix them together in one of the provided empty plastic jars to make a dry soap.

I relish each moment I spend scrubbing, as if the supplement will wash away the memories that taint my body.

You may have covered up some of the scars, but the worst still remain.

I put away my newest creation before stepping out of the bathroom. Without the sun or a clock to tell the time I can't guess how soon until my so-called peer arrives,

so I decide I need to ready myself quickly. I start sifting through the dresser. Each drawer has a collection of purple, gray, and black clothing from joggers to skirts to tees to polos. Every piece has the same tacky ass silhouette raven logo with a backdrop of swirling silver. I let out a dry laugh at the sentiment.

As I examine my options, I debate if I should cover my tattoos for the day. I spent days crafting the design, my garden of venomous flowers winding their way up my arms. Sharp thorns peek from the vines and stems, while ornate daggers emerge from the floral arrangement, appearing to drip with a dark blessed liquid. I even carefully shaded the bare parts of my skin to obscure the wounds with my masterpiece.

Unfortunately, my ink and all it hides may attract more attention than I need right now. I throw on a purple long sleeve and a flannel skirt.

A click echoes as the door of my room swings open to two visitors. The first is a woman, probably two or three years younger than myself with thick curly blonde hair and golden eyes. She's clearly a shifter, but her height suggests she's the runt of her litter. Behind her, the large guard from the previous night glowers down at me as if his salary isn't large enough to deal with us.

"What, no service with a smile?" I taunt.

The wolf bares his teeth, but the woman pays it no mind, flashing a bright grin as she introduces herself. "Welcome to Ravensburg! I'm your mentor Mira. I see you opted for the skirt, love it! But what's with the long sleeves?" She speaks so quickly I wonder if she's gonna pass out from lack of oxygen.

My response is monotonous. "My legs are my best attribute."

"To each their own." She shrugs playfully. "Come on! We only have a little bit of free time before breakfast." She pulls me into the hallway and the guard slams my door shut. Locking it into place.

"I didn't get my schedule."

"That's okay, I memorized it for you! Can't believe you get to take three specialty courses! What are you?"

This woman is oddly cheery for a mental asylum, even one as misleading as this. I can't imagine what landed her in here. "Sigil User, two dormants."

"Ooh cool. I have a dormant too. Reverie, but honestly I don't think I got any of it."

Oh she definitely did.

"Anyways, we get an hour of free time before breakfast, that started about twenty minutes ago, but Samuel the old fool thought we should wait till the hallways were clear to come retrieve you."

We walk past a keypad door and enter a bustling hallway.

"Rooms are off limits throughout the day. For right now you can go to the rec room, the courtyard, or the library. Most of us chill in the courtyard, it's the closest outdoor experience we can get while trapped in the nuthouse." She rolls her eyes, but doesn't lose the harmonious tone of her voice. "Back there is the kitchen."

"Wonder how I'll get past."

"Yes you have kitchen duty! How dreadful." Mira sounds almost heartbroken at the thought. "Hopefully I get to spend *some* time with you. It's so hard making friends here."

Friends? Now I know how this woman ended up here, she's delusional.

As we continue down the hallway we walk into another pair of women. The one on the right, radiates popularity in a nauseating fashion. She has sleek black hair, vivid green eyes, and a gaunt face. "Fresh meat."

To her left is a shorter arcane female with shiny purple hair, green eyes, and a collection of freckles across her nose and cheeks. "She looks feeble."

"Malnourished." The first agrees

Mira's posture immediately shifts, straightening her back as she lets out an animalistic growl. "Selene, Violet, never the pleasure." She tries to push us through but the girls block the hall.

The girls remain in a standoff until the guard interrupts “Would you move this along?”

“I wonder what the alpha has to say about this.” Violet remarks, giving one last glance up to the guard before deciding to walk away.

“What’s got a stick up their asses?” I mutter.

“Try to avoid them at all costs. They target all the low classes in the building so you’re kinda their prime target.”

I roll my eyes, but my lips curl into a peculiar grin.

She laughs, returning to her normal glow. “Ooo so confident. I love that. I’ll show you where all the classes are and then we’ll circle back.”

The hallway of classrooms takes up the entire East wing of the facility. The doors are mostly locked, but a few remain open to the public as if the instructors are as uninterested in teaching as we are in learning.

“I’m surprised we can come here during free time.”

“No one hangs around here, it’s where the local gang start up does their disciplinary procedures.”

Great. More fucking MC nonsense.

“Stay under the radar and you’ll be fine.”

Maybe they’ll have their fun with you just like your father.

I shake off the voices, as Mira pulls us back around towards the final door in the hallway. “The most luxurious place in the building.”

I glance over the sickly gray walls and mold littered ceiling, towards the collection of tattered couches and chairs with claw marks. The center almost looks promising except that the ping pong and foosball tables don’t have any balls.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

As if reading my mind, Mira continues. "We usually are able to play, but somebody ate the balls during an unsanctioned shift." She glowers over towards who I'm assuming is the guilty party.

He is broad-shouldered, with untamed blond hair and striking blue eyes, but a crooked jaw and a nose that had clearly been broken more than once kept him from being conventionally attractive.

"I thought we can't use our powers outside of training?" I ask

"Yeah, well, every once in a while a cocky asshole will steal a wristband from a guard and try to make a break for it." She continues her punishing glare.

"Got a problem runt?" He growls

"Just warning the new girl about the mutts." She snaps back.

I glance between the two. They're clearly familiar, the same blonde hair and blue eyes, shifter builds. He is larger, his hair is more wavy than curly, and he's definitely gonna be more annoying, "Brother?"

"Thorne's my *half*-brother, unfortunately, he's the reason I'm stuck in this dreadful place."

Now that makes more sense.

I know a psycho when I see one, I have good enough practice looking in the mirror.

The man walks over and starts sniffing the air around me like an animal stalking its dinner. "You are a petite little thing." He remarks as he examines my physique. "You look like you're begging for a man to throw you against the wall and show you a good time."

"She doesn't have to answer you."

"I believe the little lady can speak for herself." He pushes his sister aside and walks towards me. "If my sister is done boring you, I'd be happy to give you some personal attention."

I stretch my arms over my head, blankly staring at the ceiling above me. His flirting is rather derivative. The man is looking for a quick fuck, which is an activity I am always eager to avoid as it is, let alone with the poster boy for Trojan. "I'm quite happy with my tour guide."

He approaches until he's centimeters from my face, cornering me against the wall. I reluctantly jerk forward from the force against my wounds. "Oh, don't be so jumpy. "I don't bite." He licks his lips slowly. "Unless you like that."

"Thorne, leave her!" Mira pleads.

"Trust me when I say, you couldn't handle me." I whisper to him.

"I love a challenge." His breathy voice vibrates against my ear.

I give him five seconds of senseless hope before kneeing him in the gut. "Handle that please." I walk out of the room.

"She wants me." He mutters.

"You're a moron." Mira sticks her tongue out at him and meets me out in the hall. "You ok? I know Thorne can be a lot."

I practically cough out a laugh at the thought.

"You don't scare easy huh?" She asks curiously.

"I've met real monsters and trust me, he doesn't qualify."

We spend the rest of our free time relaxing in the courtyard until the bells ring for breakfast. Guards shuffle us into the dining hall one by one, careful to ensure no one tries to duck away in one of the rooms. Food is served buffet style from the kitchen, but none of the patients are gathered around. Instead they sit in the back corner.

"What's everyone waiting for?"

"Zaden." Mira's reply is almost sultry.

"That your boyfriend or something?"

"Ugh, no, he's fucking mental, but he's so hot and charming nobody cares."

A loud whistle echoes through the room as a young man jumps atop one of the tables. My mouth instinctively waters at the sight of his muscular build. The veins along his arms pulse against his dark olive skin, as his lips curve into a smirk. He slicks back his wavy black hair, sliding the locks peacefully back into place.

“Listen up everybody,”

The smoky and velvety tone of his voice sends shivers down my spine as I quickly obey his demand.

He’s a Charmer. Class 2 at least.

“Lycanwoods, you’re up first.” His voice booms and a large collection of individuals run to gather their meals.

“That’s me.” Mira says cheerily. “Come find us once you’re called, we sit over by the windows.” She rushes away.

Us? I have to interact with MORE people today?

I glance back up to Zaden, and catch the golden glow to his eyes as he speaks.

Great, a shifter too.

My mind drifts until the name “Hollow,” finally escapes his lips. I grab my food and search for Mira. When I get to the table she introduces me to her one singular ally, a scrawny post-pubescent teen with black hair, blue eyes, glasses, and prominent furry eyebrows. “Hiya.”

I grunt an acknowledgment before sitting down, causing the two to exchange nervous glares.

Mira senses the slight trepidation. “Isabella here is a Sigil User like you Corwin, class 3.”

He lets out a breath. “Oh thank goodness, not that I mind being the only non-animal at the table.” Then he looks to Mira. “Class 3 you say? She don’t carry herself like a low rank.”

“Cause I won’t be.” I say darkly before turning to my food. I’m strong, and come the Colosseum, lying low won’t be an option anymore.

This weak sigil user can not possibly be of my blood. She’s your bastard child!

The memory takes root in my head as I eat.

Throw her into the trials. She can compete for her place like everyone else.

Bite me.

My father took me up on that offer, I have a collection of teeth marks in the upper right side of my abdomen. He was trying to bite off a piece of my liver since it would eventually grow back...

I wonder how long that takes.

“Earth to Bel?” A distant voice breaks through the noise. “You good, girl?”

The bell blares, cutting our discourse short

“I never get enough time to eat.” Corwin mutters as he goes to throw away his garbage.

I follow suit and almost drop my tray as Mira pulls me forward. “Time for class! I’ll make sure to lead you today, but after that you’re on your own. I only get the late pass for the tour.”



Morning classes drag. Mira and I only overlap once in the schedule, so the rest of the day was unfamiliar faces and stingy older teachers. Lunch is rather uneventful as well. Between sitting at tables and desks all day and the gnawing urge for violence crawling along the walls of my brain, I’m growing into a restless little killer.

Maybe you just need to stab something.

The training arena comfortably fits the seventy-something patients trapped in this facility. Mira says we are ‘well under capacity’ due to a massive loss in student population earlier this year, which means I can expect greater competition in the

future. The large room is a far cry from a compound yard, this gym boasts an impressive strength training setup—including a complete dumbbell set that spans from 50 to 1000 pounds.

I take in a deep breath and let the familiar aura of aggression, anger, and violence calm my body.

The patients already spread out their perspective centers, and the bleachers are empty save for three young men. The first is Zaden from roll call. Unlike this morning, however, he has decided to bless the room with his six pack abs and striking v-line.

You want him.

Charmer and a Shifter. I remind the perky little voice echoing through the steel walls.

Above him, is a slightly older arcane, his alpha status made apparent by his much larger frame and slightly increased height. His skin is shades darker than Zaden, and his eyes are twice as haunting. Unlike the charmer, this man oozes an unfeeling aura.

Ah, a fellow sociopath.

The third is wearing a T-Shirt and has Satanic tattoos dripping down his arm, a stark contrast to the silver cross he wears around his neck. His pale skin glistens under the cheap lights of the training room.

“You checking out Zaden again?” Mira says as she steps in front of me.

I assess her gaze. “Not in the way you seem to.”

“Stay clear, those three are the worst of the worst. They actually killed people before coming to this place.”

Oh if only she knew. “How many we talking?”

“Zaden left a collection of bodies across the east coast, I think they caught him well into the hundreds.”

Well shit. They are the real deal. Which means I need to stay away.

Or you could have some fun with them... “So what, we doing first?” I ask, trying to ignore my little whims.

“Well I usually warm up at the racks before lifting some weights, but-”

“But what?”

“I kinda do a pretty intense routine.” Her tone is awkward as she tries to avoid the point of her statement.

I crack my neck in either direction. “So you lift more weight than me.”

She pulls us toward the power corner. It’s not a surprise that Mira expected me to try and go for an easier workout, but it didn’t hurt any less. And it did nothing to silence the echoes of my father and Vice.

You’re too weak to be my spawn.

Just give up and come back to me, doll.

Instead of burying the words to the back of my mind, I let the anger infect my bloodstream. “What first?”

“Pull ups.”

The rack is about two feet above from my grip, but before Mira can lower it I hop up and grab the bar.

“How many reps?”

She takes a step back. “I do two sets of a hundred, but-”

I ignore whatever handicap she is about to offer me and begin pulling. My father’s words hurt more than any ache my arms feel as I complete my set. I don’t let go until the pain in my body outweighs the pain in my mind, which by my count was one-twenty-five. Relief floods through me as my walls lock back into place, and I land back on the ground. “Your turn.” I say, in my regular routine of monotony.

Mira hops up. “So you worked out a lot before coming here.” She says as she begins her reps.

“Something like that.”

“You always give vague answers?” She laughs.

“Usually.” I say.

Apparently my number motivated her because she decides to surpass my count before hopping down. “Last rep and then chin ups.”

I keep up easily with Mira’s warm up routine. It’s not until we walk over to the plate rack that I need to make adjustments.

“I typically lift about half a ton for my squats. If I shift I can lift twice as much.” She laughs “Do you know how much you can lift?”

“Not sure.” The most weight I ever lifted was when I flipped a 300 pound beta over my head in a fight. “Probably a quarter of that.”

My muscles are crying, but I refuse to give in now

“I know you like to show off but can we start off a bit lighter?”

“Not my style.”

She lifts two fifty pound plates and puts them on either side of a large metallic bar. She then does the same with two twenty-fives. “Ok, with the bar this is about two hundred, you think you can manage?”

I walk over to the large contraption and position myself carefully so as to not strain any muscles. I require a bit of form adjustment from Mira who I reluctantly allow to touch my skin. I’m surprised when I don’t immediately flinch.

“How many do you do?”

“One Hundred... But.”

“Relax, I’ll do as many as I think I can manage and then stop ok?”

She nods.

I am at fifty when my body decides to yell at me, so I put the bell back in place and make that my rep count.

I take a moment to glance back across the gym and catch an observation window. I swear I can make out Vanderbilt's frame through the one-way glass, but Mira immediately drags me away.

"So your dormants are Lycanwood and Bloom right?" She says adding more weight for herself before beginning her own set.

"Yeah, my dad was a Class 1 Shifter and my mom a Class 1 healer."

"Oooh what pack?"

"I'm not sure." I perfected this lie during the year I spent on the run, so it's no surprise when it flows past my lips as if it's my true life story. "I never met him. Only know what my mom told me."

"Oh, where is she?" Mira says finishing her reps.

"Dead." I say calmly.

I remove her plates and continue the routine. While Mira watches in silence. *Please don't say it.*

"I lost my mom too." Mira whispers kindly. "I know there's nothing anyone could say to help."

Well Shit, good on you Mira. No sympathy gives you some points in my book. But I know not everyone shares my aversion to emotions. "No one should have to go through that."

"Yeah she died in a fire my brother started. He shifted while fighting with her, and knocked over a candle..." She starts to shiver at the memory. "He told the cops we both did it, to try and get the family insurance money."

I don't say anything, but I do complete ten extra squats.

"My dad wanted to argue for me, but he was too scared of my brother. He has connections here. Thought he was doing me a favor."

“Does he visit?” I ask, placing the bar back and stepping forward.

“I see him more than most of the patients see theirs.” After a decent weight adjustment she takes her place in front of the bar.

“I see why you hate your brother.”

“He ruined my life. All because I was the favorite. He could never understand why my mom adored her weak little runt.”

“You may have been born the smallest, but you don’t have to act it.” I say.

“Oh I know, I ranked twenty-eight in the last games out of one-hundred fifty.”

This peppy ass twig really beat eighty percent of the arcanes in the deadliest east coast competition.

“You seem surprised.”

“Not used to arcanes being nice, especially not strong ones.”

“Oh I’m not that strong.” She says sheepishly. “I just play the long game. Believe it or not patience is not a skill of the mentally unstable. Uh.... No offense.”

“None taken, I’m impatient as fuck.” I say with a smirk.

She looks me over, and I can tell what she wants to ask.

“You don’t want to know why I’m here Mira.”

She gives me one more gleam of curiosity debating whether her need for gossip is greater than her need for calm. I am thankful when she turns away, leaving me to sulk in my secrets.



The next morning, the same dickhead guard comes to fetch me for my first assignment in the kitchen. As I am yanked towards duty, I start taking notes on the guard stations, eight in the courtyard, three sitting on their phones in the dining hall, and two walking the halls. The paths are robotic, suggesting they have rounds scheduled at set times throughout the day.

No one is getting you out of here.

Except me, my doll.

We walk through the locked door on the far end between our dining area and the library and turn into the first opening. My eyes fall to the right side where knives are openly stacked within the sinks and I can't fight the smirk that blesses my lips.

Behind the collection of stoves and ovens in the back corner, an aggravated alpha stands beside the freezer. His muscular form is barely contained by the uniform shirt.

He catches me staring as I wonder if Ravensburg had clothes custom tailored to his size.

He doesn't say anything, but I know he's watching now. I am thankful when one of the chefs speaks up from the corner. "You must be Isabella." The man has the whitest hair I've ever seen, stands about five foot ten, and has muscles to suggest a human work-out, but no arcane stature. "I'm Clarke, and this is my kitchen. What I

say goes.” He dismisses the guard before refocusing on me. “You bad with directions, Isabella?” Clarke inspects my form.

“I can be.”

“But will you be?”

“I never plan to.” I say honestly making my way towards him. “But I will be on my best behavior.”

“Good.” He smiles, amused by the tantalizing honesty of my words. “Well come on in, there’s lots to do before breakfast. Leo can show you the ropes.”

Joyful.

Leo approaches, his figure shadowing over me. He’s almost as big as El Presidente, and he definitely has Vice beat. “Do as I say, and don’t move against me. Stairwell to the morgue is down the hall.”

That’s the best opening threat he’s got for me?

Underwhelming.

“Good to know I won’t have to carry you too far.” I try to add fire to my tone but the stark proximity to his biceps forces something more sensual.

The kitchen is filled with a collection of ooohs.

Leo makes a step to challenge me, but Clarke intervenes. “All right enough with the dick measuring Leo, I’m pretty sure she has you beat.

The alpha could easily grapple either of us to the ground but instead he smirks at the man. “Interfering in my business.”

“So long as you feel the need to intervene in mine.” Clarke mews as he examines Leo’s body.

The creature noticeably relaxes before returning to his assigned job of the day.

“Dish Duty.” Leo says with a placid stare as he guides me over to the back wall where two large sinks are piled high with eatery and utensils.

We take our spots and I roll up my sleeves. I turn just in time to catch a musty old dish rag with my face. “What a gentleman,” the sarcasm drips out of me.

“Inside my asylum you listen to me.” The hairs of my neck prick up at the familiar alpha demand.

“I thought this was Vanderbilt’s asylum.”

He lets out a soft growl, turning to say more, but Clarke clicks his tongue. Surprisingly the self-proclaimed alpha heeds the human’s demands.

I make no move to reignite our discourse but every once in a while I get the burning feeling that I am being watched.

Neither of us moves to break the silence, but I keep a roster of retorts ready to go at any moment. The tension isn’t cut until the bell dings signaling the start of breakfast.

“You got some guts.” Clarke says walking over to me.

I shrug my shoulders. “I’m not gonna cry over an empty threat.”

“Oh believe me dearie, it ain’t empty.”

“He seems to mind your orders fine.”

“He and I have come to an understanding, but outside the kitchen gate, he’s a wild animal.”

I smirk, “Thanks for the warning, but I can handle myself.”

“I’m sure you can.” He replies before returning to his task.

Breakfast brings the same boring roll call, with me and Corwin the last to sit at our table. “Where were you at training yesterday?”

“With Mira.”

He gives me a widened glare before subtly resting his gaze on my training partner. “Mira is intense.”

I actually manage to finish before the bell rings for classes.

“So you have therapy right?” Mira asks me.

“Sadly.” I sigh. “Which way is it? You didn’t show me yesterday.”

“Yeah that’s because it’s in a no-go zone, a guard should be coming to-”

“Let’s go,” the familiar burly tone barks from behind me.

Without a chance to say goodbye he drags me through the crowd.

Dr. Charles’ office is just across from the kitchen, and apparently right beside the doorway to the morgue. It is exactly what you would expect from a low budget therapist. He has a desk that he refuses to sit behind, a couch for the patients, and a reading chair beside the couch to allude to some form of trust between us.

The man himself has a kindly demeanor, warm smile, and noticeable roundness around his abdomen, but I try not to let it lure me into some false sense of security. He works here for a reason, which means he knows all about the Colosseum they host in the underground.

I imagine it’s his job to diagnose me, evaluate what kind of strengths and weaknesses this will pose in the Arena.

I sit on the couch.

“Feel free to lay down, the patients say it’s much more comfortable here than on those lumpy old mattresses.” His hardy old laugh makes me think he belongs in a red puffy suit ordering a bunch of midgets to wrap up gifts.

I sink deeper into the pillows to rest the never-ending pain on my back, but I know if I lay down I’ll fall straight to sleep.

“So it says in your file that you’ll be here three days a week.”

Mass murder buys you three days of therapy. I wonder how I can up the ante.

“Do you have anywhere in particular you would like to start?”

“I don’t much see the point of it.”

“Most of the patients here don’t at first, but many come to love it. They have the freedom to finally let down the acts that keep them alive in the halls.”

“Very straight forward.” I remark. “This shouldn’t be overly painful then.”

“So you would say honesty is important to you?”

“It’s my preferred mode of communication.” I say dryly.

Dr. Charles makes a note on his clipboard. “Have you made any friends since coming here?”

“Does anyone?”

He clicks his pen and leans forward. His voice is gentle but I can hear the rumbling baritone it once was. “You know your vague answers tell me just as much as the direct ones.”

“Yes, my predisposition to alienate myself from human connection.”

“Your sense of self is isolated.”

I can’t quite tell if that is an observation or a question. “My life-style of choice is isolation. Not one for civilities.”

“Then let’s cut right to the chase, what brings you to Ravensburg?”

“You have the file.”

“I don’t read that deep into patient files before meeting them. I want to get to know you for who you are in all your moments, not just your worst one.”

“Then why start there?”

“Oh we don’t have to, if you’d prefer a happier memory.” His voice seems genuine enough, although it would still be that way if he were a master at his con.

“Don’t got those.”

“Maybe you’ll make them here.”

“Doubtful.”

He leans back and stares into my gaze. Apparently I am meant to be leading this discussion.

I decide talking will speed up this encounter, so I skip to the end of my story. “I’m a serial killer.”

“Well, I hardly believe that.”

“Looks can be deceiving. I killed fifty men in cold blood.”

“Cold blood, no reason behind your choices?” He asks as he adjusts his glasses.

“None other than I wanted to.”

“Somehow I feel this is more nuanced than you are letting on.”

I let out a long breath trying to decipher the point behind this. Surely if I were a normal patient in a rehabilitation center, I could see his purpose. The goal would be to make me believe I am capable of good and that deep down that is who I want to be. But here, everyone leaves a villain. “Because of who they were, the judge thought I did a public service.”

Dr. Charles’s posture lightens in pity, *how disgusting*. I just told him I killed people, they could have been fathers, sons, uncles, and he makes excuses. It’s people like him, people who see the fucking good in the monsters that let men like my father walk around every day. “Serial killers bask in the loss of light in a person’s eyes watching them struggle until their last breath. They develop it like a skill, perfecting a particular method of torture. Mass murderers are usually the fault of our healthcare system and poor mental illness awareness. Many even feel remorse for their actions—”

“Listen, Dr. Charles, I’m sure you’ve helped many people before, but I won’t be one of them. There’s no redeeming quality, no secret explanation that exonerates me of my sins, a demon is a demon.”

“An angel can hardly survive the fires of hell without the ash darkening their wings.”

This man is as delusional as the people he treats. Me? An angel, please. If I ever had a halo I smashed the thing myself and lodged the sharp edges into my enemies' chests.

"You know Isabella, it sounds like you're punishing yourself, which means you do feel remorse."

A lump catches in my throat as if I swallowed one of the deer flies from the Bayou. Because he's right about one thing, punishment is the only companion I can depend on, and her return is almost comforting.



The classroom is less appealing today than it was yesterday. Same dingy old teacher, apathetic students, and crappy overused desks. Thanks to therapy I've arrived early enough to snag a seat in the back. A few students pile in and among them. Just as I gear up for another tedious day, the charmer of the Unholy Trinity pushes through. Students part ways as he stalks towards me. "You know I always sit in this chair."

"I hear change is good for the soul." I say slouching into the spot to remove the pressure from my back.

The students around us give cautious glares but avoid looking for too long, lest they grab his attention.

"Let me be clearer," his voice keeps its usual alluring tone, telling me he's ready to use his charm. "Move."

The compulsion ripples through me, and if I were slightly weaker I'm sure it would work. But I decide to be smart about it. I twist my body as if trying to crack my back and return to my position. "I moved."

"Cute." He looks at the boy next to me. "Scram."

The man seems to have more regard for his life than I do for my own because he immediately follows orders.

Zaden slides into the desk before putting his feet up on mine. "So you're the new girl, got a name?"

“Don’t everybody?”

“You know I could make you tell me.”

I observe him for a moment. His lips are twitching into a maniacal smile, but there is a fire in his eyes. He is not used to someone talking back to him, and unlike his alpha, Zaden seems to appreciate my efforts. “Oh, that would ruin your fun.”

“You’re right about that . . . Isabella.”

I can’t say I’m surprised, since his Alpha and I had a little squabble this morning. “Leo tell you that?”

“And why would Leo take an interest in you?”

“Well I did threaten to put him in the morgue.”

Zaden chuckles at me in a deep and condescending delivery of praise. “And you lived to tell the tale. That’s more than most can say.”

“Guess I’m just special.”

“To that I have no doubt.” Zaden practically licks his lips as he looks me up and down. I’m not exactly showing off my best features, but the skirt does highlight a few things I might almost be proud of.

Before he can decide whether he’d like to eat me, which is definitely a double-edged sword, the teacher walks to the back and hands me a test. “Take this to the best of your ability, Ms. Reid. We need to know where you stand.”

Numbers, the only thing in this world that has one right answer. I’ve always been good with them, searching El Presidente’s books to find a mistake to report to the IRS.

Even with Zaden’s feet taking up most of the desk, I finish in record time. “I’m surprised you haven’t asked me to move.”

I ignore him and walk to the front placing the test on the teacher’s desk before returning to my seat.

“Oh come on, don’t tell me you got all that fire just to be a stickler for the rules.”

I shrug. “I like solving things.”

“Ok, solve this problem for me. A sweet, innocent pup finds herself trapped in the center of a wolf den, does she A. Run Away or B. Join the Pack?”

“I opt for C: bite off the nearest one’s neck to infect them with rabies.”

“Are you saying you’re rabid?”

“Only one way to find out.” It’s meant to be a threat, but Zaden doesn’t seem to care. In fact, the thought of me attacking him seems to evoke an entirely different kind of pleasure.

Of course, the attractive Beta is a fucking Masochist. What else do I expect from a place like this?

He leans in closer to me and wraps his fingers around my thigh, “You are welcome to mark me any time.”

I rejected Thorne on the spot, but Zaden is different, in fact a dark part of me welcomes his advances. The only thing that can save me now is the ring of the Ravensburg bell.

