I thought everything in my life was finally back to normal. Well close enough to being normal after the insane discovery of my origins but I made peace with it. At least I think I did, but there are still questions left unanswered along with a few demons; figuratively AND literally.
Chapter 1

I was in a deep slumber, till my older siblings slammed into me. I gasped as Melissa Arora sat herself on my back and Johnny Hawkfeather held my legs down. "Guess what day it is Amy," she giggled.

"Crush Your Little Sister Day," I said through gritted teeth.

"No, it's your birthday!"

My eyes widened, "wait; wait!"

But they didn't listen; Johnny tightens his hold and Melissa brought her hand down on my bottom, "One!" Then she slapped it again, "two!"

This went on for another sixteen times, and finally she reached the last slap, "and one to grow!"

I cried, "Get off!"

Both of them laughed and jumped off the bed. I was rubbing my sore ass through my Wonder Woman pajama shorts. "Shit! I think you left a bruise."

"This is coming from a supernatural that can heal almost instantly." Melissa crossed her slim arms. Her dark hair was in soft curls and her dark eyes gleamed with mischief.

Johnny smirked, his long black hair was free and flowed pass his shoulders. He checked his watch, the leather brown strap blended well with his light copper skin, the same shade as Melissa's. "And that will be in," he shrugged his shoulders, "a minute?"

The word 'supernatural' didn't fit. I'm not vampire or werewolf or anything cool like that. I'm a nation, the nation of the United States of America.

I narrowed my eyes at them and they giggled. "Aw, look at her, she's so cute when she glares," Melissa pinched my cheek.

"If you two are done harassing your sister," Mom's voice ringed from the bottom of the stairs. "Come down and help me with breakfast."

"Food!" Johnny exclaimed and ran down the stairs.

"You're not eating anything! You're helping us cook." Melissa shook her head, "he's twenty-seven and he still acts like a teenager."

"And you're Ms. Mature," I lifted an eyebrow at her.

She ignored my statement and walked to the door, "Make sure you wear something nice for your party tonight."

"Yeah, yeah," I yawned and rose from my bed. Lady, my medium sized Cocker Spaniel was stretching at the foot of the bed. I scratched her behind her light brown floppy ears; this light brown circled around her dark eyes and scattered patches over her freshly cut white fur. It was longer, but with the weather reaching in the hundreds we knew it was best to have it short.
Dad called Lady down and she leaped off the bed and ran out the door. I stretched my arms and bent out my knees, trying to wake myself up. I took a quick shower and brushed my white teeth in the mirror. Once I was back in my room, I discarded the towel and slipped on my blue one piece swimsuit. Then I wore blue cut jean shorts and an indigo plaid button down shirt with no sleeves over the swimsuit. I slid my feet into a pair of flat, strap in brown sandals and sat myself in front of my vanity mirror.

I rubbed in some morocco oil into my blond curls and brushed through my hair with my fingers. The curls landed around the nape of my neck and touched the base of my shoulders. I grabbed a lock of hair and looked at it through the reflection of the mirror. I bit my bottom lip in annoyance; *it grew this long in two months? Maybe it has something to do with being a nation,* I wondered.

My eyes then glanced to the pictures around my mirror. Photos of family and friends, but three new faces have joined the party. These three people were young men, all blond and bright eyed. They're my blood relatives, well, now that I think about it; they're technically not, but we do share the same secret.

They're nations, just like me.

I stared at the pictures of Arthur Kirkland (Britain), Francis Bonnefoy (France) and Matthew Williams (Canada) at my brother's wedding. I'm sure most of you are confused, but to make a long story short. I was adopted by a human family, mostly because John Senior Hawkfeather knew the previous nation of America, Alfred F. Jones (my supposed father). The US government then concealed the fact that I was alive from the other nations and hid me away in my hometown of Summerland, California.

All my life I believed I was a normal teenage girl, till my spring break in New York City, where I met Arthur, Francis and Matthew. They took the liberty to tell me that I was a nation. It didn't go over well; I was in denial for a week, till my grandfather (John Senior Hawkfeather) left a video for me, explaining everything. Slowly, I got to know more about the nations I met in New York, but before I knew it I was thrown to the wolves in Austria. Figuratively and literally, all for the sake of protecting my family; but it didn't last long.

Ivan Braginski a.k.a Russia tracked me down and decided to inform all the other countries of my little secret. Everything kinda blew up after that. Luckily, thanks to Isabella Garcia (the president of the US) and the government, they were able to keep the nations away from my family and friends. They were also not to have any contact with me till my eighteenth birthday, which was today.

I sighed, a part of me hopes that they'll think I celebrate my birthday on the fourth of July rather than the first. I didn't think I was ready to deal with them just yet, I mean Arthur, Francis and Matthew were the exception of course, but the others were somewhat irritating.

When I was at the bottom of the stairs I was greeted by my adorable niece and nephew. They wrapped themselves around my waist; they're heads reaching my chest. They had grown.

"Happy birthday Aunt Amy," Blair Arora grinned, her permanent front teeth had grown into place and now had a winning smile. Her dark hair was in her natural waves down her back and her light brown skin mingled well with her simple pink summer dress.

Blake Arora was the quiet one of the twins, but he seemed to be growing out of it. "You're legal now, that means you're fair game for the nations."

I ruffled his dark short hair, "don't remind me."
He stared up at me with bright brown eyes, "If they ever hurt you, I'll make sure they pay for it."

My eyebrows rose, "You're eight-years-old, and you already think you can take on the world."

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"Such a serious eight-year-old," their father, Sanjay Arora walked into the living room and wrapped his arm around his son's shoulders. "You're a kid, so act like one," he flicked his finger at Blake's forehead. Sanjay carried the same coloring as his children but the twins had the soft features of their mother. He pulled me into a hug, my head knocked against his shoulder, "happy birthday."

"Thanks," I smiled.

"My turn," Celine Hawkfeather, the most recent added member to our family wrapped me in another hug. Her light brown curls were in a ponytail and her pale green eyes shined lovingly.

Dad walked in from the kitchen, holding up a large plate of chocolate chip pancakes. "Breakfast is ready." His graying black hair was tied in a low ponytail and when he smiled his dark eyes gleamed and his copper skin winkled. But he was still quite handsome for his age.

We followed him to the kitchen table, where plates of eggs, sausage, and waffles were placed on the table. Pitchers of milk, water and orange juice stood at the center along with a vase filled with wild flowers.

We took our seats; Dad took the head of the table. Mom sat across from him, with Melissa on her right and Johnny on her left. Sanjay sat next to his wife as Blake took his seat next to him. Celine sat in the middle of Johnny and Blair as I sat on Dad's left and Aponi Hawkfeather, my grandmother sat across from me. The two month old baby, Raiden Arora sat in a high chair in between Melissa and Mom.

I'm sure if anyone looked through our window right now, I would stick out like a sore thumb. My family is filled with dark haired, dark eyed and natural tan skinned people, while I had blond hair and blue eyes. My fair skin on the other hand, had recently gotten a light tan, thanks to all the time I spent in the summer sun.

After we had our meal, they brought out the gifts. Sanjay and Melissa went first, "You're going to love it," Melissa grinned as Sanjay handed over a large white rectangle box with a blue bow tied around it.

I opened it up to find a stunning blue and violet sari. "Oh wow, Mel, thank you."

"Hey what about me," Sanjay said jokingly.

I gave him an apologetic smile, "Thank you Sanjay."

"Us next, us next, us next," Johnny chanted as he drummed his hands on the table. Celine handed over a bag filled with three graphic tees and two pairs of skinny jeans. One shirt was white with black fading sparrows flying across the shirt from the shoulder to the waist. The two other tees had written words on them. One was a purple tank with a quote written in white: 'Nobody is perfect until you fall in love with them.' The other was a black shirt with a phrase written in bright blue: 'My death will probably be caused by being sarcastic at the wrong time."

I laughed at the last shirt, "That most likely will happen."

Johnny raised his hand, "I picked that one."
"Of course," I beamed and turned to Dad, who was already pulling out two black boxes. "Remember your grandfather's ring?" he asked.

I nodded as I made a grab for the ring that was no longer around my neck. "I've been feeling naked ever since I lost it."

"Well," Mom bit her bottom lip nervously, "you didn't. I kinda borrowed it."

My eyes widened, "Mom! I've searched everywhere for my ring, how could you hide it from me?"

"Calm down," Dad placed a hand on my shoulder and handed me one of the gifts, "we just wanted this to be a surprise."

My ring was in the black box. It originally belonged to Grandpa; it was silver with a beautiful crafted hawk on it. The hawk's wings were extended out with its feathers large and sharply detailed. The beck was faced forward while small pieces of tiger's eye were placed to represent the eyes. Its tail was flat and its claws were curled into the tail.

"We decided to get the design re-crafted, seeing that it faded through the years," Dad explained, "but mostly we had it re-sized."

I slid it on my middle finger, "Wow, it fits," I grinned and hugged him. "Thanks Dad," then I quickly ran over to Mom and kissed her on the cheek.

"Hold on there's still one more," Dad held out the last box.

I opened it and pulled out silver chain necklace with a small simple cut aquamarine pendant attached to it. Mom came from behind and wrapped it around my neck, "when I first laid eyes on this stone it reminded me of your eyes. Those stunning, sweet blue eyes," she turned me around to face her. "They were the first thing I fell in love with the moment I met you."

I looked away, bashful, "Mom."

"Oh don't 'Mom' me," she brushed a lock of my hair over my ear, "I'm proud of you and whatever happens, you'll always have us."

I smiled and wrapped her in a tight hug, "I love you."

"I love you too," she whispered in my hair.

After a moment of silence Blair speaks up, "See this is why you guys should have gone last. I mean how can we present our gift after all that emotional feels."

I giggled, "She's got a point. You guys kinda stole the show." I sat back in my seat, "Whatcha got?"

Blair nodded to Blake and he ran back to the living room. "This is from us and G-Ma," she proclaimed.

Blake came back with a carryon bag and a rolling luggage. Everyone rushed to clear the table, so we could set the baggage on it. The roller was designed as an old fashion trunk; like something a traveler would have in the eighteen hundreds. The main color was a dark shade of tan while the straps were brown. It had gold colored clips, but still had a modern zipper and wheels. The carryon was in the same shade and style as the roller.

I grinned, "Are we going on a trip?"
Everyone shared nervous glances with one another till Johnny said, "maybe."

Before I could question their looks, Blair cuts in. "Look at the strap," she exclaimed and pushed the shoulder strap of the carryon into my face.

There were animals crafted into the leather. Each animal was detailed and imprinted with realistic features. They ran together across the strap, beginning with a hawk and ending with a mouse. "Oh cool. Grandma did you design this?"

She shook her head, "I just gave the materials, Blair drew it on paper and Blake crafted it on the leather."

I passed it around for everyone to see. Celine was in awe and Johnny whistled, "This is amazing." Then his eyes lit up, "hey you guys put a Great Dane on it."

Melissa took a look, "and a hummingbird."

"There's a deer," Dad grinned.

"We decided to use our family's spirit animals in the design," Blake proclaimed.

"Yup," Blair continued, "It starts off with G-Pa's hawk and G-Ma's butterfly, then it to Grandpa's deer-"

"A deer," Sanjay turns to Dad, "I figured your animal was a wolf."

Dad lifted a brow, "why do you say that?"

"You always wear that wolf charm around your neck."

"Ah, well this wolf charm is to honor a good friend of mine, he died when we were young and he was always like a brother to me," Dad explained.

"It's like me when I wear Grandpa's ring," I added.

"Is that what Natives do?" he asked in all due respect.

Dad shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know, but it's what we do."

"Can I continue please," Blair asked, annoyed.

Dad patted her head, "sorry Blair, yes you may."

"After the deer, we have Grandma's cougar-"

Johnny snorted, "Mom you're a cougar?"

She shook her head, "last I checked your father was older than me."

"No Grandma, the cougar is your spirit animal," said Blair.

"Cougar represents leadership, strength, balance and cleverness," Blake proclaimed.

Mom nodded, liking the idea and Blair moved on. "Then we have the hummingbird for Mom and the robin for Dad."

"Robin?" Sanjay questioned.
"It represents luck, hope, clarity and the strength to move forward," his son answered.

Blair continued, "Then there's Uncle Johnny's Great Dane and Aunt Celine's rabbit."

"I always did like bunnies," Celine added.

"Then we have Aunt Amy's bear-"

I raised my hand, "I'm a nation. I don't think I have a spirit animal."

"Well," Blair shrugged her shoulders, "G-Pa always called you Amy-bear, we just figured."

"And don't you remember, you went to live with them for a few days," Johnny smirked.

I made a face as Blair finished, "Then finally we have Blake's owl, my fox and Raiden's mouse."

We all turned to the baby in the high chair, who was still being fed green squash from a jar.

"Isn't a little early to tell," Celine asked, "he is just a baby and you are just basing this off on personalities."

Blake shook his head and stared at her with unwavering eyes. "I know his spirit animal is a mouse, like I know your spirit animal is a rabbit. I'm never wrong about this."

Johnny sighed and placed an arm around his wife, "Honey, Blake is special. I'm sure you can see that some things in this world are a pretty bizarre." He pointed at me and I stuck my tongue out at him.

"Blake has the Sight," Grandma followed, "he can see aura and be able to tell which people are human or nation."

"He also sees dead people," he made a scary voice.

"Johnny," Melissa gave a warning.

"I see spirits, if they happen to be human, then I guess that would make them dead." Blake shrugged his shoulders, like it was nothing.

Celine's eyebrows rose, "I've certainly joined a strange family."

"Hell, at least you know you'll never get bored," I grinned.

Later on I drove downtown to meet with my two best friends, Michel Russo and Jamie Chen at The Dragonfly. I spotted Michel combing through his brown curls with his fingers as he sat at a table by the cafe's window. He was wearing white knee length shorts and a purple t-shirt that brought out his green eyes. Jamie wore a loose light pink blouse tucked into a floral pattern skirt. Her silky black hair was pulled into a high ponytail and her dark almond shaped eyes were outlined with pink eyeliner.

Once I walked in they greeted me with smiles and hugs. We sat around the table as Noah brought over a plate of chocolate chip cookies, "here you guys go," he sat the plate. "The usually?" he asked.

We nodded and he walked back to the cashier. When he was out of hearing distance, Jamie turned to me, "hey didn't that guy give you his number?"
I knitted my brows in confusion, "I don't think so."

"Yeah he did," Michel proclaimed, "he gave it to you when you met Arthur and them here."

I slapped my forehead, "Oh right."

"You never called him did you," Jamie said in a monotone.

"Yeah," I shrugged my shoulders, "I kinda forgot."

Michel shook his head, "so cold, so cold."

"It doesn't matter any way," Jamie quickly added, "you have Heracles to worry about."

"And don't forget about Toris," he said.

I rolled my eyes; ever since I told them of my time in Austria they began to pick which nations would be my perfect boyfriend. They've made teams, kept points and even wrote short stories about it.

"Hey did you finish reading my latest story?" Michel asked Jamie.

"Yeah," she pulled out a journal from her pink purse, "I loved your sex scene. It was so sweet but yet so passionate."

Noah walked in at that moment; he gave us curious glances and sat down our drinks, a glass of cold milk for me, ice coffee for Jamie and a double chocolate cappuccino for Michel. He gave me a nod as a greeting and speed walked away. I had a half of mind to scream, wait! Take me with you!

I ignored my friends as they discussed the most recent Amy/Toris one-shot by Michel. I began to nibble on a cookie as my mind turned to a question that's been eating at me ever since I left the house. The whole situation of my band new luggage set and how everyone grew nervous by the mention of a trip.

They must be hiding something.

"Hello, earth to Amy," Jamie's voice snapped me out of my trance.

"Huh?"

Michel lifted up colorful bags, "we have gifts!"

Jamie gave me a card, "but open the card first."

The birthday card was an average hallmark but inside was an international hundred dollar gift card. I smiled, "thanks guys, but I don't think I need an international card."

"Well, you never know," Michel added, "besides it uses all currencies, so no matter where you go, you got the cash."

I nodded and opened one of the bags. I removed the white tissue paper and found a green graphic tee that said 'Team Heracles' with a fierce golden lion under the words. I looked at the shirt and then at Jamie. "Really."

"What? It's adorable," she unbuttoned her blouse to display the same tee. "I got one made for me too, but it's a tank."

I set the shirt down and turned to Michel, "what do you got?"
"I have something you're absolutely going to love," he grinned.

"I don't believe you," I proclaimed but I still opened the gift. It was a blue graphic tee with 'Team Toris' written on the front and a gray and silver wolf howling underneath. "And I was right," I sighed.

Michel then took off his shirt; he was wearing the same Team Toris tee. "It's all about Team Toris!"

"It's official I'm gonna burn these," I held up the shirts.

"No," they both pleaded.

"Come on, every time you wear one of the shirts, one of us gets five points," Michel exclaimed.

"One of the many reasons why I should burn them," I said.

Jamie sighed re-buttoning up her blouse, "come on Amy, can't you take a joke?"

"Yes, but this is going too far," I shook the shirts at them.

"No, too far is when we start recruiting members and making tumblr accounts dedicated to our shipping pair," Michel proclaimed dramatically.

I sighed; I've learned there was no use in fighting them about this. "Just so you know I'm never going to wear these."

Neither of them said anything, only smiled at one another. Then they turned back to me with the same joyful grins on their faces. "We have good news," said Michel as slipped back on his purple shirt.

"What?"

They each held out a letter and I quickly scanned through them. They were acceptance letters from Rhode Island School of Design and Juilliard. I stared at the letters in astonishment, "when did these come in?"

Jamie mental counted off her fingers, "I think May."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Michel shrugged his shoulders, "you had a lot to deal with. A death of a family member, finding out you're a nation, discovering new relatives and fighting off advances from other countries. We figured college was the last thing on your mind."

I sighed, "but still-

"Just leave it be, we still got our summer together." Jamie smiled, "so what's the plan?"

She was right, there was no use thinking about college or the fact that they will be moving across the country for school. I didn't even know if I was going to college. Will I simply start working as nation? If so, what exactly am I supposed to do? Go to meetings and talk about what's wrong with everything in the world. Then fight about it for hours and get nothing done in the end.

_Yup, that's some career._

But I didn't have to think about that just yet.
The summer was mine and I planned to spend every day as I pleased.

"We're going to the rec center; my co-workers are holding a small party in my honor."

Morgan Hills Reaction Center stood in the center of town. The brick building was one story with a large gym, media room, a workout station, a kitchen and six extra rooms for classes. The soccer field was on the right while the playground was on the left; the pool was around back. During the six months when the community of Summerland had to live in one building together after the Quake of 2014. The soccer field became a crop field and the pool was drained and used for storage. Most of the families lived indoors, some outside in tents, and the injured were moved to the Emerald Bed & Breakfast. Half of the hospital was destroyed and any buildings left with minor damages were used for the sick and injured. Before the Quake, the rec center was called Bradfield, but it was renamed for Morgan Hills. He was the first to take action and assign jobs for everyone. He was currently our mayor.

I parked my blue jeep in front and speed walked to the doors. Michel and Jamie were right behind. We were met with Kurtis Watterson, Gabriel Perez, Isha Smith and Henry Anderson at the resources desk.

"Hey Amy, happy birthday," Kurtis greeted me a fist bump. He was a tall, skinny guy with dark black skin and a clean shaved head.

Gabriel gave me a hug, "glad you can make it." He was light skinned with hazel eyes and loved to wear graphic baseball caps.

"The kids are so excited," Isha was a light dark skinned girl with jaw length black hair. She and the rest of us were around the same age, I was the youngest though, so they made it a big deal that I was now legal.

Henry was a middle aged man with graying brown hair and dark eyes. He was also my boss and ran the rec center. "They're waiting at the gym for ya, so you better head over."

I grinned, "Thanks guys," we all shared a group hug.

Once we entered the gray and white colored gym, we were greeted by children of all ages with a hardy, "Happy birthday Miss Amy!"

I laughed as a group of small children tackled me into a hug. I was day camp counselor for the summer and I was instructed to teach dance. Isha was the arts and crafts miracle worker, Kurtis also taught dance and worked out the sports activities with Gabriel.

I was dragged to the center of the gym and Kurtis turned up the stereo. Miley Cyrus's 'Party in the USA' played and I groaned, "Why?" I stared daggers at Michel and Jamie; they had to be behind this.

Their evil smiles only proved my theory. But the kids clapped and cheered for me to dance. I turned to face the front, shook my hips to the beat and began a line dance. My friends and co-workers quickly joined me along with the kids. Our little party only lasted for two hours, but dear lord, it felt like five minutes.

"Bye everyone!" I waved both of my hands in the air as I was pulled back to my jeep. "I'll see you all on Monday!"

"Come on, we gotta go," Michel shoved me into the passenger seat as he took the wheel.
We arrived after three and we had to park a block away from the Melissa's beach house. "Where did all these cars come from?" I asked. "I mean we only invited family and close friends."

We walked up to the house and we went around back. I instantly came to halt. I clutched my fists to my sides and my eyes widened. I was pretty sure Jamie and Michel could see my shoulders shaking. Large pieces of plastic tile were pressed down on the ground to represent a dance floor and tables were set up around the yard. A long table was used as a buffet and a DJ turn table stood with the stereo system next to the tile floor. There was even a massive white screen set up in front of the dance floor.

But that's not the reason why I froze in place.

Feliciano Vargas the nation of Italy was the first to see me. His brown curl bounced with every step and his light auburn eyes shined as he came running to me. "Amy," he exclaimed as he wrapped his arms around my neck and planted a kiss on both of my cheeks.

"What are you doing here?" I asked as I took a step back.

"We came to celebrate your birthday," Ludwig Beilschmidt the nation of Germany proclaimed. He wore a causal suit and his blond hair was slicked back, like always. Kiku Honda a.k.a Japan stood right next to him. He bowed like a proper Japanese man and gave me congratulations for my birthday.

I scanned the area. There was Yao Wang (China) chatting with Sanjay and Melissa. The other Asian nations, such as Li Chun (Hong Kong), Mei Xiao (Taiwan) and Kim Lan (Vietnam) were hanging around with Mom's older brother, Alejandro Kama and his wife, Emily Kama. Yong Soo Im (South Korea), Klahan Hyusen (Thailand) and Akram Verma (India) were playing with my cousin's kids. Other nations soon joined, such as the Nordics, Peter Kirkland (Sealand) and Raivis Galante (Latvia).

Lovino Vargas (Southern Italy), Antonio Fernandez Carriedo (Spain), and Bella and Lars Vermeulen (Belgium and Netherlands) stood together with Mom and Dad. Heracles Karpusi (Greece), Sadik Adnan (Turkey) and Gupta Muhammad Hassan (Egypt) were talking with Johnny and Celine. I then caught Grandma and Mister James Reed sitting with Natalia Arlovskaya (Belarus) and Irunya Moroz (Ukraine). My eyes began to strain, there were too many to keep count. My best guess was that all the nations were here.

I was stunned, I was not expecting this. I figured the nations would send cards or something, but to show up at my sister's house for a party; while my extended family from Texas were here and had no idea that I was a country. I'm sure the nations wouldn't say anything. I mean they want to keep the number of humans that knew of me down to a minimum. But still, this was a huge invasion on my personal life.

At that thought, I slapped my forehead. You really thought they would respect your boundaries, my inner voice jeered. I mental groaned and looked up to Feliciano, Ludwig and Kiku, "Listen guys I'm . . . surprised that all of you came. Just promise me you'll be on your best behavior."

Ludwig crossed his arms, "You do not need to tell us this. We are not children."

"They have pasta!" Feliciano lost interest in our conversation and ran over to the buffet.

"He has an attention span of a three old," I said in a sarcastic tone, "yes, clearly none of you need to be reminded." I walked away before he could say anything. Michel and Jamie said quick apologies and rushed after me.
"I have to admit," Michel said, "you're handling this better than I thought."

"Where's Arthur?" I demanded.

"Don't look at us," he held his hands up in surrender, "we had no idea that all the nations would show up."

"Uh-huh," I searched the crowd and spotted a mop of messy blond hair, green eyes and bushy eyebrows. I took big steps as I called out, "Arthur."

He turned, along with Francis and Matthew. I noticed quickly that Kumajirou, Matthew's small, talking polar bear wasn't with him. Most likely Matthew had left him back in his hotel room. I stood in front of them with my arms crossed, "Why are the nations here?"

"We don't get a 'hello' before an interrogation," Arthur asked sarcastically.

"Do you want me to smack you," I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Amy," Francis sighed dramatically, "I thought we got over all these resentment issues."

"That's not it. Just answer my question."

Matthew cuts in, "It's your eighteenth birthday. The nations see that as a stepping stone towards being an official nation."

"Did my parents know about this?" I asked.

"We don't know, but it seems they prepared enough food for everyone," Arthur commented.

"I'll take that as a yes." I looked at all three of them, "Last question, is Ivan here?"

"No, and he would be a fool to show up," he proclaimed.

My shoulders relaxed. "Okay, that makes me feel a little better."

"So the nations are just here to party," Michel asked.

Francis smiled, "yes."

"Alright," he grinned, "It's time to get this party started. I'm gonna go talk to Johnny, see if he'll get some tunes on."

"I'll go with you," Jamie quickly ran after him.

"By the way Amy," Francis held out his arms, "happy birthday."

I gave a smile and hugged him tight, "thanks it's good to see you guys." I then moved on to Matthew and Arthur, giving them each long overdue hugs.

"Here," Arthur gave me an envelope, "congratulations."

"These are from us," Francis also handed me two envelopes.

I opened each card, all three contained money; but they were of foreign currency. British pounds from Arthur, Euros from Francis and Canadian dollars from Matthew; I lifted a brow in wonder but I was still polite. "Thanks guys."
"Amy!" my cousin, Sofia Garcia waved me over. I said my goodbyes to the countries and walked over to my extended family. My three older cousins, Sofia, Mia Herrera, and Josefina Johnson sucked me into a group hug.

"Oh you grew your hair out!" Mia smiled. Her almond shaped dark eyes gleamed as she twirled her fingers into my hair. A pink Hawaiian flower was pinned to her dirty blond locks and those strands were then pulled into a loose French braid over her shoulder.

"We can play with it again," Josefina giggled. Her dark hair was curled and had a deep red Hawaiian flower pinned in it. Her skin was a natural tan while her older sisters both took on Aunt Emily's fair skin.

"Like we always did when you were little," Sofia smirked.

I allowed them to dote on me as they lead me around the yard. I was greeted with hugs and kisses by family and friends. We were soon met with my tutors, Neill Shaw and Christopher and Laura Walker.

"Well look it here, it's our little lass, finally an adult," Neill sighed, his blond bangs fell over his dark eyes. "I still remember the day I met you. You were five and eating paste."

"I did that once," I hissed at him.

"That's not what Aunt Jessica said," Mia giggled.

"Don't you start," I exclaimed.

"Still," Christopher proclaimed, his British accent ringed with each word. "It's a bloody miracle you were able to graduate from Nightingale."

His wife, Laura gave him a soft slap on his arm. "Chris, be nice," her Belgian accent had faded but she still carried her exotic red hair and onyx eyes. "She's a smart girl; I didn't doubt her for a second."

I grinned and held Laura in a tight squeeze, "You were always my favorite."

"Hey," both Neill and Christopher carried wounded looks as my cousins laughed.

I moved on to my grandparents from my mother's side, Makani and Jessamine Kama. Also known to the grandchildren and great-grandchildren as Kupunakane and Kupunawahine; it means grandfather and grandmother in Hawaiian.

Kupunakane's hair was more gray than black but it was still long in its low ponytail. His skin was a natural dark tan, but he seemed to be darker, most likely he's been out surfing.

Kupunawahine was a shade lighter, but carried the same gray hair and dark eyes. She lit up like a Christmas tree the moment she saw me. "Amy, mi pequeña bonita," she used her native tongue to greet me. Mostly she just said that I was her little beautiful.

I grinned, wrapped my arms around her and answered her in Spanish. "Hello Kupunawahine how was the plane ride?"

She waved her hand in the air, "delayed planes, rude people and lousy service." She shook her head and switched to English. "We're taking a boat back home, you hear me," she said to Kupunakane.

"Yes dear," he rolled his dark almond shaped eyes and hugged me. "How's my little moʻopuna? Are
you up for some surfing?"

I laughed, "Kupunakane it's been years since I've surfed."

"It's like riding a bike, you never forget."

"I don't have a surfboard."

He grinned, "Come with me."

I followed him and Kupunawahine to the shore where two colored surfboards were waiting. One was a tan colored hybrid with black tribal symbols designed over the corners. It was worn and the paint had faded; that one belonged to Kupunakane. The other was a blue shortboard with graphic waves drawn on the front.

"No way," I ran to the board, "I can't believe it, you got me a board!" I gave him a crushing hug, "Thank you, thank you, thank you," I repeated the phase several times.

"Thank me by catching a wave," he took off his shirt and grabbed his board. "Let's go!"

"Hell yeah!" I threw off my shoes, shorts and shirt, lifted up the board and ran after him.

"Uh," Sofia spoke up, "Kupunawahine shouldn't you say something? He could get hurt."

"I know, but he's stubborn," she shook her head.

"Aren't we all?" Josefina's comment earned her a few honest laughs.

"Go Amy!" Mia cried out, "Show that ocean whose boss!"

"Amy," Kupunawahine cried out after us, "watch out for him! He forgets he's eighty-five!"

He laughed, "I'm not nearly that old, woman!"

I giggled and tossed myself on top of my new board into the clear ocean. We stroked with our arms to open waters. I started out with small waves, focusing on regaining my balance on the board. I was nine when Kupunakane taught me how to surf, it wasn't easy. I'd fallen off on my fish board more times than I could count, but Kupunakane refused for me to quit. It took me a good month before I was able to catch a decent wave but it was worth it.

Fortunately it didn't take me that long to regain my skills. Don't get me wrong, I was still pretty rusty but I was able to keep up with my pro surfer grandfather.

After my last wave, Mom and Kupunawahine were yelling for me to return to shore. Once I was on the sand I slipped on my shorts and left my button down shirt open. I was hopping on one foot as I tried to get my sandals on.

"What's up?" I asked.

"We're about to bring out the cake, but before that we're gonna show a video," Mom answered.

"A video, oh no," I whined.

Mom gave me a look, "don't give me that tone, you're among family."

"The nations are here," I hissed in whisper.
"You need to learn how to laugh at yourself," Kupunawahine added.

I gave a soft groan as they walked back to the party. Kupunakane came up from behind and slapped his hand on my shoulder. "That's what she says, but when the jokes are about her," he shook his head and squeezed my shoulder. "She becomes a bit of a witch."

"I heard that," she exclaimed and we laughed.

Mom said that this whole video presentation would start in the next twenty minutes, so she pretty much told me not to wonder off. "I mean it, no running off towards the beach, no hiding. Stay here."

"Yes, yes," I nodded, it was best to keep my mouth shut and agree with her when she's like this. Once she was out of sight, I turned around and snatched a hot dog from the buffet table. My stomach was growling and I needed something to hold me over till cake time. I smeared on ketchup and mustard and stuffed half of it into my mouth.

"Amy," a voice sang as a hand turned me around. Feliks Łukasiewicz (Poland) stood before me, his bright blond hair was jaw length and his green eyes were brilliant emerald. His smile disappeared the moment he saw my face half stuffed with a hot dog. "I see you have the same table manners as your father."

I bit down and swallowed it whole, "yeah well, I was hungry, okay." I said to my defense.

"Please don't take what Feliks says to heart," Toris Laurinaitis (Lithuania) stood next to him. "Besides Alfred had," he took a moment, "decent table manners."

I rolled my eyes and looked them over. Feliks wore a pink t-shirt with floral designs around the collar and cuffs. His jeans were dark and skin tight and his sneakers were white, purple and pink. Toris wore a simple white button down shirt, loose khakis, sandals and a round rim fedora styled brown hat, with a gold star stitched at the side. I pointed at him, "I'm guessing he made you wear that hat."

"Hey," Feliks exclaimed, "I'll have you know I have incredible taste in fashion." He then pointed to Toris, "If I had left it to him, he would be wearing some ridiculous baseball cap."

Toris blushed in embarrassment, "I only wanted to protect my face from the sun."

"They invented sunscreen for a reason," Feliks proclaimed, "You of all people should know the possibilities that could come with having sunscreen." He wiggled his eyebrows and Toris turned a deeper shade of red.

"Should I leave you two alone?" I playfully bantered.

"No!" Toris exclaimed, "It's not like that."

"Uh-huh, sure," I smirked.

"There she is!" a young voice cried out, "charge!"

I knew that voice, "Crap! Hold this," I shoved my hot dog into Toris's hand and in the next second I was tackled to the ground by my second cousins and the twins.

"Target has been captured!" Roman Herrera cried. His slim tanned arms were wrapped around my waist as his legs pressed down on mine. I noticed that his hair had gotten longer, almost reaching his shoulders. He had the same eyes and hair as his mother Mia, but his shade of blond was lighter.
"You couldn't hide from us for long Aunt Amy." Alyce Garcia grinned mischievously, making her hazel eyes shine. Her fair skin was turning red, most likely she forgot to wear sunscreen. Her dirty blond hair was curled and bounced around her shoulders.

"Aunt Amy, Aunt Amy, Mister Yong Soo taught me how to say 'happy birthday' in Korean!" Valencia Garcia exclaimed. She was Alyce's younger sister by two years but they only shared their mother's soft features. Valencia was the darker version of Alyce, with dark hair and eyes and natural tan skin.

"I know how to say it Swedish!" Gael Garcia proclaimed proudly. He was the youngest of Sofia's children. He had almond shaped dark eyes, black hair and fair skin. "That totally beats Korean!"

"We know how to say it in Hindi," Blake and Blair said in sync.

"Mister Raivis told me how to say 'happy birthday' in his language," Lali Herrera was the youngest of the group. She had long dark hair, fair skin and beautiful green eyes, which she got from her grandmother on her father's side. She turned to Raivis, who was standing off to the side with Peter and the Nordics. "What was you're language again?" she asked with her head tilted to the side.

"Oh, Latvian," he answered.

"Right," she nodded and turned to face me, "Daaaaaa-udz lai-mes dzzzz," she struggled and her lip queried. She faced Raivis, "What was it again, I forgot."

"Daudz laimes dzimšanas dienā," he said softly.

"Daaa-uudz laaai-mes dziii-mša-nas die-nā," she looked at him, seeking approval.

Even though she butchered the phase, I didn't think Raivis had the heart to criticize a five-year-old. He smiled, "perfect."

She beamed and bounced on top of the dog pile, "Auntie Amy! I can speak Latvian, I can speak Latvian!" she said excitedly.

Every bounce she did caused the vibrations from the other kids to ram into my mid-section. I took a shaky breath, "That's nice Lali, I'm proud of you." I tried to crawl out of the dog pile but the kids held me in place.

"You're not getting away!" Roman squeezed.

"We still need to give you your birthday licks," Gael exclaimed.

"Johnny and Melissa already beat you to it," I smirked.

"Birthday licks," Peter raised a brow in question.

Valencia answered, "Every year on our birthdays, our family members hold us down and spank us on our butts. They keep spanking till they reach the number of age we have turned, it's mostly for the kids."

"That's why we need to get Aunt Amy," Alyce added, "this is the last year she'll get birthday licks."

"Then turn her around," Mikkel Densen (Denmark) rubbed his hands together, "I'll be happy to lend a hand."

"No, no," I gasped weakly; then an idea came to me. "Ribs...crushing...my lungs." I took
another dramatic gasp, "I think... I see the light." I raised my hand in the air, "Grandpa... is that you?"

"What?!" Lali cried out in horror.

"Don't go into the light!" Blair exclaimed.

"Goodbye everyone," I whispered. "Remember me... as I was," with my final words, I dropped my hand, turned my head to the side and closed my eyes, all in an exaggerated sigh.

"No!" Alyce played along and told the others to get off.

The kids gathered around me as Gael shook me by the shoulders. "Aunt Amy! Wake up! Speak to us!"

I waited for another second till I snapped to attention and grabbed Gael. He yelped as I wrapped my arms around him. "You are now in the clutches of..." I paused, "The Tickle Monster!" I roamed my hands over his mid-section and he howled in laughter.

The children cried out in joy and scattered, hiding themselves among the nations. I gently placed Gael to the side and rose to my feet. "You can run but you can't hide!" I raised my arms over my head and screamed like a banshee. Alyce hid behind Feliks and Toris, "Come out, come out Alyce," I taunted her with a creepy voice.

She gave a playful scream and ran behind the Nordics. I chased after her as the other kids ran in various directions. I picked different routes so I'd have the chance to chase each kid. Valencia ducked behind Yong Soo and Klahan and I dived between them. I roared and she dashed to Roman, who was hiding behind Lukas Bondevik (Norway) and Erik Steilsson (Iceland).

Valencia stood behind Erik as Roman peeked behind Lukas. The nations shared curious glances with them and the children smiled. They were hesitant to respond but they too smiled back.

I spun in place and leaped after Blake as he tucked himself behind Akram. He faked going left and ran to his right. Then Lali came into my line of sight and I followed her to Peter and Raivis. "Mister Raivis!" She called out, "help me!" she hid behind his legs.

"Well Raivis," I grinned, "what are you gonna do?"

His violet eyes glanced to Lali and back at me. He then swiftly snatches a stick from the ground and wields it against me. Peter grinned and grabbed another stick, "back away Tickle Monster, Lady Lali is under our protection!"

Their faces were so serious, I couldn't help but giggle, "Okay, okay." I shook out my shoulders and exclaimed in a fierce tone. "You can't defeat me!"

Mikkel snorted, "Maybe they can't," I turned to face him, Yong Soo and the other Nordics, who were all wielding thick sticks. "But we can!"

Akram and Klahan stood off to side, watching with amused smiles on their faces. The children also joined the nations with their own sticks. I was surrounded.

"Mister Berwald! Mister Berwald!" Gael jumped up and down, "Pick me up! Pick me up!"

Berwald Oxenstierna (Sweden) nodded and lifted Gael over his head. Gael sat around his neck, with his legs dangling over Berwald's shoulders. He held up his stick to the sky, "I am a giant!" Berwald
didn't seemed affected by Gael's antics, he almost looked happy to have crazy hyperactive kid on his shoulders.

Tino Väinämöinen (Finland) smiled up at Berwald and Gael as Mikkel shouted, "Attack!"

Shit!

I sprinted across the yard as they chased after me with battle cries and sticks waving in the air. I ducked and dodged from their jabs as I hopped from one foot to the next. My second cousins were grinning from ear to ear as they ran along with the nations. They seemed to be enjoying this a little too much. The countries' blows on me were gentle, but they made sure to add sound effects.

"Slash!" Mikkel tapped me on my arm with his stick, "I just cut off your arm!"

I grabbed my arm and gave a fake cry, "Ahhhhh! Damn you, Dane!"

"Such language in front of children," Tino tsked with his finger and tapped me on the head with his stick. "Naughty, naughty."

I hissed like a cat as Lukas came in with Roman at his side. "Surrender Tickle Monster," Lukas demanded.

I screamed, "Never!"

"This is taking too long," Feliks proclaimed and grabbed a stick, "I evoke the Poland rule!"

I knitted my brows together in confusion, "what's the Poland rule?"

He answered with a hard whack to my face.

I cried out in a silent moan and fell to my knees, clutching my forehead with my hands.

"I win!" he grinned.

"Feliks that was too hard!" Toris said in a whiny tone.

"What? She can handle it."

I took a deep breath to calm myself down. These past two months I've been working on keeping my temper in check, so I couldn't help but think this was a test from the universe. I mentally counted to twenty and rose to my feet, "I'm okay. I'm okay."

"Don't worry Amy, we'll avenge you!" Mikkel proclaimed.

Erik turned to him, "why would we avenge her? She was the monster."

"Things have changed, Feliks is now the enemy."

"But he was our hero!" Alyce added and walked to stand next to Feliks, "I'll fight along with him!"

Alliances were made; Alyce, Lukas, Erik, Blair, Valencia, Roman and Raivis stood on the side of Feliks. Tino, Berwald, Gael, Blake, Mikkel, Yong Soo and Peter fought for me. Lali wanted to fight with Raivis but he asked her politely to stay with Akram and Klahan.

"Hold it!" I ordered, "How about," I snatched Roman's soccer ball from a nearby table. "You guys settle this out with game of football."
"Aunt Amy that's a soccer ball," Roman proclaimed.

"I know but everyone around the world calls it a football. I figured these guys wouldn't understand if I said soccer."

"We know what soccer is," Lukas crossed his arms.

I nodded, "okay then. Now put down the sticks and play with the ball," I tossed it over to Roman.

"But the sticks are more fun," Gael pouted.

"They are now, till someone gets hurt. Now all of you put the sticks down," I said with all the authority I possessed.

Everyone glanced at one another curiously but they tossed aside their sticks into a pile. The nations surrendered first it was actually the kids that took their sweet time.

"Do you want me call your mothers?" I threatened.

Their eyes widened and they threw their sticks into the pile.

I smirked, "good, now go off and play."

Mikkel and Lukas grabbed four chairs, putting two chairs at each side of their section of the yard to represent the goals. More members were soon added into the game; Lali joined in with Raivis and Feliks while Akram and Klahan joined Mikkel's team. Toris and I watched from the side lines as Roman kicked the ball in the air, signifying the start of their game.

I observed with a critical eye, making sure that the nations didn't harm my kids in any way. But no one cried out in foul play, instead everyone was laughing. Cheering each other on and allowing the kids to make some goals. I wasn't sure if the nations played sports, but I was certain that they were holding themselves back for the kids.

"I haven't seen them have this much fun in quite a while," Toris said with a peaceful smile on his face.

I nodded, remaining silent. Erik had stolen the ball from Akram and was running towards the goal. I caught Lali waving her arms in the air, asking for the ball. Erik kicked it over and she immediately started jogging...to her team's goal.

"Lali! That's the wrong way!" Roman called out.

But she didn't hear him. Instead she placed all her attention on her foot work, the ball and the goal. Which was being guarded by Raivis; I already knew how this was going to end.

I looked to the goalie. He was torn between protecting his goal, or sparing the feelings of a little girl. In the end, he moved to guard his right even though it was plain as day that Lali was aiming for his left. She scored the goal and a big grin spread from ear to ear on her face. "I did it! I did it! I did it!"

Raivis sighed but patted her head, "yes you certainly did. Good job Lali," he smiled.

"Good job?!" Feliks exclaimed, "She kicked the ball into the wrong." Lukas cut him off by pressing a hand over his mouth.

"Lali," Raivis kneeled before her, "next time, make sure to kick the ball into the other goal, okay?"
She nodded and ran back into the field. Raivis scooped up the ball and threw it in the air, the game had resumed. As I watched, my mind rewound back to Alfred's letter. He was the reason why the government hid me away and allowed a human family to raise me. All because Alfred believed it was best. He was right of course, but he also knew that one day I would take his place. He had mentioned that the nations were good people, but there was darkness in them.

I scanned the area; all of the countries were talking, dancing, playing and laughing with my family and friends. They seemed so normal at that moment, I could almost forget that they're centuries old. But I must remember Alfred's warning. Their darkness could overwhelm me. Yet, there were wishes he had for me. How he hoped that when I was older I would be just as beautiful on the inside as I was on the out. And, that I would give some of the happiness that he bestowed on me to them.

I racked my hands through my hair in frustration. The behavior that I displayed earlier to Feliciano and Ludwig was definitely not beautiful in any way. Nor was I willing to share my birthday celebrations with the countries. I wanted only my family and friends to be with me on my special day. I wouldn't mind Arthur, Francis and Matthew to have been added, but I desired for this day to belong to Amy not America.

Was that selfish of me?

"Are you okay?" Toris asked concerned.

His voice snapped me out of my train of thought. I needed to come up with a quick excuse. "Yeah, it's just my forehead." I touched the sore spot between my eyes, "is it noticeable?"

His eyes widened, taking on the shade of forest green. "No."

"You hesitated."

"Uh, well," his color changing eyes looked away till he said. "Oh, here's your hot dog."

"You think you can distract me with food?" I tried to sound confident but my stomach had a different idea. It growled angrily, the sound was strong enough to easily be heard by him. I blushed, "give me that," I hissed and snatched it from his hand.

He chuckled, "do you want another one?"

Before I could bite into my hot dog or even answer his question. Josefina grabbed my arm "Amy, we're ready!" She glanced at my dog, snatched it and set it on an empty table, "come on, we need to go."

"But my hot dog!" I cried.
Josefina led me to an empty chair and sat me in front of the crowd that was seated around the white screen. She touched my forehead, "what happen?"

"The Poland rule," I said in monotone.

"What's that?"

"Don't ask."

The dance floor was cleared; mostly to make sure no one was blocking the video projector and to give Michel and Jamie the stage they so loved.

"Welcome everyone to Amy Felicita Hawkfeather's eighteenth birthday party!" Michel announced and everyone clapped and cheered.

Once the audience settled Jamie continued, "Now, you may be wondering, how could we possibly celebrate this most spectacular day?"

Michel didn't wait for anyone to answer. "It's actually quite simple, the only way we can truly celebrate this glorious day, is with a tribute video dedicated to Amy's entire life!"

"They can't be serious," I mumbled.

"Roll the clip!" they exclaimed in sync.

The first video that was displayed on the screen was a picture show mixed with clips from my childhood. Bruno Mars's song 'Just the Way You Are' played in the background as photos of me as baby engulfed the screen. The pictures didn't have an order, it was random. One moment it would be photo from when I was nine in Hawaii. Next it would be me as a two-year-old helping Dad build a sand castle.

Pictures of me dressed in bright colored dresses with matching sun hats scattered over the screen. Along with clips of me riding a horse for the first time when I was five. Photographs of me kicking in a goal at one of my every first soccer games; followed by images of my family's camping trips at Toro Canyon Park. Photos of my cousins, siblings and I came next; Sofia, Mia and Josefina as teenagers braiding, curling and straightening my blond locks. Melissa and I having girl nights in the living room, eating popcorn, watching chick flicks and painting our toe nails different colors. Johnny showing me how to dance to Michel Jackson's 'Thriller' and dressing up as horror movie serial killers for Halloween.

The video moves on to my tutors; Christopher drilling me in geography. He actually brought in a large world map and carried a ruler to point out countries to me. Laura rolled in next, instructing me on my French grammar. Next was not a photo, but a clip of Neill showing me how to make clay volcano erupt. Colored baking soda exploded into a sticky mess the moment I poured in the vinegar. I gave a girlishly scream as it splattered over me and Neill laughed, "It's baking soda and vinegar, it won't hurt ya."

The song was coming to its end and photos began to speed up, reveling moments I shared with family and friends. I was only able to catch a few. Michel and I sharing a massive bowl of pasta at his family's Italian restaurant; Jamie and I wearing matching red Chinese styled blouses for Chinese New Year. Then the last image was of me napping in Grandpa's arms.
The video continued with the song 'We Got the World' by Icona Pop playing in the background. This time, it only showed photographs and clips of my four years at Nightingale International Private School. Pictures of me with my hair cut to a boyish bob style and wearing the dark blue uniform with the raven crest on the breast pocket. Classmates from all over the world were in the photos along with me, but truthfully I only paid attention to the pictures of me and my closet friends.

Ella Chasse's smiling face blew up on the screen, her golden curls fell perfectly around her elbows and her makeup was flawless, like always. Daniela Aguero was right beside her in every photo. She was a beautiful Spanish girl with dark hair and eyes with amazing sewing skills. Their pictures were filled with clothes that they designed themselves. Usually I would end up being their model. I carried an irritated look through most of those pictures.

Sam Collins followed; his hair the shade of dark blond and done up in dreads. He was usually behind the camera, being video or photograph but during rare times he would allow us the permission to hold his precious camera. Next came Heisuke Sato, a Japanese boy with shaggy black hair and preferred to dress in bright colors. He enjoyed going to the beach and taking hiking trips with me at the national parks. Lastly Dimitri Maier was a tall Russian young man with groomed, clean cut dark brown hair and bright onyx eyes. He was a talented gymnast so most clips and images of him were at his gymnastics meets.

The video continued; pictures of our years together were squeezed in a three minute slide show. Our trips to the mall, the board walk and the beach were displayed in a series of crazy affects. Video clips of us going shopping, goofing off in our classes and showing off our greatest dance moves, whenever they decided to join me on my free period. Short snapshots of our tribute video to Glee's 'New York New York' rolled in next. The part where we were chased off by the police was also added, which earned us a few laughs from the audience.

After that, pictures of our camping trips, clips of me showing them how to ride my solid black Percheron horse Midnight and finally photos of our prom and graduation became the last images I saw as the music faded and the screen goes black.

Two seconds passed and the screen came back alive with Ella, Daniela, Sam, Heisuke and Dimitri. They were all standing together, short in front, which would be Ella, Daniela and Heisuke. Tall in the back: Sam and Dimitri. They all wore causal party clothes and their background looked familiar.

Ella was the first to speak, "Turn around!" she shouted in her native tongue of French.

I jumped to my feet and spun to find all of them waiting with huge happy grins on their faces. Ella, Daniela and Heisuke came running and wrapped their arms around me. Sam tackled into us, causing us to take step back on to the dance floor. Dimitri came from behind and wrapped his arms around Ella and Daniela. He squeezed and the girls were crushed into me. Michel and Jamie joined in, but their collision caused us to fall backwards.

I was laughing hysterically as we tried in failed attempts to climb off one another.

"Ella-chan, your elbow is jabbing into my ribs," Heisuke hissed painfully.

Daniela cried as she tried to crane her neck up, "My hair!"

"Michel," Sam exclaimed, "get off!"

"I'm king of the world!" Michel grinned, his ass sitting right on top of the pile.

"I think it's time we dethrone you!" Sam gathered his strength and pushed himself up, throwing...
"I personally like my position," Dimitri whispered low enough for only me to hear. I was lying on top of him, our chests were met and my nose was inches away from his lips. He slid a hand through my hair and brushed his thumb over my cheek. "You grew out your hair," he grinned, "I like it."

My face heated and I looked everywhere but his eyes. "Thanks," I shoved myself off and turned to help Ella up. "What are you guys doing here," I said in an thrilled tone.

"Where do I begin," she tapped her finger on her chin, "oh I know! Daniela and I have been accepted into the New York School of Interior Design!"

I beamed and hugged both her and Daniela, "congratulations!"

"We persuaded our parents to allow us to spend the rest of our summer here and then come August, fly to New York with Jamie," Daniela proclaimed.

Jamie jumped up and down excitedly, "We can get an apartment together!"

"And I'll be in Rhode Island, I can come visit!" Michel added.

"I have an announcement," Sam raised his hand, "I'm going to school here in California!"

Michel snorted, "Cali? Have you not been paying attention? Cali is out, New York is in."

"You're going to Rhode Island," Heisuke confirmed.

"Besides New York's overrated," Sam said.

"How did you get your parents to agree to it? I thought they wanted you to go to Oxford?" I questioned.

He crossed his arms, "I got a scholarship for the film school in LA, it also helped that they paid for my ticket."

"Way to go buddy," I slapped him on the back and turned to Dimitri and Heisuke. "How did you guys get your parents to agree to this?" They always planned to stay in their countries for school so I was curious on why they made the trip back to Summerland.

"We actually won a contest for a free round trip to any destination of our choice," Heisuke answered.

"It was a lucky coincidence that we won a week before your birthday," said Dimitri.

I knitted my brows, "yeah that's some coincidence."

"Where are you guys staying?" Jamie asked.

"At the Emerald," Ella answered, "We even have Madam Lope acting as our chaperone."

"Mrs. Lope, our homeroom teacher," my friends nodded as I searched the crowd for her plump figure. I found her standing off at the far side of the yard. Something tells me this wasn't a coincidence. I sneaked away from the group as my family came to greet my foreign friends.

I strolled over to the middle aged woman, "So they won a contest. You don't happen to know anything about this, do you?"
Shelly Lope smiled, "Are you implying that Isabella and I sent personal letters of recommendation to
their choice of schools so they would be closer to the states. And designed a fake contest for Heisuke
Sato and Dimitri Maier to travel with a round trip ticket, knowing perfectly well they would choose
to visit you. You give us too much credit Amy."

I surprised her with a hug, "thank you Mrs. Lope."

She patted my head, "your welcome," she allowed the hug to last for another minute till she said.
"Okay, that's enough. You can let go now."

I stepped back, grinning.

She sighed, "Run along now. You better enjoy them while you can."

"Wait, I just have one question, why?" I asked curiously.

She rolled her eyes, "Why? Well, there's your reason," she pointed to my friends. "Didn't you always
wonder how your parents were able to pay for Nightingale? Simple, they didn't. The government
did. The reason, the hope they had for you was that," she gestured to my friends again. "Isabella
wanted you to meet, learn and communicate with people from all over the world, so that before you
met the nations you wouldn't see them through American eyes, but through their eyes. The citizens
of those nations," she placed a hand on my shoulder. "She has great faith in you; I suggest you don't
screw it up."

"Inspiring words teach," I remarked in a sarcastic tone.

She shook her head, "off with you, this supposed to be my break from you children."

I turned to walk in the opposite direction but stopped and asked, "Are you going to work for the
government again?"

"Hell no, it turns out teenagers are easier to deal with than congressmen."

Matthew roamed the yard, making small talk with the other guests but also keeping a cautious eye on
Amy. She stayed glued to her friends throughout most of the afternoon. Swimming in the warm
ocean waters, playing volleyball on the shore and taking pictures every moment they could.

He smiled to himself, he was happy to see her laughing; it helped ease his guilt.

"Hey Birdie," Gilbert Beilschmidt grinned as he walked over to Matthew.

"Hello Gil, enjoying the party?"

He shrugged his shoulders, "It's amusing that's for sure." He turned to face Amy, who was dancing
on the plastic tile floor with her friends.

It was now evening, and the Hawkfeathers had hung Christmas lights over the tables and dance
floor; creating a magnificent twinkling wonder land. Johnny was working as the DJ and was playing
a playlist of Amy's favorite songs. A series of hip hop, alternative, electropop, rock and R&B filled
the speakers. It was a good mix and Matthew personally liked it, but he couldn't speak for the older
nations. They usually stood around and waited for songs that they knew to come on, unfortunately
that wasn't often. Good thing the humans at the party were friendly and patient. The children on the
other hand, had made it their personally mission to get all of the nations to join them on the floor.

The next song that blasted from the speakers was from Imagine Dragons called 'Tokyo'. Matthew watched as Amy and her friends started to jump to the beat and sing along to the lyrics. After a minute into the song, Amy ran into the crowd and dragged Kiku to the dance floor. She then began to show him how to shuffle his feet to the beat. Kiku tried to walk away but Amy would get in his way by spinning him in a circle. Feliciano joined in, forcing Kiku in the middle as he and Amy danced at his sides. Heisuke jumped in next and encouraged Kiku to dance.

Kiku seemed to have been won over for he began to move his feet in sync with Heisuke. They stomped their feet together with Feliciano and Amy as everyone created a circle around them, clapping and cheering them on.

"Have you guys told her yet?" Gilbert asked.

Matthew sighed, "No."

He snorted, "When you do, make sure to tell me. I'm just dying to see her face when you tell her of our little project," he smirked.

It was late, almost reaching one o'clock in the morning. The party had waned down, leaving my friends and I left standing on the dance floor. My cousins were driven to my house, Kupunakane and Kupunawahine had left with Grandma Aponi and Mr. James was picked up by a nurse from the nursing home. Family friends were long gone along with a few nations, but most had stayed, sitting around at the tables.

"Okay, it's about to be one a.m. and I'm tired. So here's the last song for you crazy kids," Johnny announced and clicked on a Lana Del Rey song.

"My feet are killing me," Ella whined as she sat in a nearby chair.

Daniela brushed through her sweat soaked hair, "I am dying for a hot bath."

"You're not the only one love," Sam yawned.

Everyone else followed, but I stayed behind. 'Once Upon a Dream' was my favorite song by Lana. She made this song so deliciously eerie that I couldn't help but find it beautiful. I kicked off my sandals and twirled with my arms stretched out at my sides. I quickly grew serious as I added ballet moves along with some interpretive dance. I did rapid a round of bourree followed by a pirouette. My arms were flowing freely to the music as my feet moved in a lone waltz.

At the corner of my eye, I caught Sam recording my performance as my friends watched in awe. I gave them a sly smile and continued to own the floor.

Michel loved to see Amy dance. She just had a way of transporting her audience to a mystical world that no one would dare leave. He took a rushed scan of the yard. The nations were observing with unwavering faces, their eyes never leaving Amy. Most of these nations were leering with such a fierce desire that it made Michel uneasy.
He craned his neck to find Toris seating at a table on the far right. He narrowed his eyes to focus on Toris's face. His eyes were dazed and he wore a small smile. His stare was different from the others; he looked at her like she was a graceful deer gazing in the fields. Simply enjoying the chance to watch her even if that means it would only be once.

Michel gave a silent approval; he was definitely boyfriend material for Amy. A mischievous grin spread from ear to ear, he had idea.

He jumped out of his seat and dashed to Johnny, "Play another song."

Johnny said, "No, I'm done. Besides Amy's the only one dancing."

"Please!" Michel begged, "One more song!"

He sighed, "Fine, any requests?"

"Starry Eyed."

"The one by the same artist?" he asked.

"Yes," Michel nodded.

"Okay, it'll come up right after."

Michel nodded and ran to Toris's table. "Toris buddy," he wrapped an arm around the nation's shoulders. "Listen, I need you to go and dance with Amy."

"W-what," he stuttered, "no, I can't besides she is doing just fine on her own and this song is about to end-"

"There's another one coming up, but you have to hurry."

"I knew you would cheat," a voice spoke from behind and Michel turned to find Jamie with her arms crossed.

"It's not what it looks like," he said defensively.

She narrowed her eyes at him and glanced to Heracles, "two can play at this game."

"No!" but she had already sprinted to the Greek's direction and Michel cursed. He pulled on Toris's arm, "come on the song's ending. You need to get up there."

He gripped the table, "no I don't want to."

"Stop being a baby and go," Feliks shoved his shoulder.

"If he won't," Mikkel raised his hand, "I'll be happy to take his place."

"Knowing you," Lukas added, "you'll do something to piss her off and we would have to scrap your brains off the floor. I don't know about all of you but I want to keep my clothes clean."

Michel spotted Heracles standing up from his table and he grew desperate. "Please Toris just dance with her! I know you like her!"

His eyes widened in shock and he quickly looked away, "no I don't."
"Dude it's written all over your face!"

The song ended and the next began. Amy was surprised for there to be another, but she recovered quickly and rocked herself to the music. Michel ground his teeth together, he was about to haul Toris over to the dance floor but someone beats him to it. Not Heracles, but a tall Russian young man with dark hair and a gymnast body.

Dimitri held out his hand and Amy took it. He spins her into him and draped his arms around her waist. Amy was hesitant at first but she ended up hooking her arms around his neck. She laid her head on his chest as he leaned his chin into her hair. They swayed together back and forth to the music, wrapped in a passionate embrace.

Michel's jaw dropped, "Dammit Dimitri."

"Dimitri? Is that what that boy's name is?" Feliks asked.

"Yeah," he answered.

"And is he Russian?"

Michel nodded and caught Toris slumping into his seat, with a defeated look on his face. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No, you just crushed all the confidence he had left," Feliks laughed.

I yawned and felt Dimitri's lips curl into a smile against my scalp. "Are you tired?"

"Yeah," I mumbled, "when I get home I'm just gonna curl up into my blankets and sleep."

"Do you wish to have company?" he bantered.

I blushed and gave him a soft smack on his arm, "no."

He grinned at first but his lips fell into a serious line. That's when I realized that I was staring at his lips. Stop it Amy!

The song was fading and Dimitri opened his mouth to say something but was interrupted by someone clearing his throat. We froze and turned to face Arthur, "Amy we have something to discuss with you."

"Okay, but-"

"Come along Mr. Maier," Mrs. Lope walked over and tapped Dimitri's shoulder. "We need to go."

"Can I-"

"No, it's pass curfew, we need to go," she turned to the others at the table, "That includes all of you, let's go."

They rose to their feet, said their goodbyes and walked to the concrete street. Dimitri spared one last glance to me and I gave a tiny wave, "you can tell me tomorrow."

He nodded, planted a chaste kiss on my forehead and followed the others to a dark minivan. When
the van had driven out of the sight the countries took that as their cue to move forward. They formed
a small circle around the dance floor right in front of the white screen. Michel, Jamie, my parents,
siblings and their spouses stood on my far left, each of them giving me encouraging smiles.

I lifted a brow in question, "is there something going on? You guys going to perform a blood ritual
that will orientate me into the UN, then sacrifice a goat and dance around a sacred fire, naked?"

Arthur's eye twitched, "no."

"Oh thank god! I was worried that I would have to kill a cute baby billy goat."

"Enough of your distasteful jokes Ms. America," Ludwig glared fiercely at me, "we have important
business to discuss with you."

I rolled my eyes, "What else is new."

"Are we connected yet?" Ludwig asked Kiku.

Kiku was on a laptop, typing rapidly, "Just about; Sealand-kun how's the web cam?"

"Almost got it," Peter proclaimed as he climbed a latter to attach a web cam on the top of the screen.
He climbed back down and walked backwards, "just tell me when to stop."

Kiku watched the computer and when Peter came into perfect view he exclaimed, "There."

Peter stopped and drew an 'X' on the spot between his legs. He walked over and pulled me to the
letter, "stand right here," he instructed as he moved the latter to the side.

"Okay, seriously what's going on?" I asked.

"Hello Amy," I jumped at the sound of a new, slightly louder voice appeared.

I faced the screen and found Isabella Garcia sitting behind her desk in the presidential office. She
wore a stylish pants suit with her brown hair curled and makeup professionally done. She beamed
when she saw me, "I hope you enjoyed your little gift from me."

"Uh yeah," I exclaimed, "I had a lot fun with my friends today and it's all thanks to you."

"You're welcome," her smile vanished, replaced with a serious line. "I'm sure you are wondering
what all this is about."

"What was your first clue? The question I asked? Or the puzzlement look on my face?"

"Amy," Mom hissed at me as a warning.

The president laughed, "Oh I just love your sarcasm." Then she sighed, "I just hope they don’t beat it
out of you."

My brows knitted together in confusion, "What?!!"

"Amy, like all nations you need to be trained as a soldier in the military," she proclaimed.

"M-military?! Like, wake up at four in the morning for ten mile runs in the rain military?!!"

"Yes," she said with a straight face.
I snorted, "You're joking right."

She arched a brow and waited.

My grin fell, "You want me to join the army?!"

"You have to learn how to fight, and besides all the nations are part of their country's army. It only seemed natural that you should join the US army." Isabella said.

I sucked air through my teeth, "Uh, no offense but I don't want to."

She clapped her hands together, "well too bad. You don't have a choice."

"Yes I do. I'm an American citizen, I can choose if I want to join the army or not."

"Amy, you are not a citizen, you are a nation, big difference. And I'm the president that means I'm commander in chief of the armed forces. I can decide if you can join the army or not, and guess what, you are."

"But-but-"

"No buts. I'm your boss, meaning whatever I say goes."

"What about Congress?! Where the hell are they in this?!" I shouted.

She laughed, "First time they actually agreed on anything without a week long debate."

I spun to face my family, "aren't you guys gonna say anything?!

"We can't," Dad sighed, "your eighteen, we no longer have a say."

"Turns out your grandfather had signed away your rights when you were two," Mom hissed through gritted teeth.

"And you didn't tell me this!"

"We didn't know till a few days ago!"

"Ladies, calm yourselves," Dad stepped between us.

Mom took a deep breath but I was shaking my head in disbelief. "Why would he do this?"

"He knew that one day you would have to serve your country," Isabella proclaimed. "Of course we discussed certain things I can control, such as your national duties, higher education and military training. As long as you give your all in your studies, duties and training, you can do whatever you please."

I glared but my anger quickly died. A part of me was relieved; I had no idea where I was heading earlier today. Now I had a plan, even though it was thrust upon me with no warning, it was better than nothing. But there had to be compromise, "Okay I get it. Studies, duties and training but I have the choice of school."

"As long as it's outside California," she crossed her arms.

"Fine, but I want a major in dance."
She nodded her head, "Very well, but you need to have a major in government economics and politics and a minor in US history."

"Okay but I want some courses in psychology, a fencing class and permission to join college clubs."

"Done, done and only if you keep your GPA at a 4.0 average," Isabella said.

"3.0!"

"3.5."

"Done," I agreed.

"You do realize that you graduated from Nightingale with a 2.7 GPA," Jamie added.

"Shut it," I narrowed my eyes at her.

Isabella giggled, "don't worry she'll have enough leverage for any college of her choice after her two year training with the nations."

I froze like a deer caught in the headlights, "huh?!"

"You didn't really think you would train with the US army."

"Uh, yeah."

"Amy, we can't afford any humans that haven't been cleared for high military status to know of you. Besides you get to travel the world and witness and take part in the meetings, its killing two birds with one stone."

"Madam President," Louis Catalano, an agent of the US Secret Service walked into the view of the camera, "We have to go, you have a campaign meeting."

She nodded and turned back to me, "talk to Germany, he'll be the first country you'll visit." She rose from her seat, "bye, bye Amy have fun," with those final words she walked out of the shot and the screen went black.

Then Ludwig placed his hand on my shoulder and handed me a plane ticket. "I suggest you pack your bags, our plane leaves at nine."
"I've should have seen this coming," I said in a meek tone as I sat at my velvet window seat. "The new luggage, the international gift cards and the foreign money," I hid my face in my hands, "I'm so stupid."

"Sweetie you're not stupid," Mom sat herself beside me to rub my back. "You just don't seem to catch foreshadowing."

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

"What's going on?" Alyce mumbled as she rose from the air mattress. Valencia yawned beside her and Gael rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, "is it time to go home?" he asked.

"Nah," Roman yawned, "we're not leaving till the twentieth."

"I don't want to go," Lali whined.

"No, the only person leaving is Amy," Melissa proclaimed as she packed more of my clothes and toiletries into my trunk styled luggage. The kids had once again used my room as their sleep over hangout. Alyce, Valencia and Gael slept on the air mattress while Roman, Lali and the twins slept in my bed.

"Where is she going?" Blair asked.

"Germany, China, Australia, where ever the hell they want to send me; I have no say what's so ever." I mumbled.

"Watch your language," Mom said through gritted teeth.

"I wonder," Melissa looked at my recently cleaned bathing suit, "will you be swimming? What's the weather like in Europe during the summer?"

Mom checked her phone. "The highs are usually in the seventies or eighties."

"Wow that sounds absolutely amazing, we've been in the high nineties for weeks, almost the hundreds." Melissa tucked in my blue one piece bathing suit along with my new clothes from Johnny and Celine.

"Do I have to leave now?" I grumbled, "I mean what about my summer?"

"Yeah, you were going to let us ride some more," Gael proclaimed.

"You also promised to take us to the beach," said Valencia.

"And take us camping," Roman added.

I nodded, "yes, yes, I know. See," I turned to face Mom, "I have obligations."

She sighed, "We tried to persuade Isabella to let you stay till September but she said that her hands were tied."

I narrowed my eyes, "by that, does she mean they had something to do with it."
Mom and Melissa nodded.

_Damn them_, I thought to myself.

"I need to pack your sari, I found out you'll be visiting India," Melissa smiled as she walked out of the room.

"Oh that reminds me. I bought you some new underwear with matching bras," Mom announced as she followed Melissa.

The children giggled, "It must have been awhile," Alyce grinned.

"Cochina," Valencia exclaimed, and that comment earned her a couple of laughs from the others. The word means nasty in Spanish.

"Ha, ha, ha. I'll have you know I wear clean underwear very day."

She rolled her eyes, "sure you do."

I rose from my seat and packed in a pair of simple toe open sandals, along with my worn out tennis shoes and black converse. I opened up my carry on and slid in my makeup bag (I usually only wore lip gloss, but who knows when I needed to be dolled up.) I then added a few more t-shirts, two pairs of jeans and a brown cross the shoulder purse that carried all the international gift cards and foreign money from the party.

"Are you really leaving," Lali asked as she gave me the wounded puppy dog look.

I sighed, "Yeah."

"But why?" she whined.

I ruffled her hair, "Sweetie I have to."

"How long will you be gone?" Roman asked.

"Two years," I answered.

"Two years!" they exclaimed in sync.

"Will you be back on holidays?" Alyce asked.

I shook my head, "I don't think so."

"But what about our Christmas traditions?" she exclaimed.

"Whose gonna tell us stories about Santa Claus?" Lali whimpered.

"Most importantly, whose gonna bake us cookies?" Gael asked.

I laughed, "Guys you'll be fine, besides just think about all the cool presents I'll send you."

"You'll send us gifts! Really?" Valencia grinned.

"Of course," I handed Alyce my smartphone, "here, plug in your addresses and add your birthdays into the calendar, that way I won't forget."

"We're getting presents! We're getting presents!" Lali sang as she jumped on the bed.
"Not yet come on," Roman picked her up and carried her to the velvet seat where the kids had gathered around Alyce as she typed in their birthdays.

I placed my camera into a side pocket and packed in the cord that would connect the camera to a computer. I mentally crossed off items in my head; I had my tooth bush, hair brush, passport, IDs, phone charger, and a European wall plug so my electrics would work. I roamed through my nightstand drawer, searching for anything else I might need. I stumbled upon my grandfather's leather bound journal. This journal was filled with stories about Grandpa and Alfred, it sure came in handy when the nations came knocking on my door. I flipped through the pages; I haven't read any entries since April, mostly because I was too busy with prom, finals and graduation.

Still, I was curious. What was Alfred truly like? The only peak I had into his mind was his will (which was paper clipped into the pages of the journal.) I had made a plan to take a trip to Charlottesville, Virginia in the fall, but clearly that was put on hold. Before I could second guess myself, I dropped it into the carry on.

"Aunt Amy," I turned to face Blake.

"What is it kiddo?"

He held up the dream catcher from my window, "You have to take this."

"The dream catcher?" I lifted up and caressed the small wooden animals that daggled from leather strings, along with crystals and feathers. But new stones were recently added into the web of the catcher thanks to Blake. Two months ago he had cut out the old web and replaced it with new string. Which was first soaked in cactus juice, mixed with lavender scented water; he then threaded small pieces of stone into the string. 'Stones for protection' he had said. Amber, black onyx, blue chalcedony, topaz and peridot were scattered over the web and every time the dream catcher moved the stones would wiggle.

"Blake, you worked so hard on this, I don't want to lose it."

"But you have to take it with you."

"I want it here."

"But you have to admit you've been sleeping better ever since I fixed it."

"True but-"

He caught my hand that held the dream catcher and moved it to my chest. "Please Aunt Amy, take it with you. It will protect you," his dark pleading eyes made full contact to my blue. "Please," he begged in a soft tone as tears formed in the corner of his eyes, "please."

My heart squeezed. "Sweetie, don't cry I'll take it with me."

"You will?"

"Of course," I smiled.

He held up his pinky, "Promise?"

I curled my pinky around his; "promise." I then wrapped the dream catcher in tissue paper and placed it into the carry on.
He wiped his tears away with the back of his hand as Blair leaped onto the bed with a knowing grin on her face. "Told you crying would work."

Blake grinned back, "She's so easy."

My jaw dropped, "you little con artist, you faked it?!"

The twins answered with laughter as I narrowed my eyes at them.

"Aw, what a touching moment," I looked up to the door where Michel and Jamie stood.

"What do you want," I asked in a monotone.

"Don't be such a sourpuss," Jamie walked in and held up a worn out spiral notebook. "Remember this?"

My eyebrows rose, "No way," I took the notebook into my hands. "Where did you find this?"

"You don't remember, we buried this in the back yard and promised to dig it up when we were eighteen."

"This notebook symbolizes our faithful promise to travel the world together," Michel's voice grew emotional and dramatic. "After you made your remarkable recovery from the Recession, we stated that we would make your number one wish come true. The wish that gave you hope for tomorrow, the reason you kept clinging to life-"

I rolled my eyes, "Are we getting somewhere drama queen."

"What he means is," Jamie said, "this is your chance to fulfill the wish of your childhood self."

"But we were supposed to do this together," I proclaimed. "We were supposed to party in London, drink wine in Rome and shop for those funny little hats in Paris."

She simply smiled, "Amy, we were ten when we buried this. Plans change. We have school to think about."

"Right," I sighed gloomily.

Michel wrapped his arm around my shoulders, "Hey now, no need to be sad. Who says we can't reschedule."

I gave a small smile, "I'm gonna miss you guys." I hugged him tight.

"I got you a journal," Jamie placed a simple blue graphic notebook into my carry on. "Make sure you write about all your adventures."

"And all your sexy romances," Michel wiggled his brows seductively.

I shook my head, "is this so you guys can count up points when I come back," I asked this more as a statement than a question.

They both nodded happily and I sighed. "I'm gonna see if Mom still has her old Kindle." I walked out the door and left them alone with my carry on. I was going to regret that.
The airport was crowded as I was shuffled in through the check in line. I confirmed my ticket along with tagging and checking in my luggage. Once I was done, (forty minutes of my life I will never get back) I headed over to Security. I lingered behind the lines and turned to face my parents, who came to see me off.

I dropped my bag to the ground, "so any final words till I'm sent off to hell."

Dad shook his head but he still carried a smile on his lips. He slipped his hand into my hair and pulled me to his chest. He wrapped his arm around my back and kissed the side of my head, "be safe and if anything happens call us. No matter what Isabella has said, if you feel like your life is in danger, you can call us and we'll wire money to get yourself on a plane back home."

I smiled and tightened my hold on him, "thanks Dad."

"And I swear to God if Russia tries anything-" 

"I'll kick his ass and come straight home," I grinned.

He smiled, "that's my girl."

When Dad released me, Mom pulled me into a rib-crushing embrace. "Be careful, I mean it."

"I know," I nodded.

"No mouthing off," she continued.

"Yeah," I nodded.

"Be respectful and clean up after yourself."

"Mom, I'm not a kid anymore."

She combed her fingers through my hair, "I know," she sighed as she blinked back tears, "I know."

I kissed her on the cheek, "I have to go, they'll be boarding in an hour."

She nodded but still she lingered. Dad came from behind, placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and pulled her back. She wiped her eyes and laid her head into the nook of his neck. "Go on Amy," Dad gestured to the line, "just remember, no matter what, you'll always have us. You'll always have a home to return to."

Mom nodded but carried a sad expression. I gave her a carefree smile, "Don't worry momma cougar your bear cub will be just fine." She smiled back and I walked through the Security line.

When I reached Boarding I met up with Ludwig and Gilbert.

"Morning," I greeted as I yawned.

Ludwig nodded as Gilbert grinned mischievously, "Well, well, it's about time you finally pulled yourself away from your mother's nipple."

"Ha. How long did it take you come up with that joke. Hold on I already know the answer, centuries."

"Centuries, yes the amount of time that will take you to reach my level of awesomeness."
"Dude, you can take your so called 'awesomeness' and shove it up your-"

Ludwig stepped between us. "Enough. Brother, please don't taunt her and Ms. Hawkfeather please show some self-restraint."

I rolled my eyes, "righty-o Captain," I gave a mock salute.

"I'm a Generalleutnant, a Major General," Ludwig narrowed his eyes at me.

I lifted an eyebrow, "What's the difference?"

The brothers shared a look till the elder grinned, "we're gonna have a lot of fun with this one."

"Attention, Flight 304 to Berlin, Germany is now boarding," a female voice announced over the intercom.

It's official, I hate flying.

The chairs are small with no elbow room what's so ever. They gave me nothing to eat besides cold chicken, some nasty stale peanuts and warm, gooey jello. You practically have to beg your flight attendant to get you a cup of water and the bathroom lines were dreadfully long. But the absolute worse was being crammed in the middle of Ludwig and Gilbert for nearly seventeen hours.

Ludwig sat in the aisle seat as he entertained himself with a book and didn't bother to make small talk. Gilbert had the window seat and amused himself with a game on his iPad.

"You actually know how to work one of those?" I asked.

He cracked a wicked smile, "I may be old but I'm not stupid."

"You could've fooled me."

His brows rose, "how about we settle this with a game of chess." He opened an app and brought forth a digital chess board with the usually white and black game pieces.

I smirked, "you're on."

Within the first hour, the score was thirty-six to zero. Clearly chess wasn't like checkers.

"Checkmate," Gilbert proclaimed as his knight took my king.

"But-but I took your pawns and your piece with the cross thing."

"My bishop, yeah you did. But you left your king open; the whole point of the game is to take the other's king."

I groaned, "And this game is popular why?"

He reloaded a new game, "such a childish thing to say." I glared as he gave a superior smile. "Are you done playing then?"

"No," I hissed, I wasn't about to give up, not until I wiped that smug grin off his face.

Surprisingly we played chess for another two hours. My score remained at zero and Gilbert was not
about to let me forget it.

"Checkmate," he grinned as his bishop and knight cornered my king, "the score is seventy-four to, what was your score again?" He asked with an evil smile.

"Zero," I mumbled.

He chuckled. "You know, I'm going to be nice. Let's play something you might have chance at winning."

I bit my tongue back from saying a snappy comment as he brought out recent games. We played UNO, ZombieSmash, Clash of Clans, Candy Crush Saga and every version of Angry Birds we could find. This scenario of non-stop gaming lasted for hours. We only stopped for meals and bathroom breaks. The scores were pretty even but I totally crushed him in UNO, thank you family game night.

After dinner Ludwig suggested we take a break from the games, mostly because we were disturbing his reading. Mom allowed me to borrow her Kindle Fire HD; she even gave me money to purchase books and paid a year subscription to Netflix. My mom is so awesome. Gilbert got nothing on her.

I skimmed through the TV shows and movies, deciding wither to start something new or re-watch an old show. Gilbert looked over my shoulder, "anything good?"

I shrugged my shoulders, "I'm tempted to re-watch Once Upon a Time."

"That girly fairy tale show," he snorted, "I asked for something good not something that would drive me to claw my own eyes out."

"Then maybe I should watch it," I smirked.

He flicked his fingers over the tablet, "Let's see, do you have anything from Germany?"

I pulled the electronic away from him, "I don't know, check your iPad."

"The battery is dead."

"And whose fault is that?"

"Yours," he said, "you couldn't accept the fact that I was awesome in everything."

"Did you forget my UNO scores; fifty-nine wins baby," I grinned.

After twenty minutes of arguing we came to an agreement of watching zombie movies. We started with the classics, Shaun of the Dead and Zombieland. Then we found Detention of the Dead, which was about a group of random teenagers that would never hang out together outside of detention (you know, a geek, a goth, a cheerleader, a jock, and a happy go lucky drug user). The entire plot is about teenagers having to put aside their stereotypically high school roles and work together to survive as zombies attack their classmates and over run their school. It was as if the Breakfast Club and Shaun of the Dead came together for a dunked one night stand and this was their sloppy love making. Spoil alert; the geek and the goth lived. Well, somewhat, the cheerleader becomes a zombie and attacks the geek at the end of the movie. We don't even know if he lived or died, but it was hilarious.

Don't get me wrong the movie was horrible but it had its moments and some redeemable scenes. My all-time favorite quote would have to be by the goth girl Willow: 'Looks like Rob Zombie raped the entire cast of Gossip Girl and this is their angry love child.' Now I would like that on a t-shirt.
Gilbert and I had more fun making jokes about the movie rather than watching it.

"Americans seem to make anything into a movie," he said as he shook his head.

I nodded, "sadly yes, but we do have our moments. You can't forget the Marvel franchise."

"The only good movies were the first Avengers and the second Captain America."

"What about Guardians of the Galaxy?? Those movies were epic."

"Can you two shut up and go to sleep," Ludwig hissed at us.

"Why bother, it's going to be like ten to eleven in the morning when we land," I remarked.

"Think about everyone else," he narrowed his blue eyes at us, "Now; turn off the tablet and go to sleep." He ended the conversation by turning his back to us and readjusting the blanket over his shoulder.

Gilbert gave me a side way glance, "are you tired?"

"Nope; want to watch The Notebook? That movie always seems to put me to sleep," I offered.

The longest I every stayed awake for The Notebook was an hour and twenty-six minutes. Jamie had gone as far as to time me. It's her favorite romance movie and she usually had to beg Michel and me to watch it with her. Michel was a good sport about it, but I was completely bored with the movie. No matter how many times we tried, I always fell asleep.

Ten minutes into the film, and I was already yawning. I laid my head back and curled the airline blanket around my shoulders. My eyelids were dropping and before long I was out cold.

Gilbert yawned, he was only thirty minutes into the movie but he no longer had the strength or desire to keep his eyes open. He stopped the film, logged out of the Netflix account and turned off the tablet. He tried to reach for Amy's carry on but it was completely under her seat, so he decided to store the tablet in the pocket of the airline seat that was in front of him.

He relaxed into his seat and draped the blanket over his lap. He was seconds away from an awkward positioned sleep until Amy's head fell onto his shoulder. He glanced over to find her kissable, petal colored lips inches away from his face. In an instant, energy surged through his body at the thought of her lips on his. He moved closer to tease himself with a simple brush of their lips. He froze when she stirred but her eyes remained close and her breathing was steady.

He brushed aside her hair to reveal her smooth cheek and at that moment a wicked idea came to thought. He reached into his back pack for a marker and began to write on her face.

"Attention everyone this is your pilot speaking," a deep male's voice awoke me from my rest. "We'll be landing in Berlin, Germany in fifteen minutes. Please secure your items and buckle yourselves in for landing."

I yawned as I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. I made sure the Kindle Fire HD was placed back into my carry on and slid it under the seat. I buckled myself in, folded the gray blanket and handed it to
our flight attendant. When she turned to face me, her eyes widened slightly but she remained polite as she took our blankets and walked on.

Ludwig buckled himself to his chair and brushed his blond hair back. He glanced to me and his eyebrows rose. I frowned at him, "what?"

He was hesitant but he must've thought I wouldn't notice, "Nothing." He moved his arm around me to shove his brother, "Wake up!"

Gilbert jumped slightly and rubbed his face with his hands, "What?"

"Did you," he spared a look at me before he continued, "do something you shouldn't have done," he said through gritted teeth.

Gilbert grinned, "Maybe."

Ludwig said nothing else, merely groaned and massaged his temples.

"What did he do?" I asked.

The younger brother quickly said, "Nothing."

We landed at Berlin Tegel Airport at 11:46 a.m. and the airport was just as crowded as it was in Santa Barbara. It sure was easier to get through Security but people were staring. I mean, Ella told me once that if a European man was interested in someone, they would make it known by staring at the person but I was pretty sure not every man, woman and child wanted to go on a date with me. I grew very self-conscious. I glanced to my clothes; I was wearing a pair of comfy jeans that I had cut to stop at the knees, a purple tank top and pair of worn out silver colored sneakers. I didn't seem to be violating any dress codes, but still, young men would chuckle as they walked passed me. Women shook their heads and mothers averted their children's eyes.

Okay, seriously what is up with everyone?

After we gathered our checked luggage; I followed Ludwig and Gilbert to the front of the airport where a cab was waiting. The cab driver grabbed our luggage first and when he moved to take my carry on, his eyes darted to my face and he smirked. I knitted my brows as I tightened my hold on my bag and he turned away quickly.

Ludwig ushered me to the backseat as Gilbert sat in the passenger seat next to the driver. "Take us to Inselstraße," Gilbert told the driver in German as he glanced at me through the rear view mirror. He smirked, his red eyes shining.

I rolled my eyes and turned to my window, I was about to plug myself into my iPod till I noticed something dark on my cheek. I focused in on my reflection and found 'I Suck Cock' written along my cheek bone with a penis drawn near the corner of my mouth.

I instantly connected the dots and leapt at Gilbert, "You son of a bitch!"

Before he could react I smashed my fist into his cheek. The blow caused him to crash against the window. He groaned and tried to unlock the door. I was climbing over the driver as Ludwig sprang into action.
He gripped me by my shirt and pulled me back. "Control yourself!"

I took deep calming breaths, "You're lucky your brother was here to save you. If not the cab driver would have to spend his entire day just to scrape your brains off the seats."

Gilbert opened the door to spit out blood and turned to the driver as he slammed the door shut. "Gehen wir," he gestured to the road but the driver didn't move. He was more concerned about Gilbert and me getting into another fight. Gilbert grew irritated, "Let's go old man!"

The driver nodded and drove us into traffic.

As we drove, I grabbed some wipes from my carry on and began to scrub harshly into my skin. I used the window to clean myself but it was hard to tell if I got all the ink off. I turned to Ludwig, "Hey did I get all of it?"

He nodded, "yes it's fading."

To be safe, I added some makeup remover to the wipe and cleansed my cheek with it. I was able to catch Gilbert rubbing his wounded cheek. I narrowed my eyes at him, asshole. I shoved my used wipe into my jean pocket and faced the window to do some sightseeing. The driver took us down south, along the edge of Berlin. He took us down swift roads with street signs and buildings scattered on both sides. We drove on, continuing straight onto highways 111 and 110.

Half way through our drive the buildings were soon replaced with tall trees. "Where are we?" I asked.

"We're in Grunewald," Ludwig answered, "it's a national park and quite a large one too."

"And where are we going? I thought we would stay in the city," I said.

"No, it's too crowded. We're going to Inselstraße, think of it as an island on a lake. We have few neighbors there and enough room for your training. You can even entertain yourself with the lake on your days off."

Finally, we reached Inselstraße and it's just like Ludwig described. An island on a lake filled with trees and few houses. Before we crossed the bridge, there was a boating dock for people to store and ride out their boats on the dark colored water. After crossing, some houses stood close, but as we drove further into Inselstraße the large houses were spread out with massive plots of land. There was only one road and it wrapped itself in a loop around the entire island.

The Beilschmidt brothers lived on the northern corner of the island, with the most trees covering the front of their estate. I could barely see this so called house. The cab driver parked the car in front a black iron gate with towering trees shading the entire sidewalk.

Gilbert paid the man as Ludwig climbed out of the car and I followed after him. He pulled out our luggage and headed to the gate. I slid my carry on strap over my shoulder and adjusted my luggage to roll behind me. Gilbert grabbed his bags as the cab drove away and he followed behind us. The sidewalk and street roads were made with worn out gray brick. The sky was clear and the sun was streaming light through small openings of branches. I had to take a moment to scan my surrounds. The branches were long and covered the land in an endless sea of shade. Further along, the trees scattered with more fields in between. The leaves were bright green, matching the fresh cut lawn. Colorful flower gardens complemented the yard and were planted around the front area of the house.

Now the house was three stories with six windows on the first two and four on the third. It was big, but more modest than Austria's house, almost like an old manor house you would see in an old
mystery movie. The first floor was built with white brick, the second floor was red and the top floor was black with a slight spacing in between of gray. In the center of the manor was a small stone porch that outlined two windows on top of one another above the two white painted doors.

"This seems cozy," I remarked.

I was met with silence as Ludwig unlocked the door and walked in. The inside was old fashion yet mixed with modern items. Paintings framed the walls, along with wooden floors and tasteful furniture. The living room had a flat screen and lazy-boy leather seats. The kitchen was bright and had plenty of windows facing the left side of the yard.

"America," Ludwig called out to me, "follow me, I'll show you to your room."

I lifted my luggage by the handle and followed him up the stair case to the second floor. He leads me down the left side of the hall to the last door on the left, "I made sure to put a lock on the door, so no one would disturb you."

The room was filled with natural sunlight, thanks to the one window in the front and two on the side. The walls were covered with blue flowered wall paper and the floors were polished wood. There was a large chestnut colored wardrobe in the middle of the two windows and a matching set of night stands stood on each side of the bed. The bed was queen sized with the same wooden frame as the furniture and had light blue covers and pink pillows.

"Thanks," I nodded to him as I walked in.

"If you would, please leave your things and come with me for a moment."

I followed Ludwig and Gilbert to the basement. Every nerve in my being was practically screaming for me to run in the opposite direction, for if I reference every horror movie I've seen, nothing good ever goes on in the basement.

But through this old fashioned stone spiral stair case was a very modern looking gym. Complete with weights, mats, punching bags and dummies, and a climbing rope. The brothers head over to the stack of mats and set a few on the floor. Ludwig then removes his jacket and rolls up his sleeves. He turned to face me, "Are you ready?"

I knitted my brows in confusion, "For what?"

"Your training," he proclaimed, "I have to see where you are to estimate the level of endurance." He held up his fists, "attack me."

My eyes widened, "Really? Now?"

"Ja, come on," he gestured for me to move forward.

I hesitated, not really sure on what do to.

"Just see if you can land a hit."

I moved on to the mat and shuffled myself to the balls of my feet. I lifted my fists up to my face and shot out my right arm. Ludwig gripped his hand around my wrist to push my fist away from making contact. He then tripped me with his foot and shoved me to the floor, all in one swift move.
I was dazed, it happened so fast.

"Try again," he spoke as he prepared himself into his stance.

I sighed, "Can't we rest first?"

"No!" he barked, "now get up!"

I groaned as I rose to my feet and held my hands up. Ludwig wasn't going to make the first move; it was my skills he was analyzing. I decided to surprise him with a high kick aimed to the face, but he saw that coming. He grabbed my calf and tossed me to the floor without even moving from his spot.

Gilbert laughed, "She's as weak as a kitten."

My face heated in embarrassment and I snapped at him, "Did you forget what I can do to your face!"

"How about you show me America," Ludwig smiled smugly.

I ground my teeth together in frustration. Here I was in the outskirts of Berlin, barely had any sleep, learning how to fight in the military and yet not by the US army. But by the nations, who took me away from my last summer with my friends and forced me into a two year training boot camp.

The anger was finally coming to a boiling point and before I could even think. I jumped to my feet and charged head on. I threw a series of punches but Ludwig easily weaved around them. Dodging or blocking every move I made. As my fists began to slow that was when he went on the offense. He elbowed me in the gut, threw me over his back and slammed me into the mat.

Pain shot up my lower back to my rib cage and it hurt to breathe.

Ludwig sighed, "we have a long way to go."
Chapter 4

Ludwig pounded on my guestroom door, "America wake up!"

"I'm up, I'm up," I groaned as I rose from my bed at four in the morning. I rushed to the wardrobe and pulled out a green shirt and black jeggings. I tied on my tennis shoes and opened the door.

The day started with breakfast, usually eggs and sausage. After our meal, Ludwig and I ran laps around the island. Twenty laps had to be done in less than an hour, which was torture.

"Pick up the pace," Ludwig exclaimed as he slowed his pace to match mine. "Move it or do fifty burpees, your choice."

I panted, out of breath but increased my jog into a sprint. Burpees were the last thing I needed.

When laps were done, we headed down to the basement. First, we stretched to increase our flexibility; I took some pride in that. Thanks to my dancing history I was able to reach certain lengths that neither Ludwig nor Gilbert could. We would then move on to weight training, building our muscles and increasing our strength. Followed by pushups, crunches and basic fighting skills; the dummies were brought out for that part.

"Aim for the gut and head," Ludwig instructed, "that will weaken your opponent."

I held my fists up near my chin and punched the dummy man in the stomach and face. I had some boxing experience thanks to Johnny. He taught me as a kid, hoping to build my strength back up after I recovered from my illness a.k.a the Recession.

"Don't lock your elbows," he called out.

"Practice your uppercuts and hooves," Gilbert added.

Uppercuts were punches aimed under the chin and hooves were hits that aim for the side of the head. The arm had to be horizontal as the fist strikes the cheek in a quick motion.

"Switch to your legs," Ludwig exclaimed.

I jumped back from the dummy and lifted my knees up to my chest one at a time. I repeated this till Ludwig told me to kick. I stepped towards the dummy and kicked forward. I practiced kicks to the side of the ribs, straight into the gut and then moved on to a high round kick to the face. This pattern continued as side kick, straight kick and round kick; this repeated till he told me to go back to punching. Then he would bark at me to switch to my kicks, then back to my punches, etc. etc. (Usually I would go on doing these routines for more than an hour each.)

Lunch came after; mostly I used that hour to rest. Then Ludwig and I would run more laps followed with combat training. I winced at the thought of my first day.

Gilbert and I stepped onto the mat. My whole body was twitching due to the recent day of actives. My limbs were on fire and that lunch was making its way back up.

"Time for you to hit something that will hit back," Ludwig said as he leaned on the wall across from us.

"Don't we get any patting?" I asked.
I was answered with a fist to the gut. I hissed in pain and swallowed back my lunch. "You don't get any patting in real life," Gilbert smirked.

Combat training lasted for the entire afternoon, ending with stretching. After dinner both Ludwig and Gilbert would instruct me in military studies. This course contained battle strategies, weapon and vehicle identification and gun safety.

I haven't used a gun yet, but Ludwig says that after I'm able to take a gun apart and put it back together in less than two to three minutes; I won't even touch a bullet. I wasn't complaining; I didn't like guns.

After my studies, I'm free till lights out; though I was too exhausted to do anything else but shower and sleep.

This routine had been going on for five days straight.

Thank God it was Saturday.

Training would only last from four a.m. to three p.m. with no class. The rest of the day and Sunday belonged to me.

"Work on your defense," Ludwig exclaimed as his fists made full contact to my forearms.

My forearms were protecting my face, "I thought I was."

He threw his arm under and I jumped back to avoid a hit in the gut. I leaped into action when I saw an opening; I supported myself on my strong leg and waved my other leg up to reach his face. My kick would have been epic, unfortunately it didn't reach its mark; only left me open for Ludwig to grab my leg in motion. With a flick of his wrist he flipped me; a loud thud bounced off the walls as I collided into the mat.

I panted, "I yield. I yield."

Ludwig was out of breath, but sure looked better than me. His muscles were taut and defined. He wore a black tank, dark green cargo pants and combat boots; definitely soldier apparel.

Also, unlike him I was covered in bruises. My midsection was batted mess of blue and purple. My face carried purple and yellow marks and both of my eyes were red and violet. Gilbert said that my wounds would heal faster after a week or two of training. I hoped he was right, I was avoiding video skyping with my parents and they were starting to take notice.

I craned my neck up, even though every fiber of my being screamed at me not to move. I checked the wall clock; it was three. I grinned, "Freedom!"

I slowly rose to my feet, my muscles ached and my back was sore and twitching. Gilbert used that moment to slap me on the back, "way to go, you survived your first week."

I sucked in air through my teeth trying to control the urge to cry out in agony. He noticed and smirked, "Aw, did I hit you too hard?"

"Shut up."

He chuckled as his eyes glanced to my shirt, "Team Heracles? What's that about?"

My eyes widened as I looked down, it was the green Team Heracles tee that Jamie gave me for my
birthday. I yelped; *I didn't even pack this.* Then I quickly remembered that I had left Michel and Jamie alone with my carry on. They must have packed their team t-shirts while I wasn't looking. Those sneaky bitches, they're so lucky they have an ocean protecting them from me.

"Um," I stuttered, "This is for," then an idea came to mind, "for the Heroes of Olympus series. It's the book series after the Percy Jackson series. This shirt is for Heracles, a character in the book." It wasn't an all-out lie, but there was no way I'd root for Heracles, I'm Team Leo all way.

Gilbert nodded, "Oh, I remember they tried to make those books into movies."

I groaned, "Don't even start, the movies were bad. Stick to the books, they're always better." Before he could ask any more questions, I found my second wind (more like fourth) and ran up the stairs.

I ran into my room and locked the door. I searched through the wardrobe and found the Team Toris shirt folded in a drawer. *How could I miss this?* I tried to think back to the day I unpacked, the day Ludwig had to analyze my skills as jet leg took its toll on my body. I remembered that I was too tried to even pay attention to my clothing. I slapped my forehead, *I'm such an idiot. I even wore it.*

At least it was the Heracles shirt, if it was the Toris shirt they would've known it was about Lithuania.

I took off the green shirt and grabbed the blue one and threw them both back into the carry on. I kicked the bag under the bed, hoping that no one would ever find them.

I grabbed the black shirt that Johnny gave me, along with skinny jeans and clean underwear. Ludwig and Gilbert each had rooms on the first floor, with their own bathrooms. Leaving the bathroom across from my room free for me; the room was simple, with white tile, white walls, white shower, sink and toilet. The shower was on the left with a clear glass door, and the sink and toilet were on the right. A large window was in between the shower and toilet, with an old fashion white bathtub raised on silver stands in front of it. I've only used the shower, so I figured I'll spoil myself with a bubble bath. I blasted the faucet with warm water and squeezed in some soap that Sofia got me from Bath & Body Works. It was called French Lavender and Honey and it smelled amazing; sweet, light and simple for everyday use. She gave me the whole set, lotion, body cream, shower gel, and body spray.

I discarded my work out clothes and slid into the tub. The warm water slipped into my sore muscles and I hissed and sighed in pleasure. The bubbles had formed quickly and completely covered my body. The sunlight streamed through the window and I was finally able to see what lies outside (it was always night when I showered). The field was open with a few scattered trees. The edge of the island was green with no sand. The lake was dark with light glittering off the surface.

I laid my head back on the rim and hummed a song from Lorde. This was the first time I was able to relax since I got here. Now I had the energy to think. The only downside to it was that I was homesick. I pondered on how my family and friends were doing as I twirled my sapphire pendent with my fingers. It was six in the morning in Summerland; Mom and Dad would be up by now, along with my second cousins. They would be planning a day of fun actives followed by a camping trip at the national park. Grandma would run the shop with Kupunawahine as Kupunakane surfed outside. Michel and Jamie wouldn't do anything till the afternoon, most likely hang with Ella, Daniela and Sam. Heisuke and Dimitri would have gone back to their countries by now too.

I wondered: *what did Dimitri want to say to me back at the party?*
I shook my thoughts away as I plunged myself underwater, pushing my nagging thoughts to the back of my mind.

After my bath, I got dressed and dried my hair with a towel. I headed down stairs for a glass of water. The front door ringed and I looked around for Gilbert or Ludwig, it wasn't my house, it would be rude to answer it. But whoever was behind that door kept ringing. I swallowed the rest of my water in one gulp, set the glass on a side table and opened the door, "Yes?"

A pair of arms wrapped themselves around me and pulled me in for a hug. "Amy! I'm so happy, you're still alive!" Feliciano squeezed as he nestled his face into the nook of my neck.

I winced at the soreness of my body and gently pushed him away, "And why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, don't take this the wrong way, I love Germany, but when he gets into his general mode he becomes a bit of a-"

"Hard ass," I finished.

"I heard that," Ludwig announced as he came up from behind. He was wearing casual clothes with a towel draped over his shoulders; he must have just gotten out of the shower.

"Speak of the devil," I grinned as I let Feliciano in, "you have a guest."

He sighed, "Italy what are you doing here?"

Feliciano gave him a big smile, "I came to visit you and Amy. This would be our chance to spend time together before the meeting."

"The G9 meeting won't take place for another week; it would be a waste for you to show up now." Ludwig lectured.

He glanced to his shoes, "I just thought it would be nice to spend some time with you."

"Feliciano, I'm busy training America."

"Technically, I'm free till Monday so if he wants to hang that's fine with me," I proclaimed.

"I actually want to stay till after the meeting," Feliciano added.

"Even better," I shrugged.

"No," Ludwig said firmly, "you can't stay for two weeks. Think about your work."

Feliciano gave a sad, pleading look, "please."

"Dear Lord it's like saying no to a puppy," I said.

Ludwig spared a warning look at me till he caved, "Fine, you can stay."

"Yay!" Feliciano squealed as he kissed Ludwig on both cheeks and moved to do the same with me.

"I'll unpack my things and then we can go sightseeing."
Downtown Berlin was like no city I ever seen. Massive, unique buildings were scattered throughout the city, along with beautiful stone brick town homes aligning themselves beside the roads. It was architect's dream. Reichstag, the building for Parliament stood tall, with a large glass dome at the top where the German politicians work and so happens to be the place with the best view of the city.

Hundreds of people walked the streets, 'summer tourists' Ludwig said. Crowds ventured into the museums, the memorials, the flea and food markets, and the East Side Gallery. Which was the world's longest open air gallery; where over one hundred paintings were drawn on the Berlin Wall. It sat along the Spree River and was about a mile long. Feliciano pulled me along the wall, asking what my thoughts were about each painting.

I enjoyed art, but I wasn't an expert. Michel would be the one to be in awe. When new art pieces were being shown at our local museums, he would already have our tickets purchased and have the back story ready for each piece, prepared to be my personal tour guide. Feliciano was the same way, his auburn eyes gleamed and his smile was dazzling as he introduced me to every piece.

"This is the famous kiss of Erich Honecker and Leonid Brezhnev," he announced.

I looked up to see two middle aged men kissing. The men were extremely detailed, almost like someone took a photograph and pasted it on the wall.

"What do you think?" he asked.

I nodded my head in approval, "It's pretty cool, I bet it shocked some people to have two men kissing back then, which makes it even cooler. And I have to say, their kiss is pretty passionate." I took out my digital camera and asked Ludwig to take our picture.

He nodded as Feliciano, Gilbert and I took our place in front of the painting. Feliciano wrapped his arms round my waist in a friendly hug as Gilbert placed a hand on each of our shoulders and put on his most charming grin. I sighed and hooked an arm around Feliciano's neck and gave my brightest smile to Ludwig.

He took the shot with a flash and Feliciano ran over to take the camera, "Go stand with Amy," he exclaimed.

Ludwig was resistant to it but the Italian only kept pushing till he was standing beside me and his brother. Ludwig had his arms crossed, waiting for his picture to be taken.

"Ludwig," Feliciano cried, "you have to smile."

"Feli, I'm not really in the mood," he proclaimed.

I rolled my eyes, "shocker."

"Come on West, give us a smile," Gilbert put his fingers at the corners of Ludwig's mouth and perked them up.

I grinned, "Take the picture or else we're gonna be here all day." Feliciano nodded as the flash went off.

We walked back to the Spree River where the Museumsinsel stood, also known as Museum Island. The UNESCO World Heritage Site contained five museums, the Pergamon, Bode, Neues, Alte Nationalgalerie and Altes Museum.
We visited the Neues first where the bust of the Egyptian Queen of Nefertiti was on display. Several Egyptian artifacts were shown, like stone coffins and urns with the Egyptian gods faces crafted on the lids. Along with pieces of wall paintings with the iconic drawings and holographics, "I sure wish Gupta was here, he might be able to translate them," I said.

Gilbert scanned the room, making sure that we had a safe distance away from any humans that could listen in. He answered, "Probably, but don't expect him to know too much about it. He was just a kid when his mother's empire fell. After that he was taken in by Sadiq and was part of the Ottoman Empire."

I nodded, "Were you there when it happen?"

"Yes."

I lifted an eyebrow, "How old are you?"

He took a moment to think. "I was part of the Teutonic Knights and before that I was a nomad, wondering around till I was taken in by an orphanage run by some nuns. I'm thinking, somewhere between seven and eight hundred years."

"You were knight?" I asked skeptically of him.

"Most of us were back in ye olden days."

"Who was ‘most of us’?"

"Let's see, Francis was one and Antonio, even though he used an axe most of the time. All of Europe really; even that bastard Lithuania."

His face took on a sour look as the name passed through his lips.

"I'm guessing there's some bad blood between you two," I proclaimed.

He snorted, "You don't know the half of it."

"Then tell me, I want to know."

He mumbled under his breath and I narrowed my eyes at him, "fine, I'm in a museum, I can find it on my own."

After some twists and turns through the halls I was able to find the section assigned to the Teutonic Knights. The hall was empty, leaving Gilbert and me alone as I read every article that was displayed on the walls. These articles were placed beside polished armor, sturdy cross designed shields and sharp blades. I grinned when I came to a certain piece of written history. "You lost to Lithuania and Poland in 1410 stopping you from expanding east, ha. I'm really starting to like those two."

He rolled his eyes, "they might have been powerful back then, but now, heh. Poland would rather decorate than fight and Lithuania, he's pathetic; trembles every time someone even mentions Russia."

A cold chill washed over my spine. The memory of Toris and Ivan on the balcony came flooding back. The scene of Ivan holding Toris close as he forced an unwanted kiss on him. His blue-green eyes filled with horror and humiliation.

"Maybe for a good reason," I said, refusing to look at Gilbert, "How about you stop being a sore loser and shut up."

I practically heard him smirk, "I'm not being a sore loser. I'm merely speaking the truth."
Then the memory of Toris trembling in the secret passage way came next; how he refused to look at me as he gave me a vague description about his time at Russia's house. I didn't push for details back then, it seemed too painful and frankly I didn't want to know.

"Then just shut up, you don't know what went down," I glared.

His smile fell, "I actually do. At one point of my life I had to live with him. He was a sick fuck but I stayed strong. Lithuania on the other hand, did nothing. Just laid there and took it like a bitch."

I smacked my hand across his face. The echo of the hit bounced off the walls as he stepped back and rubbed his cheek. He took this as a cue to continue taunting me. "Aw, what's wrong did I crush your little fantasy about the mighty knight Lithuania?" He chuckled harshly, "sorry to disappoint you but the country was never the same after Russia had his way with him."

"At least he is a country," I hissed, "you are just some piece of shit left over from the Prussian Empire. Which doesn't even exist anymore, how about you get the memo and disappear already. You don't seem to offer anything but hurtful statements and stupid antics."

His blood red eyes took on a darker shade, "Listen little girl, you should learn to keep that mouth of yours shut."

"Oh, but I'm merely speaking the truth," I mocked him with his words. "You're an asshole and the world would be better off without you."

He laughed; it was filled with hate and anger. "Are you any better? America doesn't do much except sit on its big fat ass and expect everyone else to praise it. The only pride you can take, are the achievements of the past generations. What exactly can you offer?" He answered his own question, "Nothing."

I threw my fist, ready to land at his face but he grabbed it smoothly. I tried to pull away but his hold was strong. "Really, another face hit? I know it's been a week, but didn't you learn anything?"

I swung a fast kick to his side. He grunted and lost grip on my hand. "I didn't ask to be a nation!" I screamed. "All I wanted was to live my life; I didn't give a flying fuck about the government as long as I did what made me happy."

He sucker punched me and heat exploded through my cheek. The pain washed over my nose and forehead, causing my vision to blur. "Selfish, aren't you?" he said cruelly.

I cried out for him to shut up and tackled him to the floor.

"Would Ludwig Beilschmidt please come to the security office of the Neues Museum please," a male voice proclaimed over the intercom.

Ludwig knitted his eyebrows together in confusion and worry. Why would security need to see him? Then a thought came to mind, he hasn't seen America and his brother for over an hour; he prayed that this incident didn't have anything to do with them. But knowing his luck and his brother, his prayers would be wasted.

And he was right.

He and Feliciano walked to the head desk of security, where a man dressed in a formal navy blue
uniform was lecturing two young adults. Both had bruises on their faces and their wrists were tied together with plastic cuffs. Gilbert's right eye was slightly swollen and his nose was once again broken. Amy's foundation was running, revealing her old wounds along with the new.

Ludwig sighed, rubbed the bridge of his nose and walked to the desk. "I'm Ludwig Beilschmidt."

The security guard turned to face him. He was middle aged with graying hair and hazel eyes. "Hello Mr. Beilschmidt," they shook hands as the guard gestured towards Amy and Gilbert. "They say they're with you."

"Yes, they are." Ludwig glared at them, but his look quickly softens when he faced the security guard. "What did they do?"

"They were fighting in the Teutonic Knight hall, luckily they didn't damage any of the artifacts but still," he side glanced to them. "I believe that it's best that you and your party leave."

Feliciano's mouth opened, about to protest, but Ludwig stopped him with a firm look. The German turned back to the guard, "I understand. I am terribly sorry for the trouble they have caused."

The guard pulled apart the plastic cuffs, "you're free to go, keep in mind you two are banned from our museums."

Gilbert snorted softly, "for how long?"

"First time offenders are banned for six months," the guard proclaimed.

Amy rolled her eyes, "whatever."

The car ride back was quiet. Ludwig was driving his silver BMW with a tight hold on the wheel. Gilbert sat in the passenger seat, his face at the window. Feliciano sat behind him, nervously glancing at everyone, as if second guessing himself if he should speak or not. I turned to my window and plugged myself into my iPod, listening to Adele's 'Skyfall'.

I tapped my forehead to the glass and bit my bottom lip to hold back my cry. My head was throbbing, my jaw and cheeks were marked with fresh welts and my midsection was on fire from the recent marks I received from Gilbert.

I mentally cursed myself; I made a promise to not get into any trouble. Now I've screwed it up and got myself thrown out of Museum Island. And for what, all because Gilbert was being an ass; I thought I had tougher skin than that. I even had the combat wounds to prove it. But deep down I knew it wasn't all about me. His comments about Toris hit a nerve.

Gilbert didn't see the fear in Toris's eyes when we were at Austria's house. He also didn't see how brave he was when he came to my rescue. If what Gilbert was implying was true, (and I've seen enough Law & Order SVU shows to figure out what he meant) then what Toris did took guts. I had to admire the guy for that, and I wasn't about to let a total jerk like Gilbert under mind that.

I smiled to myself, if only Michel could read my mind, he would be ranking in some points right now. I tried to laugh at my joke but my ribs ached every time I did.

Once we got to the manor, I leaped out of the car and speed walked to the doors. I still had to wait for Ludwig to unlock it, but I was ready to sprint up the stairs and lock myself in my room.
He slid the key into the lock and turned. I forced the door opened and headed for the stairs. I didn’t get far. Ludwig grabbed my arm and pulled me back, "where do you think you're going?"

I sighed, defeated. "Listen, I know I screwed up. Just let me go to my room and I won't come out till Monday."

He shook his head, "That would be too easy."

I mumbled a curse and watched Gilbert as he tried to sneak away into the living room. Ludwig didn't even turn to face him, but he must've known his brother would try something. "Don't you even think about walking away," Ludwig pointed at Gilbert and he froze in place. He then turned to face his older brother, "What on earth possessed you to fight in the museum?"

Gilbert grumbled, "She started it."

"Is that your excuse?" Ludwig glared, "She's a child, you are hundreds of years old, act like it."

"Fat chance," I said under my breath.

"And you," he turned to face me. "What exactly we've you two fighting about?"

I exhaled through my nose, "He was being an ass so I slapped him."

He cursed in German as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "America, you have to control your anger. For when you're angry, you're irrational. And when you're irrational, you will die on the battle field."

"Last I checked we're pretty durable," I remarked.

"Don't be a smart ass with me," he shouted.

His voice bounced off the walls causing Feliciano to flinch slightly. Ludwig continued, "Even though you're a nation, we can't have you dying then coming back to life every time you enter in a fire fight."

I shook my head, "Then how about we agree that I'm just not cut out for the military."

"You're a nation," he repeated harshly, "you're military is part of you, it is your strength, your will."

"Then why do I have to be part of it?"

He sighed, "Has anyone ever told you, a good soldier doesn't ask questions, simply follows orders."

"I don't know if you've noticed or listened but I'm not soldier material."

"Ain't that the truth," Gilbert commented.

"Shut up," Ludwig and I exclaimed in sync.

He turned back to me, "America, in times of war not only do your people fight; but you fight as well. Your people are a part of you, and what they do affects you. For a nation is nothing without its people."

"This is coming from the guy that represents the nation that killed thousands of his own citizens," I crossed my arms.

His brilliant blue eyes widened as the vein of his forehead throbbed. I've gone too far, but I was too
irritated with his superior attitude towards me to even care.

"Maybe it's a good thing I question you," I should've kept my mouth shut, but like Gilbert said, I don't seem to have that alarm in my head that says 'shut up' when I needed it. "It proves that I have freaking mind of my own, unlike you. And maybe, just maybe if you bothered to question authority, you and this entire country wouldn't have been swept away by some charismatic psychopath."

Ludwig slapped me across the face.

Feliciano gasped as the air grew silent. My cheek was once again on fire but I refused to show any reaction. I said nothing, only glared as he placed his hand to his side in a tight fist and walked away.
I watched as the afternoon sky faded into twilight and washed away into dusk. Stars were beginning to shine through the violet and the air was beginning to chill. I had watched this scene through the windows of my room. I was on the bed with my legs curled to my chest as my chin rested on my knees. I haven’t moved from that spot since the incident with Ludwig.

My mind quickly replayed our argument with the ending of his slap to my face. No matter how many times he or Gilbert punched or kicked my face that slap still stung.

I closed my eyes, hoping it would erase the memory and pain, but it didn't. I would be lying if I said I wasn't hiding. I couldn't bear to face Ludwig or anyone for that matter. My iPod was connected to my portable speaker and the song 'Born To Die' from Lana Del Rey played softly.

My eyes opened and glanced to my grandfather's journal on the nightstand. I needed a distraction and so far this was best I could get. (There wasn't a television in my room.) I grabbed it and skimmed through the pages. I stopped at the second entry, two years after his first meeting with Alfred.

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**June 29, 1957**

The life I knew was gone.

*In the past few days, I have dealt with more heartbreak and loss than anyone should be put through in their lifetime.*

It all started two days ago, my family and I were crossing from Indiana to Illinois. Heavy rain was coming down as my brothers and I listened to the radio. Hurricane Audrey had touched Louisiana hours ago and was making its way through the south and east of the country. It even spawned two tornados further up Louisiana and multiple tornados were reported in Mississippi and Alabama. Flash flood warnings were in effect in the Midwest and it was advised for everyone to get off the roads.

"Father," I walked over to my parents who were sitting in the front seats of our worn RV. "The weather man says that there's a flash flood warning. We need to get off the road."

"That's what I am doing," he answered calmly. "Where's the closest town?" he asked Mother.

She shook out her map and squinted at the roads between the states. "We're on highway 150 right now; luckily we're close to Paris, Illinois. We'll be there in less than two hours."

I sat in the booth next to the window, the storm was howling and the rain was hitting the RV, making the impression that stones were being thrown at us. My brothers sat in front of me, Tristen was the oldest by four years, Clay by two. We all looked so alike. We all had long raven black hair, dark eyes and copper skin. We were long, lean and well-muscled. Only small differences gave us away. Clay was the tallest at 6'2 he received that height advantage from our mother's side. Tristen had the hard features of our father while Clay and I took our looks from our grandmother on Mother's side.

We were heading to Illinois for Tristen's wedding. The woman he was marrying was a childhood friend named Rose Shay. She was a decedent of the Illini tribe that mixed with the Miami. She and her parents had left a week earlier to meet their extended family in Chicago. The other members of
our tribe stayed behind in Indiana and I'm glad they did. This storm was too dangerous.

For some stupid reason, we were trying to get to Chicago before July. But it can't be done. When it came to the safety of our family I would've-should've forced us to stop and wait it out. But I didn't and that decision will haunt me for the rest of my life.

After an hour, the rain only got worst. Father had a hard time seeing anything in the distance and Mother kept looking at the map like it would actually change anything. My anxiety grew, "Father, we need to stop, now-"

My words were cut off when Father crashed into a sign that said 'Bridge Closed'. Water overwhelmed the tires and we skidded into a overflowing river. Father tried to control the RV but he only made it worse by trying to turn. The added force of the water tipped us over on the RV's left side. The window my brothers and I were sitting at; shattered as we hit the bridge's pavement. Tristen had gripped on to Clay's shirt holding him in place as he used his other had to grip the table. I had hooked my arm around the booth as my legs dangled off towards the broken window. We didn't have long to catch our breath. The water came in quickly, filling the RV half way in under a minute.

Mother cried out to Father, but he didn't respond. Father's head had made full contact to his window. Blood mixed as Father disappeared into the dirty brown water. Mother cried and unbuckled herself from her seat. She dove for him and pulled him to the surface. She shook him by the shoulders but he wasn't breathing. Tristen called for Clay to help him with the door. I turned to Mother as she tried in failed attempts to revive Father.

I walked over and checked his pulse, I felt nothing. "Mother," I said, "he's gone. We have to go."

She cried 'no' several times as I pulled her away from Father. Once the door was opened, Clay lifted himself up, Tristen and I lifted Mother up next and we followed soon after. The wind howled causing the RV's door to shut and the rain to fall harder, piercing my skin like bullets.

Mother wept as Clay held her; she was so small at that moment she looked like a frighten child. But truthfully none of us had time to grieve. The water was rising and we were losing more of the RV's surface to stand on. At that moment, I remembered the CB radio we had on the dash board.

I tried to open the door, but Tristen stopped me. "What are you doing?!"

"There's a CB radio in there," I exclaimed, "we can try and call for help."

Tristen didn't argue with me for long, he told Clay to stay with Mother as we climbed back into the RV to get to the radio. We had to move fast, the water was rising and we had no idea how long the radio would last.

I swam to the dash board, avoiding my father's body and grabbed the radio from the dock. "Hello?! Anyone on?!!" All I got was static, but I kept trying. "My family and I are trapped on some bridge near Paris. Our RV tipped over and we're taking in water." I stopped to listen if someone heard me, but no answer came. "Please, the water's rising and it's too dangerous to try and swim out of this." I stopped to listen; I was met with static once again. I became desperate. "We need help! Someone, please, send help-"

Mother screamed as a wave crashed against the RV and a large splash hit the water. Tristen and I abandoned the radio and climbed back out to find Mother and Clay gone. I rose to my feet to look for them but slipped and fell into the rushing rapids.
I caught my breath and swam back to the surface. I spotted Tristen driving in, swimming hastily to meet me. He caught me by the arm as the water pushed us off the bridge and sent us down the river. We struggled to keep our heads above the surface, the water was coming in too fast and we were using all our strength to keep from crashing against the rocks. During this, Tristen never once lost his grip on me.

This sequence of events lasted for another minute or so, till Tristen grabbed a tree root that had been ripped out of the ground. He pulled me by my shirt and instructed me to hold on. I wrapped my arms around the root that was closer to the tree trunk while Tristen took the thinner part of the root. The river pushed at us but we hanged on till the force of the rapids caused the root to snap in two and Tristen was swept away by the river.

It all happened so fast.

I wasn't quick enough to catch him and worse, I was too much of a coward to follow him, to save him.

I cried out for him, for Clay, for Mother till my voice became hoarse and the storm finally came to its end.

Later, the rain stopped, the river had settled, but my arms were numb. I couldn't hold on any longer, I was slipping and I knew that if I fell in I wouldn't have the strength to swim.

"Hello!" a voice called out, "Is anyone out there? Hello!"

Even though my voice was nearly gone, I forced myself to scream for help. A group of men rode over in a small orange life boat. A familiar voice exclaimed, "John?! John is that you?!"

I looked up to find a man with dirty blond hair and blue eyes. "Alfred. . ." My eyes closed as my limbs lost their remaining strength to hold on. All I remembered was sinking into the water and someone driving in to save me.

I was out cold till I woke up in a hospital room. Alfred was sitting next to me, reading an old hard cover book. "What are you doing here?" I asked in a weak tone.

"Long story," he proclaimed as he snapped the book closed. "Let's just say, I was in the right city at the right time."

I blinked and muttered, "Where are they?"

His brows knitted together in confusion and worry, "Who?"

"You know who," I hissed. "My mother, my brothers, where are they?!"

He sighed, "Johnny, we-we found them but," his looked away for a moment. Then he turned back to me with sympathetic eyes, "They didn't make it."

Silence filled the room as his words sunk in. I closed my eyes, "no," I mumbled. Alfred didn't answer only placed his hands on my shoulders to hold me down as I tried to rise out of bed. "No," I exclaimed; then screamed, "No! Let me go! I need to see them! I need to see them with my own eyes!"

The nurses came in but Alfred told them to stay back. "They're gone Johnny, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."
My body fell back, defeated. The sound I made was of a wounded animal. I wept with wet tears and a dry throat. Alfred stepped back and gestured the nurses out of the room; leaving me alone to mourn my lost.

Today was bright and sunny. It almost seemed like Hurricane Audrey had never happened, but the damages were there. Newspapers were sent quickly through the country, reporting the chaos. It tore up the boarder shores of Louisiana and Texas and a total number of twenty-three tornados were counted throughout Mississippi and Alabama. The flash flood here in Paris took ten lives, including my family's.

Clay had told me once, 'that nature was as beautiful as she was deadly.' In other words, nature was a bitch.

Alfred visited, even brought me breakfast. "Morning," he sang and sat down a small box of donuts. "I didn't know what you would like so I got one of each. Chocolate, glazed, jelly-filled, you're welcome," he grinned.

I pushed the box away, "I'm not hungry."

He nodded and pulled out a worn journal from his jumper jacket. "We found the RV and Tyee," he said sadly. "Everything was destroyed, not much could be scrounged, but I did find this." He placed the journal down, the leather had turned a darker shade of brown and the paper was yellowed. "It took three hours with the hair dryer but I was able to save it. No wrinkles even, good thing you kept it in a secret appointment inside a trunk. But really, if you're going to keep a journal about me, you gotta make sure it can't be found so easily."

I stayed silent, not bothering to answer him.

He continued, "I was also able to find these," he tossed some pictures on top of the journal. Three photographs, one of my parents, another of me and my brothers, and the last was a family portrait we took a year ago. "Keep them safe, they were the only ones I could find that weren't too damaged."

I looked away from the pictures. I couldn't bear to see their smiling faces, knowing I had lived and they didn't. The tears have finally dried; the only thing that was left was anger and guilt.

"You mean to tell me after all that, this survived. This is it?!" I exclaimed. "That RV was home, I grew up in it, my brothers grew up in it. My parents bought that RV together, years were spent there and more were to come. Tristen was gonna get married, Clay got accepted to Hampton and it was all taken from them."

"You should have left me there to riot," I hissed.

"Why do you say that?" Alfred asked with blank expression.

I glared, "I had nothing to offer. Tristen did. He saved me when I fell into the water, he didn't even hesitant. But when it was time to return the favor, I froze." I ground my teeth together, "I didn't even try to follow him; I just stayed there, like a damn coward." I inhaled and exhaled through my nose, "I should've forced Father to pull over, I should've tried to save Tristen, I should've-I should've died that night."

"Well, it's a good thing your human," before I could react, Alfred slammed me to the mattress and wrapped his hand around my throat. He squeezed, stopping the air flow. "You know what a real coward is?" he asked calmly, as if he wasn't crushing my jugular. "A real coward is someone that
runs away from a life that could be more than this. This wasted self-pity, this self-loath, where will this get you?"

I crawled at his hand and face, but my attacks were useless. I choked out, "You... don't understand!" Gasp, "How could... a monster like-like you know how... I feel!" Gasp, "I lost... my entire family... in one night." Gasp. "You... will never... understand!"

He leaned down to touch his forehead to mine, "You weren't the only one to lose people that night. I lost over four hundred of my own," he tightened his grip. "I still hear their screams, their cries for help." He shook his head, "I tried to get there, but the storm flooded the only damn bridge out of Paris." His eyes glazed over, "but that's only an excuse. What good is an excuse? Nothing," He pushed himself off and removed his hand from my throat.

I sat up, coughing as I tried to breath. Alfred's face carried an old soul gaze, which was a phase I learned from Mister Two Crow. 'Old in the eyes,' he always said, 'some people carry wisdom far beyond their years.'

"Your brother sacrificed his life for you. Don't let his death be in vain." He turned away from me and walked to the door. He opened it and stopped at the frame. "Live." He said as he faced me, "Live for the people that cannot, or if you still prefer not to, I'll end it for you."

Chills ran down my spine as he slammed the door behind him.

For the last three hours, I've been writing; reliving the painful events that lead to my current situation. I had nothing to my name, no money, no proof of social security. What did I have to keep me here? Who did I have to keep me here? The tribe yes, but how could I face them. Every memory I had with them was always shared with a member of my family. I don't want them to pity me, to only take care of me because who my father was. For I don't deserve it; I took away Rose's life with Tristen. I took away Hampton from Clay and I took away my parent's lives.

As I see it, I didn't listen to my gut feeling to stop. If only I didn't ignore my instincts, I would have been able to save them.

I read the words that Alfred had said over and over again. He was right on one thing. Where was this self-loathing getting me? Was I going to take action on it or will I continue to sulk. The most ironic thing was, I didn't want to be pitied by the tribe, yet I pity myself.

What will I do?

What can I do?

I truly don't know.

Luckily I didn't have to think about this for long. Alfred came strolling in with a big smile on his face, as if we didn't have a big fight just a few hours ago.

"Get dress," he tossed me a backpack. "You're coming with me."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Chicago," he answered and then proclaimed, "You're coming to live with me for a few days."
The knocking at my door interrupted the flow of my reading. I sighed and rubbed my eyes; Grandpa never, and I mean never spoke about what happened to his family. Whenever we asked, he would clam up and say, 'I lost them.' He didn't even tell his own son about them and I'm beginning to see why; it pained him too much.

But what really interested me was that there was more to Grandpa and Alfred's friendship than I had thought. Did Grandpa really take his offer to go live with him? If so, for how long? Also, how did Alfred keep that secret hidden from the nations?

These thoughts still cycled in my head as I rose from my seat and opened the door. Gilbert was waiting and I groaned, "What do you want?"

"Walk with me," he grabbed my arm and tugged me down the hall.

I protested and tried to shove him away, but his grip on me was strong. He continued to pull me down the stairs, out the door and onto the dirt driveway. I was finally able to jerk my arm away when we crossed the gate onto the gray brick sidewalk.

"What the hell man?" I asked, irritated.

"We need to talk," he said calmly.

"And we couldn't have done this inside?"

He sighed, "Come on," he gestured to the sidewalk.

My shoulders slumped; I knew I couldn't avoid this for long.

We walked together side by side, in silence. The air was cool, around to fifty-six to fifty-four degrees. Growing up in a town with the lows only reached the sixties; I wasn't prepared for the wind to pick up. The chill sent shivers down my spine. I crossed my arms to rub them, good thing I was wearing jeans.

"Are you cold?" Gilbert asked.

I nodded as he took off his red hoodie and draped it over my shoulders. I tensed and glanced to him. He kept walking, his back to me. He now only wore a black t-shirt with dark jeans and white tennis shoes. I gave a muffled thank you and slipped my arms through the sleeves and zipped myself up.

I caught up with him and stayed by his side. I looked up to the sky; the stars were blazing against the darkness of the atmosphere. My thoughts went back to Grandpa's most recent entry; of the people he lost. I inhaled through my nose, he had once told me, when something dies their body would be consumed by the earth and their soul would be taken to the stars. So even when they weren't here physically; they would always be here, even when I can't see them. I looked down to Grandpa's ring and smiled.

"What's with the bird ring?" Gilbert asked as he looked over my shoulder.

"It isn't a bird, it's a hawk." I answered with a gentle tone. "It belonged to my grandfather."

"Why are you wearing it?"

"To honor his memory," I said.
"Now, your grandfather, was he the man that Alfred knew for over sixty years?"

I nodded, "yes, they met when he was sixteen, but Grandpa saw him for the first time when he was seven. Alfred was following his tribe for months after World War II."

His eyebrows knitted together in curiosity, "why?"

"He said that he discovered a different side of himself and that he needed guidance."

Gilbert nodded in understanding, "Ja, that war changed everything."

I sighed, "Gilbert, I'm-"

"Don't," he said, "I'm not the one you need to apologize to."

"Yeah, I do. I hit you-"

"But I taunted you; it's like mocking a wild animal. I brought it on myself. But I have to say," he smirked, "you have killer left hook."

I gave a soft laugh as I touched my face, "I can tell you the same thing."

He grinned and we continued along the sidewalk. He was quiet till: "tell me, what do you know of the war?"

I closed my eyes for a minute before answering. "It all started when Hitler invaded Poland in 1939. The war then lasted from 1939 to 1945, during these years he took control over most of Western Europe and even tried to take Russia, but because of bogus science the Germans invaded during winter. That pretty much screwed themselves over. Also with the added help with the Americans to the Allies, they took down Italy, Germany's longest and most trusted ally. Then the A-bomb came into play and destroyed Japan. Hitler comments suicide and Germany surrenders."

"That's a nice summary of the worst six years of our lives," Gilbert proclaimed sarcastically.

"If you want me to get into it, I can. Christopher made sure this was drilled into my brain since I was twelve."

"Christopher? Oh he was your British tutor, ja?"

"Yup, he's really passionate about history and it only increased when he discovered I was a nation."

"It's easy to be passionate about something you were never there to witness." The light in his eyes dimmed. We walked for another minute or two in silence till Gilbert said, "Did you know Hitler wanted to be an artist?"

I nodded, "yeah, but he was rejected by both the art school and the architecture school."

"How do you think he got so interested in politics?" He didn't expect me to answer. I remained quiet as he continued, "Around this time, West was living in my shadow. He wanted to prove that he was strong nation on his own. But no one really took him seriously and I will admit I still saw him as my kid brother." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"He would go out drinking and one night he met a defeated artist that was run down on his luck. They bonded over their shared love of good beer and dreams to leave their mark on the world. After both had served in the First World War, they had watched as their country was hit by a crushing economic system and was sunk in debt to France."
"One had ideas to better the country, to pull them out of their depression. The other said, 'prove it.'"

I connected the dots, "Ludwig encouraged Hitler to get into politics," I said slowly, letting the dreadful words sink in. Gilbert stood quiet, with a blank expression on his face. I leaned against a neighbor's wall, "Oh my god. And after what I said," I closed my eyes, "I'm an insensitive ass."

Gilbert didn't say a word to my statement, only finished his tale. "Ludwig and Adolf were friends. Both influenced one another; one more than the other. In the end, one betrayed the other." His eyes grew sad, "Ludwig trusted him, with everything and he continues to bear the scars."

"But it's not his fault," I remarked, "Hitler fooled everyone, he kept his hatred for the Jews a secret so he can have the chance to brainwash everyone into believing what he was doing was okay. Ludwig was played, Germany was played, it's-it's-"

"Yet Ludwig was the one that pushed him toward it."

I snorted, "Hitler didn't need anyone to tell him what to do. A man like that wanted power, it wouldn't have made a difference."

He sighed, "But Ludwig thinks so. He believes it's his fault that the war started, even to this day."

I blinked back frustrated tears, "but it wasn't."

"You think I haven't told him that," Gilbert said sadly. "He just won't let go of it, he will continue to carry the guilt. No matter how many times Feliciano, Kiku and I forgive him," he sighed. "He'll always blame himself."

"I have to apologize."

"He won't take it. As he sees it, you were right."

"Still, I need to say it."

He was quiet till he said, "Are you only doing it to lessen your guilt?"

I shook my head, "No. It's all for him, and if he won't take it. Then I'll work my ass off for him. As I see it, he's taking time out of his schedule to train me, the least I can do, is give him my all."

Gilbert gave a small smile and in one swift move, pulled me to his side with his arm around my shoulders. "You know, you're smarter than you look."

I shoved him playfully, "screw you."

During our walk around the island, we tried to lessen the tension of our previous discussion. We talked about random subjects; from favorite bands and genres of music to books and movies. When we reached the manor, Gilbert unlocked the door and I strolled in, heading straight to Ludwig's room. His room was on the first floor through a hall in between the kitchen and dining room. Gilbert had said that his room was on the left, while his brother's was on the right.

I heard muffled sounds as I got closer to Ludwig's room. His door was slightly ajar and the sounds were getting louder. My curiosity got the best of me and I peeked through the thin opening.

I found Ludwig and Feliciano on the bed, naked and kissing each other. Ludwig was on top and he
seemed to be moving. Feliciano was under him with his arms hooked around Ludwig's neck. Both were sweaty with a light pink blush spreading from cheek to cheek. Feliciano's on the other hand had a darker blush than his partner's. They were panting, moaning, and mumbling soft words to each other.

My jaw dropped.

Before my voice could make a sound; I stepped back with my hand over my mouth and speed walked into the kitchen.

"That was quick," Gilbert said as he brought out raw sausage from the fringe and placed it on a frying pan. "How did it go?"

My cheeks and ears grew in heat. "Fine," I choked, my voice was unusually high and I cleared my throat before I spoke again. "He took it just fine."

"Why are you red?" he asked as he placed a hand on my forehead. "Are you sick?"

I stepped back, "Nah, I'm good, I'm good." I looked everywhere but his eyes.

"Amy, what's wrong?"

He crossed his arms and waited.

I sighed, "I-I," I took another deep breath, "I saw Ludwig and Feliciano together."

Gilbert lifted a brow, "and?"

"They were together, together," I whispered.

"Oh, you saw them fucking each other," he proclaimed. "That isn't anything new, liebe."

I was stunned, "but I thought Feliciano was into girls?"

"He is, so is West. All the nations roll both ways Fräulein. Let's just say when you live for couple of decades you forget the gender and focus on the person."

I nodded in understanding, "oh."

He grinned, "You should've seen your face," he pinched both of my cheeks. "You were blushing like a virgin."

I turned a deeper shade of red and Gilbert's eyes widened. "Oh don't tell me. Are you a virgin?" I stayed quiet and glanced to the floor, avoiding his analyzing gaze. My cheeks were on fire and I gripped the hem of the hoodie to control my nerves. "You are," he chuckled, "and you saw them-" he howled in laughter. "This is priceless, this is absolutely priceless."

"Can we just drop it, please," I exclaimed.

"Drop what?"

Gilbert and I turned to find Ludwig and Feliciano walking into the kitchen. Both were fully dressed in casual clothing and seemed to be perfectly normal. I couldn't look either of them in the eyes, "nothing," I mumbled.
Ludwig moved closer to look at my face, "why are you red? Do you have a fever?"

I jumped back, "no I don't."

"Oh, she's not sick," Gilbert smiled mischievously. "Little America just witnessed something that shook her to her core," he draped his arm around my shoulders and placed his cheek beside mine. "She's right now trying to process it."

"Gil, I swear to god I'm going to punch you."

Ludwig glanced between me and his brother, "what exactly is going on with you two?"

Gilbert answered, tired with his game. "She saw you two having sex."

Ludwig's eyes widened as his face burned with a bright red blush.

Feliciano frowned in disappointment, "you should've joined."

"Feli!" Ludwig exclaimed as I covered my face with my hands and Gilbert banged his fist on the counter, laughing his ass off.

Dinner was awkward that night but over time we found the situation hilarious. Feliciano had made pasta with tomato sauce and cuts of sausage in it. I couldn't help but notice the pun of Italian pasta being mixed together with German sausage. Of course Gil noticed and threw this fact at me and Ludwig, mostly because he wanted to see us blush. Feliciano on the other hand, didn't care, will to be honest he never really got the joke in the first place. Ludwig and I said our apologies and Gilbert continued to make jokes about my virginity. That usually ended with me slapping him over his head.

At the end of our meal, Gilbert brought out a large bottle of beer and poured me a glass. "To help you forget," he proclaimed.

"I think it's gonna take more than one glass," I swallowed a few gulps and the liquor burned as it went down my throat. I made a face of disgust as I slammed the glass back down on the table.

He chuckled, "Can't handle your beer little girl?"

I cleared my throat, "yes, it's just stronger than I thought it would be."

"It isn't American beer," Ludwig commented as he took a swing from his glass.

I took a deep breath before I drank the rest of my beer and pushed my glass towards Gilbert. "Give me another," I grinned and he happily obliged.

The night became a blur and I found myself walking up on the couch in the living room. My eyes were sensitive to the morning sun and it felt like jackhammer was pounding into my skull. I groaned as I rubbed my temples and tried not to think about throwing up.

Gilbert was passed out on the table beside me and I felt something warm behind me. I turned to find Feliciano sleeping in his birthday suit. I jumped off and checked if my clothes were on. I sighed in relief when I felt my pants and shirt on my skin.

My eyes subconsciously looked to Feliciano's body. His skin was a shade of light tannish brown and his body was smooth and scrawny. He was surprising thin for someone that can eat bowl after bowl of pasta. But was I really one to talk; I was addicted to chocolate and I never seem to gain a pound. You know, there's perks to being a nation.
I pulled a blanket off the arm of the couch and covered him from shoulder to toes.

"Sorry about him, he always does that," Ludwig said as he walked in.

"When he's drunk," I proclaimed.

"No, when he goes to bed," he sighed, "he sleeps in the nude."

I nodded, "okay, that's... interesting," I said uncertainly.

"Here," Ludwig gave me a cup filled with green fluid, "drink."

"What is it?"

"Just drink it; it will make you feel better."

I glanced to him and took the cup. I placed it to my lips and nearly spit it out. Ludwig then snatched the cup and pulled my hair down, forcing the foul liquid down my throat. After I swallowed every drop he stepped back as I coughed and made gagging noises.

"What the fuck was that?!"

"You don't want to know," he said, "but don't you feel better?"

I sat back on the couch, making sure I avoided hitting Feliciano. My eyes stopped stinging and the limbs of my body were beginning to relax. My head wasn't even splitting in two anymore, "yeah, is that some kind of miracle hangover cure?"

He nodded as he sat beside me, "you can say that."

I rubbed my eyes, "What happen last night?"

"We drank, we danced and I believe we had karaoke contest."

"Oh right now I remember." I giggled, "Gilbert and me totally killed it when we sang 'Fancy' by Iggy Azalea."

Ludwig shook his head, "if you say so."

"Oh shut up."

We shared a couple of laughs till I sighed, "Did I apologize for what I said yesterday."

"Yes, but what you said-"

"Don't," I warned. "Just shut up and take my apology. And if that's not enough for you then I'm gonna make you a promise. From now on when we train, I will give it my all and follow whatever you say."

His eyebrow lifted in humor, "and no complaining?"

I snorted, "yeah, no. Can't promise that, but I can promise you the rest."

He looked away to hide his smile, but I was able to catch it before he did. He rose to his feet, "Then I suggest you rest today, for tomorrow I will break your spirit."

I rolled my eyes, "good luck with that."
Eight days passed and training continued as usual.

Laps were run every morning, weight and stance training was every mid-morning to noon, combat training was every afternoon and classes were held every evening. The very first week was definitely the hardest, but I quickly grew use to the routine and the bruises were fading at a faster rate. And I will say this, I'm getting pretty good at fighting; somewhat.

Ludwig flipped me over his back, sending me to the pat for the tenth time that Tuesday afternoon.

"Ow," I groaned.

He sighed, "Well at least you're lasting longer."

I sat up, "Are you saying I'm approving," I grinned.

He gave a small smile, "somewhat."

"I'll take it!"

"Hey West," Gilbert called as he came down the stairs, "maybe you should end the training for today. You two have to get up early for the meeting tomorrow; you might as well take the rest of the day to relax."

"No," Ludwig proclaimed, "The next four days will already be cut in half, today will be the only full day of training till next week."

"I know I promised to follow your orders and all," I said, "but I would really like today to be a half day."

"We can't, the next three days will be for the G9 meeting, then after that will be Saturday. We need today. We cannot break schedule," he lectured.

"Just this once," I bat my eyes at him, "please."

"No."

I didn't give up. "Pretty please, with sugar on top."

He wasn't fazed, "No. Now give me fifty burpees on the spot. That's what you get for wasting my time."

I groaned and rose to my feet. I dropped to do a push up, then rose again to jump in the air and repeated for fifty times. Truthfully I did more than that. Ludwig wouldn't count the ones I half assed at.

Evening came along with a fresh bowl of pasta for dinner.

I groaned, "spaghetti, again?" I looked to Feliciano.
He slurped down a few stands of pasta, "Pasta is good for the soul."
"Feli, I love you but I think you have a problem."
He stopped eating to stare at me, "did you just say you love me?"
"I guess."
He rose from his seat and ran around the table to hug me. "I love you too."
"Oh the feels," I patted him on the back.
"Give her a kiss, Feli," Gilbert smirked.
Feliciano passed me a hopeful look and I glared at him. "You know what happen the last time, do you want it to repeat?"
He stepped back and whispered, "No."
I nodded, "Good boy."
"Ah, come on now Amy," Gilbert chuckled, "Give the boy a kiss."
"How about you kiss him," I remarked.
"I already did, several times actually."
I gave him a look and turned to Ludwig, he was still eating. "Did you not hear him?"
"Yes," he nodded.
"You knew about it?"
"Yes."
"But, I thought," I glanced to Feliciano, to Gilbert and finally back to Ludwig. "You know what, I don't want to know."
"It's actually a wonderful tale," Gilbert proclaimed, "it all started-"
I slammed my hands over my ears. "La, la, la, I can't hear you! La, la, la, la."
"I swear, all of you gonna drive me to drink," Ludwig sighed.
"I think that ship has sailed, brother." Gilbert smirked and swallowed his beer.

Classes were quick and I was able to have time to use Ludwig's computer to skype with my parents. It was eight-thirty at night here, meaning it would be noon in Summerland. I had to download skype and it was one of the older models for Ludwig's computer hasn't been upgraded since 2011. Thank god, he at least had a web cam.

I login into my skype account and pressed the call button for our home computer. I was answered by Alyce, Roman, and Lali, "Aunt Amy!" They cried out happily as Roman ran out of the shot, calling out to everyone in the house.
Everyone gathered around the computer. My parents sat in chairs in front of the screen. Lali sat on Mom's lap while Blake sat on Dad's. Alyce and Gael squeezed in between them while Blair, Valencia and Roman stood by their sides. Melissa and Sanjay stood in the back with our cousins.

"How's Germany?" Sanjay asked.

"Did you see the Berlin Wall?" Alyce asked.

"Are you eating right?" Mom asked; worried.

"Where's my present?" Valencia asked.

I laughed, "The country is really mild, good weather. The Berlin Wall is epic and I have pictures, I sent them through my email. I'll give you the address and password to see them. And yes Mom I'm eating, a lot of sausage and pasta. And Valencia, I know your birthday passed, but I'm just waiting for you guys to get back home, so that way you'll be there to get it."

Valencia pouted as Mom questioned, "Sausage and pasta? That's all you've been eating?"

"Believe me Mom; I would give anything right now to have your enchiladas."

We talked for over an hour, answering questions and confirming when our cousins would arrive in Texas. I've told them about my so-called two year program. My second cousins only knew that I was traveling for college credit, which wasn't an all-out lie. They just didn't need to know that I was training to join the US army and that I was living with nations, to learn how to be a nation. It seemed a little too complicated.

Ludwig knocked on the door frame, "It's twenty minutes till lights out," he warned.

I nodded and turned back to the screen to say my goodbyes. Once I login out and turned off the computer, I ran up the stairs to take a quick shower and dress for bed. I fell into bed and wrapped myself in the blankets. Someone knocked at my door and I said, "Come in."

It was Ludwig, "Lights out America, you have busy day tomorrow."

"What? You not gonna tuck me in and read me a bed time story?" I teased.

He shook his head, "You are not a child."

"What are you saying? You've called me child several times. I mean if I had a dime every time you called me a child; I would have dollar. I think, I don't know. I'm not that good at math."

"I know, I've seen your test scores."

"Hey now that sounded insulting," I narrowed my eyes at him.

He forced himself not to smile, "Go to bed America."

"Why do you keep calling me that? Gil calls me Amy, so does Feliciano, why don't you?" I asked curiosity.

"You need to get used to it, and you have to start calling me Germany."

"It just seems weird. You're Ludwig, I'm Amy. It just clicks better with me than Germany and America."
"But Amy is not your real name; America is. We as nations must put our country above our personal ideals. Our human names are used for the public and only the public." His stare was unwavering, "We are nations before we are human."

I subconsciously glanced to Grandpa's journal on the nightstand before I turned to face him. "I would like to think it's the other way around. Like you said, the people are what make a nation and the people are human, so wouldn't we be at least a little bit human."

He took a moment before answering, "Maybe so." He turned off the lights, "goodnight," and paused before he said, "Amy."

I grinned, "Goodnight Germany."

Once he closed the door, I waited for his footsteps to fade till I grabbed Grandpa's journal and a flashlight and hid myself under the covers. I skimmed through till I found where I left off.

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I protested but Alfred would only counter with, "you need to see Rose, you have to tell her about Tristen."

I knew he was right, but I didn't want to go and stay with the man. He believes he's over 200 years old and thinks himself as America. He's insane. But what was even worse, I'm starting to believe him. That monstrous strength, that faraway gaze, whatever he is, he certainly isn't human.

But as I looked at the urns of my former parents and brothers, I knew I had to put them to rest. Tristen would want his remains to be with the love of his life. I also didn't have any other way to get to Chicago, so I took Alfred on his offer.

We drove in silence, well I was quiet. Alfred kept trying to make small talk with me but I pretended to be asleep to ignore him. The drive was short, about three to four hours, and when we reached the city he took me north. He stopped the car in front of two story red-brown brick building.

"This seems pretty big for one person," I remarked.

"Did I hear the wind," Alfred looked around, trying to find the source of the voice. He faced me with a fake confused look, "oh were you talking to me?"

"Funny," I hissed and climbed out of the car.

He followed, "This isn't just me living here. There's Ms. Clare, she lives on the second floor while I live on the first. They're flats; both floors have two bedrooms, a kitchen, bathroom and a small living room."

"It doesn't look that big," I said.

"It's just narrow, but believe me all the room is in the length not the width," he smiled and opened the door. It led to a small narrow hall with a small stair case that led to one door at the top. While on the bottom floor there were two doors, one on the far right and another on the left, under the stair case.

As Alfred closed the door, the top door opened and four cats came running. The cats mewed as they wrapped themselves around Alfred's legs. An old woman walked down the stairs but stopped when she saw us. "Alfred, you're home, its good see you," she smiled.
He bent down to scoop up a large brown tabby cat, "Thank you Ms. Clare, by the way, you look great, have you been doing something new with your hair?"

"Oh Alfred stop being such a charmer, save it for a nice young lady."

He nodded and made kissing noises to the cat in his arms, "yes ma'am."

The woman looked to me, "who is this?"

"A friend of mine," he stated, "he gonna stay with me for a bit."

She gave me an uncertain gaze, she was white and I was native. Of course, she must be scared to death for having a savage Indian living under the same roof. She must think I'll scalp her in her sleep. These thoughts were running through my head at that moment, but stopped when an old, long haired Main Coon began to rub up against my leg.

I slowly fell to one knee and scratched the cat under the chin. The cat purred and rubbed his nose and head into my palm for more.

"Wow, Walter likes you. He never likes strangers; he scratched me the first time we met." Alfred proclaimed.

I glanced up to Ms. Clare; her uncertain look had relaxed into one of general friendliness. "What's your name?"

"John," I said, "John Hawkfeather."

"Are you originally from Chicago?"

"No, I was born in New Mexico, but I've traveled around the country since I was small."

"Is it your first time in our city?"

"I've been here once, when I was eight."

She smiled, "well enjoy yourself." She turned to Alfred, "And you, stop eating out, it's unhealthy."

He nodded and sat the cat down, "Don't worry Ms. Clare, I'll start cooking at home."

"No, you should get yourself a wife."

"I know, I'll get right on that." He unlocked his door and gestured me to walk in. Once he closed the door, he sighed, "If only it was that simple."

"She seems nice," I said as I looked around. Like Alfred said, the flat was all in the length. The living room was in front with three windows wrapped around in a tower design. Farther down was the kitchen, it was small and quaint. Then there were two doors behind that and a door across from the kitchen.

"Yeah, she's a sweet old woman, tries to get me to date her granddaughter, but still sweet." He then gave me a short tour, mostly just informing me that my room will be on the right while his was on the left. The bathroom was across the kitchen and he'll make me a key later tomorrow. He then asked what I wanted for dinner, but I wasn't hungry. I only wanted to go to bed.

Alfred simply nodded and helped me with my family's urns from the car to my room. I sat them on the work desk; luckily they were labeled, for all four were the same small, gold painted vases.
I sat on the bed and stared at was once my family.

That was the end of the second entry. Soft tears fell down my cheek, my grandfather was never good with sharing his feelings and I wished just once that he told me about this. A journal can only do so much.

I wiped my tears and placed the journal back on the nightstand and switched off the flashlight. I laid in bed watching the view out my window. The moonlight had cut through, shadowing my dream catcher that was hanging in front. The net was in perfect alignment with the room, allowing the shadows of the tiny wooden animal sculptures to spread around the walls and floor. They no longer looked peaceful and stiff. They seemed to dance and looked almost, frightening.

The child within me wanted to bolt and crawl into either Gilbert or Ludwig's bed, to escape from the scary creatures. Then I realized that would be stupid and I would be pretty much asking for them to take advantage of me or hold this over my head for life. (Well mostly Gilbert, Ludwig would pretty much lecture me.)

Instead of running to them, I buried myself in the blankets and slept while clutching Grandpa's ring.

The next morning was bright and sunny. I had dressed in a new suit that was given to me by my parents. It was black with a white blouse underneath the jacket. I wore a matching pencil skirt, pantyhose and a pair of simple half inch black heels. I combed my hair with styling oil, taming my curls to be at least presentable. My bruises had faded and my skin was smooth and unmarked. I applied some light eyeliner, two coats of mascara and Shea butter lip gloss.

I slipped my phone into my jacket's pocket and my ID into the other. I sighed and shook out my shoulders, "you can do this," I said to my reflection in the bathroom mirror. "Just observe, don't say anything unless spoken to and if you do please avoid using cuss words and insulting other people." I stared at myself, "yeah, I'm screwed."

"America," Ludwig called from the first floor, "come down for breakfast."

"Coming," I exclaimed and ran down the stairs.

"Where's your brief case?" he asked.

I blinked, "do I need one?"

"Well yes, how are you going to keep notes? I know you are only watching and not presenting anything, but you need to make notes on how we display our issues and how we speak to one another," he lectured.

"You mean like a speech?" I lifted an eyebrow at him, "Dude I took speech in school, I know how to talk to an audience and make a PowerPoint."

"There's more to it than that," Ludwig stated.

I rolled eyes, "I'll make sure to take notes on my phone Mr. Beilschmidt."
He snorted, "I wasn't born yesterday."

"Clearly," I mumbled.

"Here," he handed me a spiral notebook and pen.

"Yay," I said sarcastically.

After breakfast Ludwig, Feliciano and I climbed in the BMW. I buckled myself in and turned to find Gilbert waving goodbye. "Lucky bastard," I grumbled.

"What did you say?" Ludwig looked at me through the rear view mirror.

"Nothing," I sighed.

When we arrived at the Reichstag building, the roads were crowded and it seemed like we would never get a parking spot. We entered through the front door and showed our IDs to the security guards. Certain areas of the building were closed to public; obviously that was where the G9 meeting would be held. Only the bottom floor and dome was allowed for the public, the second floor belonged to us.

I followed Ludwig and Feliciano down a white tile hall with fancy, gothic designed podium walls and high ceilings. We walked up a flat of stairs to the second floor, the windows were smaller compared to ones downstairs but everything else was the same. When we arrived at a pair of large wooden doors, I was able to spot three blonds in the distance.

I perked up and ran down the hall to collide into Arthur, "Arthur!" He yelped as we fell to the floor. I sat up, sitting on his stomach and grinned, "Hi."

"Hi," he hissed in irritation, "would you mind getting off of me."

I giggled as Francis came from behind and helped to my feet, "well don't you know how to make an entrance."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and gave a quick peck on the cheek, "Francis it's good to see you."

He kissed my cheek in return, "The same to you ma chérie."

I moved along to the last blond, "Mattie," I cried happily as I held him tight, "I missed you."

Matthew only nodded and patted my back.

Arthur picked himself off the floor and adjusted his suit jacket, "Well, that was un-lady like."

I lifted a brow at him, "do you not know me?"

Francis and Matthew laughed softly to my comment as I grinned and Arthur sighed, but his lips were tempted to smile.

"So how's your stay at Germany's house?" Francis asked.

"Ugh," I groaned, "its torture. He makes me run laps every day, in morning, noon and night. Then there are sit-ups, pushups, combat training where I'm left black and blue all over and he makes me do burpees! He's pure evil."

"Ahem," Ludwig stood behind me with his arms crossed.
"I mean," I turned around, "he's the greatest mentor anyone could ever ask for."

He narrowed his eyes at me and I sighed, "I'm doing burpees when we get back, aren't I?"

"Yes, yes you are."

"You westerners are so loud. I can hear you all from down the hall." Yao came walking from the hall on my right, beside him was Kiku.

"Hey Yao, hey Kiku," I greeted.

Yao knitted his brows together in annoyance while Kiku gave me an uncertain look. "America, we are alone, please use our country's name, not our human names."

Well, doesn't someone have a stick up their ass, I thought as I said, "sorry China, I'm still trying to get use to that." I nodded to Kiku, "Hello Japan."

"Good Morning America-san," he answered polity.

"It seems we're all here," that voice sent cold shivers down my spine. I looked back to the hall in front of me to find Ivan making his way towards us.

Everyone painted on a professional face as they official greeted one another. Ivan made sure to address me first, "Hello America," he held out his hand to me.

I swallowed my urge to kick him in the groin and shook his hand. "Hello Russia."

He gave an eerie smile and moved to kiss me on the cheek. I jumped back and opened the door the meeting room, "let's get started." I grabbed Arthur and Matthew and dragged them inside. I sat Arthur on my right and sat Matthew on my left. Francis followed and took his seat beside Arthur.

We sat at a round table, with Ludwig, Feliciano and Japan sitting next to one another as Yao and Ivan took the last seats.

"The first meeting of the G9 will now come to order," Ludwig announced.

For the last three hours we have discussed about economic drops, diseases that are in need of funding, a natural disaster that have caused a serve drought for farmers in east Europe and an escalation of crime.

I straightened myself up when Ludwig got to the topic of human trafficking. "It seems these child abductions have only gotten worse. Over three thousand children have been kidnapped and that's ones that have been reported. More street kids have been taken ranging in the ages of six to fifteen."

"You mean these kidnappings have all been done by the same group of people?" Yao asked.

Ludwig nodded, "seems so, we have tracked and busted over fifty other trafficking rings worldwide, but none of them seem to be connected this ring or the children that have been missing for the last five months."

"What makes this trafficking ring different from the others is that they are a worldwide organization and a perfectly functioning one at that." Arthur added, "They also seem to take a large amount of children in a short period of time."
"Aren't they using computers? Cell phones? Anything to stay in touch with one another?" Kiku questioned.

Matthew sighed, "Whatever they're using seems to avoid radio signals and phone towers. Somehow, they're taking kids but yet continue to stay off the grid. They use no credit cards, no rental cars, and no license boats. They avoid security cameras or for some strange reason cameras short circuit or shut off when a child is about to be taken."

We nodded in understanding; whoever these people are, they're technology was superior. They're devices blocked radio signals and satellites, no one can track them, not even the smartest, most experienced hackers. They are able to knock out power lines and cameras; one video even got on YouTube. It was a nanny cam that over looked a girl's room; she was seven years old and from the countryside of Britain. She was sleeping in her little princess bed when her camera shook and turned black. When the picture came into focus three hours later, the child was gone. Now of course there are devices that shut out radio signals, but only for a certain amount of time and cameras now days came with back up programs and second cameras hidden in the first, to capture what the first would miss. But whatever invention they used seems to shut down the program and the second camera.

They also can to hack into any security system, no matter how complicated the code was. They even took kids from different social classes; from the deepest depths of poverty to the highest ranks of society. When I meant the highest, I meant the top. Some of these kids came from families that have dinner parties and barbecues with NFL, NBA, and Major League players, politicians and billionaires too. These families could afford the most enhanced systems in the world, but yet this trafficking ring can break them like they were Intel software.

"This ring is twenty steps ahead us," Francis proclaimed. "Whenever we think we have a location, they find way to," he snapped his fingers, "disappear or send us on a wild goose chase."

"And they seem to take only children," Yao added, "no adults at all."

"Well, children are weaker and easier to manipulate," said Ivan.

This discussion brought forth images of my nephews, niece, young cousins and the kids from the rec center; to think that any of them could be abducted and forced into. . . God, I couldn't even think about that.

"What's the plan?" I heard myself saying.

The nations turned to face me, "What do you mean?" Ludwig asked.

"What are we gonna do? Are we gonna follow a lead? Locate and interrogate one of the ring members?"

I was met with silence till Arthur sighed, "America we can't get involved with police matters, it could lead to our discovery."

I gave him a look, "seriously."

He sighed, "It's just how it is."

"So what's the point of sitting here and talking about it when we're not gonna do anything about it!"

"Sit down America," Ludwig exclaimed.

I inhaled deeply, "I need air. Can I please be excused?"
He nodded and I speed walked out the door. I leaned against the wall and sighed, "Great, Amy you almost lost it. But at least you didn't flip the table."

Stomping of footsteps came echoing down the hall as a pair of men ran towards me and skidded around the corner into the hall in front of me. I knew one of them, "Neill?!

He was too focused on the man he was chasing to spare me a glance. But still, what the hell was he doing here in Berlin? I ran after him. They were a several feet ahead of me but thanks to all those laps with Ludwig, I was able to stay on their tail.

It wasn't long till Neill clutched a fist into the man's shirt and threw him to the wall. I slid to a stop and hid behind a wall column. I peeked to find Neill shaking the man and whispering harshly at him.

They hissed at one another and the man must have said something insulting, for Neill had punched him in the face. "Stop screwing with me! Where's Klipto Thas!"

"I will tell you nothing," the man hissed and shoved him aside. He tried to stand but Neill tackled him and wrestled him to the ground.

They struggled with one another till the man got the upper hand and grabbed at Neill's leather wristband, the dark brown one he always wore. The man smashed the wristband against the floor and it sparked with colorful blue lights. Neill hissed in pain as the band continued to short circuit. The man tried to run but Neill flipped out a long metal rod that was glowing with electrical currents and shocked him with a simple touch. He fell to the ground, twitching.

Neill panted, trying to fix his wristband but it only got worse as sparks flew and his image began to shake. Like when the picture of a TV shook, causing the image to blur. That's what was happening to Neill's form as his hair, clothes and body structure wavered and became see-through. Underneath this was a short, skinny body with silver-gray skin. The creature had a bald round head, it wore no clothes but it didn't seem like it needed them. It had no privates like humans did and looked like it was used to no clothing. It dragged the man back to the wall and pushed him in a sitting position. I was able to see the side of its face; it had a pointed chin, a small nose, no mouth and had big bug eyes the color of scarlet.

It was an alien.

I gasped and the alien snapped his head to face me. I froze in place, totally dumbstruck of the creature in front of me. Its face didn't really hold much in emotion but its eyes did get bigger and he spoke with no mouth. "Amy?" it questioned, but the sound didn't ring with Neill's Scottish accent. Instead its voice was high, almost girlish and carried no accent what's so ever.

I flinched as it used my name. It noticed and lifted its hands in surrender, "Amy, please stay calm."

In rapid movements, I placed a vase to the floor and lifted the podium that held that vase over my head. "Where's Neill you alien freak!" I swung the podium at him but missed when he weaved around my blows.

"I am Neill!"

"Bullshit!" I slammed the podium into its chest and sent him flying to the wall, opposite of the man it had knocked out beforehand. "You have ten seconds to tell me where he is or I'm going to beat you with this!" I lifted the podium over my head.

"I am Neill Shaw," it exclaimed, its voice fearful.
I was about to smash the podium over its head till it screamed, "Remember how you couldn't understand fractions?"

I stopped and stared at the alien. "What?"

"Yes, you couldn't understand how to add and subtract fractions, so we spent the day backing cupcakes to help you. I would quiz you on how many fractions you needed to add for the vegetable oil and water to make twelve dozen cupcakes. Remember we burnt the first batch and frosted the other batches with vanilla and chocolate icing."

My eyes widened as it recited the memory I shared with Neill. It continued, "And-and, when Chris, Laura and I traveled with you to Hawaii. I took you out star gazing and told you which stars were which. We stayed up all night till the sun rose. I carried you in my arms as I walked back to your grandparent's house, singing a lullaby to you."

I stared at it with a shocked look but I was still stubborn to believe it, "what was the song you sang to me?"

It removed its arms away from its head and looked up to me, "'Dream Angus'."

I exhaled and threw the podium to the side. My arms fell to my sides and I shook my head, "who are you? What are you?"

It rose to its feet, "I'm Neill Shaw, well that's the name I used as your tutor. My real name is Mykrutyszoni; but you're father called me Tony."

"Are you talking about Alfred?" I asked.

"Yes," it nodded.

I massaged my temples, "Alfred was friends with an alien?"

"Yes," it answered.

"Why?"

"He helped hide me from his government when I crashed into New Mexico in the summer of 1947. Through the years we grew close, causing me to have an excuse to come visit Earth more. But luckily for me, most of the outlaws I hunt down choose Earth to settle in."

"Hold on, hunt? Outlaws? What are you?"

"I'm an Alien Bounty Hunter; I work with the Universal Police Force to track and capture outlaws. I'm pretty much the only alien in the galaxy that actually knows this planet and all its unique qualities. But of course I only learned so much thanks to Alfred."

"Wait, you're telling me that Alfred was an Alien Bounty Hunter?"

"When I came to Earth looking for an outlaw, then yes," it confirmed.

I slapped my cheeks, "Okay Amy wake up now. This might be the most creative dream you ever had, but you gotta wake up now!"

"You're not dreaming," it said in a monotone.

"No, I have to be dreaming because this is just too much! I mean, first there were nations, then spirits
and now aliens! What's next a damn a zombie apocalypse?"

The window shattered as the man, who we thought was unconscious, busted through the glass. He landed with a thud and rose to his feet shakily. The alien ran to the window and cursed, "Fuck!" It lifted his arm to its face, the one that held a metal arm band (Neill's wristband). "Activate Clocking Disguise!"

The device sparked as little drills popped out and started fixing the band. A robotic voice proclaimed, "Repairs must be made. Please stand by."

"Abort repairs! Abort repairs!"

"Cannot abort, cannot abort," the robotic voice repeated.

It groaned and turned to face me, "Amy go after him!"

"What?! No! How about you go after him, oh great alien hunter?!"

"I really can't go out looking like this can I?" It gestured to its odd form, "If they reacted anyway like you did, they would have me strapped down on a dissecting table faster than you can say Deutschmarks!"

"Why do I have to?" I countered.

"Because he knows where Klipto is!"

"Who the hell is Klipto?!"

"He's the alien that's behind the child abductions for the last five months!"

My eyes widened in disbelief, "what?"

"Klipto has been kidnapping children around the world, planning to sell them to aliens across the galaxies. That alien," it pointed to the man that was running through the tourists, "knows where he is and when we know where Klipto is, we will know where the children are."

My thoughts were slurring but still I asked, "Why should I trust you? You've lied to me the entire time I've known you."

"I'm not the only one; you've family did the same."

"Touché," I remarked coldly and turned to the man (hashtag: alien) running around the building, most likely heading for the Spree River. He was getting away along with the knowledge of where those kids were. I mentally groaned and jumped out of the second story window. I landed with ease and began the chase.
The man that was supposedly an alien ran down the road called Reichstagufer. I sprinted after him, weaving around tourists and locals and rolling up my skirt with each step. My jacket caused me to sweat more than needed and my shoes were killing me. As I was running, one question just kept nagging at me.

What happened to my life?

I'm in Berlin, chasing an alien outlaw because Neill, or Tony, or whatever his fucking name was; needed me to go after him. This supposed Alien Bounty Hunter was friends with Alfred and together they were a team, kicking alien ass and taking names.

I wanted to scream in frustration, but a deeper, darker side of me said, *why scream when you can take your frustration out on him.*

I looked straight ahead to the disguised alien. Its disguise was of a tall man with short chestnut brown hair. He was long and lean and wore causal clothes. Anger and irritation boiled inside of me and fueled me with the energy to quicken my pace. The man turns onto Bunsenstraße and I followed him like a bloodhound. I was closing in and he noticed. He yelped and tried losing me on the street of Dorotheenstraße, jumping into traffic.

Cars honked as they came to a skidding stop. The man crossed the road and I continued to follow, weaving around cars and vans. Several drivers shouted at me but I ignored them. Now that I think about it, I was crazy focused. It was like everything else faded away and the only thought, the only concern I had was capturing that guy.

He cuts into Schadowstraße and I cursed, "I'm really sick of chasing you."

Farther down this road, I kicked up my legs and tackled him to the ground. He hissed back a cry and punched me in the face. I barely felt it, it was nothing compared to a nation's punch. I threw down my elbow to the side of his temple, dazing him. I curled my fingers into his shirt and tossed him into an ally between two buildings. "Let's have a little chat, shall we?" I said as I cracked my knuckles.

"Are you with him?!" he shouted, "The bounty hunter?!"

I lifted him up and slammed him to the wall, "I'm asking the questions here. Where is this Klepo guy?"

He gave me a confused look, "who?"

I slapped him with the back of my hand, "I don't have time for your stupid games!"

"You pronounced his name wrong," a familiar Scottish voice resounded from behind.

I craned my neck to face Neill, well a silver-gray skinned alien that uses a human disguise he created as Neill Shaw. I narrowed my eyes at it, "Well then," I dropped the man, "you ask the questions."

It walked over and bent its knees to be at the same level as the man, "Now where is Klipto Thas."
Ludwig could not believe the impudence of Amy Hawkfeather.

She had asked for a break but instead she had run off.

It all started when the window broke, and all the nations came running down the hall. "What happen?" Ludwig asked.

A security guard answered, "Someone broke through the window."

"Who?" Ludwig followed with another question.

"We don't know," a second guard proclaimed, "our cameras have been malfunctioning since this morning."

The nations glanced at one another, giving a silent signal to head back into the meeting room. Once they were all accounted for, Yao was the first to say, "You don't think it was America? Do you?"

"Of course not," Arthur protested, "she may be ill tempered but she wouldn't break a window." His voice may have been confident but his eyes gave away his uncertainly.

"It could be something else," Feliciano added, "let's just wait for America."

An hour passed and when Ludwig called for security to check the grounds, they had eye witnesses of a blond girl in a suit, jumping out of a window and running from the building. Ludwig massaged the bridge of his nose, he could feel the vein of his forehead throbbing. America was not coming back.

Ludwig rose from his seat and pulled out his phone. "Franz, I need you and your men to find Amy Hawkfeather. We will join the search as well, remember keep Amy's name out of the public eye."

"Of course Mr. Beilschmidt," the young cadet proclaimed. Franz Burkhard had recently moved up in the ranks and had been given permission to know of Ludwig's true identity.

Ludwig and Franz said their goodbyes as he hanged up the phone and turned to the other nations. "Let's go, clearly America isn't coming back."

An hour of questioning brought nothing. The disguised alien was not talking and I was losing my patience. "We're not getting anywhere," I proclaimed.

Alien Neill turned to me, "you think I don't know that."

I sighed and glanced to the people that were walking by the alleyway. They didn't take any notice of us, for the bounty hunter had placed silver metal disks at the walls of the buildings. Creating a force field that hid us away from the public.

The man hissed as he tried to break his bandage. There was a collar around his neck, cuffs around his wrists and shackles at his ankles. All these bands were made of metal and each were connected by bright yellow electrical currents.

Also these devices seemed to pop out of the alien hunter's wristband (a.k.a. metal band) with simple voice commands. I watched as he lifted his arm to his mouth, "Locate Cloaking Device." A tiny video projector leaped out of the band and began to scan the man. The projector locked in on the collarbone and a necklace of cross. Neill smirked and pulled the necklace from the man and just like
Neill's malfunction of his wristband earlier that day; the man's form flickered and disappeared, leaving behind a five foot tall snail in its place. It was green with yellow eyes that sat at the tip of its antennas. It had no shell, fat little stubs for arms and had razor sharp teeth.

"A Salken," Neill proclaimed, "a C.D. can only do so much. How could you ever run so fast?"

The snail creature hissed and Neill reached down to the tail and pulled off a blue, round disk. "A hover board should've known."

"A hover board," I exclaimed, "like a hover board that flies through the air hover board?"

"Yes," he answered, "it's an X39-Pyixas, can convert any type of energy to fuel and communicates with its rider's brain waves." He tossed it to me and I caught it like a frisbee.

"Wow," I placed my hands over the futuristic like disk.

"Keep your grubby hands off my board Earthling!" the Salken snapped.

"Oh look it speaks," I said.

"That's my board; I paid over 30,000 roptons for it! Its mine!"

"Roptons?" I questioned.

"It's a currency used all over the galaxies," Neill answered.

I nodded, "okay." I paid more attention to the blue disk, I moved to place my entire palm on it, to weigh it but it began to glow. "Um, Neill it's glowing."

"Relax; it's just recording your DNA."

"Why?" I asked, almost scared.

"So you can fly it."

The disk pushed off my hand and floated an inch above the ground. The disk grew, enlarging itself into a small surfboard. "Oh, wow. This is so cool."

"You filthy Earthling!" The Salken shouted. "You primitive beings have no respect!"

"I should respect five foot snail, yeah I'll get right on that," I rolled my eyes.

"You humans believe that you are the center of the universe, that nothing could touch you," it glared, but then smiled a sharp toothy grin. "But yet no matter what you Earthlings do, you can't protect your own offspring."

I glared, "what do you want with those kids?"

It smirked, "slave labor is always in demand on other planets."

"You monster, they're just kids," I hissed.

"Yet over 100,000 children get forced into your own version of slave labor very year. How does this make you any different from us?"

I smashed my fist into its face, busting it into the building's wall. It moaned, but I just kept punching,
denting the wall as I squashed its face.

Neill pulled me off. "Amy stop! We need him alive!"

I shoved him off, panting, "we're not getting anywhere him!" I faced the Salken, it was bruised but it seemed fine.

"Physical attacks won't work on their kind," Neill answered as if reading my mind. "Their bodies absorb hits."

I kicked at the building's wall, leaving a hole. The pain shot up my leg but it helped cool my anger. Allowing me to come up with an idea, "Is his kind anything like a snail on Earth?" I asked.

Neill lifted an eyebrow, mostly wondering how I could pass on my anger so quickly. "Yes, their anatomy is same."

"Even their weaknesses?"

He nodded and I walked back to the hover board. I took a deep breath, pushed it down to the ground and stepped on. It was like riding a skateboard except it had no wheels, it was wider and it kept rising off the ground. I squealed as it tried to go up.

"Amy, relax, you won't fall, the X39 creates its own gravity pull, it will keep you on and if by some slim chance you do fall; it will create a force field to catch you," Neill explained.

"Really?" I asked, skeptically of him.

"Fall off," he gestured to the ground, which was five feet below me. I gave him a wide eyed look and he smiled, "trust me."

'Trust me', how could two little words hold so much power? Maybe it was because the alien was wearing Neill's face. Well, technically it was Neill. The same Neill that stayed up several nights with me till I understood my math homework; that helped me with science projects and study guides for school district testing. He was my teacher, my mentor and as I got older, he became my friend.

I turned my back to him, inhaled through my nose and leaned back. A wall caught me and pushed be back onto the board. When I turned around there was purple tinted force field that covered in a perfect circle all around me and the board.

"Wow, just," I shook my head, "wow."

"Now just focus on where you want to go."

"Oh, right," I pulled out my phone, ignoring all the messages and calls from the nations and headed directly to Google Maps. I typed for food markets and found one called Penny Market; it was about fifteen to seventeen minutes away from where I was. "Um, Neill how fast can a hover board go?"

"To explain it would be complicated," he proclaimed. "I'll just say it can be as fast as any car on Earth."

I nodded, "Got it, also can I borrow some cash?"

He lifted a brow in question but clicked at his wristband. Transparent keys glowed under his fingertips as a credit card popped out. "Here," he handed it to me.

"A Discover Card?" I gave him a look.
He shrugged, "Hey, an alien's gotta eat."

I smiled, "Alright, I'll be back."

"Hold on," he threw the silver cross necklace at me. "Wear it; I reprogrammed it to make you look like a bird. We don't want videos of a flying girl over Berlin going viral on YouTube."

"Right," I slipped the necklace over my head, "how do I-"

"There's a button on top of the cross, press it."

I did and nothing happen, "I don't feel any different."

"It's a Cloaking Device. It puts up a shield that displays a picture, think of it as a hologram that you can touch and feel. Everyone else will see a common pigeon, while you will remain the same."

"Awesome. Wait what about the hover board?"

"The X39 has a camouflage mode; it will constantly change color to match its environment."

"How do I-"

"It listens to your thoughts and analyzes your habits, but if you still don't understand just say 'Camouflage Mode'."

"Camouflage Mode," I said to the board and it disappeared. The blue faded away and became the shade of the concrete ground. "Cool," I squealed. The board slowly floated higher and I yelped as it stopped.

"Don't think too much into it," Neill shouted, "just think of it as surfing, except riding waves, you're riding the air."

"Riding air; got it." I took another deep breath and flew forward. Unfortunately I flew into traffic. I worked the hover board as a skateboard and leaned right, dodging a car. I placed a foot back and exclaimed, "Up!" The board rocketed into the sky, sending me high into the air. "Stop!" I screamed and it slowed, coming to a halt.

I panted, my heart beat was pounding and my body was twitching with adrenaline. I looked down, the view was amazing, like a more accurate version of Google Maps. I shook out my shoulders and tested the reins. I leaned right and the board turned but didn't move. I moved left and the board slightly hovered left. I glanced to my phone for directions and the board started heading straight on Dorotheenstraße, following the map that was on my phone. Just like Neill said, it seemed to read my mind and understood my feelings on where I wanted to go and how fast I wanted it to go. "Okay, I need to go fast-" I didn't have to finish my sentence. It accelerated, passing cars at a rapid speed.

I shouted excitedly and shifted my weight left onto Friedrichstraße. I soared up and weaved right and left, practicing skateboard tricks that I haven't done since I was fourteen. It was simple. Riding air was effortless and I totally loved it.

"You have arrived at your destination," I almost missed the voice of my phone but my mind and the hover board seem to work faster than my body. The board slowed and settled above a road called Reinickendorfer Straße. My phone said I needed to make a U-turn. I smirked, "I don't have to."

I guided the board to a pizza joint that was at the corner of the opposite street. It was only a short walk away from Penny Market and it was the only place with a covered area to dismount from the
hover board. The pizza shop was called Call a Pizza, and it seemed legit. The aroma of melted cheese and pepperoni was beginning to make my stomach growl. I shook away the thought; I had a job to do.

I landed behind the pizza joint and jumped off the board. "Okay, now how do I get you back into that disk-" Again, I didn't have to finish my sentence. It folded itself into the disk and I bent down to pick it up. "This is so badass," I tried to stick it inside my pocket but it was too big. "Ugh," I sighed, "if only you could turn into something smaller, like a keychain or make yourself-" It changed form, taking on the shape of a cell phone case.

"No way," my eyes widened and I took out my phone. I snapped my phone into the case with ease and I grinned like the Cheshire Cat. "This is officially the coolest, most epic thing I ever saw."

I slipped my phone into my pocket, switched off the Cloaking Device and walked through the appointment buildings. It led to a field where a group of kids were playing soccer. I walked over and called out in German, "Excuse me, I'm lost, is there any way for me to get out of this lot?"

The group of children turned to me but they hesitated, clearly cautious of me. They're parents must've been warning them about stranger danger for months now. I gave a smile, "Just point where I have to go and I'll get out of your hair."

A little boy, about six or seven, walked over and pulled me by the hand. He was about the height Gael was and he had blond hair and blue eyes. He guided me to a concrete tunnel with an iron gate at the end, where the sidewalk met. He pointed to the tunnel's gate, "You can get to the street from here."

I grinned and ruffled his hair, "danke." He blushed slightly and I giggled. I walked down the tunnel and headed to the market that was straight ahead. Once I was inside I asked a worker for the aisle that held the spices and grabbed four bags of salt, each weighing about three pounds. Though my shopping basket was light, like I was carrying bottles of lotion instead of pounds of salt. I really didn't understand it, but I didn't have the time to think about it. I bought the salt, carrying two bags in each hand by the handles of the plastic bags.

I walked out and a man in a simple black suit stopped me. "Amy Hawkfeather."

"Yes," I answered.

"I'm Franz Burkhard," he proclaimed, "I'm here to bring you back to the meeting."

My eyes widened, "You know of us?"

"Yes, now please come with me, Mr. Beilschmidt is waiting."

I scanned the area, a man; slightly older, was watching us from across the street. A woman that stood several feet behind Franz was leaning against the wall and I could feel a pair of eyes on my back.

"As you can see, there's nowhere to run. Please come with us," said Franz.

My mind ran a mile. Of course the nations would come looking for me and obviously Ludwig would send out his government agents to come get me. I sighed, what should I do? Go along with these suits and head back to the meeting.

And do what? I thought to myself, sit your ass in a chair and do nothing.

My fingers curled at the plastic handles, no. I needed to do something; I needed to help Neill catch
Klipto. Those kids weren't going to be saved by human means. They needed Neill. The least I could do was get him the information he needs and then I would return to the meeting; but first I had to lose the suits.

I nodded, "okay."

Franz smiled, "thank you for being civilized about this." The woman and man walked over as another man came up from behind.

Quickly, I threw my hand up; colliding the plastic bag filled with six pounds of salt into the man's face. I spun and kicked the same man into his knee cap. I heard a bone crack as he fell to the ground. He cried out in pain and I ran across the street.

Franz instructed the woman to stay with the injured as he and his last man chased after me. I picked up the pace and turned back into the tunnel I came out from. I stopped mid-way and switched on the Cloaking Device. The two men followed and ran right by me. Franz shouted, "Search the lot," he looked at his phone. "She has to be here."

*They must be using a tracker.* I pulled out my phone and took out the battery.

"Shit! I lost her signal," he exclaimed.

I smirked and walked back to the side walk. No doubt he will call for reinforcements, and I was sick of running in a skirt. I sprinted down Reinickendorfer Straße, where a clothing store stood at the corner. It was called AsMo, an alternative boutique. I ran in and a woman squealed, "A bird! Get it out!"

I cursed softly and ran into the racks of clothing. I switched off my disguise and the woman pulled apart the hangers. Her eyes widened, "why are you hiding in here?"

"I'm terrified of birds," I pretended to be embarrassed.

"Oh, well don't worry ma'am we will get that thing out of here," she said.

I nodded, "thank you."

She walked away and I sighed; now, *time to get some pants.*

I changed into a pair of dark jeans, a purple tank top with brown combat boots and a matching crop jacket. It was made of light material and the collar was popped up to cover my neck. It even came with a hood hidden inside. I pulled it out, covered my head, slipped on a new pair of fashionable shades and walked out of the changing room. I stuffed my suit into one of the plastic bags as I headed to the door. I had already paid for the new outfit so I wasn't met with questions or delays.

I felt more like myself in jeans, like I was ready to take on the world. I strolled back to the tunnel and turned on my disguise. Franz and his men were nowhere to be seen. I ran to the back of the pizza joint and pulled off the hover board phone case. I threw it to the ground and it grew to its full size. I stepped on, activated the camouflage mode and soared into the air.

"I'm back," I announced as I landed the board in the ally.

"You left to do a wardrobe change?" Neill asked, slightly annoyed.
"I needed pants, but there was something else that we needed," I smiled as I jumped off the board and it changed back into a phone case. "By the way, I love this!"

"That's mine, you Earthling bitch," the Salken cursed.

I narrowed my eyes at it, "Neill, let's play good cop, bad cop." I crutched in front of the cuffed alien and gave an uncaring smile. "Tell me, have you ever been to France?"

It hissed in irritation, "I will never understand this world; these different countries, languages, religion and culture. It's too damn confusing! Why can't you all just unify under one order like everyone else."

I shrugged, "People have tried, never works out." I pulled out a bag of salt and ripped it open. "I'm going to assume that you never been to France, which is a shame, it's a beautiful country." It glared and I continued, "There's a delicacy among the French, it's called escargot. Do you want to know what the main ingredient is?" I didn't want for him to answer, "Snails," I smiled.

It gave me a confused and slightly frightened look, and I moved along to the bag. I lifted a palm full of salt, "do you know what this is?" It stayed silent, "its salt. It's the only rock humans can digest. Humans are even made of it, we cry salty tears and our sweat even tastes like salt."

"Are we getting anywhere with this?" It snapped.

I ignored it, "Salt can be found underground, in our oceans, there's an endless supply." I dropped the salt back into the bag. "It tastes pretty good too," I licked off some left over grains from my hand. "Salt is used in cooking, to give a dish that special kick. Especially in escargot; why do you think we do that? Simple, it softens the snail and makes it gooey. some people like it like that. You see, salt can melt certain things," I grabbed another palm full of salt, "like ice, snow," I blew the salt off my hand and right into its face. "And snails."

It screamed bloody murder. Its face was leaking green liquid as the grains of salt burned into its skin. I whistled, "That looks painful."

"You," it panted, "bitch."

I smirked, "Instead of all those useless insults, how about you use that mouth of yours to tell me where those kids are."

It blinked back tears and hissed, "I won't talk."

"Fine," I picked up the bag and dumped all of the grain over its body. It cried out in agony as the salt sunk into its skin, burning holes and causing its wounds to smoke. It shook, trying to shake off the salt, but the grain stood on, dissolving into its flesh.

"S-stop," it whimpered.

"Tell me where Klipto and the kids are and might think about it."

"Amy," Neill pulled me back, "let me talk to him." He bent down, "listen pal, I want to help you, really I do, but you gotta help us first."

"I can't."

Neill sighed, "You're not helping yourself. I like you, I want to help you, she on the other hand," he gestured to me, "won't."
"He'll kill me."

"So would she."

I flinched, **would I?**

"Why do you care?!” It cried, "Humans can have more children, what's the point if we take a few thousand?!!"

I snapped and I kicked the snail's face into wall. "You think a human life is that easy to replace!" I grabbed it and forced its mouth open, "I think it's time for bag two." I snatched the bag and ripped it open with my teeth. I shoved the bag into its mouth and shook the salt down its throat. It gagged as lime green liquid formed at the corners of its mouth. I stepped back as it fell to the ground, vomiting green fluids. "I bet your insides are burning," I said in calm voice and yanked it up by the collar.

"I won't ask again, where's Klipto," I ordered.

It gasped like a fish out of water and I threatened, "do you want bag three?"

"You," it gasped, "need," its voice was hoarse, "me alive."

"We can find someone else." I ripped open the last bags, "Besides, if by some miracle you survive after this. We'll just dump you into the ocean, and I'm sure you remember that it's filled with salt."

Its eyes widened in fear, tears were even falling, but I didn't care. "You know humans might not want to admit it, but they do love to see a good spread of blood and gore. I wonder, how many hits do think you'll get when the video of you liquefying into the ocean hits the internet?"

"You won't do it," it whispered.

I grinned evilly, "I would; because, personally I want to see that. I think, it will be entertaining to watch you die."

Tears fell faster as its voice rose higher in fear. I lost my smile, grabbed the last two bags, and held them over its head. "Last chance, where's Klipto?"

It continued to cry and I teased it be tipping the bags over. Its eyes widened and it screamed, "I don't know where he is right now! But, but I know where the kids are gonna be! I know when the auction is!"

"Where?" Neill chimed in.

"In London, Britain, at the Turks Shipyard, Klipto will be holding them in ship cargos-"

Its head exploded, green blood splattered over the wall as its body fell to the ground. Neill and I turned to a group of men. One held a silver gun with wires interlacing around the staff and handle. That man was the first to speak, "Damn Salken. Those idiots can never keep a secret."

"Amy, run-" Neill ran to grab my hand but he was shot in the back.

He fell to the ground and I exclaimed, "Neill!!" I leaped for him but a sharp needle stabbed my arm. I hissed and pulled the needle out, it was dart. "Oh fuck," I fell to the ground as my world turned black.
I found myself in a forest, the trees towered over me, and the grass was a luscious shade of green and soft to lie on. I yawned and tried to go back to sleep, but nimble footsteps stirred me to rise myself onto my forearms. I looked up to a figure of white fur, gold eyes and canine teeth.

It was the wolf.

I gulped, glanced to the ground and slowly crawled backwards. The wolf noticed and growled, "Stop."

I froze and looked back to find a woman with copper skin, long black raven hair and dark eyes. "Why do you run from me?"

I tried to speak, but the dream was beginning to blur. I was about to wake up.

Before I could, she gripped her hand to my chin and whispered, "Stop ignoring me."

I gasped and sat up, I tried to rub my face but my hands were tired. Thick rope was wrapped around my wrists, mid-section, arms and ankles. I scanned the area; it was a plain gray room with dimmed lighting. It had no furniture except for a table and two chairs.

"What the-" then the memory of being shot with a dart came rushing back. "Oh, that's right, I've been kidnapped by aliens," I sighed, this is my life now.

"Hey, she's awake," a screechy voice proclaimed.

I turned to the door and found a humanoid structured being, but only the shape was where the similarities stop. It was about six feet tall with dark gray skin; its skin was tight over its bones and small, taut muscles. It had no hair, just a round bald head with small lizard-like, green eyes and a bird-like beck mouth. Its arms and legs were long and lean with a defined, popped out rib cage and narrowed waist. Its fingers were long, bony and had pointed finger nails.

I swallowed back the urge to scream as it took wide strides to place itself in front of me. Its fingers brushed through my hair and I flinched. "Oh don't be scared," it cooed, "you're a pretty girl, you might be able to end up as someone's pet. Wouldn't that be nice?"

I bit its finger and it pulled back with a hiss, "you little-" it was about to slap me till a red tentacle wrapped around its wrist.

"Calm yourself Nyla, don't harm the merchandise," a deep voice proclaimed from behind.

Nyla and I turned to face a floating head. It had no body, with red, scaly skin and several tentacles all around it. Some tentacles were stubs but most had extra eyes at the ends. One large eye sat at the center of its head, just below was an enormous mouth filled with long sharp teeth; each about the length of a Subway foot long.

"What the-" I barely yelped till Nyla shoved the red tentacle off.

"She bit me Kakwatt!"
"Then don't touch her," the floating head remarked.

"Who-what are you?!!" I choked out.

The floating head turned, with all its eyes on me, "oh how rude. I'm Kakwatt, I'm from the Netrot Galaxy and my people are known as the Aberrations. Nyla here is from the same galaxy and she is a Duplin."

I blinked, "okay."

"Stop toying with her," Nyla hissed and typed on her metal wristband. (Does every alien have one?) "Now give me details."

The Aberration rolled his eyes and wrapped two tentacles around my mid-section to lift me up. His eyes began to scan me, searching all over my body. "Good bone structure," he commented as Nyla typed what he said. "Curly blond hair and bright blue eyes," he nodded in approval, "colored eyes are very popular."

"Let go of me-" Kakwatt stuck his tentacle into my mouth and stretched open to see my teeth.

"Good teeth and looks healthy and well-muscled."

"What about race?" Nyla asked.

"To the untrained eye, anyone would just mark her off as an American of European descent, but there's much more to her. Her lips are smooth and full, must be a French trait. She's also has Spanish cheek bones and German blue eyes. She has a long, lean body of a Scandinavian. Fingers of Native American characteristics and her curls are definitely from Native Mexican descent. Her skin tone is English and her delicate eye lashes are Russian." His eyes grew closer to me, "Fascinating."

"As anyone ever told you of personal space," I hissed.

"Her accent is American, but she has sight twang of the south west."

Nyla typed as she shook her head, "How do you know all this? I can barely keep track of humans that are Chinese and Japanese. Have you ever tried separating them? They look so much alike."

Kakwatt laughed, "I've been on Earth for years, studying these creatures." He smiled, "I know all of you think of them as lowly beings but they are actually quite interesting."

"I'll show you 'lowly being'," I shouted as I lifted my knees to kick Kakwatt. Though, before I could land a hit, he dropped me and floated back.

"She's not afraid, shocked at first but seems to adapt quickly."

"Maybe she can be used as a sparring partner for some aliens at the arenas," Nyla commented.

"They don't last very long," he added, "It would be a waste of money and waste of her good looks."

The Duplin snorted, "She isn't that pretty."

The Aberration chuckled, "on this planet she would be considered a beauty."

"You heard him," I smirked, "you're just jealous because you're some fucked up love child between a lizard and a bird."
She slapped me across the face, "watch your mouth Earthling."

The pain faded as I glared at her, Nyla narrowed her lizard eyes at me. "She healed. Kakwatt, humans don't heal that fast do they?"

Kakwatt's eyes widened, "no, could it be..."

"Nyla," another alien opened the door, it had two fingers on each hand, and two toes on each foot. Long black nails were connected to its hands and feet. It had piercing teeth with long canine fangs at the ends. Three pairs beady bug eyes lined from its forehead to its mouth while two large spider eyes lined on the sides of the six smaller ones. It had long tan and purple fur on top of its shoulders and looked like a gigantic flea.

"What do you want?" Nyla asked, annoyed.

"Klipto's holding a meeting," it said in a series of hisses. A small creature crawled off its arm and scurried towards me.

It was a spider.

I screamed, "Get that thing away from me!" I tried to stomp on it with my tied feet.

"No!" the flea creature screeched, "don't hurt Luna!" The over-sized flea crawled over and gently lifted the bug to give it a kiss. (I think.)

"She's not afraid of us," Nyla proclaimed, "but she's afraid of a bug that's native to her world."

"Like I said, humans are interesting creatures," Kakwatt said.

"Come on you two we have to go," the spider-loving flea exclaimed.

"Go on without me, I'll be there soon," Kakwatt proclaimed.

Nyla sighed, "Fine, but don't take too long, Klipto doesn't like to wait." She and the flea walked out of the room, leaving me alone with the floating head.

He looked at me with a whole new interest. "You're not human," he wrapped a tentacle to lift my face up. "I've heard rumors but I never thought I would be able to see one with my own eyes. A nation, telling of your accent, you must be America," his tentacle brushed through my hair, "just imagine what you have seen, such history behind your eyes."

I glared, "sorry to disappoint you but I've only lived for eighteen years. I wouldn't know much."

He snorted, "You don't give yourself much credit." His tentacle stub brushed under my eye, "your eyes say it all." His tentacles continued to wrap themselves around me once again, lifting me up in the air. "Do you want to know how Aberrations gather knowledge? We don't need to waste our time learning the material, we simply find a being that knows it," his head was the length and width of eight feet. He moved me closer so I would be mere inches away from his teeth, "and we eat them."

My eyes widened as he held me up and opened his mouth. "No," I choked, and then shouted, "No! No!"

"Relax," he hissed, "believe me, I'm saving you, at least this death will be quick." He pulled me closer to his massive mouth. I tore my arms apart, breaking the rope and slammed my fist into his large eye. He cried out in pain as he squeezed his tentacle around my neck. "You little-" I snapped
the rope from my ankles apart and kicked him in the teeth. Red blood splattered over my clothes and the floor as his teeth dangled from his gums.

I moved swiftly as I grabbed one of his loose teeth and cut off the tentacle that was around my neck. Then I snatched the other tentacle as it was about to let me go and leaped onto the alien, gouging his tooth into his center eye. Everything blurred after that, all I saw was red as I continued to stab him over and over again. Kakwatt screamed in agony and begged for me to stop but I didn't. I just wailed like a banshee as I stabbed, punched and kicked him.

The floating head fell to the ground, but I didn't stop. Not when blood began to pool below him, not when he stopped screaming nor stopped moving. I just kept slicing off tentacles and leaving deep gashes over his body till I gave out.

I panted and pushed myself off him. I glanced to my hands; one was still clutching the foot long razor-sharp tooth while the other held itself in a tight fist. Both were covered in blood.

"Such strength," he whispered and I snapped my head up to meet him at his last remaining tentacle eye. "Such grace," he panted, "and yet such brutality. Humans have seen my kind as monsters and have worshiped creatures like you like gods. But who are truly gods? And who are truly monsters? Or could we be both?"

I slashed off his eye and stabbed him one last time, "shut up." I whispered and rose to my feet. Still holding on to his tooth as a weapon, I walked to the door and stepped out into the hall.

"Freeze!" I turned to face a group of aliens that varied in size, color and species. Some looked like over grown worms with toad faces. Most were bug like with multiple arms and legs, others had lizard traits. Scaly skin, slitting eyes and long claws; exoskeleton skinned creatures with wide eyes and web like hands and feet. Few had humanoid bodies but they had different skin tones of blues, reds, greens and purples. Most of these humanoid beings had multiple limbs and eyes, and long body structures with coarse, scaly and insect-like skin. All of these creatures held future-like weapons; laser guns of different sizes ranging from hand-held pistols to massive blasters that needed to be held with both hands. Or in some cases four.

"Stay where you are!" an alien exclaimed.

I tightened my hold on the Aberration's tooth and grabbed my phone from my pocket.

"Don't move!"

I ignored them as I tore off the phone's case. A blast like shot resounded and I felt a shrill, intense pain up my arm. I glanced to the tip of my shoulder; a piece of flesh was ripped off.

"I said, don't move!"

The pain grew numb as any thoughts I had fell silent. Instincts took over as I yanked out the phone case and tossed it out to the floor. Laser blasts ringed out but the hover board blocked and re-directed every blast as I ducked behind it. When the series of shots were over, I jumped onto the board and flew straight into the crowd.

The aliens didn't expect that. They were caught off guard as I slit throats and gutted stomachs. I flipped of the board while kicking an alien in the face and slicing a hand off another. The hover board read my thoughts as it circled around me, protecting me from laser blasts as I took down one alien after the other.

I don't remember how I did it, I simply did.
I walked through the halls and stair cases, screaming battle cries as I punched, kicked, and stabbed any creature that crossed my path. Several aliens moved to strike me down, their laser blasts had ripped off chunks flesh from my shoulder blades, outer thighs, inner arms and rib cage but I felt nothing. I would just rise to my feet and hit them back a hundred times fold.

I sent aliens twice my size flying out of windows and smashed others through walls. I had snatched laser guns from fallen aliens and zipped around on the board shooting off limbs and heads of terrestrial beings.

Once I reached the fifth floor, a bright light blinded me as it destroyed the hover board and threw me to a wall.

"Why haven't you killed her yet! She's just a human!" a male Duplin shouted to a lizard creature that walked on its back legs.

"She's not like any human I've seen!"

I stood up and glanced to the board, it sparked with blue light and smoke was rising from the wound it took from the laser blast. I narrowed my eyes at the pair of aliens, "I really loved that board." I ran towards them as the Duplin shouted at the lizard to shoot but I had slit the throat of the gun wielding lizard before it could even pull the trigger. I grabbed the gun and aimed it at the Duplin. He tried to speak but I shot him in the head before he could.

A door opened from behind, "what the-" it was Nyla's voice. I spun and pointed the gun at her head, "where's Neill?"

"Fray!" Nyla screeched and the flea creature from before attacked. Its teeth sunk into my arm and I hissed a curse as I knifed it in the face with the Aberration's tooth. I kicked off the body and placed the gun closer to Nyla.

"How are you still alive?" She questioned, "An Ettercap's bite is venomous! It paralyzes its victims! An average human wouldn't be able to move by now!"

"As you can see I'm not an average human. Now, where's the bounty hunter? Tell me or I'll be painting the walls with your blood." I threatened.

Nyla gestured to her right, "he's down the hall, first door on your left."

I pulled the laser gun away from her head, "thanks." I blasted her in the knee. Nyla fell to the floor, clutching her limb and hissing out in pain. "Stay," I commanded as I walked on.

I came to the door and stepped inside. I found Neill in his alien form trapped inside some kind of force field. He was sitting cross legged on the floor and seemed unharmed. I sighed in relief, "Neill," I smiled.

He looked up, his eyes widened, "Amy!"

A blast resounded from behind and I looked down to find a large hole, which had pierced through my mid-section. Blood pooled in my mouth as I turned to face the shooter. It was a seven foot tall yellow insect; it stood upright on two segmented legs. Its head looked like an ant with massive yellow eyes, long antennas on the top of its head and severe mandibles from its mouth. It was muscular, had four arms with two fingered claws at the end of each limb and wore a long black cloak.

It lifted the laser gun to my forehead, "Watch bounty hunter, I'm going to give you a display on why
you shouldn't involve these primitive beings into our business."

Tony watched in horror as Klipto Thas exploded pieces of Amy's brain matter across the floor. He screamed Amy's name as she fell backwards and the light vanished from her eyes.

Klipto glanced to Amy's body with a blank expression, "too bad, she would've got me a lot of money."

"You bastard!" Tony screamed.

Klipto chuckled, "you seem to grow too close to humans, remember they don't live as long as we do."

Tony took deep breaths, he knew Amy would be fine, but he couldn't afford Klipto to figure that out. "I'll make you pay for this!"

He snorted, "Good luck with that." Klipto slapped the wall, leaving an object behind. It was about the size of a shoe box and it had a timer, starting at three hours. He pressed a button and the numbers began to count down.

Tony froze; a bomb.

Klipto walked out of the room, "we're moving out! Pack and seal our records to my base in London! Leave no evidence behind!"

As he closed the door, aliens that were still alive ran through the building; packing up weapons, hover boards and computers. They continued by destroying bodies of fallen terrestrials, bleaching rooms and hallways that were covered in various colors of blood, and setting up explosives throughout the building.

Tony could do nothing but wait for Amy to heal, his only wish was for her to wake up before the clock hit zero.

Two hours passed and Tony was pacing around the force field, he couldn't do much without his metal wristband. He looked to the clock, they only had hour left. He glanced to Amy; her blood had dried and turned a shade of deep brown. Tony had seen this before with Alfred. When his blood or a piece of flesh had been torn from his body, the pieces would turn brown and become dirt.

The bits of Amy's brain matter were losing its pink color along with the white scalp and blond hair. The flesh transformed into a dark shade of earthly brown and crumbled into a pile of soil. Thirty minutes passed and Amy's body began to heal; regenerating bones and organs, rebuilding muscle and skin tissue, and growing new locks of hair. The hole in her gut had completely sealed and her skull was back to its originally state.

Twenty minutes passed and Tony grew desperate. "Amy, wake up! I know you can survive an explosion but I can't!" He banged his fists on the force field, "Wake up! Wake up!"

She blinked and moved on to her side, "five more minutes," she grumbled sleepily.

"I've waited for you for over two fucking hours! Get up!"

She moaned as she sat up, "why are you yelling?" She messaged her temples.
"Sorry for yelling," he said in a sweet tone before his voice rose in harshness. "But we only have ten minutes before this place goes ka-boom!"

She looked at him with worried eyes, "What?!" She rose to her feet and looked to the clock, "why is that counting down?"

"Oh, it's the count down to the big summer blow out sale at Macy's." He gave her a thumb's up, and then a thumb's down, "it's a bomb! Now get me out of here!"

"How?!"

"The control panel; right on the wall," Tony pointed to the computer. It was half the size of a smart phone and it displayed its screen as a hologram.

Amy tapped her fingers over the screen. "I can't understand this."

"Come on! You've worked with holograms before!"

"They're still a new thing; only skype and my Galaxy Infinity hold the programs. They're too new to work smoothly. I still have to update the programs every month!"

Tony sighed, he knew yelling at her wouldn't work. "Amy, calm down! Just think of this as a math question."

"Math?! How does math have anything to do with this?!"

"Okay, wrong choice of words," he sighed once again, "type in the code to let me go."

"How?! This thing's written in some alien language!"

"Just listen to me and do what I say," Tony exclaimed as he instructed Amy to type certain holographic keys.

When she pressed enter, nothing happened. "What the-" before Amy could curse the bomb beeped and the time was cut in half, they had less than five minutes.

"Oh fuck," Tony and Amy swore in sync.

"Maybe I did something wrong," she turned back to the screen.

Tony shook his head, "you didn't; it must be another code."

"Then tell me!"

"Amy there could be millions of codes and if that clock is programmed to cut the time in half every time you mess up. Then we don't have that many chances."

Amy cursed and rubbed her eyes. She started panting and Tony noticed that her eyes were beginning to water. He inhaled through his nose, "go."

"What?"

"You heard me, go! Go back to the nations, tell them what you know! You all might be the only chance those kids have!"

"But would they believe me?!"
Tony tensed, remembering his time with two other nations. No matter how many times Alfred told Arthur that Tony was an alien, he never believed him. Toris may have played along with him but he never really took him seriously. Tony punched the force field in frustration, "You have to try."

"But-

"Don't argue with me! Get out now!"

"I'm not leaving you!"

"You have to!"

Amy clutched her fists and turned to the computer.

"No, Amy, don't-"

She slammed her fist through the computer. The screen and the force field disappeared as the bomb beeped and the time was once again cut in half. They had two minutes and thirty seconds.

Tony stared at Amy in awe as she grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the room. They ran through the halls only to find more bombs counting down. They were on the fifth floor of the building and no matter how fast they ran; they wouldn't be able to make it out in less than two minutes.

They reached the fourth floor and Amy stopped to watch the clock hit to its last minute. "We're not gonna make it like this."

"Use the hover board," Tony exclaimed.

"Yeah about that," she sighed, "it kinda exploded."

The clock had reached forty seconds and Amy lifted Tony to her chest. "What are you doing?!!" he exclaimed.

"The only way out of here is through that window," she took a few steps back and prepared herself to sprint towards the window.

"But we're on the fourth floor!"

"Yeah, I figured you can use me as a pillow." She pushed herself off the wall as Tony screamed like girl and she leaped out of window. Glass shattered as they fell through the air and the bombs exploded behind them.

The force of the explosion sent them flying. Amy covered her arms protectively over Tony's head and held him close. Like she said, she used her back as a cushion. They crashed to the ground and bounced twice till they stopped.

Tony pushed himself up and rubbed his head, he may not have ears but he could still hear the ringing. He groaned and looked to Amy; she was covered in cuts, bruises and her shoulder was dislocated. "Oh Amy, stay with me," he gently lifted her head and felt something warm dripping from his hand.

"We're alive," she asked in a hoarse tone, "how is that possible?"

"You're a nation and you used your body as a shield for me, it does wonders," Tony said as he brushed through her hair lovingly. No matter how old Amy will get, he will always see her as that
sweet little girl he met over thirteen years ago.

"Where are we?" Amy said weakly.

Tony scanned the area and found the faint outline of the Eiffel Tower. It was night and the city was alive with twinkling lights, "we're in Paris."

"Crap... Ludwig's gonna kill me, then the president and then my parents."

Tony chuckled, "who are you more afraid of?"

"D. all of the above," she gave a bloody smile.

Sirens roared in the distance and he asked, "Amy, are you wearing your grandfather's ring?"

She knitted her brows together in confusion, lifted her hand up and hissed in pain as she did. Tony held it softly and carefully pulled the hawk ring off her finger. Her parents were afraid that Amy would flip the house upside down searching for that piece of jewelry, and they were correct. She tore through each room and John had to give the ring to Tony (as Neill), for safe keeping.

During that short period of time, he had placed a small homing clip inside the ring. "Contact ship," he commanded the clip and after a pause a robotic voice said.

"Connection made."

"Lock in on our location," Tony ordered.

"Location, locked. Please stand by."

Barely a second passed as his space craft flew over them, sending down a beam of light to float them into the frisbee shaped craft. Once they were inside, the space craft blended with the sky and zipped away to the island off the coast of France.
I was laid out beside a crystal blue pond in the same forest I had been in my last dream. I was
wearing a violet dress that came to mid-thigh and nothing else. I sat up and groaned as I rubbed the
throbbing pain in my forehead.

Why did my forehead hurt in the first place?

Then my ears ringed as a blaze exploded inside my head. The memory of the large cockroach alien
blasting my skull open came flooding back and I winced.

I died. . . .

The moment I woke up, I was too busy rescuing Neill to really think about it. Then I jumped out of
that window. . . A piercing sting spread from my back, arms and skull. I remembered Neill holding
me, then asking for Grandpa's ring and then. . . I saw the light.

I gulped and wrapped my arms around myself, "am I truly dead this time?" I whispered.

A soft laugh resounded and I looked up to see the same dark haired beauty from my last dream.
"You're not dead, simply resting," she bent down and brushed her hand gently over me cheek. "Oh,
you look so much like him, but you really do remind me move of myself than him."

"Who are you?" I asked in a small voice.

She smiled, "I'm only a concerned grandmother, that's all."

"G-grandmother? Are you-"

"I am North, well that is what the empires and the tribes of the Central and the South called me
before some European man named our continents the Americas."

"You're America before the Europeans came?"

"I was still America after the Europeans, not for very long, but still."

"Wow. So that makes you Alfred's mother right?"

She nodded.

"And that makes you my grandmother."

Her smile widened, "yes."

I gave her a tiny smile in return and we were silent for a minute till I asked: "So why are you here?"

"I'm sorry for how I acted the last time," her voice was filled with genuine apology. "I was just
frustrated; I've been trying to contact you for months now."

"Why?"

Her dark eyes grew sad. "To warn you; a powerful spirit is after you."

I knitted my brows together in confusion, "For what? I didn't do anything!"
"You're America. America has always been desirable land to humans, nations and spirits alike. This spirit is gathering an army of vapors to find you."

"Vapors?"

"Beings that live in the Abyss of the Spirit World, they thrive off hate and anger and devour any light they can find."

"They sound pleasant," I said sarcastically.

She chuckled lightly as she shook her head, "Oh Amy, they are not. They eat and eat and they are never filled. They want; they take and give nothing back but hate."

"You guys sure like to rhyme don't you?"

She hooked her arms around me and pulled me into a motherly embrace. "I know that you're scared, but I am here."

She skin smelled like the earth and wildflowers and her hair carried the texture of silk. She rubbed my back and the tension in my shoulders released.

"Amy you must be careful, spirits are tricksters by nature," she lifted my chin up to face her. "We take any form we desire being man," in a blink of an eye, light surrounded her as her features hardened and her body became lean and muscular. "Child," her voice was deep but it quickly lowered as she turned herself into a small boy. "Elder," she rapidly grew into an old woman, and finally into the form of a white wolf, "or animal."

I leaned back, "you're the wolf from Austria's house."

She nodded again and turned back into her female form, "as you can see, spirits are shapeshifters. You can't trust anyone."

"Well, I got my family, friends and the nations-"

Her eyes narrowed in annoyance, "Amy, they look at you like they looked at me. They want to possess you. Yes, they'll protect you from this spirit but only so they can have you. You cannot trust them," her dark eyes turned gold, "You can't trust anyone."

My eyes shot opened as a massive light shined above me. I groaned and sat up, I was sitting on a metal table and I was wearing a new set of clothes. My white shirt had a round neckline, had no sleeves, and was styled like a Greek tunic. The thing was it wouldn't be counted as a dress for the length stopped right under my ass. Well I couldn't say that, most girls would wear this as a dress. I wore a new pair of skinny jeans and a small brown woven belt around my waist, which matched the combat boots I had brought from that boutique earlier that day.

I messaged my temples; it's been months since I experienced a dream like that. I had just met Alfred's mother and that was cool but supposedly there was a whole new threat to deal with and I had no idea how to handle it. Except for the warning; don't trust anyone. Why was it that whenever I discover something new, it only adds on to the pile of drama I called a life?

I sighed heavily as images of aliens being killed by my hand engulfed my thoughts. I panted as I covered my face with my hands and placed my elbows in my lap. The memories wouldn't stop.
Aliens of different shapes and sizes flashed through my mind one after the other, each one a bloody moment where I took their lives. I tried to shut away the thoughts by forcing my eyes closed but it only increased the intensity of the images.

The blood of various colors splattering over my clothes, the walls and the floors.

The bodies of terrestrials falling to the ground as their lives vanished from their eyes.

And me, above them with the Aberration's tooth in one hand and laser gun in the other. My eyes cold and my body numb.

I swallowed back a sob, I took life so easily, it wasn't like me, or was it? The nations didn't seem to be fazed by taking life. Arthur had cut off Francis's head. Ivan tortured Toris and several other nations and Gilbert had waged war against Toris and Feliks so of course they must have killed people.

*Was this natural for me?*

*Was this what nations do?*

*Kill?!*

A hand brushed over my head and I jumped. Neill stepped back, his hands up in surrender, "whoa, it's okay, it's okay." He was back in his human form and he looked worried. "Are you alright?" he asked uncertainly.

I shook my head, "Neill," I inhaled, "am I a monster?"

"What?!" he knitted his eyebrows together in confusion. "No. Why would you ask a question like that?"

"Because I-because I," my vision blurred with tears, "I killed without a second thought," I choked out. "I don't know how I could! It just started when that floating alien head wanted to eat me and I just lost it. But it wasn't like any other time I lost my temper, I just kept stabbing him." I sobbed, "over and over again, I didn't stop, even when he begged. I just kept stabbing," my voice was high and tears were flowing down my cheeks. "Then when I went into that hall way and saw those aliens, it was like I-I turned off and became something entirely different."

Neill sat beside me and pulled me into the nook of his shoulder. I continued in a whimper, "I threatened that snail man but I would never have gone through with it! I was still me! I mean I wasn't turned off-" I cried out in frustration and guilt. "God, I just don't know how to explain it."

He remained quiet and rubbed my back, "I know, I know." He sighed, "Alfred told me about this once."

I rose and wiped my cheeks, giving him my full attention. He squeezed my shoulder before he pulled his hand away and stared ahead. "It was about a year or two after I first came to Earth; I was hunting down an alien that was eating human prostitutes. Turns out humans are a delicacy in some galaxies," I winced and he continued, "Alfred had cornered the alien before I did, but I was able to make it in right after the alien tried to take a bite out of him. I just stood there, in fear as he tore that alien apart. He beat it till his hands were covered in its blood and the alien laid dead at his feet.

"He had such a rage, but yet his eyes were cold, he neither enjoyed it nor hated it. He simply fought. It surprised me, before then he was always so happy." He paused for a moment, with a faraway look in his eyes. "But he told me when a nation felt like their life was threatened they can push aside their
human emotions to fight. He described it the way you did; a switch would go off in his head and he would fight and kill without any hesitance. It's a survivor's instinct that all nations possess."

We were silent till I snorted, "I'm just like them, aren't I," I said bitterly.

"Amy," he squeezed my hand gently, "you fought to save my life. This warrior mode you have is made to protect you and the people you care about. But you can't rely on it. That's why you need to train with the nations; you need to know how to fight. For if you place all your faith on that instinct you could lose yourself in the process."

I nodded as he released my hand and walked over to panel of buttons and a hologram screen. I scanned the area; it was a futuristic room with computer panels around the walls, and a pod that seemed to be used for sleeping. "Where are we?"

"My space craft," Neill answered as he typed on the screen. "It may be small but it's fast."

"I thought you lost your wristband."

"Spares," he tapped at his arm, "I got tons of these."

"Why are you in your human form? We're in your space ship, why do you need to hide?"

Neill turned away from the screen to look at me, "You don't seem to like my alien form."

"That was only because I was surprised to find that my tutor was an alien and I should have realized, it explains so much." He gave a small laugh and I proclaimed, "I don't want you to hide from me."

He smiled and typed on his wristband, his disguise flickered as his alien form appeared. I hopped off the table and sat beside him in the passenger seat. I stared at him, "You know, you're actually kinda cute, like a little anime chibi thing."

He laughed, it was high and girly but he was still Neill.

"So what's the plan?" I asked, "We do have a plan right?"

He sighed, "I sent out a message for back-up but they won't be able to reach Earth in time."

"What do you mean? You're aliens! You mastered space travel; don't you have warp speed or something?"

He blinked, "you've been watching too much Star Trek."

I narrowed my eyes at him, "okay then, we need to gather the nations. They might want to bite my head off but once we explain about you and the kidnapping aliens they'll help us."

"They might not believe you."

"How could they not! I have you and a space ship to prove it."

He sighed, "Amy I've met two other nations before and they didn't believe that I was an alien."

I gave him a look, "Who?"

"The countries of Britain and Lithuania; no matter how much Alfred told Arthur I was an alien, he never believed us."
"What did he think you were?"

"Some kind of mythical creature," he proclaimed.

"He believes in fairies and unicorns, but he doesn't believe in aliens?!"

Neill shrugged his shoulders, "go figure right."

"What about Toris?"

"He played along but he never took us seriously."

"But-but we have this space ship, your wristband and laser guns, this has to be enough to prove that you're real."

"Do you really want to go back and try to explain this to them? Amy, they'll either going to argue with you or argue with each other about believing you; and we don't have the time. The auction is being held tonight at midnight." He tapped at the hologram clock, "it's after noon; we have less than twelve hours to rescue those kids. Do you think that's enough time to gather the nations and try and convince them that aliens exist?"

My thoughts went back to the chaos of the meeting we had back at my school's auditorium. I groaned, "We're screwed."

"Not entirely," he typed his screen away to reveal a scene of the English country side. Massive gray boulders stood in a broken circle; some were vertical with horizontal stones lying on top of them. Other large rocks were scattered around the area.

"Are we at Stonehenge?" I asked.

"Yes, it's the perfect place for you to contact the spirits."

My eyes widened, "you know about the spirits?"

He nodded, "I've met several through my years but they don't like me."

"Why?"

"Because I'm an alien; half of them want me off this planet while the other half wants to kill me. Same goes for any other alien they meet. Spirits are protectors of this planet and they can't stand us."

"And you want me to talk to them? I don't know how to contact them, they usually find me. Besides, what if they try to kill you?"

"It's a risk I'm willing to take," he said, "I also believe you can persuade them not to kill me."

I leaned against my seat, "we're so screwed."

Dusk came as the last tour bus of the day drove down the dirt road, Neill and I climbed out of the recently cloaked space ship. "So what do we do? Set up torches around the area? Chant in an ancient language?"

"I was thinking you would just call out to them."
"Fine, take all the fun out of it." I walked to the center of Stonehenge. Neill was in his human form as he followed and sat on one of the rocks. I took a deep breath and spoke to the violet sky as the sun sets. "Um hi, spirits, um this is Amy Hawkfeather a.k.a. America. Uh, listen we're in a bit of a jam and we need your help. If you could, I don't know send some people to fight along with us that would be nice." I was met with the sound of crickets, "please?"

"Don't you know any spirits?" Neill asked.

"Don't you?" I snapped.

"Like I said, most wanted to kill me," he exclaimed, "but there is Alfred."

"Wait, you know about the whole cycle of nations and spirits?"

He nodded, "Alfred told me about it after I spent a year looking for him after 9/11."

"Hold on, you mean he took time out of his busy spirit schedule to talk to you but not the nations. Does he not realize how fucked up they were when he so-called died."

"I think it's a rule, none of the former nations can speak to the current."

"Bullshit." Irritation was growing as I shouted at the sky, "Alfred, get your ass down here!" I was met with crickets once again and I screamed, "Don't ignore me you asshole!"

"Amy, be respectful, that's your father-"

"He's not my father! Technically the sky is my father and a star is my mother."

He gave me a confused look, "huh?"

"Oh he didn't tell you about the birds and the bees; well for us it's called the stars and the sky. And Alfred didn't tell me about it, oh no he left that job for a shaman chief with a magickal campfire. That reminds me, where are you old man! The least you can do is talk to me! Oh, wait and there's Nina but she seems to be ignoring me as will! What the hell do I have to do to get your attention?!"

"Well for one you can shut up and turn around," a new male voice spoke from behind.

"Clovis, be nice," a female voice said as a smack of an arm resounded in the air.

I spun to find two young adults sitting on top of a vertical standing boulder. The young man looked like he was about the age of nineteen or twenty. He had light aqua eyes and blond hair that was cut up in layers; the longest layer was tied in a low ponytail. He was dressed in a black graphic t-shirt that displayed a French band's logo, a pair of tight red skinny jeans and black converses.

The young woman was about a year or two older, she had long brown hair and green eyes. She wore a bright green peasant skirt with a tanned tank top and brown sandals. She had a dazzling smile and wore silver Celtic knot rings around her pinky and index fingers on her left hand. A radiant emerald ring on her right hand and a gold necklace with a tree pendant laid at the center of her collar bone.

"I'm gonna take a wild guess here and say you two are spirits," I proclaimed.

The man clapped slowly, "and you would correct," he said sarcastically; his accent seemed to be a mix of French, German, and Latin.

The woman rolled her eyes, "don't mind him; he's in a foul mood." Her accent was English but it
"Sounded old.

"’Foul mood’, that doesn’t even scratch at the surface. Here she is, practically ordering us to help her when the last spirit that decided to lend a hand got dragged in to the Abyss."

"The last spirit," I whispered to myself till I figured out what he meant. "You mean Nina?"

"Oh look she remembers her name. Didn't you ever wonder what happened to your dear friend Nina? Of course you didn't, you were too busy with shopping and boys to give a damn. Like every other typical teenage girl."

I narrowed my eyes at him, "I have a half of mind to throw one of these boulders at you."

"Bring it on Blondie," his voice became eerily as his eyes turned from aqua to gold, "I'll show you the true power of a spirit."

The woman shoved him off the rock and fell to the ground with a hard thud. "What was that for?!" he shouted at her.

She jumped off and landed with grace, "you were being an ass." She turned to me and smiled, "I'm sorry for Clovis," she offered her hand, "I'm Kaelee."

"Amy," I took her hand and shook it.

She smiled but that smile faded when she glanced to Neill.

Clovis followed her eyes and glared at him, "you have some nerve to show your face, alien."

"I come in peace," Neill gave a cheerful smile.

In a blink of an eye Clovis rose to his feet and tackled Neill to the ground. I grabbed the spirit by the shoulder and threw him so his back would collide into a boulder. "Touch him again and you'll have my foot up your ass," I threatened.

Clovis growled as Kaelee lifted a hand at him, "enough."

"But-

"I said enough," she commanded.

He grumbled as he sat down with his arms cross. Kaelee turned her attention back to us, "I'm terribly sorry Amy but their kind is not welcomed here."

"Well he's with me so deal with it," I remarked.

Kaelee's eyebrows rose slightly but then she gave a knowing smile, "You are so much like him. So why have you called us?"

"We need your help," I said quickly, "children are being kidnapped by alien outlaws and are going to be sold to other aliens across the galaxies. Neill here is a bounty hunter and I'm a nation but we can't go up against all of them by ourselves."

Kaelee and Clovis remained quiet as they glanced to one another, Kaelee carried a look filled with worry and Clovis carried one of contained rage.

"Nina told me once that spirits like to be friends with kids and Neill said that spirits are protectors so
it would make sense that you all would join us right?"

"How the hell did we not hear about this?!” Clovis shouted at Kaelee.

"Have you forgotten what is happening?" Kaelee narrowed her eyes at him. "The Spirit World is in trouble, all of our man power has been put into keeping the balance. Not many of us could venture out into the earth plane and read the newspaper."

I lifted a brow at her, "you must've been away for long time because no one reads the paper anymore."

Clovis snapped, "Can't you see we're having a conversation."

Kaelee smacked him behind the head, "Clovis, focus. If aliens have been able to get under our radar then clearly they think we have been declawed."

"Not entirely," Neill proclaimed, "the stories of your kind nearly destroying the Daevlaions have stuck fear in the hearts of aliens for thousands of years."

"Yet we have outlaws on Earth," Clovis narrowed his eye at him in annoyance.

"Because they're desperate they know that the police force wouldn't follow them. That's why they send out bounty hunters, the less number of aliens that show up in a group the less likely chance you all will explode our planets."

"Okay back up," I exclaimed, "Are you guys saying aliens have been showing up since ancient times?" My eyes widened, "Did they build the pyramids?"

"Of course not," Kaelee proclaimed, "we are the ones that helped the humans."

"Amy, how familiar are you with the Bible?" Neill asked.

"Uh, not much," I admitted

"You do know the tale of Lucifer's fall?"

"From Supernatural."

Neill sighed but said, "Okay I guess that works. You see the battle between angles and demons are true but not the way you think. The demons were actually an alien race known as the Daevlaions. They tried to colonized Earth and kill off the humans but the spirits," he gestured to Kaelee and Clovis, "fought back. They took the form of humans but added wings so humans would see them as celestial beings. They then waged a war with the aliens and won by threatening the home planet."

"So angels and demons were actually spirits and aliens. The Christians ain't gonna like that. Wait, how can spirits even threaten another planet?"

"We are star children," Kaelee said as her eyes shined gold for a slight second before fading back to green. "We can harness power from our mother star and set off an explosion of energy from our bodies."

"Also known as a super nova," Clovis explained, "stars exist all over the universe, we can easily track their home planet and make it go boom."

"Of course that power is dangerous, for if we use it when we are weak we could cause our mother star to go super nova before it's time. A child cannot live without its mother," Kaelee added.
"But stars would be next to those planets, wouldn't they fight back?" I asked.

"All stars throughout the universe give birth to spirits and the Spirit World is our home and our home cannot exist without the earth plane. We live in a continuous cycle; the Spirit World and Earth are forever entertained, meaning spirits and humans need each other to survive. Humans give off emotions such as faith, hope, love; these emotions feed the Spirit World and so feed us. The Spirit World in turn gives life to nature."

"Can't say that all humans follow the code of hippies," I proclaimed.

She nodded, "of course humans also give off anger, rage, and hate and all that is thrown into the Abyss. All worlds have a dark side, even ours."

"And we have to keep the balance in our world in check, if not Earth will suffer," Clovis added.

"From what? Earthquakes? Floods? The dead rising and eating the living?" I joked.

"Yes, yes and possibly," he said seriously.

Neill chuckled, "Looks like a zombie apocalypse is in your future."

"Shut up Neill," I said through gritted teeth.

Kaelee clapped her hands, "I believe we have a more pressing manner at hand." With a flick of her wrist a bright glowing sparrow was formed, she whispered into its ear and threw it up into the air. It flapped straight up into the sky and disappeared into the stars.

"You said you couldn't go up against them by yourselves," she smiled as fairies appeared behind her and flew in all directions. Large black bears and massive gray wolves stepped out from behind boulders. Dragons, griffins, and birds soared from above as trolls and goblins jumped from stone to stone. People of different ages that ranged from the elderly to children walked over the hill, gathering around with the animals and mythical creatures.

"Will this be enough," Kaelee asked with a mischievous smile.
Chapter 10

The Turks Shipyard was completely deserted. The boatyard was stretched along the River Medway and it contained four other white buildings attached to the main. This massive shipyard had high ceilings and held cargo crates and small boats. The street lights gave a soft glow and all the buildings were lit with fluorescent lightening. The parking lot was filled with space crafts of different sizes and colors. Terrestrial creatures stepped out of the platforms of their ships and walked towards the main structure. Some species I knew, Salkens, Duplins, Aberrations and Ettercaps. While most were aliens that I only caught split second glances of when I was in that building in Paris.

I stood on the roof, watching the aliens walk in. The plan was for some spirits to venture and blend into the crowd while the rest stood behind me. A small blue skinned fairy flew from the crowd and soared to Kaelee, "the children are locked in the cargo boxes; they are separated by country."

"How do you know this?" she asked.

"They were labeled," the fairy answered.

I dug my nails into my palms, labeled like cattle.

Neill flew over on a hover board; he decided to stay in his human form so the spirits wouldn't mistake him with the others. "I've set up the dome," he threw a metal device to Clovis. "When they try to escape, press the button and a force field will cover this entire area."

Clovis grinned evilly, "They're gonna be sitting ducks for us."

"Yes, but please, control yourselves; I need them alive for arrest."

The spirits grew silent and Kaelee proclaimed, "We'll try but we can't keep any promises."

"At least keep Klipto Thas alive."

"The ugly cockroach creature," the blue fairy exclaimed.

"Yes, he's the ring leader of this entire project."

Kaelee agreed, "We won't kill him."

"It's five minutes till midnight," Clovis proclaimed.

Kaelee nodded and placed her hand on my shoulder and the other on Neill's. "You two ready?"

We told her yes and she spoke in an ancient language, this spell made our bodies see-through and floated us down through the ceiling. We were like ghosts as we lowered down into the crowd of aliens. No one could see us or hear us.

Kaelee stopped us in the center of the crowd about six or seven feet away from the stage. I took deep breaths as I clutch the metal rod to my chest. This rod was the length and width of a cane and with a press of a button, it sparked with electrical currents. It was like pole taser. I asked Neill if there were lightsabers, he said no and that it was invention of the human imagination. I was pretty disappointed; I could've been real live Jedi.

Five minutes seemed to drag on for hours, till Neill checked his wristband, "it's time."
Klipto Thas stepped onto the stage, "Welcome, welcome fellow terrestrials. I'm so happy that all of you could make in for our auction. We have a wonderful section of human children, some with the darkest of skin tones that can blend into the emptiness of space. Others with bright colored eyes and hair, a rare section of twins that are mirror images of each other and of course there's a selection of children with amazing talents." With flick of his fingers, a crane clutched on to a cargo crate and placed it slowly behind him. "Shall we begin?"

The crowd clapped and cheered as Kaelee recited a spell and called forth tree roots to spring from the ground. The roots wrapped themselves around the necks of five aliens, hauled them into the air, snapped their necks and tossed their bodies aside. That was the cue for the spirits to come out of hiding.

Spirits took the forms of aliens while others were invisible by the side lines. The ones that were aliens gave a soft glow of golden light so other spirits wouldn't attack them. The invisible ones took forms ranging from massive predatory animals to mythical creatures. Some we're human and battled against aliens either with magick or their bare hands.

The extraterrestrials were taken by surprise but they were ready to hit with a counter attack. They shot back with laser guns and had blasted heads and limbs off, but it was no use. The spirits would regenerate instantly after being shot. These terrestrial beings were no match against them. The spirits defied the laws of nature; they could become an animal, making them as big as giants. As trolls, goblins and ogres they would summon weapons out of thin air and crush skulls with a single collision. Most cast spells of the elements to kill aliens or trap them under ground; keeping their promise to leave some alive for Neill.

I tasered an alien in the gut and caught a side-way view of a group running out of the building. I grinned to myself; they were in for quite a surprise.

Clovis perked up when he heard the cries of battle rumbling from the building. He smiled like a child on Christmas morning. "Here they come," he shouted to his small army and turned to face the ground as aliens ran out the door. He pressed the button and just as the bounty hunter said, the force field went up like a dome. No one could get in, no one could get out.

Clovis summoned a claymore and lifted it up into the air, "Charge!"

Spirits leaped off the roof, most of the fairies changed into massive dragons and landed on the space ships. They spat out fire to keep the fleeing aliens away from their ships. Two that were in the shape of average humans grew into twenty foot giants. Their skin took on the color of silver as their hair turned light blue. They were now frost giants, a popular giant in folk lore. They stomped on terrestrials and blew cold air to freeze any survivors.

Clovis jumped to stand on a giant's shoulder, "hey now, leave some for the rest of us." He slid down the giant's arm and slit the throat of an over-sized gecko. It's been too long since he had tasted the air of battle. He almost wished that these aliens were more of a challenge to allow the battle to rage on.

As if the fates answered his prayer, an eight foot tall humanoid being stepped out to face him. It was male with six arms, pointed ears, green skin and glowing red eyes with no pupils. The alien roared and Clovis smirked, "I'll make it a fair fight. I won't grow myself to your height and I won't use any magick."

The creature threw three fists at him but he dodged each one and stepped towards the alien. He swung his blade and sliced off its head, red blood rained as the body fell to its knees and collapsed to the ground.
Clovis sighed, "I give you a handicap and you still lost." He spun to face a group of frightened aliens, "whose next?"

Aliens had tried to form a protective circle, shooting at us from behind their hover boards. Trolls and ogres ran towards them, trying to break the formation but the laser blasts would overwhelm them. Their limbs, torsos and heads would be made into Swiss cheese. They flew back and landed at Kaelee's feet. They were healing rapidly but they were hesitant on jumping back into the fight.

"We need to break their formation," a ten foot tall, brown skinned ogre exclaimed.

"We can go head on again, have more guys in the back this time," I proclaimed.

The ogre glowed, "We're not your shields! We may heal instantly but it still hurts!"

"Thomas," Kaelee said, "if you would be a dear and grab one of those boats?"

The ogre's eyes glanced to one of the blue and orange ships. It was about twenty feet long and fifteen feet wide. Thomas gave a yellowed toothy grin, "Of course." He stomped with his massive feet and used his defined muscles to lift the boat over his head and aimed. "Heads up!"

I covered my head with my arms and watched with amazement as Thomas flung the ship effortlessly through the air. The boat crashed into the hover boards, even squashed a Salken. Kaelee waved her hands as the wind swirled around her and blew the aliens into the air. With flicks of her fingers, she forced the aliens to collide into one another and then finally scattered them throughout the room.

I should've been paying attention to my surroundings instead of watching the show. It left me open for an attack. A creature clawed me in the face, sending me to the ground. Once my vision cleared, I looked up to find Nyla standing over me. She screeched a battle cry and threw another punch. I dodged it by rolling onto my side and jumping to my feet, "someone woke up on the wrong side of the bird's nest."

"You don't seem to heal as quickly as the others," she remarked.

I touched my cheek, the claw marks were slowly fading away. "Yeah, but still it helps when I have to deal with ugly bitches like you."

She slammed another punch into my gut, "you made a mistake of living me alive."

I gritted my teeth together, "Don't worry; I won't make the same mistake again." I bent down and tripped her with a sweep of my leg. She caught herself and swung her foot. I snatched it in mid-air and swung her over my head and slammed her against the floor.

She groaned, "W-what are you?"

"Hm, good question," I jerked her up by the arm and smashed my fist into her face. I repeated this till she was dazed and lost the will to fight back. I dropped her, "I'll get back to you on that."

I snatched the taser rod from the floor and aimed it at a lizard creature, "care to dance?"

It dropped its gun, "I surrender."

"Smart." I tasered it in the chest and it shook violently as it fell. "Now just you wait, Neill will be making his rounds to slap on a new pair of handcuffs on ya."
I scanned the area, there may be more aliens but the spirits had the upper hand. Most were being killed but some were captured in cages made out of stone and metal. Neill rode around on his board and placed metal collars, cuffs and shackles on each apprehended terrestrial, but he was missing the most important one. I craned my neck up to find Klipto making his escape through the cargo crates. I ground my teeth together in rage and chased him through the maze.

He cuts around the corner and I sprinted after him, he slid to a stop when he was met with a dead end. "Nowhere to run," I proclaimed as I took a step towards him.

His eyes widened as he hissed, "How are you alive?! I killed you!"

I shrugged my shoulders as I set the taser rod at full charge, "clearly you didn't."

He looked wildly to his surroundings and forced opened a crate. He pulled out a small Asian boy and used him as a shield. "Come any closer and I'll blast this boy's head off," the boy was about nine or ten years old. He had black hair, dark eyes and pale skin; he wore a white shirt and dark pants, clearly slave apparel. He looked healthy and clean, but he was scared out of his mind.

"Drop your weapon," Klipto ordered and I tossed aside the rod. He smiled (I think.), "Now call off the force field! You want the kids alive right? I'll leave them and be on my way."

I glanced to the boy in his arms, he was weeping in what I thought was Japanese. I sighed and tried to remember the few words that Heisuke had taught me. "I'n da yo," this phase meant 'it's okay', well I hoped that's what it meant. "I'n da yo," I repeated.

The boy stared at me and swallowed back his cries. Klipto glanced to the boy and back to me, "what the hell did you say to him?!

He doesn't know Japanese, this could be our chance. I bit my inner cheek and found Clovis on top of a crate on my right side. He held a finger to his lips and an idea came to mind. "Kare o kamu! Kare o kamu!" I shouted.

The boy nodded and bit Klipto. I was trying to say you kick him, but that works too. Klipto hissed in pain as I shouted, "Clovis!"

He leaped off the crate, shifted into a tiger and tackled him to the floor. Klipto freed the boy and I dashed to grab him. "You okay? You okay?" I asked as I snatched the laser gun from the floor. The boy nodded as I pushed him behind me and aimed the gun at Klipto's face.

Clovis growled and slowly backed off him. I wielded the gun closer to his face, "on your knees," I exclaimed. Klipto hissed but followed my orders. I took a deep breath as the boy curled his fists into the fabric of my shirt. I glanced to him; he was trembling and hiding his face into the small of my back. He may have had no physical wounds but it didn't mean he wasn't in pain. I glared at Klipto; this bastard had put innocent children through hell and I wasn't about to let him get away with it.

I pistol whipped him in the face, "did you enjoy taking kids from their homes in the dead of night?" I smacked him again, "Did you enjoy labeling them and locking them away like damn animals?!" I kicked him in the gut, my anger was rising, "did you enjoy shooting my brains out?!" I blasted one of his four hands off. He howled in agony and lifted the gun to his head, "let's see how you like it!"

"Amy, stop!" Neill yelled from behind.

I didn't bother to face him; I just held the gun closer to Klipto's forehead. "Amy please," Neill begged, "I need him alive. This isn't the first time he has done this! He has taken and sold thousands of extraterrestrial children across the universe, I need to know where they are and he's my only
I inhaled through my nose as my hand began to shake. Neill placed his hand on my shoulder, "just put the gun down," he whispered.

"You head him," Klipto chuckled, "besides you don't have guts to do it."

I gritted my teeth and shot off an arm, he screamed as I handed the gun to Neill. "Hurry up and arrest him before I shoot his goddamned brains out."

Neill sighed in relief, "you got it." He spoke into his wristband and the metal collar popped out. It wrapped around his neck as cuffs followed and locked on his now three arms. Shackles were placed on his ankles as the metal bands were then connected by bright yellow electrical currents. "Klipto Thas, you are under arrest for selling of intelligent live, hosting an illegal auction, possession of firearms without proper paper work, and child endangerment." He took Klipto away and I turned to the boy who was still hanging on by my shirt.

" índa yo," I said as I ruffled his hair and lifted him up. He wrapped his arms around my neck and I carried him from out of the maze. "What about the other kids?" I asked Clovis as he turned back to his human form.

"It would be a zoo, don't worry we're erasing their memories as we speak," he gestured to the fairies as they glided into each crate. "It's for the best," he proclaimed.

"Agreed," I sighed as a radiant purple fairy fluttered over to the boy. He flinched and I soothed him, "índa yo." He nodded and allowed the fairy to touch his forehead. A minute passed as his eyes closed and he collapsed into my arms. He was breathing softly and he looked peaceful.

Clovis and I walked out of the building where the spirits were separating aliens. The dead were thrown into a pile as the others were cuffed and lined up in front of Neill. He lifted his band to his face, "contact headquarters in the Ophelia district." After a minute a humanoid female was displayed on a hologram screen. She had a cat head with brown fur all over her human-like body, her eyes were bright green and she had a pixie cut hair style that blended into her fur. She even wore a spandex uniform.

"Oh Mykrutyszoni," the cat woman smiled, "haven't heard from you in a while."

"Hey there Kitty," he greeted with a smile.

"Don't call me that," she hissed.

"Yes, yes," he grew serious, "I've captured Klipto Thas and several other outlaws, prepare for transport."

She nodded as she typed on a computer, "Transport ready."

Neill held up his wristband and a blue light beamed out and scanned the cuffed aliens. The scan lasted for two minutes till in the light shined even brighter and the aliens were gone in a flash. Neill then moved along to the space crafts and transported them to headquarters.

I laid the boy down in front the Turks Boatyard sign as Kaelee created a blanket out of thin air and covered the boy. "Thanks," I said as I glanced to the pile of dead aliens, "what are we gonna do about them?"

Her hands burst into flames, "I got an idea." She stepped forward and shot out her flames into the
pale. Other spirits followed her lead and summoned a blaze to torch the terrestrials. The inferno soared into the sky, frying the bodies till nothing was left but ashes. As the blaze died, Kaelee called out for a gust of wind and scattered the remains into the river.

"Alright, I've called the police, they're on their way," Clovis proclaimed. "Let's move out!"

The spirits transformed into birds and leaped into the air. They dispersed and flew into different directions. I was hesitant to leave the boy and the other children behind till Neill patted my back. "We can wait on the roof."

I nodded as Kaelee fixed the broken windows and moved the shattered ship back to its place in one piece. Once everything was back to normal, I hopped on the hover board behind Neill and we soared to the roof. Clovis and Kaelee followed and waited with us till the lights of the sirens could be seen in the distance.

"Come on Kaelee, we need to go," Clovis said as he helped Kaelee to her feet.

"Wait," I called out and they turned to face me. "Thank you, for everything."

"Yeah, yeah," Clovis exclaimed, "you wouldn't have been able to pull this off without us. We already knew that."

Kaelee smacked him and faced me with a concerned look, "Take care of yourself, okay."

I gave her a carefree smile, "I'll be fine."

Kaelee sighed but smiled as she and Clovis vanished.

I yawned and I bit into my English crumpet. Neill and I sat in a quaint little café in downtown London, watching the seven o'clock morning news. The anchorwoman announced, "Over three to four thousand children have been discovered at the Turks Shipyard early this morning." The screen cuts to a clip of the boatyard. "The children were stored into shipping crates and we're locked inside for over twelve hours." The police propped open the crate doors and carried each kid one after the other into ambulances or tent areas that was filled with medical supplies.

"So far no injuries or signs of abuse have been reported," The anchorwoman was back on the screen. "But what really has officers baffled is that the children have no memory of being kidnapped. No sign of drugs have been used and no evidence has been found in linking anyone to the crime."

"Because they were aliens," I whispered as I sipped my tea.

Neill chuckled and looked out the window into the cloudy sky. I turned back to TV as children were checked by paramedics and the older children were questioned by police. "Scotland Yard has informed us that they will be working with other government officials from the UN to find the culprits of this world wide trafficking ring."

"Not even Sherlock can solve this mystery," I smirked.

"Sherlock is a fictional character," Neill proclaimed.

"Shut up, you know what I mean."

Summer rain was beginning to fall as we sat in our seats and merely observed as the locals opened
their umbrellas and continued on with their day. Neill sighed, "I have to get you back to the nations."

I sighed along with him, "I know; I'm in so much trouble."

"I have you plugged in the battery back into your phone?"

"Yeah," I mumbled as glanced to my smart phone, which remarkably had survived laser blasts, major fights with terrestrials and a pesky little goblin that thought my phone was a snack. I have to admit when a spirit commits to a role they stick to it till the end. "There are tons of messages from the nations, my parents and from the president."

"Oh my," Neill said as he sipped his tea.

I laid my head on the table, "I'm in a deep pile of shit here."

"But you have to go back."

"I know, I know," I sighed again. "How did Alfred keep all these secrets? Did he just come up with really good excuses?"

"No, he simply played the role of the fool."

I looked at him, "he played the fool?"

"Don't get me wrong he had his blond moments as you would say, but he was able to keep everyone in the dark by making them believe what they already thought they knew."

I raised an eyebrow, "get to the point."

"When people already believe you act a certain way it's hard to change their opinion of you; and Alfred used this to his advantage. He acted like the fool everyone believed he was."

"Oh," I laughed, "The Fool fooled everyone."

"Now," Neill proclaimed, "what role will you play?"

Neill was able to transform his space craft into a car, which was pretty cool and helpful for when he had to drive me back to the manor on Inselstraße Island. He stopped the car and I took a deep breath, "Wish me luck," I said as I climbed out of the car.

"You'll be fine, you may not believe me Amy, but you're a lot like him." Neill smiled and drove down the road, in a blink of an eye it morphed into his space ship and shot up into the morning sky.

I adjusted my clothes, which were recently cleaned and pressed. I had added a new brown crop jacket to the outfit replacing the one that was damaged on Wednesday. I opened the iron gate and walked down the dirt road, rental cars were parked along the driveway and I shook out my jacket nervously. I knocked on the door and smiled big and wide when Gilbert opened the door, "hey Gil, what's up?"

His red eyes widened as he quickly checked behind him, stepped out of the house and closed the door. "Where the fuck have you been?!" he whispered harshly. "West is about to explode!"

"I figured," I opened the door and walked past him. "Are all the G9 nations here?"
Gilbert sighed, "yes and they're pissed."

I grinned, "I'm sure they're not that mad." I sauntered over to the living room where the nations were arguing.

"She hasn't answered any of my calls," Arthur proclaimed, "not even from her parents or the president."

"Even Germany's so-called government agent lost her," Yao remarked. "If we were in my country she would have been captured, gagged and delivered after the first hour she pulls her little disappearing act."

"Oh, Yao I knew you cared," I said sweetly as I stepped into the room.

Eight pairs of eyes snapped up to meet me and I smiled, "Sorry about not answering my phone." I strolled in and sat on a leather chair, "so, what I miss?"

Ludwig rose from his seat, "Is that all you have to say?! You've been gone for nearly forty-eight hours and all you have to say is what I miss!" He paced around the room, "You broke and jumped out of a window, lead my agents through a wild goose chase and shattered a man's knee cap. He'll never be able to work in the field again!"

Guilt crept under my skin, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to kick that hard."

"You didn't mean it; that seems to be your catch phrase." He massaged the bridge of his nose, "All I'm going to ask is why; why did you run off?"

I was silent till: "You want the truth?"

"Yes," he hissed.

"After I lost my temper, I realized," I paused, "I realized that's what I'm going to be doing for the rest of my so-called immortal life. Sitting in a chair, behind a desk, doing paperwork that won't change anything what's so ever. My life will be filled with boring meetings, talking about the world's problems and doing nothing about it.

"You could say that I had early mid-life crisis. I just needed to get out, I needed to release some steam. Granted I over did it with jumping out of that window, and I'm really sorry about that."

Ludwig's forehead throbbed but I continued. "I know you all are trying to make me into this, business woman but that just isn't me. I can accept being a nation but all this," I gestured to them, "is just ridiculous. My country may be hundreds of years old but I'm eighteen and before all this I wanted to be a dancer. I know most of you think it's silly but I was really serious about it. I was gonna audition for dance schools all over the country, maybe some around the world. It was my dream.

"Then all of sudden, I'm support to wear a suit, seat behind a desk and be happy about it. I needed a break, I called up some classmates from school that live here and went out on the town. We went to some of the night clubs, checked out that open air movie theater I've been hearing about, we drank, we danced and just had fun."

I made eye contact with Ludwig and held my head up high. "And, I don't regret a single moment of it."

His eye twitched as his hand tightened into a fist. I mentally prepared myself for a slap to the face but he only lectured. His voice was low and mean, "You insolent little girl. You may think what we do
means nothing, but you refuse to understand it. I have a half of mind to pack your bags and send you back to America, but I know the last thing you need is to be alone with average people.” He grabbed my chin and forced me to look up at him, "If I have to tie you down in that chair for the rest of your life, then so be it." With a final irritated look, he released my chin and stomped out of the room.

Feliciano spared me a glance before he ran after Ludwig. Arthur rose from his seat and stood before me.

"Arthur-

"Don't," he cut me off, "I'm deeply disappointed in you." That was all he said as he walked out the room and slammed the front door behind him.

Francis sighed, brushed a hand through his hair and squeezed my shoulder, "I'm glad you're okay." He gave me a smile that didn't reach his eyes and headed for the door. Matthew spared me a worried look as he followed Francis.

"We are wasting our time with you," Yao narrowed his amber eyes at me and struts to the door. Kiku walked beside him, leaving me alone with Ivan and Gilbert.

Ivan smirked and moved to touch my cheek, "such a rebellious girl you are."

Gilbert grabbed his forearm, "should I show you to the door Russia?"

"That is not necessary," Ivan smiled but it was cold and the air seemed to chill between those two. The Russian shoved the albino off and walked out of the manor.

If being lectured by Ludwig wasn't enough, I had to be screamed at by my mom and threatened by the president.

"You are so lucky I'm not there to smack you! You had me worried! Haven't you been paying attention to the news, there are sick people out there kidnapping pretty girls like you! Amy you have no idea how angry I am at you right now." said Mom.

"If you pull another stunt like this again, I will put a tracking chip inside your skull." said the President.

I sighed and stared out into the evening sky. "This sucks," I mumbled. My phone ringed and I winced, "oh fuck, what did I do now?" I glanced to the screen and found it was a news notification. I clicked on the link and found that it was a video about one of the kidnapped kids.

She was about seven years old and was running out of the police station in London to collide into the arms of her parents. The mother lifted the girl to her chest and rocked her back and forth, whispering loving words into her ear. The father wrapped his arms around both of them and kissed the top of the girl's head; all three of them were smiling and wiping away tears of joy as they continued to hold each other.

My heart squeezed as a smile spread from ear to ear. "I don't regret a single moment of it."

A week passed and we were in our final days of July. Ludwig has been running me into the ground, with more hours of training. My Saturdays were now full days and Sundays became half days. I was also on lock down; I wasn't even allowed to be off the island without someone supervising me and
that someone had to be Ludwig. He didn't trust Gilbert to watch me.

Chores were even added; I swept, mopped, and dusted nearly every other day. At that moment I was finishing up the dishes from our dinner of three. Feliciano had left the day after I had returned to the manor and I couldn't help but feel a little sad. He had grown on me and his cheerful attitude would have helped with Ludwig's irritated mood.

The doorbell ringed and Gilbert answered the door. I was drying up the plates and putting them away in the cabinets.

"Amy, I got a surprise for you," Gilbert announced as he stepped into the kitchen.

"What is it?" I turned and found Peter and Raivis standing behind him. I beamed, "Peter! Raivis! Oh my god," I wrapped my arms around them both, "It's so good to see you!" Peter returned my hug while Raivis was too anxious to move. I stepped back, "what are you guys doing here?"

"We just wanted to visit, check up on ya," Peter proclaimed. "Heard about what you pulled at the meeting and I have to say, Britain is being an ass about the whole thing."

I knitted my brows together in confusion, "how did you even know about that?"

"Nations love to gossip."

I sighed, "of course they do."

Ludwig called for Gilbert from his room and he flinched, "if he asks, these two are my guests not yours, got it."

"Got it," I nodded as he walked out of the room. I turned back to the boys, "I'm guessing you're staying."

"Only for a week or so," Raivis said nervously as looked to his duffle bag.

"Uh-huh, I don't know how much fun we can have though. I'm grounded till, well forever." I continued to set the plates away as Peter forced Raivis to speak.

"T-there is one other r-reason why we came."

I lifted a brow at them as he continued, "y-you remember how Peter saved you back at Mr. Austria's house?"

"Yeah."

"A-and you said that you o-owed us one."

"Yeah."

"Well," he glanced to the ceiling as his cheeks flushed and Peter exclaimed, "Can you help us talk to girls."

I blinked, "huh?"
"Come on, pick up the pace!" Ludwig yelled at Raivis and Peter, who were running behind me. The boys were panting as they tried in failed attempts to catch up with me. I fell back into a jog and ran between them. "You guys doing okay?" I asked.

Peter glanced to me, "Why," gasp, "yes," gasp, "we're," gasp, "fine."

I nodded and turned to Raivis, his hair was drenched in sweat, his cheeks were red and his eyes were glazed over. This was only their second day at the Beilschmidt's manor and they looked like they were a lap away from collapsing.

"Ludwig," I called out, "they need a break!"

"No, if they want to stay, they have to train! That was the deal," he exclaimed.

I sighed, "Come on, a ten minute break won't hurt us."

He glared, "Fine. Ten minutes."

"Thanks," I came to stop as the boys fell to their knees and laid themselves out on their backs.

"I'm never getting up again," Peter panted.

I smirked, we were on our twelfth lap and I was barely out of breath. I felt like I could do another ten more. Two days ago, Peter and Raivis agreed to this endurance training so I could help them talk to girls.

"Help us talk to girls," Peter repeated after I was rendered speechless.

"Um, you do realize I'm a girl," I proclaimed.

"Not like that," he mumbled as his face flushed. "I mean like-like-"

"Flirting?" I almost giggled. "You want me to help you flirt with girls? Do I look like Will Smith to you?"

The boys knitted their brows together in confusion. "Well no, you're a girl and white," Peter answered.

"Not that," I said annoyed, "I meant, Hitch."

"Oh, yeah, good movie," Peter said as Raivis nodded.

"Well at least you understand the culture reference. Toris didn't even understand when I tried to fist pump with him."

Peter laughed. "You tried to fist pump with Toris? Bloke doesn't even know how to high five."

"He does," Raivis came to his friend's defense.
"Okay back to topic," I proclaimed, "so you want me to help you flirt with girls. Why?"

Raivis said, "We look old enough now."

I lifted a brow in puzzlement and Peter proclaimed. "He means we finally aged to look like older teenagers."

I nodded, remembering Grandpa's journal, the story of Raivis being hundreds of years old but had the appearance of a thirteen year old boy. I narrowed my eyes at them, really taking in their looks. Their features were hard and mature, taking on the ages of seventeen or eighteen. They had a few inches over me. Raivis was the taller of the two; he had light chestnut hair and a pair pretty violet eyes. Peter on the other hand, had shaggy, dirty blond hair and bright blue eyes; both were cute, in that awkward sort of way.

"How old are you two?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders, "I'm seventy-six."

I glanced to Raivis, "What about you? Are you and the other Baltic States around the same age?"

"I believe so, we're always known of each other's presence."

"Toris told me he was over seven hundred that means you could be around the same age right?"

He snorted, "That's a good guess, but Eduard has been doing research on us," he rubbed his forehead, "we possibly could be older."

"What's your earliest memory?"

He thought about it as he massaged his temple, "Being attacked by Vikings."

"Lovely," I sighed and pointed to Peter, "I can hook you up with the nice old lady down the street." I gestured to Raivis, "You on the other hand, we're have to dig through a grave."

Peter glared, "Are you messing with us?"

I placed my index finger and thumb an inch apart, "a little bit."

"Amy," Raivis's cheeks burned with a slight blush, "please, help us."

I bit my bottom lip, "I just don't know how much help I could be."

"We're prepared to beg," he said seriously.

I laughed, "I'll like to see that."

They dropped to their knees and spoke in sync, "please!"

Before I could tell them to get up, Gilbert and Ludwig walked into the room. "Well isn't this interesting," Gilbert chuckled.

I pulled the boys to their feet, "Hey Ludwig, look who's staying."

"Nein," he growled. "I know what you two are doing and they are not staying here."

"But they're my guests," Gilbert proclaimed.
"You never even spoke to these two unless you were threatening that one," he pointed to Raivis who began to tremble.

"Come on, Luddy," I tested out the new nickname. "They just want to stay-"

"Nein!" he yelled, "Nein, nein, nein, nein!"

I flinched as Raivis hid behind me and Peter moved closer to my side. I gulped and spoke the first thing that came to my head. "But they want to train with you!" Peter gave me a confused side-way glance, but I ignored him. "They want to be stronger and-and they know you're the man for the job."

His nostrils flared, "do you think I'm stupid?"

"No," I gave my sweetest smile.

"They're leaving, now." He turned away to leave.

"But they just got here." I stopped him by his arm, "please, please, they just want to learn from you."

"Do you not understand?" he glared, "you are being punished."

"I know, but don't punish them for my mistake."

He inhaled and exhaled from his nose, "they train, they stay, but if they waste my time I will kick them out of this house and make the rest of your stay here a living hell."

"They're homeless, I'll live in hell, gotcha," I nodded as he stomped out of the room.

Everyone was silent till Gilbert said, "That went better than expected."

"Come on guys," I pulled them by their arms, "get up."

Petered looked up to me, "Go on, leave us to die," he said weakly.

"Speak for yourself," Raivis mumbled.

I sighed, "You know what girls like?"

They turned to me with curious looks, "they like guys that are healthy and confident and all this," I gestured to them and our laps, "will get you both." I clapped my hands together, "Come on! Come on!"

I caught Ludwig watching me as I hauled the boys up and wrapped their arms around my shoulders. "We leave no man behind!" I began jogging as the boys dragged at my sides.

He covered his mouth with his hand, mostly to conceal his chuckle.

I narrowed my eyes at him, "how about instead of giggling like a school girl, you help me out here."

"They're your problem," he proclaimed as he continued with his run.

"Funny that's what the President said about you," I mumbled.
Ludwig observed with a critical eye as the three teenagers did their pushups, crunches and burpees. They continued on to the dummies, practicing their punches, elbow jabs, knee hits and kicks, and during all this it was Amy and Raivis that were clearly in their domain. Amy might have been in this routine for over a month but Raivis had experience. He may not show it, but Ludwig knew that he was skilled. Peter on the other hand was struggling, but determined to stay in pace with the others.

He clapped his hands, "on the mats, let's go." They moved on to the blue mats, "Sealand and America, you're up first."

Gilbert leaned against the wall, rubbing his hands together, "this is gonna be fun."

Amy and Peter stepped onto the mat as Raivis stood off to the side. Ludwig waited for the teens to roll their shoulders and hold up their fists to their chins. "Begin!"

Peter threw the first punch, but Amy ducked. She moved like lightening and slammed an upper cut under his chin. Peter fell back and collapsed to the mat, he was rendered unconscious.

Amy's eyes widened, "Oh my god! Peter! Are you okay?!" She bent down and lightly tapped him on the cheek repeatedly.

Raivis knelt beside them, "Peter," he shook him by the shoulder, "Peter, wake up!"

Gilbert howled in laughter as Ludwig walked over to check on the smaller boy. He pressed his fingers to Peter's wrist, "there's a pulse; he's fine. Move him aside, next up Latvia and America."

The American glared at him, "You have no heart."

"Does it look like I care," he proclaimed as he effortlessly tossed Peter over his shoulder and laid him outside the mat.

The last remaining teens moved along and took their stances. "Begin!" Ludwig exclaimed and Amy swept a kick under Raivis's feet. He caught himself, pushed up and slammed a fist into her gut.

She gritted her teeth and punched him in the face. The Latvian shook it off, wrapped his hand around Amy's arm and threw her over his shoulders. She fell to the mat with a hard thump and sighed, "You're good."

"I had to be."

"Yeah, when dealing with Vikings, you have two choices," she rose to her feet, "fight or die."

He nodded, "I learned that the hard way."

"Respect," she grinned.

They continued with their sparing, throwing hits and swinging kicks. They blocked each other's attacks, but most were taken. Raivis flung his leg to Amy's hip as she snatched it with one hand and tossed him to the floor. He caught himself again and flipped out another kick. Amy jumped back and stomped down his toes.

Ludwig stared at Raivis in wonder; he had known the Latvian for over a hundred years. The only times he ever saw the boy; he was either hiding behind the other two Baltics or Russia was ordering him around. The boy has certainly grown since his release from the Soviet Union, Ludwig thought to
"He's strong isn't he," Gilbert slapped his hand on his younger brother's shoulder. "Don't think it's a new trait, he's always been strong. The kid may not show it but he has a one hell of a back bone."

He nodded and turned his gaze onto Amy, she has been wearing the same serious expression ever since her return from her mini-vacation. It wasn't just her features, the way she carried herself had changed. She was quick to react and was no longer hesitant to strike. She continued her training with such focus and determination, at first he believed it was an act to please him but he quickly realized it was not the case.

"She seems different," Gilbert said as if reading his mind. "It's in the eyes," he proclaimed as he continued to look at the young American. "She has experience in the battlefield."

"The question is," Ludwig narrowed his eyes at her, "how?"

Raivis and I were covered in bruises; neither of us broke skin but Raivis did have a split lip. I'd admit that was a little harsh, but hey he smashed his fist so hard into my cheek I spat out two molars. We were also exhausted and stubborn; neither of us would yield. I wobbled as I forced myself to stand.

"You're a little unstable," Raivis panted, "maybe you should surrender."

I tackled him to the ground for the fifth time that day. We fell to the mat in a pile of painful groans and weak punches. I sat on his stomach and we shared an understanding glance, "truce?" Raivis asked.

"Truce," I agreed and collapsed beside him. "By the way, you look like a battered mess."

"You don't look that great either."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you too."

We shared another gaze and laughed.

"Oh, the joys of male bonding," Gilbert smirked.

I flipped him off as I rose to my feet and walked over to Peter, he was still unconscious. "I'm beginning to worry about him."

Ludwig walked over with a bucket, "Move aside."

We stepped back as he dumped the water over Peter's body. He sat up in a gasp and wiped his eyes, "what happen?" he mumbled.

"I kinda knocked you out," I gave an apologetic smile, "sorry."

He moaned as he rubbed his chin, "I lost to a girl; this is the lowest point of my life."

"Stop being a drama queen," I said as I helped him up.

After dinner and evening classes, it was time for me to take a shower. I grabbed my Batman pajamas
and headed for the bathroom across the hall; it was locked. I groaned, "Who's in the restroom?"

"Queen Victoria," a sarcastic voice exclaimed, "who do you bloody think?"

"Peter! This is my bathroom; use the one in your hallway." I stayed on the left side of the second floor, while the boys were on the right.

"Raivis is using it."

I groaned, "You better not use any of my body wash!"

"Why would I? I don't want to smell like a girl."

"Just hurry up! We got an hour before curfew."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist," he said, "I'll be out in a sec."

Once he was done I was able to take my shower and brush my teeth in fifteen minutes. I swiftly got dressed and walked back into my room while tower drying my hair.

"About time," Peter said annoyed.

I jumped as I spotted the boys dressed in shorts and t-shirts, "What the- have you two ever heard of knocking?"

Raivis fidgeted with his hands, "sorry Amy, but Peter said this couldn't wait."

I turned to him, "what?"

"When are you gonna teach us about girls?"

"Seriously?" I sighed, "Here's something, treat girls like human beings instead of sex objects." I clapped my hands, "Words of wisdom right there, think about it while you two lay in bed. Now get out."

He crossed his arms, "anything else?"

I sighed and sat beside them on the bed, "just talk to them, show confidence, girls like that."

Raivis glanced to his shoes, "I don't think I could do that."

"Look at me," I gently pushed his chin up, forcing him to look me in the eye. "Always make eye contact and talk about your interests or hobbies. What you're favorite music?"

"Uh, well I do like Beethoven."

"Classical, good, but let's stick to this decade."

"I like Opeth," Peter added.

"Who?" I asked.

"You don't know who Opeth is?! They're the most wicked heavy metal band ever!"

"Oh, that's cool."

"You don't like heavy metal?"
"Not really."

"I agree," Raivis jumped in, "they pull off yelling as singing, that doesn't make any sense to me."

Peter narrowed his eyes at him, "do you want to get into this again? Cause we can and we will."

"Okay Mr. Heavy Metal calm down. People like what they like, being from classical to metal to Justin Bieber," I proclaimed.

They both looked at me, "You like Justin Bieber?" Peter asked.

"I was eleven, I didn't know any better." I decided to get back to topic, "now, if you guys can't think of anything to say just ask questions. Girls love to talk and you can gather more info on them so you can keep talking to them. Remember, when in doubt ask questions."

"What if they don't answer?" Raivis asked.

I sighed, irritated, "Then keep asking questions, come up with a witty joke, I don't know." I fell back onto the mattress and covered my eyes with my arm. "I really don't see what the big deal is. You guys can only have one night stands or short little flings, I mean, you can't get serious with anyone."

Peter rose to his feet, "That's only if they're human."

I sat up, "You want to get with female nations. No offense guys, but there's not that many to go around, and if you guys can't even talk to human girls, then I can't help you."

"You're a nation," he proclaimed.

"Yes, but I've been a human girl for seventeen years, being a nation is still pretty new to me. I'm still getting over the fact that most nations are bisexual."

"Is that a problem? I know Americans are little-"

"It's not like that, it's just I found this out in the most graphic way possible. It's like finding your parents having intercourse and they explain to you about sex right after. It's embarrassing." I could feel my cheeks and ears spark in heat.

"Amy," I turned to Raivis, he looked up to me with sad eyes. "We have to try."

I sighed dramatically and pinched his cheek, "you're so lucky you got that baby face." He blushed and I smirked, "so are we going after any nation or is there someone special?"

The boys flushed as Peter said, "Victoria Lambert."

Raivis stuttered, "E-Erika Zw-ingli."

I knitted my eyebrows together in thought, "those names sound familiar."

Peter groaned in annoyance, "You met them, back at Austria's house."

I finally remembered, "Oh that explains it."

"Explains what?"

I rolled my eyes, "You two were practically drooling over them."
Raivis stared at the floor; his cheeks were bright pink, "was it that obvious?"

"Yes."

The boys blushed even harder and I channeled my inner Michel, "So, what's the story?"

Peter lightly shoved Raivis by the shoulder, "you go first."

He whined, "Why me?"

"Just do it."

He grumbled as he adjusted himself to face me, "back," he took a moment, "When I was living with Mr. Russia I didn't have that many friends."

"Hey, you had me," Peter proclaimed.

"You couldn't come over, Mr. Russia didn't like you."

"He doesn't like anybody."

"Anyway," I dragged out the word as I gestured for Raivis, "continue."

"I had Toris and Eduard, but they were older and I was always the odd man out." He sighed, "There were times that Mr. Russia took a small vacation to Switzerland and he would drag us along with him. During these times he would talk with Mr. Switzerland, this gave us the opportunity to have time for ourselves. I usually wondered around the garden or the house, anywhere as long as I was out of sight.

"One day I stumbled upon the library and found Erika."

"Was it love at first sight?" I smiled.

"Not really, I was so surprised that she was there I screamed and tripped over my own feet."

I failed to hold in my laughter, "that's so cute."

"It wasn't cute, it was embarrassing," he muttered.

"Okay, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I sighed, "go on."

He bit his lip nervously, "If you think I'm bad with girls, you should have seen me with her. I couldn't even speak or look her in the eye. My only replies to her were head shakes or nods, but she didn't seem bothered with it. Our first encounter was quick, she asked if I was okay, I nodded and I walked swiftly out of the room," he smiled at the memory. "Like me she didn't have that many friends, for her brother was very protective of her. She passed the time by reading, she loves books. Everywhere she went she carried one with her.

"Over time, we met occasionally, she would invite me to sit with her or have tea and cake when she decided to have a picnic in the garden. We would talk, mostly it was one-sided or we would read together. It may have not been much, but those moments were precious to me."

I laid myself on my stomach, supported my face in my hands and kicked up my legs. "Aww, this is so adorable but long. Can you skip to the part when you discover you're madly in love with her?"

Raivis shook his head, "it wasn't like that, this type of affection started as companionship, then
friendship and it slowly became love."

"But when was the moment you knew, come on, you have to know."

His eyes became painful, "when I was in the hospital, being held as a war prisoner."

My face became serious, "During the Vietnam War."

He nodded. "I spent most of my time in my room; I was only allowed to leave if I had a guard escort. I didn't mind it, being held as a war prisoner by the US army was better than being with Mr. Russia. While I was there, I had a few visitors," he looked at me, "you're father mostly but I also had Erika."

"No way," Peter interrupted, "Switzerland would never, in a million years bring his little sister into a country at war."

"True, but Mr. America got him to bring Erika; whatever he said to him worked."

"That's surprising," I added, "Switzerland didn't seem to think highly of Alfred."

Raivis agreed and continued, "She was only allowed to visit me once and we only talked about little things, to others it may have not been much but when she held my hand and smiled at me." He grinned at the memory, "I knew that I needed her in my life."

I sucked air through my teeth, "oh the feels," I turned to Peter, "your story better be good."

"It is," he said to his defense.

"Well what are you waiting for? Dish," I grinned and swung my legs in mid-air.

"I've known Victoria pretty much all my life. She might have been the only one that believed that I could become a real nation."

"Toris believed you could," Raivis proclaimed.

"No he didn't. He only lectured me about bigger countries trying to take over me."

"Anyway," I repeated, "we're on a short clock here, move along please."

Peter sighed, "I met Vicky when I snuck into a meeting of the United Kingdom and the colonies. I was trying to get some of the countries to accept me as a nation, it wasn't going well. Before long I was kicked out of the building by Britain. I tried sneaking back in and while I was scheming, I found Victoria hiding in the women's restroom."

"What were you doing in the women's restroom?" Raivis asked.

"That's how I got back in, by climbing through the window."

I sat up, "You could've used the men's restroom," I added.

"I was outside the bloody building, how was I supposed to know which was the men's or which was the women's."

I shook my head, "Excuses, excuses."

He rolled his eyes, "She was surprised at first to see a small boy creeping through the window but when she found out my reason for doing so, she laughed in my face."
"If that's not love, what is?" I shrugged my shoulders.

"Are you done?" he asked peeved.

I nodded, "yes."

"She told me that I was stupid for wanting to be a nation. That I should enjoy the freedom I had for not being noticed by the other countries." He chuckled lightly, "we started bickering about it," his smile fell, "till she showed me the collar that she had to wear."

"Was it like a choker or something?" I asked.

"No it was collar, the kind you put on a dog. Britain made her wear it so all the countries would know who she belonged to."

My jaw dropped, "he put a dog collar on her; that asshole."

"Agreed." Peter sighed, "Victoria always found a way to take them off but this one was made of leather and the ends were sewed together. Then she told me that the moment a nation sees me as one of them is the moment I'll lose my freedom." He paused, "It gave me a lot to think about later on that day, but before then, I pulled out a pocket knife. Heh, you should have seen her face, she giggled and said it was cute. She sure knows how to knock down a bloke.

"I told her to turn around and I cut her free. We spent the day touring around the city and tossing that stupid collar off the London Bridge. After that we became as thick as thieves; visiting each other's countries, mostly her's than mine. Sneaking me into world meetings, and pulling pranks on Britain," he grinned at the last part.

"Did this whole relationship start as friendship too?" I asked.

"To her it was friendship, but to me, I admired her; her strength, her beauty and her wit." He flushed as he rubbed his hands together nervously, "But she only saw me as a kid, a little brother. This only drove me even harder to be seen as a nation, hoping that could speed up my aging. My plan didn't go as expected, but I aged. It took years, but I finally look the same age as her; though she still sees me as kid." He gazed at me with determined eyes, "I just want a chance for her to see me as her equal."

I turned to Raivis, "I still like your story better."

"Hey!" Peter exclaimed.

"So what am I supposed to do? Sounds like you guys have everything figured out, just tell them how you feel."

Raivis gave me a frightened look. "Mr. Switzerland would kill me, did you not see how trigger happy he is?"

I remembered he carried a gun in his suit jacket, at a party, "okay I see your point."

"And I can't tell Victoria now, she would only see it as kid with a crush," Peter complained.

"Isn't it," I said.

He glared, "no, it isn't."

I sighed, "Guys, I don't know anything about them, how am I supposed to give you advice?"
"I was hoping you would ask," he grabbed an envelope from the nightstand. "This is from Ms. Hungary."

I opened the letter.

*You are cordially invited to*

*Elizabeta Héderváry's Slumber Party*

"You have to be kidding me."

Peter smiled, "Ms. Hungary has a slumber party every year and all the female nations are invited. I know Victoria is friends with Ms. Hungary and Erika will be there because Switzerland trusts the host. You can go there and-"

"Spy on them," I interrupted.

"I was gonna say gather intel, but that works too."

"She won't be able go, the party is in Budapest and West is still pissed at her."

We jumped at the sound of the new voice. I turned to Gilbert who was leaning against the door frame. "How long have you been there?" I asked.

He took a moment, "I came at the part where these two," he pointed at the boys, "were confessing their pathetic, unrequited love."

Peter glared and I said, "What do you want?"

"I wish to help you," Gilbert grinned evilly as moved to stand in front of us, "of course for a price."

I raised a brow, "and what is this price?"

"I still want my kiss."

I smiled, "Ha, ha, you're funny," and then my smile fell, "now get to stepping."

He crossed his arms, "How are you going to get Ludwig to let you go to that party huh?"

"I just won't go, problem solved."

"Amy," Peter exclaimed, "you have to go."

"No, I don't."

"You said you owed us," he said, "This is our chance."

"Guys we'll figure something else out." I pointed at Gil, "We don't need to make a deal with the devil."

"I resent that," he remarked.

"Shut up."

"Amy please," Raivis spoke up, "let us at least hear what Mr. Prussia has to say."

I groaned and glared at Gilbert, "Ludwig will never let me go. He can barely stand these two and
that was when I begged.

"What if I brought the party to you," he proclaimed.

"Ha! I would like to see that."

A dark grin grew from ear to ear, "as you wish," with those final words he walked out of the room.

"Did anyone else feel that chill in air," I turned to the boys and they nodded in agreement.

Gilbert was gone the next day.

Ludwig said he traveled to visit a friend, he didn't think much of it. The boys and I on the other hand, were worried that he was up to no good. He came back from his trip on Thursday night and our worries would be answered the following afternoon.

The day's routine was like any other till-

"Gilbert!" a female voice screamed.

Peter and Raivis stopped sparing as I looked up to Ludwig, "who was that?"

Ludwig cursed in German and faced his brother, "What did you do?!"

"Why do you think it was me?" he said innocently.

The door to the basement was kicked down. It flew off its hinges as it slid down the stairs, stopping at the wall across the room. Footsteps echoed as a person slowly walked down; she was a young beautiful woman with chestnut hair that curled around her waist and bright green eyes. She was Elizabeta Héderváry the nation of Hungary and she was pissed.

She looked at Ludwig, her eyes blazed with anger, "where's Gilbert," she hissed. Ludwig didn't have to answer, for she saw him backing into the wall on my left side. "You conniving little bastard!" she exclaimed as she walked over to him, wielding a frying pan.

"Liz, Liz, what is the problem?" he tried to sound calm but his fear showed in his eyes.

"You're my problem!" she shouted as she swung the pan to his head.

He ducked, "What do you mean? How could the Awesome Prussia be any trouble to you?"

"There are termites in my house!" She swung again and Gilbert ran to the mat.

"Then you should get an exterminator," he said and Elizabeta finally got a hit. The collision of the pan to his face resounded with a hard whack.

Peter and Raivis had moved to stand beside me on the sidelines and the three of us winced in sync.

"Ooo," I said as Raivis sucked air through his teeth.

"That's gonna hurt," Peter commented.

"My house was free of bugs and vermin before you came over and when you left, there they were eating away at the wood and drywall." She leveled the pan at his face, "Now, do you think it was an
unfortunate coincidence?"

"Ja," he whispered.

"Hell no it wasn't!" she slammed the pan down but Gilbert jumped back. "You did it! Now I have to wait a week before I could go back into my house!"

"Ms. Hungary," Ludwig stepped between them, "you can stay here with us."

She laughed, "of course I'm staying here, and I've also moved my party to this address."

"What?" Ludwig's eyes widened, "Can't you just reschedule?"

"No," she hissed, "I've already sent the email."

"You can't just drop in on us-"

She wielded the pan to his cheek, "I will use this."

Gilbert leaped in, "you are right, we owe you. Use our house for your little slumber party and of course we know your rule, no boys allowed." He begins to shove Ludwig to the staircase, "the guys and I will pack our bags and head to the flat we have in the city."

"But-but the house, it isn't ready for guests," Ludwig exclaimed.

Gilbert paused, "oh that's right," then he snapped his fingers, "Amy you can stay and watch the house."

"She can't-"

"Why not? She knows where all the cleaning supplies are and you wouldn't want Liz's guests to believe we are filthy, do you?"

"Well no, but she can't miss any more days!"

Gilbert pushed him up the steps, "it's only two, calm your ass down." He looked back to me and the boys, "Amy the house is under your care. Raivis, Peter, pack your bags. We're leaving in twenty minutes." They disappeared up the stairs with Elizabeta right behind them.

The boys and I stared in disbelief.

"He did it," Peter whispered.

"He brought the party to you," Raivis added.

I groaned, "This means I have to kiss him."

Once the guys were packed and ready to go, I walked over to the passenger window where Ludwig was mumbling curses in his native tongue. "I'll take good care of the house, Luddy."

"Don't call me that," he glared at me. "You and my brother planned this didn't you?"

I sighed, "Germany it was all-"

"Stop," he hissed and opened his mouth to say something else, but he stopped, waved his hand to shoo me away and rolled up the window.
"Goodbye to you too," I grumbled and turned to Peter as he rolled his window down. He and Raivis both gave me a look that said, good luck, like I was going on a dangerous mission. I mentally sighed, maybe I was. "Don't worry guys, I got this," I gave a thumbs up.

The boys smiled, said their goodbyes and rolled up the window. I walked to the back of the BMW, where Gilbert was finishing up the arrangement of the bags, "Where the hell did you get termites?"

He grinned, "I know a guy," he closed the trunk door and leaned against it. "I'm waiting."

"I know," I said through gritted teeth, "just make it quick-

He yanked me by the arms and slammed his mouth onto mine. I instantly froze and tried to resist the urge to beat him. He caressed my lips with his, trying in failed attempts to coast me into kissing him back. My only response was grounding my teeth together, shutting my eyes tight and digging my nails into my palms. But a plan slowly formed in my head and I used this chance to take action.

Gilbert gave up and stepped back, "how about you kiss back next time."

"How about you drive away before I slam your head through the rear view window," I threatened.

He laughed nervously and walked towards the driver's seat, "I'm off." He climbed in, started the engine and drove away.

Once I believe he's a good guy, he goes and does something stupid. I walked back to the manor to find Elizabeta pushing back the living room furniture to the walls. "Need any help?"

"No, I got it," she pushed the last leather recliner to the wall. "Where's the broom and mop?"

"In the hallway closet, it's a neat freak's dream," I proclaimed. "So who's coming?"

"Well, not many could show up because of the change of location, but we have a good number." She checked her smart phone, "Belgium is coming, also Brazil, Taiwan, Vietnam, Seychelles, and Liechtenstein." I mentally did a fist pump at the last two names. "Oh and Belarus and Ukraine will be joining us as well."

"Cool, is there anything else you need?"

"I need pizza, snacks and ice cream, but all the food I had prepared is now being pumped with poison," she said irritated.

"Well good thing we have this," I pulled out a wallet from my pocket.

Her eyes widened but a smile quickly lit up her face, "is that Gilbert's wallet."

"Of course it is," I grinned, "now let's go shopping."
Elizabeta and I borrowed the spare black BMW and drove into the city. We walked to Mauer Park; the largest flea market in Berlin. It not only sold fruit, vegetables, and grains. It also gave me the chance to check out some cute vintage clothes and souvenirs. I even heard that there were bargains on Sundays, too bad it was Friday, but that didn't stop me from buying stuff. Ludwig was never going to let me go shopping for fun as long as I lived with him.

Elizabeta needed fresh ingredients to make pizza, we were able to gather everything from the market; tomatoes, onions, olives, herbs, and flour.

"What about pepperoni? We gotta have pepperoni," I proclaimed.

"We'll get some at a super mart; we can also pick up some ice cream and snacks while we're there." Elizabeta was placing another package of flour into her portable metal cart. "By the way, do you know how to make a pizza from scratch?"

I grinned proudly, "I lived in an Italian restaurant for a quarter of my life." I kissed my fingers in a common gesture used by Italians, "I can I make a pizza," I said this in an Italian accent.

Elizabeta covered her mouth to conceal her laughter.

We walked over to a table filled with stylish, vintage clothes. I lifted a baggy denim shirt with colorful patches of diamond cut patterns sewed onto the back. "This is pretty cool."

"You should get it."

I turned to her, "I should, I mean we do have this," I pulled out Gil's wallet, we were using the cards for food but he had tons of cash. "And you are going to need a whole new wardrobe. After their done with your house, you gonna need some clothes that doesn't smell like poison."

She nodded, "you are so right and you must get something for yourself," she gave a wicked grin.

"I must," my grin slowly turned into an evil laugh and Elizabeta joined.

Elizabeta got new button down blouses, denim and graphic printed jeans, sexy high heeled boots that stopped around the ankles and massive rings with green stones. She also brought earrings, hair barrettes, green and white peasant skirts, sleeveless tunic blouses and mini shorts.

I brought some rings as well, some with turquoise stones, tiger eye, amber, and a stone that took on a crystal/peal effect. I made sure to get matching necklaces. I also purchased a gray wool cardigan and high waisted shorts in the shades of aqua, white and light denim. Graphic tank tops, brown gladiator sandals and I never really cared for dresses but I couldn't pass up on this one. It was a slimming, mini dress with a back opening design that had three pieces of cloth tied together in bows. It was dark blue with inch length pink roses scattered over the surface.

Elizabeta clapped as I strutted out of the changing room, which was just a tall, narrow tent. "It's perfect!" she exclaimed.

I grinned and admired myself in the full length mirror; the dress hugged my toned body perfectly and the hem stopped at mid-thigh. The dark color of the dress bright out my long tanned legs and made me look slimmer. "I don't usually go for dresses, but I look good."
"Try this on," she said as she held up a bra top, it was aqua blue with a red and white floral design.

"I don't really wear anything that shows off my stomach."

"But you have a beautiful figure, try it on."

"But-

"Try it on," she handed me the top and shoved me back into the tent.

I sighed, slipped back on my worn out high waisted jean shorts and removed the dress. I unhooked my bra and slid on the top. The spaghetti straps wrapped around my shoulders as the top came to the middle of my rib cage. I felt like I was walking out without a shirt on but I swallowed the uncomfortable lump in my throat and stepped out of tent.

"I knew it would look amazing on you," Elizabeta grinned.

I turned to the mirror, the top defined my hourglass figure and the reveal of mid-section was actually kinda sexy. Thanks to all my training with Ludwig, my stomach was taut and my shorts were slightly loose. I must have lost some inches.

I was never blessed with C-cup breasts like all the women in my family were, but this top did make my A-cup chest pop. I nodded at the reflection, "I like this, I'm gonna wear this out." I also ended up buying two more, one that was gold with a purple floral pattern and the other was denim with a zipper in front.

We placed our clothes on the table as the sells woman said, "Will that be cash or card?"

"Cash," Elizabeta pulled out a large amount of bills from Gilbert's wallet.

Once we reversed our change, we moved along to the next table. "They sell records!" I said excitedly as I lifted a record that displayed a picture of Louis Armstrong. "Mr. James would love this," I handed the sells man Gilbert's credit card.

"Who's Mr. James?" Elizabeta asked.

"He's a friend of the family," I answered, "we hanged together when I was younger, he taught me a little bit about the piano and opened me up to wonderful world of jazz." I smiled at the memory, "I think his birthday is next month, oh that reminds me I gotta get Valencia her gift."

The man gave me back the card with a smile and I waved goodbye as we walked along. Three tables down, I spotted an old fashion instant film camera. Valencia loves to take pictures so it would definitely be-in Gilbert's words an awesome gift. Hey, he was paying for it.

"We need to get to a post office and mail this out," I proclaimed as I placed the camera on top of our over piled cart.

"The shipping fees will be expensive," said Elizabeta.

We both looked at each other and laughed again.

After I packed the gifts and had them shipped to their addresses; we loaded up the BMW and headed to a super mart. We purchased three rolls of pepperoni, six bags of chips and over twenty ice cream pints-all in different flavors. I was practically jumping like an excited five year old when I saw that they had my favorite flavor, "they have cappuccino chunky chocolate chip! They have cappuccino
chunky chocolate chip!" I repeated this phase as a song till we skipped out of the store. Well I skipped, Elizabeta walked.

Once we were back at the manor, we began to prepare the pizza dough, figuring it was best to have it ready for tomorrow. I watched Elizabeta from the corner of my eye as she worked on her pizza dough; I was on my second.

Her hair was tied back in a ponytail and her sleeves were pushed to her elbows as she beats the dough with her fingers. The silence was relaxing but I was curious about this nation. "So, who taught you how to make pizza?"

She glanced to me, "I learned from Feliciano and Lovino."

I nodded, "cool, I know Feli but who's Lovino again?"

"He's Feliciano's brother, you met him back at your house."

"There were a lot of nations at my house, can you be more specific?"

"He looks like Feliciano, just tanner, with darker hair."

I must have taken too long to think for Elizabeta continued, "Remember Antonio?"

"The green eyes, dark hair and Spanish accent," I proclaimed.

"Yes, he was the one that introduced you to him."

The memory came flooding back, "oh right, what nation is he again?"

"He's the south of Italy, Feliciano is the north."

I gave her a look, "there's a difference?"

She smiled sweetly, like a motherly smile someone would give to a misguided child. "Northern Italy is the main focus for industry; they are also closer to Germany and France meaning they're open to the markets and communication, making the north richer. South Italy is mostly used for farming but they're farther away from the markets so they don't have anyone to sell it to, making them," she sighed, "not as rich."

"How do you know this?"

"Well for one, I've known the Vergas brothers for years and two there's this invention called the internet."

"Ha, good one," I narrowed my eyes at her playfully.

"Amy if I may say; you can't be so ignorant of other countries. It only leaves you open for defeat, to beat your enemy, you have to think like your enemy."

"Think like Feliciano," I proclaimed. "That won't be hard."

Once we had the dough prepared and ate a light dinner, we separated our new clothes and did our nightly routines. Elizabeta was staying in the room next to me and was right now taking a shower down the hall. I had recently taken my bath and was drying off back in my room. I was deciding either to wear my Batman pajamas or my Captain America ones for tomorrow's slumber party. I glanced down to the Batman top I was wearing, I shrugged, "can't go wrong with Batman."
I collapsed into bed and pulled out my journal from under the mattress. I scanned through the recently written pages of my adventure with Neill the Alien Bounty Hunter and the spirits along with the pages of me playing match maker. I could just imagine how Jamie and Michel would react to the journal. They'll believe that Neill was an alien (we always speculated) but me playing match maker, they would howl in laughter.

I quickly wrote my entry of today and hid the book back under the mattress. Next to it was Grandpa's journal; I tugged it out and opened it to the next entry.

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July 1, 1957

I spent all day yesterday locked in the guestroom, only coming out for bathroom breaks. The only time I ate was when Alfred would knock on my door and leave a tray with my meal on it. I never saw the so-called nation yesterday, he must have left me alone to grieve and I appreciated it.

Today on the other hand, he didn't leave me be.

He knocked on my door, I ignored him at first, but then he began banging his fists on the wood. Beating along to Elvis Presley's version of 'Hound Dog' that was currently being played on the radio; he also began to sing along with the lyrics.

"You ain't nothing but a hound dog,
"Crying all the time;
"You ain't nothing but a hound dog,
"Crying all the time,
"You ain't never caught a rabbit,
"And you ain't no friend of mine."

Because of him, I still have that song stuck in my head.

He continued to sing and bang his fists on the door. I was going crazy. I swung the door open and shouted, "what do you want?!

"We have an engagement party to get to, did you forget?"

I shook my head, "No, we'll visit Rose tomorrow." Before I could close the door, Alfred gripped it and pushed his way through.

"No, we'll see her today. We are not going to let the bride think the groom has left her before the wedding, that's too cruel."

"And going to the engagement party, holding up the urn that was once my brother and saying 'here's the groom' is any better?!"

"We wouldn't say it like that."

I crossed my arms, "I'm not going."
He sighed, "The hard way it is." He grabbed my arm and pulled me into the bathroom. I clawed and punched, but just like on the first day I met him, he showed no sign of my attacks harming him. He tossed me into the bathroom and closed the door. "There are clothes for you on the counter."

I twisted at the knob but he held it down with an iron grip on the other side. I slammed my shoulder against the door, "Let me out!"

"Not until you take a shower and get dress," Alfred exclaimed.

"I am not a child! You can't tell me what to do!"

He ignored me as he continued to sing along with the King.

I banged my fists on the door for a few more minutes till I gave up and placed my forehead on the wood. He has no idea how the tribe will react to the death of my family. He's insensitive bastard that doesn't care about the feelings of Rose or myself; I mean, to tell Rose and everyone at the party that my family died and to announce this at a ceremony that was supposed to be a wonderful occasion. Does he not see the indecency in this?!

I'm really starting to hate this man.

Then I caught my reflection in the mirror. My hair was greased with natural oils, dark bags were under my eyes and I had sweat stands under my armpits. I took whiff and wrinkled my nose in disgust. A shower didn't sound like a bad idea at that moment.

After I took my shower and got dressed in a clean white button down shirt, khaki slacks and a pair brown dress shoes. I walked out of the no longer guarded door to find Alfred dancing to Big Joe Turner's song, 'Shake, Rattle And Roll'.

He moved his hips, legs and arms to the rhythm as he snapped his fingers with the beat. I lifted a brow as he spun and when he spotted me, he beamed, "you clean up nicely."

I rolled my eyes and stride to my bedroom door, but he snatched my arm and hauled me out the door. "I've already packed up the urns, let's go."

I yanked my arm away when we were on the side walk and heading towards his car. "We can't tell them like this! It isn't right!"

"Then what is!" he exclaimed, "the newspapers didn't release your family's names, they have no idea what happen to you and your family. Rose must be worried sick about Tristen, how long are you going to make her wait? How long are you going to make your tribe wait? How long are you going to hide in that damned room?" He narrowed his eyes at me, "Well?"

I hate to admit it, but he was right.

But I would rather die than tell him that.

I climbed into the car and slammed the door shut, "let's go," I mumbled.

Alfred sighed, sat himself behind the wheel and waited.

"Ain't we going?"

He shrugged, "You're the only one that knows where it is."

I rubbed the temple of my forehead, "You are so frustrating."
He laughed, "I heard worse."

The hall Rose's family had rented was surprising close. It was called the Armitage Hall and it was decent place, a little run down but the inside was large enough for Rose's family and my tribe. Familiar RVs, cars and vans lined the streets; the only space Alfred could find was three blocks away. I decided it was best to leave the urns in the car for now.

When we got close to the hall, a part of me wanted to run back to the car but Alfred stopped me by gripping my shoulder and shoved me forward. We were met with Mister Two Crow at the door; he was an elderly man with white hair and a slight hunched back. I almost didn't recognize him without his eagle feathered head dress. He was one of the medicine men of the tribe and a member of our council. He was also my mentor.

"John," he greeted with a relieved smile as he patted me from my shoulders to my arms. "Where's Tristen? Rose has been asking, and where's your father? The other members are upset that he hasn't answered the CV radio. . ." he trailed off when his eyes fell on Alfred. "Achak," he muttered. That name was another word for spirit.

Alfred grinned like a happy fool, "Hello Kai, it's been a while."

I stood between them as they gazed at each other. Both wore a serious expression, almost like they shared an unspoken agreement with one another.

"Why are you here?" Kai Two Crow asked curiously.

Alfred gestured to me, "I came to drop him off."

Kai knitted his brows at me worriedly, "John, what happen?"

I sighed, "Can you bring the council members and Rose to a private room, please."

Kai moved quickly to gather the members, along with Rose and her parents. Counting my father and Mister Two Crow there are six members in the council. Dakota Nozedar, a tall, muscular man. Ray Stone, the youngest member at the age of twenty-seven. Ayleen Smith, the oldest member and the only woman on the council and Len Silverwolf the second in command and my father's closest friend.

We met in a back room, away from the guests that were cerebrating in the main hall. When Rose saw me, she came running with scowl. She demanded to know where Tristen was and I had to beg her to meet with us in the room. Alfred had followed us, which had the council on their toes; expect for Ray, he wasn't on the council during their meeting with the strange man.

Once everyone was gathered, I had to take a big breath (more than once) and tell them of what happen to my family.

Rose cried out in a heavy sob as she lost the will to stand. Her mother coddled her in arms as she continued to weep. The council grew silent and waited for Rose's cries to soften.

Dakota was the first to speak, "where are their bodies?"

"They were cremated, the ashes are in my car," Alfred informed.

Dakota narrowed his eyes at him in annoyance, "I didn't ask you."

"Well he's right, they'll in the back," I rose to my feet and turned to Rose's father. "I came to give
Tristen to your daughter; he would have wanted it that way."

Ayleen, Rose and her mother were left behind as we traveled to the car. Alfred opened the truck and I handed the urn with Tristen's name on it to Rose's father. He accepted it with a grim face and gave his condolences. A moment of silence passed till Len proclaimed, "Alright, gather their ashes we’ll hold a ceremony for them."

"Wait," the word came out by surprise and I grew tense when the council members turned to me with confused looks. I swallowed the lump in my throat and remembered of parent's wishes. "They wouldn't want their deaths to be a big deal."

"Our chief has passed John," Len said, "the tribe must be informed."

"Yes, I know but-"

"There is no buts," Dakota exclaimed, "Bring them in and we can scatter their ashes along the Chicago Bay."

My body trembled, "No. I lost them in a river; I refuse for them to be given back to the earth through water."

"It's alright John," Ray added, "We'll scatter them somewhere else."

The council members moved for the urns.

I have no idea what came over me. Maybe it was pride, I didn't want be dragged into the hall where the engagement party would be turned into a wake. I didn't want the tribe to look at me with pity filled eyes. I didn't want them to coddle me like I was something fragile. All I wanted was to put my family to rest.

I jumped in front of the trunk and screamed for at them to get back. They tried to move forward, calming me with soothing words, but I heard nothing.

Kai stepped towards me, "Calm yourself John."

"Stay back, just stay back!"

In a blink of an eye, Alfred wrapped his arms around me, holding me in a warm embrace. I froze as he said "It's okay, you're among people that care about you Johnny." He stroked his fingers into the back of my hair, "Everything's gonna be okay."

I tried to shove him away but his grip was unbreakable. "Let go! Let me go!" I continued to scream at first, but my voice began to lower. "I just-I just-" I thought I was done crying but for some odd reason, I ended up weeping on Alfred's shoulder. Maybe it was because I had retold the story, or maybe the sight of seeing the council gathering my family's ashes just made it all too real. Whatever the reason, Alfred said nothing as he hugged me and waited for me to stop.

The council had left us be, expect for Kai, who stood aside and waited patiently to talk to me. When I calmly pushed Alfred away, he patted my back one last time and smiled. He didn't say anything, just leaned against the car as Kai moved to my side.

"I'm sorry for my outburst," I whispered as I wiped my eyes.

"It's understandable," he nodded as he placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. He stared into my eyes, searching for answers in my soul. Kai was always met to be a spiritual man, for he had the gift
of reading souls. He was the first to approach Alfred on that day twelve years ago. I remembered when I had asked him about it he would only say, "He was a misguided spirit."

Did he know that Alfred wasn't human?

He sighed, "I knew this day would come, you have an adventurous spirit. You are a person that needs to stride out on your own, to create your own world. When you're father brought you to me, he and I knew you wouldn't be satisfied here with us." He glanced to the urns and back to me, "You're brothers, Tristen and Clay were led by Wolf and Goose, they are strong pack animals, they stay with the family while Hawk soars and creates her own family."

He smiled sadly, "Now the time has come."

"No, Kai I-"

"Are you happy here John? Tell me, are you?"

I froze, I had nothing to say.

"Go. And if by some slim chance you come back, then we will rejoice, if not we will hope that you had found happiness." He gave me a final embrace, "The Great Spirit has an amazing path for you." He said as he released me and walked to Alfred.

Kai's face grew serious, "It is because of you, he has the chance to decide now. Thank you Achak."

Alfred nodded to him in respect.

He began to walk back to the hall, "wait," I exclaimed, "ain't you even going to say goodbye?"

He gave me a knowing smile, "We'll see each other again." He waved to me, "till then," his smile grew wider as he continued along the side walk.

I gazed after him, watching as his figure grew smaller and smaller. He said it wasn't a goodbye, but why did my gut say it was.

Later on I would discover that Kai Two Crow passed in his sleep that night. His granddaughter was able to find me and tell me the news. When I asked her how she had found me, for I had left no address or phone number for the tribe to reach me. She said that a raven stole a picture of Kai and me and had taunted her with it; which ending up with her being led by the bird to me.

The tale made us smile, Raven was Kai's spirit animal.

I sat myself on the bumper of the car as Alfred moved to stand by my side. "So what are you going to do now?"

I glanced to my family's urns, "I need to put them to rest, but not here. Clay would want his ashes to be spread in New Orleans and my parents would want theirs in Hoopa, California."

"You're going to need a car," Alfred proclaimed.

"I know."

"You're also going to need some food for traveling."

"I know."
"And you need money for, well pretty much everything. Gas, clothes, hotels, or camping grounds, more food-"

"I know," I hissed. "I'll figure something out."

"Or you could work for me."
I whipped my head to face him, "what?" I said dumbfounded.

"Be my assistant," he proclaimed.

"What could you possibly do that would need an assistant?"

"I'm America," he said proudly, "I'm pretty busy with meetings and I don't have Toris around to help me cook and clean anymore, so I would like to have a helping hand."

"Cook? Clean? Like a servant?"

"I said help; all I would really need for you to do is house sit and make sure it's not in a complete mess."

"Like a servant," I proclaimed. Then shouted, "Hell no."

"You won't be a servant," he repeated. "You'll help me out with chores and I would also like your input in national politics."

I snorted, "My input? I'm Indian. We don't even vote in your elections."

"I know," Alfred eyes glazed over with a sad tint in them. "But I want them to know that their concerns matter to us."

"As you can see, they don't. You treat us, the colored, the Mexicans and everyone else that's not an American born white man like second class citizens."

"And I want to change that," he exclaimed, "and I need someone that has lived it. I need to see it through your eyes."

I stayed quiet as he continued with a sigh, "We won't stay in Chicago for long, we'll drive through the country and visit New Orleans and California. Of course it will be a long road but all I ask is one year. One year to travel with me through the Midwest and then through the south to California; when we lay your parents to rest, we can go our separate ways. Till then, all I ask is for you to be my companion."

He's completely insane.

Why would I travel through the country with a complete stranger? A stranger that I had first met when I was seven then took me out to dinner ten years after (without aging) and then saved my life just a few days ago. He's not dangerous at least I hoped not, but he sure is loud, obnoxious and seems to have a screw loose.

But I must be missing two for I agreed.

I was dozing off as the entry came to its end, causing me to drop the journal to the floor. I rose to sit
up and rubbed my eyes tiredly. I moved to grab the journal and noticed the inside of the cover was torn open. I cursed and patted the yellowed paper in place. There was a bulge under the cover. I struck my fingers in and found photographs.

Pictures of my grandfather and his family, "Wow Gramps, you look so young," I said to myself. I skimed through the old sepia colored photos. I gazed at each one, memorizing each face of Grandpa's family. The last photo was of an elderly man and a young boy. They seemed to be sitting in the middle of a forest as the elderly man showed the boy different plants. I turned it over; it read Kai Two Crow, age sixty-five and John Hawkfeather, age six.

I smiled but then I realized that the elderly man was wearing a familiar eagle head dress. I squinted at the image; he was the old man I had met in the forest back home. "It can't be," I mumbled, but my mind only countered with my statement on how I was wrong. Kai was the old man I had met months before hand. Kai was the one that told me about Alfred and my birth as a nation; then set me on a quest for an eagle that ended up with me finding this journal.

All this couldn't be just a coincidence.

I rubbed my eyes and placed the photos back into the cover. Go to bed Amy, go to bed. Everything will make sense in the morning, hopefully. I guess I was more tired than freaked out because once my head hit the pillow, I was out cold.

When morning came, I was awoken by the sun's rays hitting my face. It was the first morning since I arrived in Berlin that I was able to sleep in. I yawned, stretched and got dressed at a leisurely pace. I decided to temporarily forget of my little discover last night, and focus on my match making mission for Peter and Raivis. I got dressed in my new white shorts and the denim button down shirt with the diamond patches on the back. I folded the sleeves to my elbows and left the first two buttons undone.

I ran down stairs as I bushed my fingers through my hair and leaped over the last three steps. I slid into the kitchen where Elizabeta was making breakfast.

"Morning," I greeted, "Whatcha making?"

"Pancakes," she proclaimed, "what some?"

"Yes please, with chocolate chip?"

"Sure thing," she smiled.

She served me a pile of pancakes with orange juice as she took her seat in front of me. We ate for several minutes till I said, "I'll start cleaning the house after this and if we want to use the guest rooms-"

"No need, I found the air mattresses. We can set them up in the living room, there's not that many of us, so we can stay in same room together."

"Cool, less cleaning for me."

She said, "I'll help."

"Thanks," I grinned.

"Oh before I forget," she grabbed a rectangle board from the seat beside her. "I found this in my room," she placed an Ouija board on the table.
My eyebrows rose, "why would this be in your room?"

"It must belong to Gilbert; he has a fascination with the supernatural. Do you think the girls would want to play with it at the sleepover?"

"Yeah it will be the perfect addition to our Truth or Dare and Never Have I Ever drinking games." I took a slip of my orange juice, "You know in horror movies, this kind of combination is just asking for trouble."

"Don't tell me you're scared of ghosts."

I took a moment; technically I've talked with Kai's ghost twice and fought with spirits that took on the forms of mythical creatures to fight aliens. So why should I be afraid of ghosts? I faced scarier things. I shrugged, "nah, it will be fun."

We finished our meal and I cracked up my portable speaker as an old Beyoncé song blasted through. Elizabeta snapped her fingers to beat as she grabbed the broom and I started washing the dishes. Ludwig didn't allow me to listen to music as I cleaned, which was just whole new degree of evil.

If that was evil to our dear heroine what would she possible think of the dark figure lurking in the trees, watching her through the window?

The figure only observed, analyzing its prey, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

A vapor materialized beside this figure, "what do you wish for us to do Iya?" it whispered in hisses.

"Bring her to me."
The female nations started arriving at six in the evening. The first to knock on the manor's door was Vash and Erika Zwingli.

Vash wasn't pleased when I was the one to answer the door.

"Where's Ms. Hungary? I believed she was the host of this party, if not we're leaving," he proclaimed.

"Chill Vash, she's here," I rolled my eyes.

"Seems you still have that habit of calling nations you barely know by their-"

"Yeah, yeah, human-nation names all that." I waved my hand at him and smiled at Erika, "Welcome, come in, come in," I snatched the duffle bag from Vash and pulled his sister inside.

"Hey!" he called out as I sat the bag by the living room and guided Erika into the kitchen. Where Elizabeta was spreading tomato sauce and cheese over a disk of pizza dough, "Ah, Erika," they hugged and Elizabeta formally greeted Vash.

"Here's a list of numbers to call if anything happens," he handed her a paper list.

"Yes," she nodded.

"Remember, no sweets after nine," he continued.

"Yes, I know," Elizabeta was gently pushing him towards the door.

"No horror movies, she won't be able to sleep."

"Yes, Vash, I know. You have nothing to worry about, she's in good hands."

"Goodbye Erika, be safe, remember stranger danger-" Elizabeta waved farewell and closed the door to cut him off.

She sighed, "finally," she walked back to the kitchen and handed the list to Erika, "would you like to do the honors," she grinned.

Erika smiled mischievously and tore the list into pieces. She threw the pieces in the air and they scattered like confetti as Elizabeta and Erika screamed out excitedly, "Freedom!"

I smiled and turned up the song from Avril Lavigne, 'Here's To Never Growing Up'. We started jumping to the beat and singing at the top of our lungs. It turns out that every year Vash would give a list of numbers and rules for Erika to follow and it was tradition to tear them up.

As the song was ending the doorbell ringed and I answered it to find Victoria Lambert. "Hey," she greeted and craned her neck up to find Erika dancing with Elizabeta. "You guys tore up the list without me?"

I shrugged my shoulders, "Vash was early."

Later, Bella Vermeulen arrived along with a sun kissed-tanned woman. Elizabeta greeted them with hugs and introduced them to me. "Amy you remember Bella and Raquel?"
"I know Bella from Arthur's pictures," I said.

"Oh Arthur has pictures of me," Bella giggled, "such a naughty boy." She was at average height with blond shoulder length hair and green eyes.

"So you don't know me then," the flawlessly tanned woman smiled with a perfect set of white teeth. The woman was tall, with dark hair and eyes. She had a curvy figure, with a full chest, firm bottom and long legs. Her hair was waist long and it was curled in natural waves, she also had a Latin accent. She reminded me of those women that danced in Carnival in Brazil.

I mentally slapped myself, "You're Brazil," I held out my hand, "It's nice to meet you."

"Please call me Raquel," she pulled me close for a tight embrace and kissed me on both cheeks. One of her kisses was dangerously close to the corner of my mouth.

I laughed it off, "well, aren't you friendly."

She smiled sweetly and grabbed my hand, "yes I am and so much more." She brushed her lips sensually over my fingers as she gazed into my eyes.

Goosebumps spread over my arm as my ears grew in heat. "I-I'm straight," was the only thing I stuttered out at that moment.

Raquel grinned, "That sounds like a challenge," she winked at me.

Elizabeta pulled her off, "Now, now, Raquel no flirting. She has enough of that with the boys."

"But I would give her the most fantastic orgasm."

I flushed, "I'm sure you would, but no thank you."

After the pizzas were ready, the last four girls arrived. Mei Xiao, Kim Lan, Natalia Arlovskaya and Irunya Moroz; we greeted each other with hugs as Victoria and I took their bags and sat them down in the living room beside the walls.

"All right ladies, get dressed." Elizabeta announced. "It's time to get this party started!" She glanced to me and I grinned.

I had connected my iPod to the radio entertainment system that was under the flat screen TV. I turned up the volume and Beyoncé's song 'Run the World (Girls)' boomed through the speakers. I swayed my hips to the rhythm as I sang along with the lyrics. Victoria and Raquel joined my sides as we answered Beyoncé when she would ask, "Who run the world?"

"Girls," we screamed.

Victoria pulled Erika into our circle of dancing as Bella and Mei jumped in. Elizabeta then got Kim and Irunya to join as I worked on Natalia, who was leaning against the wall.

I grabbed her hand, "come on Nat; dance with us."

"I don't really dance," she said coolly.

I rolled my eyes, "okay, then," I bowed to her like a gentleman and gave her my hand, "dance with me," I smiled.

She lifted a brow at me in bewilderment, which I took as my chance to yank her into the dance floor.
I held her by the arms and made her twirl with the beat. Natalia humored me but her heart wasn't into it.

As the evening continued, the girls changed into their pajamas and sat around the living room table with two freshly baked pizzas.

"We brought vodka," Natalia said as she pulled out two bottles of iced vodka from a mini cooler. She was wearing a blue, ruffled night gown that stopped around her mid-thigh.

"From Russia?" Elizabeta asked. She wore green sweat pants with a tight gray tank top.

Natalia rolled her eyes, "Is there anywhere else."

Raquel grinned, "How many bottles?" She wore the most revealing pajamas, it was a bright red gown that hanged low from her breast and stopped right under her ass.

"We could only bring five," Irunya said apologetically. She was the complete opposite of Raquel. Irunya wore baggy, plaid sweats with a matching long sleeved, button down shirt.

"That's fine," Bella gestured to her own cooler, "I've brought beer." She wore a cute set of lacy shorts with a matching sleeveless blouse.

"I got sake," Mei pushed forward her cooler. She and Kim were dressed in Asian style clothing. Mei wore a black night gown that came to her knees. The collar was designed as a Japanese kimono and it was made of silk. Kim wore a green Chinese blouse with sleeves that stopped at the elbows and matching pants that came to her knees.

"I brought champagne!" Victoria added. She was wearing a blue tank top with white shorts. Erika sat next to her, wearing a pink, vintage night gown with lace straps around the shoulders, a lace bow tied under the chest and the hem was ruffled and came above the knees.

"And Amy and I have found Gilbert's stash of beer," Elizabeta and I laughed wickedly.

Bella passed a beer to each of us, "Then let us eat, drink and merry and drink some more," she announced as we clicked our bottles together. After we ate through five pizzas, four chip bags and half of the ice cream pints. We sat around the table, talking, drinking and grooming each other. It seems that Mei has an obsession with nail art, she brought a kit filled hundreds of shades, stickers and pop out art. She was currently working on Erika's finger nails as Victoria painted Bella's toe nails.

Irunya came at me with a brush, "can I braid your hair?"

"Uh, sure, but I don't have a lot of hair to work with."

"I can do a milkmaid braid."

"Okay," I shrugged as the girls carried on with their Truth and Dare game.

Kim was wearing a lamp shade for the entire night, Elizabeta had pranked called Arthur and said, "Seven days," in a creepy voice and Raquel had danced on the kitchen table as I played 'Krazy' by Pitbull. Victoria and Erika kept it safe with truths while Natalia was dared to sit on my lap for thirty minutes.

"Nat, don't take this the wrong way, but my legs are going numb," I said as she gave me a glare.
"Are you saying I'm heavy," she narrowed her eyes at me.

"No, no, of course not," I reassured her. "It's just over a period of time the pressure gets to you and something's poking me."

"It must be her daggers," Mei commented as she blew at Erika's nails and then used a quick dry spray.

"Daggers?" I questioned with wide eyes.

Natalia pulled up the hem of her skirt to reveal brown leather straps wrapped around her upper thighs. Each strap held about six to seven knives, "I never leave home without them."

"But you're at a slumber party," I proclaimed.

She lifted a brow at me, "so?"

"Never mind, I'm just gonna play with your hair kay? Kay." I combed my fingers through her stands and began to do a simple braid.

It was Irunya's turn as she was finishing up with my hair. She had parted it through the middle and had French braided from each side, wrapping them around the sides of my head and ending them at the nap of my neck. Remarkably, it was all held together with seven bobby pins.

"Truth or dare," Raquel asked her.

"Well..."

"Pick dare," Victoria giggled.

"Yeah, dare," I grinned and began a chant among the girls, "Dare! Dare! Dare!"

Irunya gave in, "very well, dare."

Raquel grinned wickedly, "I dare you to give us a strip tease; you can stop when your bra comes off."

The girls and I dissolved into laughter as Irunya's face turned bright red, "no, no, no, I can't."

"It's either that or you drink," Raquel held up a shot glass. It was the rule, if you didn't tell the truth nor did the dare, you drank.

"I'd rather drink," she took the vodka shot, "thank you."

"Boo! You're no fun."

Elizabeta shook her head, "what did you expect?" She turned to me, "truth or dare?"

"Dare," I grinned.

"I dare you to go skinny dipping in the lake."

I snorted, "You call that a dare?" I finished Natalia's braid and we rose to our feet. I bent my legs and once I felt the blood circulating, I was off. I ran out through the back door of the kitchen. The girls followed as I stopped at the edge and tore off my Batman pajamas and underwear. It was pitch black outside, so I didn't feel too self-conscious when I stripped. Also, the alcohol helped.
The girls were laughing, cat-calling and cheering me on as I walked down the dock. I gave them a salute as I jumped into the lake, screaming, "cannon ball!"

The water chilled me to the bone as I sunk deeper and deeper to the bottom of the lake. A disturbing reminder burned in the back of my skull. This entire scenario looked too much like the dreams that had haunted me for more than two months straight back during the spring of my senior year. The dreams would start out differently but all of them ended the same. The darkness would pull me in, taking me deeper and deeper into the unknown. I would scream for help but no one could hear me. I was all alone...

Fear kicked in as I frantically moved my limbs to swim myself to the surface. Once I had air, I was greeted by the female nations on the dock. I took deep breaths and tried to relax, "care to join?"

Raquel grinned flirtatiously, "I thought you would never ask." She ran back to land, tore off her clothes and sprinted through as the girls parted for her and she drove in with a splash.

Everyone quickly followed as they took off their pajamas, while underwear was optional and leaped in. We spent an hour in the water, dunking and splashing one another.

We dried off back in the living room, with towels wrapped around our mid-sections. My Batman pj's were cool against my wet skin, but it didn't bother me that much, at least there wasn't any sand. Amazingly the milkmaid braid was still intact.

"Okay, next game, Never Have I Ever." Elizabeta brought out the last three remaining vodka bottles. She gave us each a shot glass and poured the cool liquid into each glass.

"Oh, I got one," Bella raised her hand. "Never have I ever slept with both Prussia and Germany."

Elizabeta narrowed her eyes at her, "You bitch," she swallowed her drink in one gulp.

Irunya followed suit and I stared at her with wide eyes. "You slept with them?"

She blushed, "yes, they both have an attraction to large breast."

"Good thing you have more than enough for both of them," Kim smiled slyly.

"My turn, never have I ever slept with Britain just to make Spain jealous," Elizabeta gestured this mostly to Bella.

She was the only one to drink as she flipped Elizabeta off.

I tried to shake that thought away. "Okay, I got something. Never have I ever been caught making out with anyone?"

Everyone expect Erika took a swing.

"What about you Ms. America," Mei lifted a brow at me, "you must've been caught at least once."

"No, I'm the master of stealth."

Kim carried on with the game. "Never have I ever. . ." she glanced to Mei, "Slept with either of the Italian brothers."

Mei pouted and swallowed her liquor along with Raquel, Bella, Elizabeta, and Victoria. The girls shared a look, "Romano?" Mei questioned.
They nodded as Bella giggled, "Boss taught him well."

Mei turned back to Kim, "Never have I ever slept with the previous America," it was clearly revenge for the previous question.

Kim narrowed her eyes and swallowed, along with Bella and Raquel.

I perked up and looked to each of the nations, could either of them have married Alfred? I acted fast, "Never have I ever married another nation."

Elizabeta was the only one to take a swing, that plan went south fast.

"I have one," Erika proclaimed, "Never have I ever killed someone."

Natalia shook her head, "Really is that the best you could come up with." She drank her vodka along with everyone else around the table. Well, expect me and Erika. I couldn't drink to this one, even when it was true. The girls would ask for details and I couldn't tell them I killed aliens, for obvious reasons.

"Never have I ever tried to marry a sibling," Victoria proclaimed.

Natalia glared at her, "really? We're playing that card?"

"That's what you get for being rude," Victoria stuck her tongue out and said, "Now drink."

"You tried to marry Irunya?" I asked confused.

The girls laughed as Irunya said, "no, no." Then she gazed at me with wide set eyes, "did anyone tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"I wanted to marry my brother," Natalia proclaimed.

"Who's you're brother?"

She gave me an indifferent smile, "Ivan Braginski also known as Russia."

I went pale, "he's you're brother and you wanted to marry him?!"

Natalia chuckled, "it was different back then, he was different," her smiled died, "Things change," she swallowed another glass of vodka.

I wanted to ask more on the subject but with the tension growing around the table. I decided it was best to leave it be.

The game continued. "Never have I ever..." Raquel gazed at me, "had sex with a woman." She then drank as everyone but me, Erika and Victoria followed. "Oh America I was hoping you would have joined us for that round."

I laughed nervously, "I told you I'm straight."

"Not till I have my way with you," she winked at me.

Irritation was building but I kept my cool, "listen Raquel, I'm flattered but no."
"Oh don't be like that. How do you know you don't like it if you don't try it?"

"Do you want me to kick your ass?" I playfully threatened (somewhat).

She grinned, "I do like it rough."

"You are one sick puppy."

She threw up her arms in frustration, "Merda! Well, it would be better losing your virginity to me rather than to one of the men, just think about it. Their egos crushed as they realized that they had lost their bet to a woman."

"Raquel." Elizabeta growled at her.

My jaw dropped, "what bet?"

"Amy it's nothing-" Elizabeta tried to change the subject but I screamed.

"What bet?!"

Bella sighed, "Some of the male nations have made a bet with one another, to see which country will have you-"

"To claim, as they say 'bragging rights' of having you first," Raquel added.

"What the fuck!" I cursed, "Why?!"

Natalia laughed cruelly, "You ask 'why?'. I can give you a list; you are a new toy, clean and untouched by others. You have been placed on a pedestal and everyone is trying desperately to have you."

"You're a girl," Bella added, "we are rare among our kind and it only places a bigger target on your back."

"You're also a huge resent button," Raquel proclaimed. "When our continents were discovered we became free game for anyone to have. No questions asked, no protests granted, whoever found you, kept you." Her dark eyes lowered to her glass as she poured herself another drink. "The Portuguese, the Spanish, the French, the English, the Dutch," she laughed, "they all had claim or so they said." She swallowed her liquor in one gulp and smirked, "don't you see? You're the second chance for any nation that couldn't claim your father back in the fifteenth century. They can't have your land of course, but they can have you."

I slammed my fists against the table, leaving dents. "Do I look like a damned trophy to you?!" The girls grew silent as I continued to rant, "I'm a person! I have feelings! Does that not mean anything to you people?!"

No one answered till Elizabeta said, "I suggest you keep your feelings close America. Because the ones you need to watch out for are the ones that try to be your friend. The ones that take you out to dinner or dancing, they take it slow, make you believe that you're special, that they're different from the others. They slowly creep into your heart and once they have you," she shook her head, "it's over."

My anger was reaching to its boiling point. "I won't fall," I hissed. "I refuse to be part of their game and you can go ahead and spread this little piece of gossip. No one will have me! I belong to no one but myself!"
Raquel sneered, "You sure you want us to spread that message around? It would only encourage them." She played with the rim of her glass, "you should be happy that you were born in this day and age. Back when we were fresh little flowers, they would just take it. I mean there is a reason why Hungary dressed as a boy for most of her early years besides the fact that she thought she was boy."

She laughed, "Go ahead Hungary, tell her what happened when Turkey found out you were a girl."

Elizabeta glared at her but told the tale, "He made me into one his concubines and on the first night he tried to have me," she swallowed down her vodka. "I slit his throat and stabbed him in the eye. He made sure to check me for knifes after that, but he thought twice before he laid a finger on me again."

"And Belarus, I believe you have an interesting story for us," Raquel gestured to Natalia.

Natalia shook her head, "is there a point to this."

"Of course there is, Little America doesn't see how good she has it, continue please."

The Belarusian girl breathed through her nose, "Prussia tried to have his way with me but I killed him."

"But how? Give us the details."

Natalia glanced to me and back to Raquel, "I cut off his penis and forced it down his throat. I then watched as he bleed out and choked on his own dick."

I paled and stared at her with a whole new set of eyes as Raquel laughed, "Marvelous." Her face sobered up when she placed her attention back to me, "See. Aren't you lucky you live in a time where consent matters?"

I glared at her, "well it certainly didn't stop Ivan," I hissed.

She shrugged, "if he had raped you it wouldn't have counted; besides you got away didn't you?"

I dug my finger nails into my palms controlling the urge to bust her head against the table. "I need air." I said through gritted teeth and walked out of the room. I sprinted up the stairs, locked myself in the bathroom and threw my fist into the wall. I took deep breaths to keep my anger in check as I tore my hand out of the hole I made in the wall.

Deciding to rub salt in the wound, my mind set me back to the event of Ivan forcing me to the floor as he tore my dress and forced his hand up my leg. The memory sent chills down my spine as I fell against the door and slid myself to the floor. I brought my knees to my chest and tried to block out any thought of Russia from my mind.

Once those thoughts were successfully barricaded I was left open for my imagination to go wild; images of Elizabeta and Natalia killing Sadiq and Gilbert engulfed my thoughts. Each girl had cold eyes as they slayed the men, striking them down, simply to protect their virtue. But what morals were they protecting when they didn't even seem fazed that they were covered in their attacker's blood.

I shook my head, I sounded like a hypocrite.

When Ivan threatened me I was too terrified to even think. All I wanted was to run, to get away and if killing him meant safety. . . God, I don't know. I've killed aliens yes, but it helped that they looked like monsters. I guess it's easier to kill something that doesn't look like a person.
But still, I had no right to judge Elizabeta and Natalia.

I sighed; I almost believed that I was hanging out with average, everyday girls, but here comes reality, slapping me in the face once again. These girls were centuries older than me and if I remembered anything from my world history class most of them went through war, famine, disease and any other crap that rolled their way and survived.

To think they would be undamaged by those events and be totally normal for one night was naive of me. And the booze definitely didn't help.

But the thought that continued to haunt me, that continued to remain me, was that one day I could be just like them.

A knock came from the door, "Amy?"

I flinched, "yes?"

"Are you okay?" asked Victoria.

"I-I'm fine," I breathed in deeply one last time. "I'm fine."

When I returned to the living room all eyes were on me.

"Are you alright?" Bella asked.

"Yeah," I reassured.

Elizabeta slapped Raquel's arm, "You better apologize to her."

She rubbed her stinging limb, "What for?"

"For scaring her."

"I was warning her."

I cut in, "It's fine Elizabeta. I'm glad she told me, now I can make sure to be on my guard."

Irunya's eyes grew sad but knowing, "America, come, sit beside me."

I gave her puzzled look but did what she asked.

"What Brazil and Hungary have said is true, most nations will only want you for ulterior motives but there are good ones out there." She proclaimed, "Some that actually want a decent, human connection."

Raquel snorted, "Name one."

A cunning smile grew on Irunya's lips, "Argentina."

Raquel instantly twitched as she continued, "he cares about you and you care about him, you just been hurt too much by Uruguay to actually let him in. You know it hurts him, but you refuse to see it. Frankly, sometimes I wonder why he puts up with you, but I know it's because he l-"

"Don't even say that word." Raquel warned, "That word doesn't exist for us."
Mei rolled her eyes, "someone's in denial."

Irunya turned back to me, "What I mean to say is, one day America you will find someone that will care for you and actually wish to have a relationship with you, being a nation or human."

I blinked, "you've had a relationship with a human?"

Bella laughed, "Amy we all have, at least once or twice in our lifetime."

"I know that Victoria prefers to chase after humans," Elizabeta teased her.

"Hey, I can't help it. They're just so handsome and with half of the drama."

"Very true," Kim nodded.

Irunya carried on, "Now that you know that the nations are after you for a silly bet, don't be so quick to put up your walls. Keep yourself open to love even when you fall for someone that will hurt you in end. Don't let one mistake-"

"Or hundreds," Elizabeta added.

"Keep you from finding someone special. Also, there's no such thing as a soul mate, yes one person will be more precious to you than another. But I believe that there are countless of people for everyone to have at least two or three loves in their lives. And with our life rate I figured we can have at least twenty."

The girls giggled as Irunya caressed my cheek, "I will not sugar coat it. Love is a double edged sword; it can heal just as it can break hearts. But hearts do mend over time, no matter the scar it will fade. What won't fade will be the affection for that person, no matter how the relationship has ended, if they will good and kind, you will be able to look back on your time together with fondness."

"Do not close yourself from love; it will only leave you bitter and hateful. Fall in love whenever you can and when you find a person to cherish, to love; don't let go. Enjoy your time together no matter how short."

I smiled, "you sound a lot like my mom; she would've told me something like this."

She beamed and Elizabeta announced, "Alright, I think we're done drinking for tonight."

"Psh," Raquel mumbled as she drank another glass of liquor.

Elizabeta and Bella cleared the table to make room for the Ouija board. Natalia cursed in Russian, "you are not serious."

"What? It's just a game," said Elizabeta.

"That is not a game," she warned.

"Oh come on, are you scared of ghosts?"

"I am simply cautious."

Bella handed her a notebook and pencil, "then you can watch and keep track of the answers."

"I'll keep you company," I sat myself next to Natalia on the leather couch. Raquel and Irunya joined us mostly because Raquel wanted to drink and Irunya didn't care for the board.
The rest of the girls circled the table and placed their hands on the planchette. Elizabeta became the medium, "Welcome all dear spirits," she and the girls moved the pointer around the board. "If one is among us, reveal yourself to us."

Nothing happened.

Elizabeta smirked at Natalia, "see, there's nothing to be scared of."

The game continued with nothing to report; mostly a lot of random letters and Bella moving the piece around to screw with Elizabeta. After ten minutes, Mei and Kim lost interest and joined us as we watched the 1996 film *Scream*. Thirty minutes into the movie Victoria called out, "Uh, guys the board is asking for you all to come here."

Raquel laughed, "For what? Is it going to tell us when we're going to die?"

"Just get over here."

I paused the movie, "It must be a prank." I whispered low, "just pretend to be scared and they'll leave us alone."

We gathered around the table as Elizabeta said, "We are all here, now who are we speaking to?"

"Yoda," I said as a joke.

Bella gave me a look, "don't make fun of them."

The planchette moved to spell-


My eyes widened.

"Who's Kai," Erika asked the most obvious question.

Victoria looked to Mei and Kim, "Name ringing any bells?"

They shook their heads and I mentally shook myself. Kai was a common name and Elizabeta was just messing with us. They continued to move the pointer.


"Two Crow?" Raquel knitted her brows together, "what kind of name is that?"

A chill traveled down my spine and I tried to laugh it off, "Okay, Elizabeta have you been in my room?"

"No."

"Yes, yes you have." I proclaimed. "Who else would know this?! Admit it, you read my grandfather's journal!"

"What journal?!" she exclaimed as she rose to her feet, "I have no idea what you are talking about!"

My breathing was rapid and I had to swallow the lump in my throat to try and calm myself down. I glanced to the Ouija board and I snapped, "Seriously, an Ouija board! Seriously?!!" I shouted at the ceiling, "I've seen you twice old man, twice! I've seen you in your stupid shirt, in your stupid khakis
and in your stupid feathered, Indian head dress! Guess what you're not scary!"

"Ms. America calm down," said Irunya.

"No! No! This old man is messing with us! Get out here, right now!"

Erika screamed and we turned to find her pointing to the board, "t-the planchette moved on its own."

We stepped closer to find that the planchette pointed to the answer: No.

Kim lifted a brow, "Well, things sure have gotten interesting."

I ignored her. "No? What the hell do you mean no?!" I exclaimed at the board.

"America is it really a smart idea to yell at the spirit," Bella remarked.

"I know this spirit," I hissed, "this spirit won't do shit!" I turned back to the board. "Who are you hiding from old man?!"

The planchette wiggled and slid to-


Before any of us could even question what those letters meant, the planchette shook and slid rapidly to three corners of the board over and over again.

"What is he spelling?" Victoria trembled as she moved closer to Erika's side.

Mei stood over the table, "it seems to only point at three letters." She focused on the board, "R . . U . . N," she blinked, "Run?"

At that moment the lights went out, sending us into complete darkness.
Chapter 14

The girls screamed and I will admit, I screamed along with them.

Once we took a moment to breath, we had the chance to hear someone laughing.

"Ha," Raquel gasped for breath, "Liz, I gotta say, you got us good this year."

"Raquel, I didn't do this," Elizabeta proclaimed.

Everyone was silent as I blinked to adjust my eyes to the darkness. The girls were accounted for, Kim and Mei stood at attention as Erika and Victoria held each other. Irunya was crying as Natalia comforted her and Bella was leaning against a wall, wrapping her arms around herself. I glanced to Elizabeta as she walked over to the light switch; she flicked it once, twice; nothing.

She sighed, "The fuse box must have short-circuited." She walked over to a hallway table and pulled out four flashlights. "Amy, you're with me, everyone wait here."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Outside, that's where the fuse box is," she answered as she passed flashlights around.

"That's a bad idea," I proclaimed, "have you not seen horror movies?"

"Amy, this is real life not a movie, we'll be fine."

"Besides she's just screwing with us," Raquel added.

"I'm not-" she rolled her eyes, "whatever, come on." Elizabeta gestured for me to walk out the door. I purposely took my time to put on my sneakers, hesitating to follow her. When she noticed, she shook her head and pulled me along by the arm.

It was a cool, moonlit night. Owls were hooting, crickets were chirping and the leaves were wrestling. I was jumping and yelping at ever sound, "what was that?!" I asked turning my head from the left to the right.

"That was a stick, you stepped on it," Elizabeta said as she pointed the flashlight at my feet.

I looked down to find a twig under my sneaker, "Oh." I flushed, embarrassed, "hehehe."

She walked on and I followed, not being able to shake the feeling that someone was watching us. We rounded the manor to the left side to where the gray fuse box was. The older girl lifted the light to the box to find it completely wrecked.

"What the hell?" Elizabeta cursed as she ran a hand over the box. Three deep gashes had dug into the metal and wires. Some electrical currents sparked and hissed and the cover of the box was twisted off. Literally, it was lying on the ground in the form of a bow tie.

"It looks like something clawed into it," I remarked.

At that moment a flock of birds screeched and scattered in the wind. We spun around as Elizabeta flashed the light into the trees and to the ground. The air suddenly stiffens and the animal life grew eerily silent.
"We should go back into the house," I proclaimed.

"It's alright; it must've been a cat."

A ghostly sigh echoed and I flinched, "did you hear that?"

She groaned, "Can you stop!" She waved the light around, "There's nothing out here!"

I followed the light and I yelped when a flash of figure appeared and disappeared in a blink of an eye. "Go back!" I exclaimed, "To the tree!" I snatched the flashlight from her and guided the light back to the tree, the figure was gone.

She sighed, "You're as bad as your father, let's go," she headed back to the front door.

That hit a nerve. I grumbled a string of curses as I followed behind her, but the feeling of someone watching would not go away. My gut told me to keep walking but I ignored it and turned around. I pointed the light to a tree that was about ten feet away. A freakishly tall man, dressed in a black suit stood next to that tree. I narrowed my eyes, he looked oddly familiar.

The man lifted his head and I froze. He had no face.

My heart sunk into my stomach as I grabbed Elizabeta's hand and made a mad dash back to the house. I shoved her in and locked the front door. I was gasping, trying to wrap my head around the idea that my pre-teen nightmare had come to life.

The girls came running with their lights flashing, "What's wrong?" Erika asked.

"I don't know," Elizabeta said, irritated. "America got scared and dragged me back in."

"I got scared for a reason! I saw Slender man!" I exclaimed.

The nations gave me confused looks, "who?" Natalia asked.

My eyes widened, "You don't know who Slender man is?! Have you been living under a rock?!"

"No," she said through gritted teeth, "but I would prefer it that you wouldn't shout in my face."

"Okay, settle down," Elizabeta stepped between us and looked at me, "Amy I didn't see anything."

"Of course you didn't see anything," I exclaimed. "But it explains everything, the birds flying away, the insects going quiet and the fuse box being torn apart! Slender man's behind it all-"

Elizabeta slapped me and I cursed, "what the fuck was that for?!"

"To slap some sense into you," she exclaimed.

"But-" then the memory of Nina came rolling back; how some spirits love to scare humans. I released a short laugh and stomped back outside. "Ha! Kai, you got us! You got us good old man!"

"Amy, get back inside!"

"No!" I shouted. "Show yourself Kai!"

"Wasn't that the spirit that told us to run," Mei proclaimed.

I snorted, "Don't bother. He's just screwing with us!"
The air chilled and I glanced to my left to find Slender man. I mentally pushed aside the fear and remembered that it was just Kai. "You're still using that bit!"

The nations were leaning against the door, each of them staring in a mix of horror and wonder. "What is that?" Kim asked.

I rolled my eyes, "it's Slender man, but relax it's a guy in a costume." I figured that it would be too confusing to explain that spirits are shape shifters. "You better drop your act old man. It ain't funny no more!"

"Amy, get back in the house!" Elizabeta exclaimed.

Raquel laughed, "Liz you really went all out this year. Who's that? Germany? Prussia?"

"Raquel, do me a favor, shut up!"

I ignored them and stepped towards the internet mythical creature. "Seriously Kai, enough already." The faceless creature tilted his head and reached for me with his long, boney fingers. He had no mouth but yet there was a voice, it was unisex and it sounded like hundreds of voices were speaking at once.

"Iya is waiting," he proclaimed as he wrapped his hand around my neck and lifted me up into the air. Some of the girls screamed as Elizabeta and Natalia came running. Elizabeta kicked this creature in the gut as Natalia pulled a knife and sliced his arm off. He screeched in a series of pained hisses as I fell to the ground, his discarded hand evaporating into dark smoke. The creature held its wounded arm as black vapor leaked out slowly.

I knitted my brows in confusion, when spirits are attacked they heal instantly by regenerating. Nothing about black smoke was ever part of the equation. "What the-" I murmured as Elizabeta forced me to my feet and shoved be back into the manor.

"Whatever that thing is we can all agree it isn't human," Elizabeta proclaimed as she locked the door.

"America," Natalia said as I turned to face her. She smacked me, "what were you thinking?! You could have gotten yourself killed!"

I rubbed my wounded cheek, "I thought it was just a prank," I mumbled.

"By who? This Kai person? By the way, who is he? Is he another one of your friends?"

The way she said the word, I figured she meant did Kai know about us. "Somewhat," I sighed, "My grandfather left me a journal and he mention someone named Kai Two Crow. But he died over sixty years ago."

"So is he the one haunting us?" Bella asked.

"He's the one that warned us," Mei remarked.

"Oh stop!" Raquel exclaimed, "This is all a joke. I give you props Liz, but don't you think this is enough? I mean look at Erika, she's about to cry."

We all glanced to Erika and she seemed fine, frightened but fine. The small blond girl narrowed her eyes at Raquel, "I'm not crying."

"I did say 'about to'."
"Brazil," Elizabeta hissed, "For the last time, I didn't plan this!"

Raquel rolled her eyes and spun to face the darkness of the main hallway. She grew silent as she focused, "Hey, Bell can you point the flashlight here."

Bella did what she asked and once the light hit the hall, Slender man was there. Everyone jumped as Raquel cursed, "Shit!" She smashed the vodka bottle she was holding against the wall and wielded the sharp, broken bottle at the faceless creature. "Get out of here you freak!"

When Slender man didn't respond, Brazil strutted forward and knifed him in the chest. Slender man moaned as black smoke leaked and circled around him. This black smoke quickly formed and hardened into tentacles. They wrapped themselves around Raquel and hauled her out the front window. Glass shattered as her body crashed through it and fell into the yard.

Elizabeta was the first to react, "Scatter!"

The nations ran in different directions; Kim, Erika and Victoria headed into the living room. Natalia and Irunya made a break for the front door as Bella, Mei and Elizabeta rounded into the kitchen. I was alone as I sprinted upstairs and of course Slender man followed me.

I leaped into my bedroom and locked the door. I frantically searched through the room, looking for anything to defend myself with. I found my phone and discovered it had no signal, for all the times T-Mobile had to fail, this was definitely not it.

That's when I heard something tapping at my window; I looked up to find a black bird. I ignored it and continued to search but that bird would not stop.

"Shut up," I threw a shoe at it.

The bird cried, "Amy, let me in!"

My jaw dropped; mostly to the thought of a talking bird, which I had to mentally slap myself right after. I've met talking animals before, this was nothing new, but what made me stare at the bird was that I knew that voice. I walked over, slowly, "Kai?"

"Yes, now let me in!"

I slid open the window as the bird flew in. He circled around the room and in a blink of an eye; he took his human form as he landed to the floor. He brushed off some dirt that was on his shirt, "thank you, those things were right on my tail."

So many questions spun in my head, but I was able to keep the number low. "What are the spirits doing?! Why have they taken the form of Slender man?! And why are they coming to get us?!"

"Those things are not spirits."

I froze as the realization hits me, "then Slender man is real?!"

"No," Kai sighed. "Amy, Slender man is not a new idea. The concept of a faceless creature is as old as time itself. The Duenne from the Trinidad, the Chi lobos from Mexico, the Noppera-bō from Japan, and the Allu from the Sumerians; all are different in shape and size but they have no face. Then there's Skuld, one of the Norse fates, she represents the future and has no face. Then there is Leinth, the faceless goddess of death in Etruscan mythology. Tell me, throughout all these years and throughout all these countries, why would a faceless creature myth be made into each culture?"
I remembered what Grandpa always said, "Because all myths are born from truth."

He smiled, "I told that to your grandfather, he taught you well." Then his smile disappeared replaced with a serious expression. "Do you know of the vapors?"

"Yeah, they're dark, evil spirits that survive on hate and anger, right?"

He sighed again, "There is more to them. It is true; they thrive on hate, anger, fear, everything that is negative about humanity. But a vapor is born in two ways. When there is chaos in the world and there always is, they can use that energy to multiply, to split themselves in two, over and over again. The second way is when a human soul is beyond saving, when they choose to hate and hurt people. They are tempted by the Abyss and are led into the darkness, where the vapors are waiting to devour them." His eyes grew sad, as if taking a moment of silence for the lost souls. "From those pieces of discarded souls, they lose their light and become vapors themselves."

I nodded, "okay so there is a hell, good to know, but that doesn't answer the most important question. What the fuck is behind that door?!" I exclaimed as we took a moment to hear something moan as it scratched at the door.

Then the faceless creature sank his fingers into the wood like claws and tore the door apart. I cursed as Kai took the form of the black bird and flew at his head. He pecked at him as the creature swung its long arms at Kai. I grabbed the chair from the work desk, kicked off a leg and used it as a bat.

"Kai move!" I swung as he flew away and I smacked Slender man upside his head. "Batter up bitch!" I swung again, landing a hit under his chin. He fell back and I exclaimed, "Is that the best you got!"

Kai, still in his bird form, soared to land on the headboard of my bed, "Amy, don't underestimate them, this is the vapors' most powerful form. In their weakest stage, they can only survive on the earth plane when there is enough negative energy and even with that they can only tempt a person into evil, whispering in their ears, promising them their deepest desires."

"I guess Christianity is on the right track there when they say the devil is on your shoulder."

Slender man stretched his arm and sank his fingers into my shoulder. With a simple flick of his wrist, he tossed me into the desk. The wood snapped and collapsed into pieces. I groaned as I moved myself on my side, "fuck," I cursed. Slender man crept forward and Kai flew with his talons out, slashing and pecking at him rapidly. I ignored the stinging pain in my back and pushed myself to my feet.

Kai screeched, "Out the window!"

I nodded as I grabbed a table leg and climbed out the window. Unfortunately, I quickly discovered that the manor only had a slim rim separating the first and second floors. I lost my only weapon as I had to use both hands to grip the window frame.

Kai followed me, "jump for the attic!"

I leaped for the roof of the third floor but missed. I tripped over the rim and fell back. I protected my head as I crashed to the ground. Pain surged through my hip and ribs, "Ow," I cried in a soft voice as Kai landed beside, "are you okay?"

"Do I look okay to you old man," I hissed.

He didn't have time to say anything else as Slender man crawled out of the window with his legs on
backwards and his arms crouched forward. It found us by tilting his head in a full 180.

I scrambled back, "okay, that thing ain't Slender man." I grabbed the wooden leg and held it front of me.

Kai nodded, "in their second stage, when there's more than enough negative energy for them, like having a power source or opening a door into the Abyss," he narrowed his dark bird eyes at me.

"Why are you looking at me for?"

"The Ouija board doesn't just open a door into the Spirit World it also opens a door into the Abyss. Didn't anyone warn you about those things? Ouija boards are dangerous if you don't know how to use them," he lectured.

"I get it old man I screwed up. But again, what does any of this have to do with that?!" I pointed to the faceless, suit-wearing, spider-man wannabe.

"Knowledge is power," he proclaimed. "In times of war, there is enough hate and despair for them to come together and create a human form so everyone can see them. But what gives them away is that they have no face, no identity, no soul. They want what you all have."

My eyes widened, "A soul."

The creature leaped for me and I rolled away, jumping to my feet. It hissed at me as he twisted his mid-section around to a line with his legs. It moved like it had no bones, bending himself back into place.

I slammed the leg into its skull again, sending his head completely backwards. I watched in horror as he twisted his head back into place, "this thing's a demon!"

Kai soared onto the branch above me. "Well I guess you can call them demons, but we call them nunasishs."

"And what does that mean?"

I snapped and beat the nunasish in the head, crushing its skull and leaving it twitching on the ground. "So they are spirits!"

He tilted his head, "Not entirely-"

I threw the table leg at him, "you crazy old man! Why the hell didn't you say all this sooner?! Instead of showing off how much you know everything and that you can turn into a stupid crow!"

"I'm a raven," he remarked.

"Does it look like I care?!"

He snapped his head up, "Amy behind you!"

Before I could prepare myself for a behind attack from the nunasish, a black BMW zoomed pass me and crashed the faceless demon into a far off tree. The vehicle's hood had wrapped itself around the tree, pinning the demon against the bark. The wind shield was shattered, the air bag was activated and the engine spat out smoke as it died. A tan skinned woman kicked open the driver's door. That same door fell off its hedges with a thud as Raquel climbed out and leaned against the destroyed car.
"That is what you get for throwing me out the window and ruining my favorite night gown," she gestured to her pj's that were covered in rips and tears. She lifted her hand to her mouth and took a long drag from her cigarette.

I recognized the car; it was the BMW that we were borrowing from Gilbert. "How did you-"

She turned to me, "I hot-wired the car, found a pack of cigarettes in the glove department and decided to show this faceless bastard how we drive in Brazil."

"But that's not even our car!" I exclaimed.

"Relax, I'll pay for the damages, but more importantly, did I kill it?" she inhaled her cigarette again.

I shook my head as I walked to the front of the car. The nunasish was slammed by its side, restrained against the tree and impaled by the bumper. Its long spider limbs were limp and its upper body was spread over the hood.

"I think you did-"

The nunasish's hand twitched and started to move. "What the hell is this thing?!" Raquel glared at it.

"It's gonna be a pissed off demon if we don't get out of here!" I exclaimed. We headed straight to the manor but I missed the front door as something wrapped around my ankle and rammed me against the front step. I spat out blood as I was dragged back to the nunasish.

I dug my nails into the dirt, kicking at the black tentacle with my free foot. Raquel grabbed my forearms and I became the rope in their tug-a-war struggle. Unfortunately, Raquel was losing.

"Do something," she hissed.

"I'm kicking as hard as I can, dammit!"

We dropped to the ground as the tentacle around my leg disappeared. I looked back to find Natalia with a dagger in hand. The nunasish hissed as the wounded black tentacle sank back into its body. It then began to twist and dig its way out between the BMW and the tree.

Irunya came out of nowhere and in one swift move, stabbed the demon with a pitch fork. Raquel and I stared as the nunasish convulsed and cracks began to spread throughout its body. Bright yellow light peeked out through those cracks, causing the demon to scream in agony. Its blank face actually creating an expression; its gray skin stretched giving it a nose as three black holes formed where the mouth and eye sockets would be.

The bright fractures and splits covered the nunasish's body and like a vase, it shattered. The pieces disappearing into smoke.

"Irunya!" I tackled her into a hug, "You're amazing!"

She scratched herself behind her head, "thank you," she said nervously.

"I don't get it," said Raquel, "I crashed a car into it but it was killed with a pitch fork?"

"It seems its weakness is metal," Natalia proclaimed as she caressed the dagger in her hand.

I nodded, "okay, but where did you get the pitch fork?"

"From your next door neighbor's shed," Irunya smiled.
"Raquel committed grand thief auto and you broke into a shed and stole a gardening tool. We're certainly building up a record."

Raquel snickered, "she thinks that's a record," she inhaled her cigarette.

I ignored her, "So their weakness is metal," I clapped my hands together. "Let's gather the girls, give them some knifes and pray we live to see the sunrise."

"Their weakness is not metal," Kai called out as he flew to land on my shoulder. "Their weakness is your aura."

"Are you the spirit that had warned us?" Natalia asked the bird, unfazed that it had spoken.

"Yes, and I'm sorry I could not have warn you sooner."

"No need good spirit," Irunya added, "we should've taken your warning more seriously."

Raquel said nothing as she pulled the cigarette pack from the middle of her boobs and took out another fig. She burned out the last one and lit the new one with a lighter, also from her cleavage.

"Aren't any of you fazed that this animal is talking?" I wondered.

"America we are very old, we have seen many things." Natalia proclaimed as she glanced to Kai, "he is old magick."

Kai nodded to her as Raquel continued, "So, what is this aura you speak of? Is it like life energy?"

"Yes, Aura is your life essence that leaks from your soul and spreads over your bodies."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted, "isn't that what they want? Our souls?"

"Yes, but think of your soul as a blow fish, if prepared right, it is delicious but when eaten without being properly cut, it is poisonous. The only way a nunasish can eat your soul is when they drain it from your mouth or eyes." He continued, "The only way to destroy a nunasish is to stab it with your aura."

"How do we do that?" I asked.

"You already did it," he gestured to the Natalia and Irunya. "Why do you think humans have believed for centuries that the only way to kill a dragon or a monster is with swords, stacks or silver? What humans don't understand is that weapons become an extension of one's self. When you bond with a weapon your aura expands over the blade."

Natalia nodded in understanding, "so the metal of the weapon does not matter as long as we can stab it through."

"Precisely," Kai nodded.

Screams and gunshots echoed as bright lights flashed from the manor's windows. The three older girls took off and I followed behind as Kai flew above. Raquel kicked open the door and found Erika, Victoria and Kim cornered by another faceless demon. It was dressed the same way as the last, as Slender man.

"I'm guessing these things are not that creative." I remarked.

"Creativity comes from the soul," Kai answered me; "they have none."
Kim used a coat rack to flip herself up and spun kicked the demon across the face. She landed with ease, crossed the coat rack between her arms and smacked it over the head. The nunasish collapsed as Kim continued to beat it and didn't stop till the head was reduced to puddle of black ooze.

Kim panted as she stepped back, "you think that did it?"

Victoria's eyes widened, "His head's growing back! Erika, shoot him!"

Erika aimed her pistol but Natalia jumped in and stabbed a knife into the back of the demon. It died just as the last, breaking into tiny pieces like fragile glass.

Everyone was quiet for a minute till Kim proclaimed, "Erika shot three bullets at him and I crushed his skull but the only way to kill him is to stab him with a little dagger."

"It's because people bond with guns not the bullets and crushing them is useless," Kai answered.
"Wish we knew that before Raquel totaled the car," I mumbled.

"Oh merda, I said I will pay for it," Brazil hissed.

"Enough with your petty quarreling," Natalia exclaimed. "What I would like to know if that was the last of them."

A loud crash came from the kitchen and I just had to say, "I believe that answers your question."

She ignored me as we chased after her into the kitchen. Three nunasishs had surrounded Bella, Mei and Elizabeta, all three nations were wielding skillets and large knives. The faceless demons leaped at them and the girls didn't even bat an eye. Bella bent low and stabbed a nunasish in the gut as Mei high kicked her demon to the floor and knifed him in the chest. Elizabeta smacked her's over with a skillet and stabbed it in the neck.

All three demons screeched in sync as they broke and shattered into pieces.

During the brief moment of silence I looked to each girl. Their clothes were ripped, their hair was knotted and they were covered in dried blood.

"Is it over?" Bella sighed, exhausted.

"Far from it," Kai proclaimed, "the only way to end this is to close the gate."

"What gate?" I asked.

"The Ouija board, also known as the door or the gate others would call them," he said sarcastically.

"Don't be smart," I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Amy, you do realize that bird is talking right?" Victoria asked.

"Thank you, at least somebody is questioning this," I pointed to the raven on my shoulder.

Elizabeta hurried into the living room, "Fuck!"

"What is it?!" Bella exclaimed as we ran into the room.

"The Ouija board is gone," she sighed as she rubbed the bridge of her nose.
"Seriously?!!" Victoria whined, "Where would it go?"

"It's a magickal board that opens the door to the Spirit World. It does whatever the fuck it wants," Raquel pointed out.

"Like release faceless, soul eating demons," Natalia remarked.

"And give us the aid of a talking bird," Kim added.

"I'm a raven," Kai proclaimed.

"So why wouldn't it want to play hide and seek with us," Mei shrugged.

"Okay, before we do anything else, we need weapons," said Elizabeta.

"Why," I said sarcastically, "we seem to be doing fine with skillets and knives."

"Are you done," her eye twitched in irritation.

"Yes I am," I smiled.

Elizabeta led the way to the third floor, by walking into a spare room on the right side of the second floor. There was a doorway with a flat of stairs that led to the attic. It was filled with typical junk you would find at any garage sale. Old bicycles, a vintage type writer, worn out trunks and a wooden rocking horse; there were even photo albums scattered everywhere. I opened one to find Gilbert holding up a small blond haired boy, it was an old black and white photograph and they seemed to be wearing clothes from a Jane Austen novel.

"That's Mr. Germany when he was child," Erika said over my shoulder.

I jumped a little, "Holy crap, don't scare me like that," I whispered harshly.

"Found it!" Elizabeta exclaimed as she opened a massive black trunk. We walked over and my eyes popped out of their sockets as Elizabeta pulled out swords, knives, bows and arrows.

I blinked, "What the heck is this? The Lord of the Rings?"

"Not your everyday skillets and kitchen knives," Elizabeta smirked and held up a sword with a very sharp point. It had a basket handle, almost like a fencing blade. "Victoria, are you any good at fencing?"

She gave a prideful smile, "I've beaten Britain and France; they were no match to my skills."

"Then you get the rapier," Elizabeta handed the blade over and turned to Kim and Mei. "Are you two familiar with short swords?"

Mei nodded, "It's like the wakizashi."

"The waki-what?" I questioned.

"It's the Japanese version of a short sword," Kim answered. "Think of it as a smaller katana."

"But this one is European styled," Elizabeta added, "the width of the blade is several inches wide and its handle makes it look like a smaller claymore." She hands each one to Kim and Mei.

"There are three claymores," she continued, giving a sword that looked like it was a prop from the
Narnia movies to Bella. "Irunya do you want one?"

"I'm fine, I'll stick to the pitch fork," she said.

"Here, take a knife," Elizabeta handed her one as she gave a leather harness filled with knives to Natalia, who nodded in thanks and wrapped them around her shoulder. Strapping it across her chest and tying it around her waist. "Erika, you got the best aim," she hands her a bow and a quiver filled with modern archery arrows.

I analyzed the arrows, "those seem pretty new, does Gilbert update these?"

"He must," she gestured to the cover and I read, "For Last Resorts," this was written in red letters.

"At least he sharpens them, Boss forgets," Bella commented as she practiced with the claymore.

Elizabeta grins, "Yeah, the last thing we need is dull weapons." She then held up a curved blade, it looked like a pirate sword. "Raquel, I found you a cutlass."

"Finally," she snatched the sword and unsheathed it. The blade was clean, sharp and shined when the moonlight hit it.

Elizabeta turned to me, "here," she shoved a sword's handle into my hands. "Take a claymore." She unsheathed her claymore, "let's go," she proclaimed as they headed out the door.

"Wait, I have no idea how to use a sword," I exclaimed but they ignored me as they walked down the stairs.

"You did play with them when you were a kid," Kai added.

I gave him a look, "they were Nerf swords; they were made of foam."

"Amy, stop arguing with the bird and come on," Victoria called.

I sighed and turned to the door as it slammed in my face. The nations on the other side cried out for me as I tried to break open the door. A chill ran down my spine as I side-glanced to a dark corner. A gray hand with long fingers bolted out and slammed me against the floor. My head collided against the wood as my vision blurred and I gasped for air.

I was so disoriented that I didn't even notice that this hand was pulling me into the dark corner. The nunasish fully formed, bringing its blank-less face an inch away from mine. "Iya is waiting," it whispered.

Kai transformed into his human form as bright purple light sparked in his hands. He shot this colored fire at the nunasish. It shrieked in agony and shot out a tentacle, wrapping around his neck and banging him against trunks, bikes and finally the wall. Once Kai was held down it continued to drag me towards the darkness, repeating, "Iya is waiting."

My vision finally cleared and I began to kick and punch the faceless demon. My hits were useless as it gave no sign of weakening. I stretched my hand over my head, trying to reach for the sword. My calves dipped into cold water and I instantly froze, this felt terrifyingly familiar. I grew desperate, kneeling the nunasish in the gut and sinking my nails into its face.

Again, it felt nothing as it tightened its hold on me and pulled along as it sank deeper into the pit of darkness. Tears formed in the corner of my eyes as my heart rammed against my chest.
"Amy, don't be afraid!" Kai exclaimed, "That's what feeds them!"

I heard nothing as I struggled for freedom, kicking, scratching and screaming frantically. I was only able to catch blurs of purple light as this light sliced off the tentacle and the arm of the nunasish. I scrabbled away as Kai tackled the demon into the black vortex.

"Kai!" I shrieked as all I could do was watch as the old man sank into the tar of darkness. Before he was truly gone, he parted one final look to me. He beamed as the tar swallowed him whole.

Fear disappeared as I leaped for the black hole but I was only met with wooden floors and discarded trunks. I ignored the pain from my shoulders and arms and patted the floor; the vortex was gone. "No," I whispered, "no, no, no! Kai!" I slammed my fists on the floor, "Kai!"

Elizabeta was finally able to force the door open. She cried out for me as she kneeled beside me, "What happen?"

"They took him," I said, "The nunasish took him!"

Elizabeta noticed that Kai was no longer in the room and sighed. "Amy, we don't have time to grieve."

"But I could've done something," I said through gritted teeth as I placed my forehead to the wood. "I should've done something," I punched the floor again, "dammit."

She was quiet as she pushed the fallen claymore into my hand, "sometimes fear grabs a hold of you but you must learn to overcome it."

We shared an understanding gaze and I pushed back my grief and allowed my frustration to take charge. I gripped the handle of the sword, rose to my feet and followed her out of the attic.

Everyone was silent as we moved through the second floor. The air carried an unnervingly atmosphere and I could feel the muscles of my shoulders tense with each step we took.

"Is just me or does it seem too quiet," Bella said.

Mei pointed her flashlight up to the ceiling, "it's not just you."

We looked up to find nunasishs scattered over the ceiling, looking down at us with their faceless heads on backwards along with the lower half of their bodies. They attacked and the nations struck back with slashes and arrows.

Kim made sure to carry the coat rack as she continued to use it as a bow staff. She slammed an end into the gut of a demon, with the force of her weight; the coat rack trapped the creature under its hold, allowing her the chance to stab it with the short sword. Then Mei swung herself off the same coat rack, kicking a nunasish in the chest and knifing another in the neck.

Erika and Victoria were back to back as one girl shot out arrows with perfect precision. The other thrusting her sharp blade into anything that dared to come too close to her and her friend. Raquel sliced off limbs till she drove in for the kill. The face she made was of pure bliss, almost as if she enjoyed the blood, gore and excitement of battle.

Irunya waved her stolen pitch fork with experience as she impaled nunasishs with ease and reeled them off rail, sending them crashing to the first floor. Natalia moved like a fierce lynx, dancing around demons as she flung daggers into their heads and backs. She aimed low to strike and jumped to slit throats. She would then run up walls, throw her knives like kunais (hitting her targets every
time, I might add.) and land on her feet like an agile cat.

It was like watching a *Kill Bill* movie come to life. You know, instead of fighting Yakuza we were fighting demons. *Yeah, my life makes total sense.*

I wielded the claymore with both hands as I swung the blade around; I was blessed with lucky hits but I had no skill and it showed. The nunasishe had their focus on me, trying to snatch me with their boney hands. The nations realized this and moved to circle around me. Raquel took my back as Elizabeta and Bella guarded our sides.

I tried to mimic the moves of the claymore wielding girls as they clashed, blocked and jabbed at the nunasishe. They were ferocious as they slashed and pierced the faceless demons effortlessly. Shouting battle cries in different tongues and using quick two person strategy to take on three or five demons at a time. Their true nature as warriors revealed as they attacked in perfect sync, reading each other's subtle expressions and movement.

The battle raged on, and the nunasishe seemed to only multiply as we continued to rip and stab. Mei called out as she knifed a demon in the chest, "does anyone have a plan?"

"I got one," Raquel kicked her opponent in the knee and pierced him in the side of the head. "Shut up and keep fighting."

"We can't go on like this!" Natalia exclaimed as she flipped a demon over her shoulder and speared it with a dagger.

"I'm running low on arrows-" Erika screeched as demon seized her by the shoulder and yanked her up to face him.

The world seemed to slow as Erika's arms were held in an iron grip above her head. The demon wrapped his hand around her neck and stared into her eyes. His face stretched, displaying the three dark holes we had seen before; when we had killed them. This time was different. The gaping hole that was the mouth grew larger than the eye sockets; engulfing warm air like a powerful vacuum.

Erika struggled against his hold, but nothing helped. The nunaish thrusts his fingers into her mouth and yanked her jaw open. He drew her close, inhaling her air and scent. Erika soon began to glow. A golden light poured out of her body as it was sucked in by the nunaish. Her body trembled as her face grew pale and the light from her eyes began to dull.

Victoria jumped into action and sliced off the head of the demon. Erika dropped to the floor, shaking like a leaf. Victoria then, jabbed her sword into his mid-section and slit him in half. He shattered into pieces as Victoria slid to her knees and embraced her friend.

"Erika, Erika!" Victoria placed her head on her shoulder, rubbing her hands over the smaller nation. "*Oh mon dieu,* she's so cold," she whispered.

Irunya stepped in front of the younger girls, protecting them from the faceless demons. Natalia joined her as the nunaish focused in on the wounded nation. It was the perfect chance for the other girls to strike back. Elizabeta, Bella and Raquel charged, slicing apart any monster that crossed their path. Kim and Mei worked as a team to flip themselves off each other's backs and shoulders to kick and stab their opponents.

I adapted quickly, just as I did back in London. I swung my borrowed claymore like I was a character from a fantasy novel; thrusting and slashing at the nunaishs without hesitation. Then a boney hand grabbed hold of my shirt and threw me over the rail. I landed painfully on my back,
"fuck," I hissed.

A nunasish dove for me and clawed his hand into my flesh. I bit back a cry of pain as the dark spirit pulled me into the kitchen. I grabbed my sword and slit his cheek, he showed no sign of pain as his raspy voice repeated, “Iya is waiting.”

I stabbed him in the chest, "heard you the first time!" I tore the blade through his body.

Two more demons jumped from the ceiling, stepping forward with claws ready. I wielded my blade in front of me, "You want me! Come and get me!" They hissed and moved forward as light broke through the windows and the dark spirits screeched in sync. They stepped away from the sunlight and disappeared into the shadows.

I spun around and found the sun rising in the sky.
Chapter 15

The next sequence of us meeting up in the living room and discussing what we do next ran in a blur. The nations and I separated into two groups; Mei, Raquel, Irunya and Victoria stayed in the living room, watching over Erika, who was coddled in blankets on the couch. The rest of us stayed together as we searched the house. Still carrying our weapons, we tore each room apart; digging around in closets and drawers, finding things I wished I never saw. Such as questionable porn in both Ludwig and Gilbert's rooms, and Elizabeta's revealing lingerie in her drawers.

The basement and the attic gave no clues to the Ouija board's whereabouts and throughout the entire manor we discovered that the nunasishs were gone along with the board.

We walked back into the living room.

"Did you find it?" Mei asked.

"What do you think," I asked sarcastically.

The girls took their seats around Erika as Elizabeta asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Are you sure?" Victoria added, "You were freezing."

"The tea helps," she said softly as she took another sip of her hot chamomile tea.

We all gave a silent agreement to take a well needed break, to simply rest and absorb the events that had taken place.

"So," Kim checked her nails, "what are you going to tell Germany and Prussia?"

Elizabeta sighed, "I have no idea."

"I suggest we keep all this supernatural stuff on the down low," I proclaimed.

Everyone nodded, "agreed."

"But we still need to come up with an excuse for," I counted off my fingers, "the window, the fuse box, the car, my door, my work desk and chair is there anything else I'm missing?"

"There are claw marks in the walls on the second floor," Natalia remarked.

"And there are bullet holes along this wall," Mei added.

I hid my face in my hands, "I'm so dead."

"Not yet!" Elizabeta rose to her feet, determination burned in her green eyes. "We clean this place up! Cover up those holes and claw marks and come up with a good enough excuse to use on Germany and Prussia."

"Blame it on the alcohol?" Raquel asked.

"Blame it on the alcohol." Elizabeta agreed.
We worked tirelessly for the next four hours; sweeping up debris, fixing up rooms, and covering up holes and claw marks with plaster paste Elizabeta found in the attic along with paint to re-paint the walls. Kim boarded up the broken window, Mei gathered the shards of glass and Erika and Victoria collected the arrows and weapons. They cleaned them and placed the back into their trunk. Natalia helped me toss out the broken work desk and chair into a neighbor's trash can. It took an hour to chop it into pieces but we were able to squeeze it in there.

I hoped that my missing door would be more of a distraction for Ludwig than the missing furniture. We also hanged a curtain along the top of the door frame so I could have privacy.

When everything in the manor was put back into their rightful place (somewhat) we all took a moment to stare at the BMW that was wrapped around a tree. I moaned to myself as Raquel smoked another cigarette. "Yeah, we can't fix this in time."

I glared at her, "You're the one who did this in the first place!"

"Do you have to yell," she rubbed her temple, "just send me the bill goddammit."

Another hour passed and the girls were packing up to catch their trains and flights back home. The doorbell ringed and Elizabeta opened the door. "What happen to the car?" Vash said as greeting.

"Oh that," she said, "Raquel crashed it."

"Shouldn't drive while drunk, now we know," Raquel proclaimed as she walked out of the house. She was dressed in a tight top and slimming jeans; her hair was brushed and wild, but in a cool, sexy way and her make-up was flawless.

Bella followed along; she was wearing a deep dark red mini dress with a ruffled skirt, a crop black jacket, black tights and inch heels. "See ya Liz," she smiled and walked to the waiting cab.

Vash shook his head and noticed the window, "What happen?"

"We were dared to have a dance off," I gestured to Mei. "I was going all b-boy with break dancing and stuff."

Mei cuts in, "And I decided to try to be cool and add some of my kung fu moves."

"Long story short, she kicked a vase through the window," Kim said as a car honked in the distance. Both of the Asian girls were wearing causal western clothing. "That's us, let's go Mei."

Mei hugged Elizabeta and me goodbye, and followed Kim to the car. Vash didn't say anything else as he collected Erika and Victoria and headed back to the door.

"What do you say," he gestured to Erika.

"Oh, thank you for having me over," she nodded to us.

"Always a pleasure," Elizabeta hugged her.

She turned to me, "It was good to see you again Ms. America."

"Ditto," I grinned as we hugged, "Are you really okay," I whispered in her ear, when I felt that she was still cold.

"Yes, I'm fine, don't worry," she whispered back.
Elizabeta and I watched as Vash, Erika and Victoria loaded themselves into their cab and drove down the street. At that moment, I realized that I didn't gather a single piece of information for Raivis and Peter. I failed them, like I failed Kai.

"I don't see how everyone is so relaxed about this," Natalia's voice broke me from my thoughts as I turned to find her leaning against the door. She was wearing her usually dark purple dress. "That cursed board is still missing."

"Nat leave it be," I proclaimed, "It's gone, I say rejoice."

"Unless you want part two of this night filled terror to make an appearance later on tonight, I suggest you look for that board and burn it." Those were her final words as she and Irunya left the manor.

Another hour passed as Elizabeta and I ate our breakfast, it was peaceful till-

"Elizabeta!" Gilbert cried out as he slammed the doors open. "Liz?! Liz where are you?!" He ran into the living room, searching till he stepped into the kitchen and laid eyes on the young Hungarian woman. He didn't hesitate to embrace her and pat her down for injuries. "I saw the car outside, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Elizabeta shoved his hands away, "I'm fine Gilbert, now let me eat my breakfast," she shooed him away as she drank her tea.

Gilbert blinked and raised his brow at me slightly, as if I appeared out of nowhere. "Oh Amy, West is looking for you."

I gave him a look, "thanks, I figured."

"America," Ludwig called, his voice was tight and mean.

I sighed, "I'm here."

He entered as Peter and Raivis walked behind him. He crossed his arms, "may I speak with you privately."

I nodded and rose to my feet. He gestured to the backyard and I followed him as we walked along the dock. He brushed a hand through his blond locks, massaged the bridge of his nose and glanced to me. "What happen?" he tried to sound calm but he sure didn't fool me.

I took a deep breath, "Well, we were drinking and Mei and I were dancing and she ended up kicking a vase through the window-"

"Stop!" he shouted, "I refuse for you to lie to me, I demand the truth."

"I am telling you the truth!"

"No, you really think I wouldn't notice your lying habits? Like how your voice instantly lowers or how you fidget with your hands?"

At the mention of this, I pulled my hands apart and placed them at my sides. Ludwig narrowed his eyes at me, giving me a dirty look but his look soon disappeared. "That's it. I am tired of your insolence. If you believe being a nation is beneath you than you are too young and immature to understand. I am merely wasting my time with you."

I tried to defend myself but he raised his hand to silence me. "Clearly you need a few more decades
to truly gasp your situation here, you still believe yourself to be like them. You're family, your friends they're all still young, maybe the only way you'll understand is if you watch them age and die before your eyes." He turned away from me, "Till then, I am done with you."

He strides back to the house, leaving me alone on the dock. My emotions swirled as I paced back and forth, having no idea on which emotion to focus on first. Anger was the strongest; I hated the way Ludwig assumed I didn't understand, I mean I am here right? I am trying right? Confusion sets in as I tried to read his speech and body language. He was furious; I was sure, but yet he seemed disappointed. Irritation rolled in next; I was so frustrated of the fact that he had to bring up the aging factor on me. A day doesn't go by that I don't think about it but I preferred to focus on the present.

Anxiety engulfed my body, causing me to come to a halt and rub my eyes with my hands. Dread followed as the events of last night came flooding back; the images of nunasihis materializing out of the shadows and striking out with their bony, claw like hands came to life when I closed my eyes. Their blank faces forming dark ghostly masks, repeating one phase in a series of whispers, 'Iya is waiting.'

Those words chilled me to the bone. Who was Iya? And wait, wasn't that the name that Kai spelled?

Once that name crossed my mind, my knees quivered and I had to support myself on one of the legs of the dock to keep from falling over. Grief and guilt swarmed in, fusing together as the image of the wise man came into full focus. From all the incidents that took place last night, the memory of Kai being sucked into a dark vortex was the sharpest. He didn't blame me, that last smile he spared me was filled with fondness. A stinging pain sparked in the back of my eyes but no tears came. This only increased my guilt, for what type of person am I if I can't even cry for someone that sacrificed himself for me. My heart squeezed and I could feel my throat tighten as the air thinned.

Before any other thought could be created, I sprinted back into the manor. I ignored Elizabeta and the others as I ran up the stairs and closed myself off in my room. I racked my hands through my hair and tried to settle my nerves. I stepped towards the bed, desiring nothing more than to sleep.

Though, instead of collapsing into the comforter, I found the Ouija board waiting for me. I yelped in surprise and terror and jumped back. I was gasping, trembling and my heart was ramming against my rib cage.

Before I could do anything the planchette began to slide across the board.


I smacked the board off the bed, smashing it into wall. Anger drowned the other emotions as I snatched the dented board and stomped into the kitchen. I continued to ignore Elizabeta and the guys as I grabbed a container of cooking gas and a pack of matches. I stormed into the office that sat across from the living room. I slammed opened the Victorian style sliding doors, it was like stepping back in time. The floor was covered in deep red carpet, polished wood walls and ceiling to floor book shelves.

A brown desk sat on the far left, where all of Ludwig's paperwork and computer laid on the smooth surface. Book filled shelves covered all the walls expect for the wall on my right, which held three windows. In the center of the office, there was a small coffee table in between two, matching vintage couches. But what I really needed was the room's fire place. It was built with brown brick and was a lined in the middle of the book shelves in front of me.

I added wood into the mouth of the chimney and threw the Ouija board on top. I squirted a large
dose of gasoline, lit a match and watched as the board was engulfed by flames.

Elizabeta stood beside me, "You found it."

I nodded, "Yeah."

Gilbert walked to stand on my other side, "Where did you find that."

The way he said this, it was more of a demand and less of a question. "It was in Elizabeta's room at first; then it ended up in my room."

Elizabeta glanced to him, "It is yours," she said slowly, "right?"

He gave us a confused and slightly worried look, "It is, but I got rid of it because it scared Ludwig."

"I don't blame him," I proclaimed.

"No," he quickly added, "I got rid of it when he was just a kid; nearly two hundred years ago."

Elizabeta and I gave him wide-eyed looks, "it can't be the same one," I asked, desperately wanting him to be joking.

"Yes, it is," he said seriously.

Fear and rage bubbled under my skin and I attacked with another dose of gasoline. The fire rose, the blaze licking at my hands and forearms. Amber flew and landed on my collar bone and shoulders.

Gilbert pulled me back from the flames and I shoved him away, "don't touch me!"

He stepped back, hands raised in mock surrender. Elizabeta walked forward and gently touched me, "Amy, your arm."

I looked down to find harsh burn marks across my hands and forearms. I blinked and turned back to face the fire, "It's fine. I don't feel it."

And it was true.

Gilbert and Elizabeta peeked from the door way.

"She hasn't moved from that spot for over two hours," Elizabeta said worriedly.

Gilbert glanced to her, still feeling the relief that had surged through him. The dread of losing Liz, his Liz was long gone from earlier that day. He knew that a car crash couldn't kill them (not for very long anyway) and he knows that Elizabeta was strong but it still pained him to see her hurt. He took a moment to simply view her, alive and unharmed.

"Someone needs to talk to her," Raivis snapped Gilbert from his thoughts. He and Peter were on the other side of the door frame opposite from him and Elizabeta.

Before anyone can do or say anything, Raivis walked in as Peter followed, which happen to be the first time Gilbert saw their roles reverse.

When the Latvian was only five feet away from Amy, she spoke for the first time in two hours. "Go
away, I don't want to talk," she continued to watch the fire.

Raivis flinched at the tone of her voice, it was cold and robotic, but he shook out his shoulders and asked, "Are you sure?" He stepped closer, "I don't mean to pry but you seem upset-"

"No shit Sherlock," Amy snapped, her voice filled with venom. "I still don't want to talk about it."

Raivis anxiety was coming to its boiling point, Gilbert could tell, he was sure that the Baltic State would make a break for it, but he did something that surprised everyone.

"There's no need to be rude," he snapped back.

Gilbert blinked at his boldness and even Peter was taken back. Amy didn't even flinch, she just sat there.

He continued, "I'm worried about you, is it that such an inconvenience for you?" He inhaled through his nose, to calm his nerves no doubt. "I-I," he stuttered, "I thought," he paused to look at his shoes; "we were friends."

Amy snorted, "Friends? The only reason you two even bothered to come here, bothered to befriend me, was so I could help you with Erika and Victoria. Oh you know what, I have another piece of advice for you both," she turned to face them, "grow a damn pair, tell them how you feel and leave me alone."

Raivis flushed in embarrassment and speed walked out of the room. Peter glared at her, "He was just trying to help, you stupid cow!" The blond quickly left to chase after his friend.

Amy's face was empty of emotion as she turned away to face the blaze.

Three hours passed and Amy still sat in her spot in front of the fire place. The Ouija board had burned away by now, the cursed board was nothing but ash; but she didn't move. Amy would do nothing but add another log into the flames and watch as those flames danced.

She didn't move for anything, not for food or for water and when lunch came around Elizabeta decided to bring the meal to her. Gilbert watched this attempt to feed her by the door.

"Hey, I brought you some currywurst," Liz proclaimed.

Amy didn't react.

"It's really good," she said.

The American girl simply nodded.

"Amy did Ludwig say something to you?"

"I don't want to talk about it," she said in a monotone, "please, just leave me alone."

Elizabeta sighed, "Okay, I'll just leave the food on the table if you get hungry."

Amy nodded, never taking her eyes off the blaze.

Elizabeta strides out of the room, leaving Amy alone as she wished.

Night rolled in and the house seemed to be drained of life. Dinner was silent as everyone but Amy met at the kitchen table. Candles were lit around the house and Ludwig had called a technician
company. They had informed him that someone would check on their fuse box in the morning.

Gilbert tried on multiple occasions to carry on a conversation but everyone seemed to be in their own worlds. Peter and Raivis looked at no one but their dinner plates, pushing around their food with their forks. Elizabeta was worrying over Amy, replacing the cold, untouched currywurst with a warm bowl of soup.

Ludwig didn't seem to care about Amy, he didn't ask any questions nor did he try to force her out of his office. He simply ate his dinner and once he was finished, he announced, "America's going back home."

That was the snap everyone needed to come back to reality. Gilbert knitted his brows in confusion, "what? But she's scheduled to stay here for another two months and then head to Denmark in November."

"She's not ready," he rose from his seat.

"But-"

"I've already told her, she'll be leaving the day after tomorrow."

"West-"

"Brother, don't even try to argue about this, she has caused us nothing but trouble. She got herself kicked out of Museum Island, broke two windows, destroyed your car."

"She made mistakes," Gilbert exclaimed, "You of all people should understand that." He knew he was hitting below the belt but he couldn't allow Amy to leave just yet.

Ludwig's eyes widened slightly but they quickly grew cold, "And you have made your own mistakes brother."

He sighed, "West please."

Ludwig slammed his fist against the table, "you will not question me Prussia. America is leaving, end of story." He placed his dishes in the sink and stomped into his room.

Gilbert glanced to the dirty plates and then to the direction of his younger brother. *He didn't even wash his dishes; that's not like him.*

Once the others were done with dinner, the teenage boys had separated from the group to hide in their rooms as Gilbert and Elizabeta picked up the kitchen and had their tea at the table. Elizabeta would check on Amy every hour or so and her anxiety was starting to rub off on him.

"Liz what happen last night?" he finally asked.

She sighed and sat herself back in her seat, "you can't tell this to Ludwig, he doesn't understand the supernatural."

Gilbert nodded, completely understanding. Ludwig may act mature but he will never be as old as Gilbert. In all his years he has seen war, disease, and things that could not be logically explained. The feeling of being watched when no one was around, the unusual chill that sank into your bones and the monsters that lurked in the night.

"We were attacked last night," Elizabeta began, "by faceless demons of some kind, they came
through the board."

"Which you decided it would be fun to play with," Gilbert jeered.

She rolled her eyes, "yes, yes, I know, I messed up." She sighed, "I just forgot, in this day and age you forget of the old legends, myths, and warnings."

"That's dangerous for us Liz," he smirked, "those who do not know of the past are doomed to repeat it or in our case, forget."

She nodded, "we started playing with it and a spirit talked to us, someone named Kai and Amy knew him. Soon after he gave us his warning to run we were attacked. During the night we headed up to the attic to borrow your weapons, guns did not work on them."

"You fought with a claymore?" he grinned, "That sure brings back memories."

Elizabeta gave a soft smile, but it didn't last for long. "Amy was locked in the attic alone, she was only in there for a few minutes but that was enough time for this spirit, Kai to be taken."

"We're they after Kai?"

"No, they we're after Amy. Kai was in the way." Her eyes grew sad, "we found her beating on the floor, screaming for Kai. I told her to put aside her grief and fight."

He nodded, "like a true warrior."

"But Gilbert, I think I broke her. I mean, you've seen her," she gestured down the hall, "she won't talk, she won't eat. She won't even cry."

Gilbert rose from his chair, "I'm going to talk her; unlike all of you she and I have a bond."

She rubbed her temple, "she knows about the bet."

His eyebrow rose, "you told her?"

"Raquel did."

He shook his head, "that bitch."

"She's a bitch for warning Amy of nations like you."

"Hey, I didn't start it."

"But you certainly ran with it." She narrowed her eyes at him, "I saw you kiss her."

He wasn't surprised that she knew, but he was surprised that she almost sounded jealous. Their relationship was a complicated one, but they both knew that they cared for one another, in their own ways.

Gilbert placed his hand on her's, "Liz, you know she'll never mean as much to me as you do."

She tore her hand away, "You really are stupid." She rose to her feet, "She needs a friend Gil, not a hook up; and I swear if I hear her scream I will come back down here and kill you." Those were her final words as she left the kitchen and walked up the stairs.

Gilbert gulped, she was deadly serious.
After a few minutes passed, he stepped into the office. Amy was still sitting in the same spot, still adding more logs into the fire. He closed the sliding door behind him as he entered the room. The young American woman did not react nor greet him. Gilbert wasn't bothered by this and sat next to her, taking in the view. The soft glow of the fire caused the shadows to dance around the room and made Amy's milky skin glow. Her blond, curly locks fell over her face as she kept herself covered in her knees.

He took a moment to admire her long, taut legs and dancer body. She was wearing shorts with a graphic tank top and a wool cardigan, her outfit was so simple but she didn't need much. She was very much a beauty as her father was. Hair the color of gold and eyes as bright as the sky; her skin untouched by scars and was as smooth as silk.

But something was off about her. This wasn't just grief taking its toll on her; something else was playing a role. She had her arms locked around her legs as if protecting herself from a blow or trying to hold herself together.

"I know you said you wanted to be alone but don't you think you've had enough alone time," he said lightly.

She ignored him, only watching the flames.

"You should go to bed, it's late," he added.

Again, she ignored him.

A wicked grin spreads across his face as he moved closer to her, brushing his lips over the shell of her ear. "You're scared aren't you?"

She gave no reaction to his antics. This only encouraged him to go farther, "afraid that the boogeyman will come and get you?" He planted butterfly kisses over her cheek and along her jaw. "Don't be Liebling, I'll protect you," he had kissed the corner of her mouth and was about to deepen the kiss till Amy tackled him to the floor and slammed her fist into his cheek.

Teeth rattled as blood filled his mouth; he spat it out and gazed into her eyes. They were filled with rage and sadness. "Don't you dare make moves on me for a stupid bet. Especially when Elizabeta is here," she rose off him and sat herself back in her spot. "You really think I wouldn't notice," she hissed.

Gilbert gave her a bloody smile, "notice what?"

"Don't play stupid with me," she narrowed her eyes at him. "When you saw your car, the broken window, you only called one name." She looked at him with piercing eyes, "I'm nothing to you."

"That's not true."

"Yes it is." she snapped. "You called out for one person and it definitely wasn't me." She snorted, "I was practically invisible."

He tried to laugh this off, "come on don't be jealous-

"I'm not jealous," she exclaimed, "I'm pissed."

He blinked as the mask she had tried to keep in place began to crack. "I'm pissed," she repeated, "and tired, so tired." She shook her head as if shaking a thought away and turned to him with firm eyes, "I will not play your game. Now go and beg for her forgiveness."
Gilbert rolled his eyes, "why? She knows its all part of a wager-

"It still hurts," she hissed. "I see the way you look at her and I've even caught her glances towards you, there's history between you two."

His eyes widened, she said the exact same words Alfred had told him when he tried to claim the nation.

She continued, "I'm not a prize to be won Gil, don't waste your time on me when you already have her."

He gave genuine, friendly smile, "clearly you're a lot smarter than Alfred."

"When are you people going to realize I'm nothing like Alfred."

"Let me finish," he said, "I meant to say was that you pick up on things quicker than he did, but he read people, better than most." He leaned back onto his hands, watching the fire, "Did you know I trained him to fight for his war of independence?"

She blinked, "really?"

"Ja, we trained for hours on end, along with his sorry lot of farmers he called an army." He chuckled at the memory, "and once he was free from Britain, it was our chance to see who would have the boy first."

"Oh dear lord, please tell me you weren't his first, cause seriously, I don't need to hear this," Amy groaned, a bit of herself peeking through.

Gilbert laughed, "I tried but your father saw right through me, he told me the exact same thing you did." He paused, "We were at a ball at Austria's house and that was the first time he met Hungary." He sighed, "Liz and me couldn't really act on our feelings back then."

"Why?"

"She was married to Austria."

Amy shook her head, "but you loved her, and you still do."

He gave her a side-way glance, "damn, you're just as much as a romantic as Alfred was."

She laughed and this time it was genuine. "So you tried to hook up with Alfred but he ended up trying to get you with Elizabeta."

"No, he first punched me so hard in the face that it broke my jaw and then he told me to follow my heart. I swear to god he spent too much time with France."

"Then why are you doing the same mistake?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, "Amy do have any idea what its like to be me? I used to be a powerful country, an empire." He massaged the bridge of his nose, "and for it to be taken from me, to have my land taken apart and absorbed by other nations. It was... heart breaking." He sighed, "And Alfred was the one to disband me."

Her eyes widened in shock and he continued, "He didn't want to but he knew it needed to be done. I thought that it would be the end of me; I thought I would disappear just as the others, my name becoming nothing more than words in a history book."
"But I didn't vanish. Everyone figured I would disappear soon or later, but that day never came. The nations had no way of understanding me and the human leaders found my existence disturbing, believing that my nation would make a comeback, that didn't happen either.

"The nations treated me differently after that, I wasn't like them anymore and they were just waiting, watching to see what would become of me. Even my own brother couldn't look me in the eye. This was after World War II and he believed that it was his fault that I became like this." He paused for moment as a smile slowly grew, "But Alfred didn't change; he still treated me as I was. Heh, everyone thought it was disrespectful and rude but it wasn't, not to me at least. He saw me as Prussia, his ally, his mentor and his friend."

They were silent as they sat there in front of the fire, simply gazing at the flames till Gilbert said, "What happen with West?"

Amy snorted, "Isn't obvious, I screwed up."

"He's just mad; I'll talk to him tomorrow-"

"No Gil, he means it," she curled herself back into her ball, retreating from the world once again. "I knew this sleepover was a bad idea."

She was done talking, Gilbert cursed to himself; he had driven her back into hiding. He tried to coax her back into a conversation but she was gone, back to staring at the blaze. He rubbed his eyes and did all he could do; grab a blanket from the hallway closet and place it over her shoulders. "Try and get some sleep, okay?"

She nodded, saying nothing else.

Gilbert sighed and walked out of the room. Asking himself, where did he mess up? Then he remembered that Amy tensed at the mention of Germany. He tightened his fist and stormed to Ludwig's door, he pounded on the wood. "West open up!"

He answered the door, wearing an exhausted expression, "what is it?"

"What do you think?" he rolled his eyes, "what the hell did you say to Amy?"

Ludwig sighed, "Does it really need to be discussed at this hour?" He tried to close the door but Gilbert pushed himself in.

He had no idea why he was acting like this, why he cared so much. In truth, he only wanted Amy to stay so he could win the bet, but that thought was long gone. The Amy he witnessed tonight was not the Amy he knew, granted he didn't know her long but she sure as hell didn't act like some kind of psych ward patient. It had something to do with the Ouija board and this spirit Kai; something had broken in her and he was pretty sure his brother only made it worse.

"What did you say to her." he demanded.

Ludwig blinked at him but did what he was told, "I told her she was too immature to deal with being a nation. She still thought herself as human, I told her to come back when she has witnessed her family and friends age and die without her. That is the only way for her to truly grasp all this."

Gilbert held his fists to his sides; that's it. After she had to watch someone she knew be taken away, Ludwig tells her to go home and watch the people she loves die, now that was just too cruel. "You're an ass," he proclaimed with pure venom in his voice and stormed out of the room.
But did he have any right to say that?

He was just as much of an ass as Ludwig was, even more so; for his intentions of getting close to the American were deceitful and selfish. The feeling of guilt swarmed and he desperately needed an escape, to have one good thing out of all this. Before he could second guess himself, he climbed up the stairs and knocked on Elizabeta's door.

It didn't take long for her to answer, for she never went to bed. They shared only one gaze and through that one look, all questions were answered and all was forgiven. Through the years they have mastered this art of reading one another; mostly through trial and error but they did it.

Gilbert stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Elizabeta, muttering sweet words to her in his native tongue. The woman smiled and shook her head, most likely thinking of how much of an idiot he was but still she hugged him back.

Ludwig stared at the ceiling as his mind replayed the scene he just had with his brother moments ago. His words repeating in his head, 'You're an ass.' Ludwig didn't understand how Gilbert could be so upset about this. Yes he would lose that idiotic bet, but he could have other chances, it wasn't the end of the world.

But yet, Gilbert was concerned for that incompetent American.

He massaged his forehead as he pushed back his hair. How could this, this girl get his brother wrapped around her finger? Ludwig snorted at the thought; she seems to have won over anyone that crossed her path. Being human or nation, frankly Ludwig didn't see it. She was naïve, impulsive and irresponsible; she was also a smart-aleck, sarcastic little girl, that doesn't seem to know how to keep her mouth shut.

_Just like Alfred_, he thought irritated.

He sat up and raked his hands through his hair in frustration. Amy was so much like Alfred and yet so different. They had the same attitude towards life and the same ridiculous quirks. But she was quicker to pick up on other people's emotions and was cautious when needed; and obviously she had a vicious temper.

_Why would any of the nations bother with her?_

Yes, she was new to their circle, a sense of excitement; and there was a sense of loyalty to one another but that will fade. Before long, she will be just like them, give or take a hundred years.

He sighed and rose to his feet, his mouth was unusually dry and he needed a moment away from his stuffy room. He walked out into the kitchen, cursing when the light switch wouldn't work. _Dammit America._

He drank a quick glass of water and turned back to his room, till he saw that the office's door window was glowing. Meaning the fire place was still lit, that would explain the uncomfortable heat he had been experiencing for the last few hours. He strides in to find Amy, sitting in front of the blaze with a blanket wrapped around her. He checked the clock; it was five minutes passed midnight.

Ludwig was swiftly reminded of everyone's worries about America; how she sat there all day, not moving for anything besides to add a log into the flames. Ludwig shook his head, she was just being dramatic.
"I know you don't have any training in the morning but don't you think it's time to go to bed." He was expecting for her to ignore him, like she had done with everyone else but she surprised him.

"I can't."

"And why is that?"

She shook her head, "I just can't." She changed the subject, "why do you even care? It's not like I'm bothering you."

"Well, yes you are," he stepped towards her, "this is an old house, the heat that you create spreads to every room and makes them uncomfortably warm."

"That's strange," she said in a monotone, "I'm still cold."

"How could you possibly be-" Ludwig stopped, not even bothering to ask the question. He made a grab for her, trying to force her to her feet but winced once his hand made contact. She was ice cold.

Ludwig dropped her hand and Amy said, "no matter how long I've sat at this fire or cuddled this blanket I can't get warm." She finally turned to face him, her teeth clutched as her eyebrows twitched forward. "I don't know what's wrong with me, it's like I've turned off but yet I'm conscious, if that makes any sense. I can't feel anything but I want to, but then I don't. And I'm so tired but I can't close my eyes."

He knew what she was talking about; sometimes when nations bottled up their feelings or blocked out their people's emotions, their bodies take a toll. They lose a sense of awareness and become an image of their formal selves. He had experienced this himself during the war, the lack of empathy and sleep, the emptiness of warmth. Most nations believe this was a tool their bodies used when it was time to open up. Pushing the sensations and thoughts away only makes it worse. He should know, for when the war was over and everything came tumbling down, he finally broke. The cries and agony of his people, his Jewish people had finally reached him, causing his entire body to quake and his head to throb.

This agony, this excruciating pain only increased in intensely as their cries mixed with his soldiers, his citizens and of the teenage youth who were sent to camps just for their love of swing music. Many more followed as grief and guilt engulfed his entire being. Ludwig could barely keep his sanity back then.

He looked back to Amy; she was shaking as she cocooned herself into the blanket. She brought her knees to her chest and was staring into the fire again. He kneeled beside her and said, "America, whatever that is eating at you, it won't go away if you bottle it up." She glanced up to him, "What's wrong?" he asked with genuine concern.

Her lip quivered as she blinked away tears, but they seem to only spill faster. "I-" her voice broke, "I let everyone down." Amy breathed through her mouth, trembling as she did. "I let Peter and Raivis down. I let you do-" she had pushed her face into her knees causing whatever she was about to say to muffle. She shook, causing the blanket to fall as she looked back to Ludwig. "I'm sorry Ludwig," she whimpered, "I'm so sorry." Her words once again mumbled together as she dropped her knees and curled to touch the floor with her forehead; apologizing over and over again as she bawled.

Ludwig hesitated to react, clearly there was more to this than just him but for some strange reason Amy wouldn't say a word about it. He decided it was best not to snoop and placed a comforting hand on her back.
She tensed, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she repeated those two words as Ludwig gently pulled her into his arms. He guided her head to his chest and held her in place as she sobbed. He slipped a hand into her hair and softly sang a lullaby he remembered from his childhood.

He never liked to sing, it was embarrassing and he thought that his deep voice was not suited for the soft melody. Though, it was the only thing that came to mind of how to comfort Amy. She loves music and she never seemed to go anywhere without that iPod of her's.

Amy didn't question or criticize his singing, only lowered her cries, reducing them to hiccups and wiped her face with her hands. Ludwig noticed that she had folded her arms into herself, conserving warmth. He grabbed the blanket and wrapped her in the sheet. He then carried her to the couch and laid her on the cushion.

He whispered, "Go to sleep," and was about to make his exist when something tugged on his boxers. "Please," her voice sounded small and scared, "can you stay."

Ludwig sighed through his nose and rubbed the back off his neck. He didn't say a word as he pulled back the blanket and slid in beside Amy. She placed her head on his chest as he covered themselves with the sheet. "Now, go to sleep."

She nodded as her eyes fluttered to a close, whispering goodnight.

Ludwig mumbled back the same word as exhaustion finally claimed him and he fell into a deep slumber.

Ludwig and I awoke to the sound of a doorbell. He muttered a curse as he sat up and went to go answer it. I fell back onto the couch taking advantage of the extra room and lingering warmth. I tried to go back to sleep, but my mind would not let me. It just had to recap me on everything I did yesterday, the frightening message I received from the Ouija board, burning the board soon after, Ludwig saying he was done with me. Yelling at Peter and Raivis, ignoring Elizabeta and punching Gilbert. It was like I was me and yet not me; it was strange, like I was watching myself through a haze.

But what really drove me insane was the fact that I cried in front of Ludwig. I cursed; I made a promise to myself that the nations would never see me cry. That was now out the window, but what had really shocked me was that Ludwig comforted me. He actually held me, sang a lullaby to me and slept beside me on the couch; and you think you know a person. His behavior was surprising, especially when he had said that I was a waste of his time and he didn't want to bother with me anymore.

Ludwig walked back in and sat on the other couch across from me. He sighed, "the electrician says that it will take two weeks to repair the fuse box."

I slumped in my seat, "I'm sorry."

"For what? Did you purposely destroy the fuse box?"

"No."

"Then you have nothing to be sorry for."
I nodded and remained quiet as he scratched the back of his head, "I guess this is a good as time as any to take a vacation."

I blinked, "vacation?"

"Yes, you've worked hard and all of us are due for a break. Feli has been begging for you to come to his house, so this works out for all of us." He rose to his feet, "pack your bags, we're leaving for Rome in five hours." He then walked out of the room and I followed him.

"But-but you said that I was going home," I questioned him.

He turned to me, "I've changed my mind. I might have been too quick to pass judgment and I know you wouldn't purposely try and destroy my house. So no, you are not going home, you will continue with your training and meetings."

I breathed a sigh of relief, I was staying, which was weird for all I wanted was to be with my family. But I didn't want to leave, I wanted to see how far I could go. "Ludwig," I called out to him as he was about to enter the kitchen. He looked over his shoulder and I beamed, "thanks for not giving up on me."

He nodded and turned away before I could see his smile.
I know some of you had questions and here's my answer for all of them.
IT'S ALL A SURPRISE!
MWHAHAHAHAHAHA!

Ludwig was the master of grabbing deals on traveling prices. He also had plenty of travel miles and
discounts, allowing us to take a train to Rome for sixty-three euros each. The only down side was
that the train was leaving at three, it was two.

"I told you we should take a plane," Gilbert exclaimed packing in his passport into a duffle bag. "It's
faster, and I'm sure we can find a flight at a cheap price."

"It was good deal and I've already paid for them," Ludwig proclaimed as he was checking his
smartphone.

I skipped down the stairs, swinging my carryon's strap over my shoulder as stuffed in clothes, shoes
and my wallet. Peter and Raivis followed both wielding duffle bags. I was surprised that Ludwig
asked them to join us and I was a little taken back that they agreed. I've been avoiding all eye contact
with them the entire morning; feeling guilty for saying such harsh statements to them the day before.

They weren't looking at me either; well Peter was the one officially ignoring me. Raivis seemed to
only have his attention to his shoes and the floor. I sighed; I need to apologize to them.

Elizabeta fell into step behind us, with her travel bags ready, "come on, the taxi is waiting."

We followed her lead but I lingered behind when Ludwig was locking the doors. He glanced to the
broken window and sighed. I bit my bottom lip before I asked, "does the electrician have a spare
key?"

"Yes," he said in a monotone as he placed his keys into his khakis and stepped down to the dirt road.

"I'm really sorry Ludwig."

He took a moment to pat my head and ruffle my hair before moving on. I spun around watching as
Ludwig walked towards the taxi van, but he was not the Ludwig I knew a month ago. This one was
almost compassionate, kind. It was kinda scary like someone took the real Ludwig and replaced him
with a stranger; like in the Body Snatchers.

He turned back with a familiar irritated look on his face. "What are you standing there for? Let's go!"

I released a short laugh, "There's the Ludwig I know and love."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," I sang as I sat next to Elizabeta and Gilbert.

Traffic was hectic but we were able to reach our train with a minute to spare. Literally, a minute; we
had to make a mad dash from the taxi to the train, shouting at one another as we rushed through security, which were much more laid back than American airport security. The train conductor was announcing the dispatch as we hopped on and the train began to pull out of the station. Ludwig led us to our private cabins, which was pretty awesome for nearly four hundred euros. (The cost of the tickets also covered the cabins.) I did the math on my phone, each euro was worth a dollar and thirty-six cents and then when I multiplied the number of euros with the dollar and thirty-six cents, it came out to five hundred. I'm not entirely sure if it's right but if it was, it would be totally mind blowing. I mean, now a days a one-way plane ticket was worth that much and only if you'd traveled within the area you lived in. Oh, and that plane ticket was only used for one person, while that amount of money was used for six train tickets.

I definitely needed to keep track of my travel miles.

The cabins were right next to each other, covered with blue carpet and simple brown leather booth seats on both sides of the room. Both rooms had white walls, black cage designed cubicles high over the seats, drawers filled with spare blankets and pillows under the seats and there was a window across from the sliding door.

"Elizabeta, my brother and I will have the first cabin," Ludwig said as he handed me a key, "you three can have the one next to us."

"This is so cool," I opened the door and peeked in, "are we in first class?"

Gilbert snickered, "she thinks this is first class."

Elizabeta pulled him in by his ear and tossed him to his seat. "Amy, this is more like a mix of coach and second class, first class cabins are more glamorous."

"And expensive," Ludwig added as he turned to me. "Is this not enough for you?"

"No, no, this is totally amazing. I've never been on a train before," I said excitedly. "I really want to check this out."

"Well, please don't cause any trouble, that's all I ask."

I batted my eyes to him, "I'll be a perfect little angel."

He lifted a brow at me, skeptically and walked into his cabin. I unlocked my cabin's door as Peter and Raivis walked in, set their luggage in the cubicles above them and sat themselves on the left side booth. The boys did all this in silence, completely ignoring me as Peter played a video game console and Raivis read a battered, old book with a title written in another language.

I closed the door and threw myself onto the booth seat across from them. "So, whatcha playing?" I asked Peter.

He ignored me as he pressed his thumbs over the game device.

"Okay," I whispered to myself and turned to Raivis, "Whatcha reading?"

He flinched nervously as he glanced to Peter, noticed that the Brit refused to acknowledge me and he decided to follow his lead and turned back to his book.

"Are you guys really going to ignore me? I mean why would you even bother coming along? Wouldn't you want to go back home?" I proclaimed.
Raivis was breaking first so I worked on him. I flopped beside him and began to poke him in the cheek.

After a minute Raivis whispered, "Can you stop please."

I gasped dramatically, "Did I hear a voice?"

Raivis answered by sinking his face further into the book. I grew annoyed with his attitude and slapped the book from his hands to the floor. Raivis yelped, "That's the first edition of Aleksandrs Čaks's Seši!"

I blinked, "what?"

He jumped to his feet and grabbed the book, smoothing out pages and dusting off imaginary dirt. "This is Seši a poetry book written by Aleksandrs Čaks, it is a classic and should be treated as such."

"It's a poetry book written about poverty and prostitutes, how is it a classic?" Peter countered, never taking his eyes off the game's screen.

Raivis flushed with anger, "because it was never done before," he remarked.

"I think Greece beat you to it," I added.

He narrowed his eyes at me, "well this is certainly better than any vampire nonsense that you call literature."

Peter snorted, "don't be a hypocrite old chap, you've read all of the twilight books and even the Vampire Academy novels."

I laughed as Raivis turned bright red and exclaimed, "Whose side are you on?"

"Right now on Zelda's," he proclaimed, still playing his game.

I tried to swallow my laughter, "it's okay Raivis. I liked twilight when I was like twelve."

He turned a deeper shade of red, "but-but I only read it because Erika was reading it at the time."

"Excuses, excuses," I countered.

"Shut up!" he shouted.

Both Peter and I stared at him; the Latvian never raises his voice. Raivis finally noticed what he did, blinked, looked to the floor and sat himself in the seat across from me. He clutched his book to his lap and spoke in a wounded tone. "Don't make fun like we're friends because you made it clear yesterday that we're not."

My shoulders slumped and I turned to face the window as the scenery outside passed us at a smooth pace. Everyone was silent the only sound that could be heard was the music and action sounds of Peter's game.

I racked a hand through my hair, "I didn't mean it-"

"Yes you did," Peter remarked as he sat aside his game.

"Okay yeah I did, and I'm sor-"
Peter knitted his thick eyes brows together in annoyance, "are you really going to apologize?"

"And what if I do? Is it wrong to say you're sorry for saying mean things?"

"No, it's just stupid. What you said was true, we only came here to use you." He crossed his arms over his chest, as if protecting himself, "Friends don't use each other."

I inhaled through my nose before I said. "Friends also do stupid things when it comes to their crushes and totally mess up everything. Yeah, you'll piss off most of your friends, but real friends will be there no matter what, even when you screw everything over. Real friends will give it to you straight and then pull you back up and shove you into the direction that you're meant to go." I smiled to myself as the image of Michel and Jamie appeared in my mind, "they will annoy you, even embarrass you, hell they will end up being more like siblings than friends but that's when you know you have good ones. They'll not afraid to tell you when you're being stupid and to tell you that they're sorry when the drama has passed."

Both boys have turned to face me and I took my chance to look to Raivis. "I'm sorry I snapped at you but you gotta admit my advice was dead on."

Raivis gave a small chuckle as he shook his head.

I turned to Peter, "and if you ever call me a stupid cow again, I will bend you backwards and shove your head up your own ass."

He gave me a look as he gestured to Raivis, "he gets an apology and I get a threat?"

Raivis raised his hand, "mine was more like a back-handed apology."

"And you didn't even want an apology," I countered.

"But it would've been nice to have one," Peter proclaimed.

"You didn't deserve it," Raivis mumbled loud enough for us to hear.

"Neither did you!" he exclaimed.

We were once again silent, looking at each other as what we just said circulated around in our heads. We glanced to one another once more and a smile slowly began to form on each of our faces. Then we quickly began to laugh, I have no idea why we were laughing. Maybe we realized how petty our argument was or maybe what we all said to one another could've came from an old eighties movie about teenage self-discovery. Whatever the case, the laughter definitely helped smooth the edges that had grown around us in the past day.

Peter rubbed his hands over his face, "we're so stupid."

I shrugged, "We're young; we do stupid things."

The boys each gave me a look and I remarked, "Okay, I'm young but let's face it you two still do stupid things."

Peter nodded, "like sending you to the Coventry."

"What?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes, "freezing you out."
"Oh, then why," I shook my head, "never mind."

"And I followed along," Raivis groaned, "I'm the oldest; I'm supposed to be the mature one."

"How's that working out for you," I said sarcastically.

He narrowed his eyes at me, "fuck you."

"Fuck you too."

"Fuck you both," Peter added.

Before any of us could react, Gilbert slammed open the door, "Shut the fuck up all of you! Hurry up and tell each other you'll be besties for life cause seriously this is being dragged out more than it needs to be." After he said his piece, he closed the door and walked on.

We burst out into another fit of laughter as Peter tried to breathe out words, "If Prussia has to come in here and give us friendship counseling clearly we are totally pathetic."

Raivis and I agreed and I quickly directed our conversation elsewhere, "back to a more important issue, Raivis you like twilight?"

He flushed, "it's not like that! I only read them because Erika was reading them at the time and that's how we spent time together-"

"He also made me go see the movies," Peter added.

I howled in laughter, holding my gut, "I can't breathe, I can't breathe."

Raivis blushed and threw a spare pillow at Peter's face. I covered my mouth to keep my giggles under control. Peter looked to the light tannish pillow and then to Raivis, "I see you have declared war." He picked up the pillow, "I will show no mercy!"

He tackled Raivis, bombarding him with multiply pillow attacks. I snatched a pillow from a drawer and smacked it over Peter's head. Raivis then followed with a whack to my face, it became a free for all as we hit and slapped one another with pillows. The force of our strikes finally took its toll as our pillows ripped and white feathers scattered through the air.

I grinned like a little kid, "Oh my god, feathers! I've only seen this in movies."

"Well consider this movie magic," Peter proclaimed as he and Raivis smacked me with their cushions, causing even more feathers to fly.

Gilbert could hear muffled laughter from the cabin next door and he was glad to hear that Amy was having fun.

His brother on the other hand was peeved, "Gilbert could you check on them," he asked as he placed his book to his lap.

The albino rolled his eyes; seriously my brother has to learn to relax. He rose from his seat next to Elizabeta and walked out into the narrow hallway. He quickly reminded himself of the group's little heart to heart moment only a few minutes ago.
"I really hope that they got through that awkward conversation, he thought to himself.

He looked through the square window of the door to find Amy, Peter and Raivis seating on the floor of the cabin, laughing hysterically. White feathers were everywhere, scattered over the seats and floor. They even stuck to the teens' clothes and hair. The empty sacks that were once pillows were tossed aside as Amy threw move feathers into the air.

Gilbert chuckled lightly and walked back to his cabin.

"Well, what are they doing?" Ludwig asked.

"Hmm, do you want the truth?"

"Yes."

"They had a pillow fight, now all the feathers are out and have covered the entire room."

Gilbert noticed the vein throbbing in his younger brother's forehead as he forced himself to look back at his book, "I'm on vacation, I'm on vacation," he muttered to himself.

We had scoped the feathers back into the ripped open pillow cases and hid them in one of the drawers. We were able to gather most of the white fluffy feathers but there were a few stays floating around. I sat back into my seat as Raivis brushed away feathers from his book.

"Is it a good book?" I asked.

He nodded, "yes."

"He only reads the bloody thing because it was a gift from Erika," Peter teased lightly.

He blushed and I smiled, "that's so sweet." Peter continued, "He also likes teen vampire novels, long walks on the beach.-"

"Stop," Raivis begged as hid his face in his hands, his ears turning bright pink.

I tried not to laugh, but I couldn't help it, these two kinda reminded me of my friends Heisuke and Sam. Those two had the same kind of relationship as this country and port; they would tease each other like brothers, usually more than the other but they were the closest of friends brought together by the fate of two girls with a love for fashion.

"You two are so much like them," I giggled to myself.

Peter heard me, "like who?"

I smiled, "you remember Sam and Heisuke right?"

He nodded, "The Japanese and British blokes."

"Yeah, you guys act the same way they do; always messing with each other and hanging out, you know the usually bro-mance."

"Bro-mance?" Raivis questioned.
"Its American slang for male bonding," I said, "but in truth we did more bonding as a group than anything else."

"How did any of you become friends? You all seem so different from one another," Peter proclaimed.

I grinned as a flash of the memory of our group's meeting came into focus. "Jamie was accepted to Nightingale thanks to a scholarship, my parents were able to pay for the tuition but I had recently found out it was the government but hey I'm not complaining. Jamie and I were so excited to go to an international private school and Michel was always able to get a ride from Carpinteria High." I smirked, "a lot of public school kids came to visit the foreign boys and girls.

"At the end of September Jamie had joined the drama club and stayed after school every Friday for meetings. I would wait outside or wander the halls; Michel usually had to work so he wasn't able to keep me company." I snickered, "I remembered, on that day I was complaining of how bored I was and how I wished something interesting would happen. I got my wish."

Four years ago...  

I skipped around a corner passing the drama club's door for the fourth time that afternoon. I checked my phone's screen it was only twenty passed three, I had more than an half an hour to wait till Jamie was finished. I groaned, brushed a hand through my boy cut hair and leaned against the wall. "I'm so bored," I moaned.

I jumped off the wall and continued to walk down the hall; I wish something interesting would happen. As if god wanted to be ironic he threw Ella Chasse into my life. We bumped into each other, our heads made a full collision with a loud smack. We both groaned and hissed out curses in English and French.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going," I mumbled.

The teenage girl had long honey curls and dark eyes, she was about the same height as me but she was curvier; with perky breasts and a narrow waist. She was one of those girls that could make any outfit look good, even our plain white button down shirt, dark blue plaid skirt, matching tie and blazer uniform. She blinked at me with eyelashes that were long and coated in mascara; her makeup was flawless and her hair shined like a shampoo ad. A smile spreads over her glossed lips, "You are perfect!"

"Huh?" I gave her a look, was she messing with me? She was the perfect one from the two of us. I never wore makeup no matter how much Jamie tried to slap some on me every morning. I was tall with a thin, stick-like body, flat chest and long bird legs. My hair was lifeless, dull and a simple shade of blond.

She wrapped her hand around my wrist and dragged me to the main commons area where most of the students would hang out in the mornings, during passing periods or lunch. It was deserted now, for most of the student body was back in their dorm rooms preparing for a night on the town either here in Summerland or in Santa Barbra.

"I have found her!" the honey haired girl proclaimed.

Three pairs of eyes turned to look at me. A girl with dark wavy hair and dark eyes, her features were striking and beautiful. She was curvy just as the blond with slightly bigger breasts and an equally slim waist. The other two pairs belonged to a pair of boys; one was a scrawny Asian boy about an inch or so taller than me. The other had dirty blond hair that was twisted together in dreads, I never
thought white boys could pull off the hairstyle but this one could. His dreads were tied in a low pony tail and he had a big black camera hanging from his neck.

The dark haired girl walked forward, circling me with a critical eye. The blond soon followed her lead as I nervously fidgeted with my fingers. Both of these stunning girls were analyzing every part of me and I couldn't help but feel self-conscious.

Then the dark haired girl took out a measuring tape and began to measure the length of my legs, arms, waist, hips, and breast. "Oh thank god she has a small chest; she can be able to wear the backless dress designs."

"I know," the blond smiled excitedly as she pulled me along to the white boy. "Here take her picture."

"What?" I exclaimed as flash went off and I went blind for split second, "What the hell! Get that camera out of my face," I was about to smack him and his camera but he jumped back.

"Watch it you cow this camera is my life!" he snarled.

"Then I suggest you back the fuck off!" I hissed.

"Don't harass my model," the blond shoos away Dreads.

"Model?! What's going on?!" I exclaimed.

"You're going to be their fashion model," the Asian boy proclaimed.

"But I didn't agree to this, I was dragged here!"

Dreads rolled his eyes, "welcome to the club love," he snapped another photo.

I covered my face, "stop! I don't want to be a model."

"Who doesn't want to be a model," Blondie giggled as she and the dark haired girl walked off to talk with one another.

"Who are they?" I grumbled.

Dreads heard me, "The Brunette is Daniela Aguero, a math genius."

"A math genius? Really?"

"The girl is brilliant; she has the top scores in the third-former section."

"Third-former?"

"Oh right you Americans call your first year of secondary schooling freshmen year." He shook his head, "you're school system is so strange."

"Yeah, clearly we're strange," I said sarcastically.

Dreads ignored my comment and continued, "The blond girl is Ella Chasse, the granddaughter of Charles Chasse, a well famous artist."

"How do you know this?"
"He is a huge donor to the school and her father is on the school counsel board in Europe. Did you ever read the student handbook, it's all in there."

I gave him a look, "you actually read it?"

"The teachers said we had to," the Asian boy added softly.

"They say so but it's not really a big deal, just read the rules and you'll all good," I shrugged. "What are you in for? I get that Dreads here is the photographer, what are you?"

"Oh, uh, they want me to be a model too," he said nervously as he rubbed the back of his neck.

I nodded, "well you are a pretty."

He blushed and looked to the floor as Dreads snickered, "maybe they plan to dress him up as a girl."

The Asian boy stared at him with horror filled eyes and I slapped him on his arm. "That was rude."

"You called him pretty."

"That's a compliment," I proclaimed.

"No it isn't what boy wants to be called pretty?"

"Oh look at this," Ella's voice squealed from across the commons area. The boys and I shared a curious look as we walked over to the windows that faced out over the school's gym. Daniela and Ella were watching a young brunet boy as he swung himself off beams and poles. The boy was wide chested and well-muscled. His gymnastic skills were amazing; he flipped through the air with grace, taking himself from one side of the room to the other.

The Asian boy stared at him in awe whispering something in another language.

"He's incredible," I proclaimed.

"That's Dimitri Maier; he's a gymnast trying to join the Olympic Gymnastics Team for his country," Dreads added.

"Do you know everybody?"

He gave me a look, "I don't know you or the Japanese boy."

"I have a name," the Asian boy narrowed his dark eyes at him.

"Well what is it?"

"I'm Sato Heisuke," he gave a small head nod.

"I'm Amy Hawkfeather," I gave him my hand, "it's nice to meet you."

He hesitated but shook my hand. I smiled and turned to the blond boy, "So what's your name? Or should I just call you Dreads."

He wrinkled his nose at me, "Dear Lord no; my name's Samuel Collins."

"Can I call you Sammy?"

"No."
"I'll just call you Sam."

Heisuke spoke, "What are those two doing?" The sound of his voice brought our attention back to the gymnast.

Ella and Daniela were running down the stairs and surrounded Dimitri. After a few exchanges of words between the girls they grabbed his hands and guided him to the commons area.

"Look at this beautiful physic!" Ella announced as she squeezed his muscled arms and chest.

Daniela was measuring him, grinning from ear to ear, "such a defined chest and so tall."

The brunet didn't seem fazed about having two girls groping him. But what boy would complain if they looked like gorgeous movie stars. He was definitely tall, nearly towering over all of us. He was about the height of my brother at six foot six inches.

Ella turned to me and Heisuke, "you, and you, come and meet our last model isn't he just marvelous."

Heisuke and I shared a glance before we turned back to Dimitri; he was carrying the same confused look as we did.

"You," Ella gestured to Sam, "take his picture."

"You do realize I have a name," he said.

"Oui, oui, you are Samuel Collins a film artist, at the age of thirteen you won a national award for your photos in London and at fourteen your short film was accepted into the Sundance festival. Why do you think I asked you to take pictures, I am not stupid I know when someone has talent, even when they look like they're homeless."

Sam looked like he was about to rip into her till a new voice was added to our group. "Amy where are you?"

It was Jamie, "Help Jamie! I'm being held against my will by some crazy French girl!"

She walked around the corner, carrying both of our backpacks, "what?"

Ella and Daniela both gasped, "Who did your makeup?" Ella asked as she snatched Jamie's hand and yanked her towards us. "Daniela, look at this." She waved her hand over her face as both girls invaded Jamie's personal space, examining her eye makeup. "Who did your makeup?" Ella asked again.

"I did," she answered.

"Such straight lines, and so natural," said Daniela.

"You just have to be our makeup artist for our photo shoot," Ella proclaimed.

"Photo shoot?"

"Yes, your friend is going to be our model-"

"No, I'm not," I exclaimed, "I'm out of here, come on Jamie."

Ella brought out a sketch book from her bag and showed the contexts to Jamie, "what do you think?"
"Oh wow, Amy did you see these?" She asked me before she turned back to the pages, "Yeah I can totally work with these designs."

"No, no, no, no," I exclaimed, jerking her away from them.

Ella jumped in front of me, "please we need you."

"Find someone else, I don't play dress up," I continued to walk down the hall.

"We'll pay you!" she cried.

I stopped and spun on my heel, "how much?"

"If we win; a hundred dollars."

"If we win?" Sam questioned.

"The Los Angeles art community is having a competition for young artists," Daniela proclaimed, holding up a flyer. "The first prize is an exhibit opening in a local art museum for our piece and a five hundred dollar award."

Jamie and I shared a look, already thinking about all the clothes we could get at our favorite boutique.

Sam quickly added, "Um that only leaves sixty for the rest of us, that doesn't seem fair."

"Technically, sixty-six," Daniela remarked.

Ella laughed, "We don't care for the money; all we care about is getting our names out there. So each of you can be paid a hundred each for your services," she countered.

The boys glanced to one another, also liking the idea of little extra cash.

The French girl smiled and offered her perfect manicured hand to me, "Do we have a deal?"

I shook her hand, "deal."

Her smile grew wider, "we'll be in contact."

"How? You don't have our numbers."

"We do now," Daniela said as she typed over her tablet and then back to her smartphone.

My phone instantly ringed along with Jamie's, Sam's and Heisuke's. We checked our phones to find a message from the same number. "That's my number," she said, "make sure to save it."

"How did you get our numbers?" Heisuke asked, almost frightened.

"Oh, the school's security system code is so simple to break; I really need to inform them about it." She grinned at us mischievously.

"Like we said we will be in touch," Ella shared the same playful smile as they waved their fingers at us in farewell and strutted out the front door.

Dimitri crossed his arms, "Why does it feel like we made a deal with the devil."
Peter smirked, "that was the first thing he said to all of you?"

"Yeah and he was right we did make a deal with a devil. I love Ella, I really do but she's crazy. She and Daniela were able to track our every movement, it was kinda scary," I proclaimed.

"Did you win the contest?" Raivis asked.

I sighed, "No; turns out fashion wasn't included in the 'acceptable material'' I said those two words with air quotes, "to be used in the art contest." I breathed in through my nose, "The boys and I spent over two months being fitted into Daniela and Ella's clothes. Sam spent over a hundred dollars for film, just to take our pictures and Jamie had used her entire beauty kit. I sat in a chair for hours for hair and makeup and I wore high heels that left my feet sore and blistered and I didn't see a penny." I took a deep breath, "I was so mad about it but Ella was crushed, mostly I was angry for her. She put everything into her clothes and for them to say that her clothes wouldn't be included in the contest, I snapped.

"I began screaming at the judges, telling them that they we're pricks that couldn't see real talent even if it was shoved up their asses."

Peter laughed, "It's so like you."

"Thank you."

"What happen next?" Raivis asked.

"I was then escorted out of the building, along with everyone else." I continued the tale, "When we told Michel about it he came up with the idea to have Ella and Daniela's best designs and paint them on a wall so the whole city would see. He was able to make stencils from the paper designs and used spray cans to paint them on a brick wall." I grinned at the memory of the painted image, which was still on that wall in Los Angeles to this day. "I remember sneaking out, taking my mom's keys and driving to pick up everyone in the middle of the night.

"It took about two hours to get to Los Angeles but it was worth it to able to see Ella and Daniela's art pieces on the wall for everyone to see. Then we packed ourselves into the car and drove back home." I sighed, "We were so close with getting away with it too, but I got caught driving without a permit and we had to spend the rest of the night in a jail cell. Luckily they didn't call the school for if they did, Ella, Daniela and everyone would have been sent back home. Instead they sent someone worse, my mother.

"You should have seen it, my mom came storming in with Dad right behind her along with Michel's mom and Jamie's dad," I smiled at the memory. "You should have seen it, they were yelling at us in Italian, Chinese, Spanish and English and my dad was just standing there, with his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed at us disapprovingly. And then Gemma saw our friends and said they were too thin and they needed to eat.

"We ended up back at the restaurant had an early morning Italian meal and we were grounded for three weeks."

"Did they know about the street art?" Raivis asked.

"Hell no, if they knew that they would have grounded us for a year."

"You and your friends seemed to get yourselves into a lot of trouble," he proclaimed.
"You call it trouble, I call it fun," I grinned.

The train ride would last for another seventeen hours, and the boys and I were discussing how we should spend it. Raivis suggested reading but Peter and I groaned; we didn't want to read to each other or huddle together to read over one another's shoulders. Peter offered the idea of movies and I was quick to agree for I had a kindle and a Netflix account.

"It would be perfect if we had snacks," I said as I set the device on a kick stand.

Peter brought out his duffle and pulled out bagged chips and candy. I grinned and high fived him, "you are awesome!"

"So what should we watch?" Peter asked.


He groaned, "No, anything but zombies."

I turned to Raivis, "we can watch *Vampire Dairies* or *Teen Wolf.*"

He flushed in embarrassment but he didn't object. Peter groaned even louder, "No! I refuse to watch anything to do with romance involving vampires or werewolves, it is overdone to death."

"We can watch *Once Upon A Time,* it's filled with badass princesses, evil queens and magical fairies-"

"Let's watch something good, like *Doctor Who.*"

I lifted an eyebrow at him, "what's that?"

He grinned, "something that's gonna blow your mind."

We spent the next three hours watching the first season of this science-fiction, time-traveling doctor. I was pulled in by this series after the first episode but I completely fell in love when they added in zombies with Charles Dickens.

"Okay, I'm totally hooked," I proclaimed as I side glanced to Raivis, who was nodding off about to lean his head into my shoulder. "Raivis, how could you sleep through this?"

He moaned sleepily, "Peter has already made me watch this."

Peter snorted, "You made me watch *twilight;* you owe me."

He blushed and I laughed, "Hey, don't be ashamed, a lot of guys like vampire romances."

"Name one," said Peter.

"My friend Michel," I said proudly.

"No offense but someone that isn't gay."

I smacked him over his head, "Heisuke does and Sam and Dimitri even if they don't admit it they do. And you must like them at least to some degree because I highly doubt Raivis can make you do anything."

Peter narrowed his eyes at me and I smirked, "You like vampires don't deny it."
"Shut up."

After we had dinner with Ludwig and the others in the dinning cart, we watched one more episode of *Doctor Who* and then started the first season of *Teen Wolf*; I figured that it was the best show for both genders. Raivis enjoyed it; he found the main character very ordinary (in a good way) and seemed like a very relatable guy. Well expect for the whole werewolf thing. I had joked that Scott must remind him of himself.

He blushed, "no."

"Well, I like Stiles," Peter proclaimed.

"Same, he's just so sarcastic and funny," I added. "I love those kinds of characters."

"I see, so that's your type then," he wiggled his over-sized eyebrows at me.

I laughed, "Yes, you can keep all those bad boys. I'll take a funny, quirky guy any day."

At one o'clock in the morning we decided it was best to get some sleep. We still had three more pillows that weren't totally damaged and plenty of blankets to spare. I took the booth seat on the right and Peter and Raivis played a round of paper-scissors-rock to see who would get the floor.

Raivis won the booth with a smile, "sleep tight."

"Don't let the bed bugs bite," I finished.

Peter mumbled a few choice words and laid out two blankets as a comforter. Once the boys were settled I switched off the light and curled up on the cushion of the long seat. An hour passed as all I did was watch the stars pass by from the window. This made me think of Neill and how he must be traveling through the galaxies, saving other extraterrestrial children from slave owners.

"I hope he's okay," I mumbled.

Thinking of Neill only brought forth questions about his time with Alfred and the possibility that he could've met Grandpa. I sat up feeling a surge of energy coursing through my veins as I quickly did the math in my head.

*Neill said he met Alfred in 1947. . . .*

*Grandpa began traveling with Alfred in 1957. . . .*

*Could Grandpa have met Neill? Did he know that he was an alien? I have to know.*

"Hey," I whispered to the boys, "are you awake?"

Peter muttered in his sleep and turned on his side. Raivis was out cold, his back to me. I took this as my cue to reach for my bag and grab a flashlight and Grandpa's journal.
Chapter Notes

Klan members are mentioned; don't worry they get the shit beaten out of them.

July 15, 1957

It's been about two weeks since Alfred and I left Chicago and during those days we were able to cross Indiana and Kentucky. We were now in Tennessee, it was official; I just saw the sign pass.

"Do you also have house here?" I didn't mean to ask this nor did I mean it to sound rude, but I can't seem to control my tone of voice when I'm around Alfred. I doubt this man ever had to work a serious day in his life. He seems to be well off, he was able to travel the country without batting an eye to the prices of gas and hotel rooms. He has a house prepared for him in every state, and what really gets under my skin was that he leaves for three to four days at a time, saying he was at a 'meeting'.

We would have gotten to New Orleans sooner but we just had to stay in Indiana for week, for a 'meeting' he said he had in DC. Then another week in Kentucky for another 'meeting' he said that was in Canada. What did he possibly do that's so damn important?

He wasn't offended by my question or by my tone; he never seemed to get offended by anything. If anyone said anything rude or insulting to him, all he did was smile and walk on. Kai told me once that it takes a bigger man to walk away. I glanced to Alfred, smiling to himself as he tapped his fingers to the song on the radio.

I still think he's an idiot.

"No, I don't usually stay in the south for long, but we can have a hotel room," he proclaimed.

"What hotel would take me?"

"Not a very nice one but hey, a bed's a bed."

From these past few days I've only discovered a few things about this so called personification of America. He was annoyingly optimistic about everything, always looking on the bright side of life. I'm not saying it's a bad trait but he takes it to whole new level, like the time we had to sleep in the car because none of the hotels in Louisville, Kentucky would have me. He said, 'well at least we get to see the stars.' It started raining soon after, he then said, 'I do like the sound of rain; it's soothing.' Then as if the Great Spirit wanted to mock him, the rain quickly turned into a storm with lightning and thunder rolled in. He then tried to make that situation better by saying, 'well I'm sure tomorrow will be better.'

I told him to be quiet.

Alfred seems to defy logic; he can eat more than three times an average man but yet doesn't seem to gain any weight. He would say, 'I have a big appetite,' or 'I have a healthy metabolism.' He doesn't have the best habits, preferring to drink coke and eat hamburgers. He doesn't like to talk much about himself. He avoids any questions I ask about his past. I've played along to his delusion about being
'America', but I think this proves that he's just an ordinary man, a sick, delusional man, but ordinary none the less.

We stopped by a rundown motel, a motel that was desperate enough to take Alfred's money and give us a room, even if I was an Indian. The room was dusty and it smelled, but like Alfred said, a bed's a bed.

Alfred fell backwards into his bed, "we're making good time; we'll be in New Orleans by the end of this month."

"Maybe I don't have to spend a year with you," I said.

Alfred grew quiet and he rose from the bed, "I have to make a call." He walked out the door without looking back.

I sat up, could it be that I have hurt his feelings?

After an hour passed, I was starting to feel guilty. I was about to walk out to look for him but the second I moved for the door, Alfred came storming through. He ignored me as he locked himself in the bathroom. When he came out, his face was blank of emotion and his voice was strained.

"Get some sleep; we need to get to Birmingham, Alabama by Wednesday."

My jaw dropped, "Birmingham?!” Fear coursed through my body, I've been to that city once in my life and that city wasn't at all kind to me or my tribe. We tried to hold a small festival like we always did but the white men made it perfectly clear they didn’t want any of us around. They set our cars and trailers on fire as they wore white robes and hoods. I was only ten as they dragged me, my family and the rest of our tribe to kneel in front of them, saying that we were savages and that no one would give a damn if we all ended up dead.

They would have killed us if the sirens didn’t scare them off. My father wanted to press charges but the police said it would be best to leave town. Later I would find out that the police knew about this round-up and that they allowed those men to have their time with us.

We avoided the town ever since.

"I'm not going," I said firmly.

Alfred sighed, "I understand but we had a deal-

"No, I'll stay here and you can come back and get me or just leave me, I don't care, I'm not going."

He removed his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose. "Believe me, I don't like this anymore than you do, but they decided to have the meeting there and it's already too late to change it."

"Why would they even have this so called meeting there? And who are these people your meeting; doesn't your government hold meetings in DC?"

He sighed again, "they wish to talk about the growing violence here but I know he just wants to be there to lecture me."

I gave him a look, "who?"

"My brother," he said crossly as he brushed a hand through his hair and collapsed into bed. He turned away from me and kicked off his shoes, he was done talking to me.
I fell back into my bed and pulled up the covers to my chest. I stared out the window, watching as the street lights flickered and shadows walked passed by.

I couldn't sleep.

I know I had a promise to keep to Alfred and he was paying me, but was it really worth it? I could be killed in Birmingham just by looking at a white man the wrong way or for the simple reason that I was Indian.

But that tone of voice that Alfred carried reminded me of how I was with Tristen. The resentment I held for him and his superior attitude. The wasted moments we shared by arguing and fighting with one another. All of the moments we could've made better, but I was too stubborn to do so. Guilt instantly crept in, shutting down my emotions, leaving nothing but regret.

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July 16, 1957

I've decided to go with Alfred to Birmingham.

I had to take a moment to read what I just wrote, I truly am insane. But I just can't seem to leave Alfred, not like this. He's not smiling as much, he doesn't even try to make small talk anymore, he doesn't sing along to his favorite songs and he stares off into space for long periods of time. It's as if he's been drained of his blissful, youthful energy and was left with anxiety and uncertainty.

The ride to Birmingham was a slow and quiet one; Alfred didn't say a word to me as he drove down the southwest of the city to section named Titusville. He parked in front of a small one-story house that recently had a 'for sale' sign but now was sold. Movers were bringing in furniture: stylish couches, a high-end stove and refrigerator, large king sized beds, polished nightstands, a dining room table with matching chairs and a new box television.

I turned to Alfred, "how did you-"

"Dwight got this place ready for us; he figured that this house would be better than a hotel."

"Dwight? As in the President Dwight D. Eisenhower?"

"Yes," he nodded and walked in.

The movers gave him questionable side-way glances, they were all white and this area was a black dominated neighborhood and it seems we were causing a stir. The children had run back into their homes to inform their mothers of spectacle. They came out, completely stunned to the fact that a white man was moving in. Then they would look at me with worried expressions. I tried to be friendly and waved to them with a smile, "Hello."

They didn't return the greeting.

I sighed and walked into the house, ignoring all the dirty looks I was receiving from the movers. Once I was inside I found Alfred sitting at the kitchen table massaging his temples. I leaned against the wall across from him, "are you alright?"

"I have a screaming headache; please tell me they put a coffee maker in here?"

I nodded and pointed to the device across the room, "yes."
"Thank god," he mumbled and stood to make some, but quickly realized that we didn't have any food or coffee beans. He sighed, "I need to go shopping."

"I'll do it for you," I said.

He gave me a grateful smile; it was the first smile he displayed that entire day. "Thank you. I'll make you a list and leave you some money."

"Mr. Jones," one of the movers called and he sighed.

"Yes?"

The mover walked forward and gestured to a pile of boxes in the living room, "that there holds your dishes, some books and here's your keys."

"Thank you," he took the keys and pulled out his wallet, he handed him a bundle of bills. I think they were twenties.

The mover grinned but his smile didn't last, "Sir if you don't mind me asking, why would a respectable man like yourself, live in place filled with niggers."

Alfred glared; his blue eyes had darkened, filling with a dangerous rage that I have never seen anyone possess. "Because I can and I will, now get the hell out of my house!"

He flinched and didn't move it only made Alfred even more furious. He curled his fist into the mover's collar and dragged him to the front door. He then tossed him like a rag doll down the porch steps and slammed the door behind him.

Alfred was panting like he ran marathon, his fists were shaking and he was staring at the floor. A moment of silence passed and when he looked up, his eyes still carried that rage.

I couldn't help but step back.

He didn't make a move towards me, just threw his wallet and keys to the couch, "get whatever you think we need." He walked into the hall on my right, heading straight into the bathroom.

It was just like on that day at the hospital, he completely changed.

I will admit he terrified me.

And I will also admit that a tiny piece of me hoped that he would return to normal when I got back to the house.

He didn't.

I found him sitting at the kitchen table, in the dark, just staring at the wood.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, trying to sound normal myself. "I can make you something."

"I'm not hungry," he said in monotone and rose to his feet, "I'm going to bed, goodnight."

After I put away the groceries, I pulled out a pack of cigarettes from my pocket. I never cared for smoking but I needed some kind of release from my aching nerves. I walked out to the front porch and sat myself on the steps. It was late afternoon, the children were out playing and the men were returning home.
The children greeted their fathers with hugs and smiles. I took a long drag from my cigarette and wore a sad smile to the image of these happy families. I tried to ignore the hostile looks I got from the fathers. I decided to look to the sky, trying to calm my racing thoughts.

Then I heard a rustle of movement. I glanced to my left and found four children peeking through the bars of the porch. Three of them were boys, roughly around the ages from eight to ten. The girl was the smallest and possibly the youngest. They saw me look at them and they ducked down, hoping to hide from me.

I chuckled, "I saw you."

The children didn't move and I continued, "don't worry, I ain't gonna do anything. But, I gotta question your manners," I smirked, "didn't your mothers teach you how to introduce yourselves?"

The oldest boy stood up. "yes." The other children followed his lead as he walked over to the front of the house, but they still kept a good distance from me. "I'm Walter, this is James," he pointed the boy next to him. "This is Devin," he pointed to the smallest boy and then to the girl, "this is Audrey."

The young girl had hid behind Walter and I nodded to them, "I'm John."

The children were quiet for moment till Devin asked, "What are you?"

My brows rose and I laughed, "I'm human."

"No," James proclaimed, "he's asking what color you are."

"Hm, I don't know," I smiled and lifted my arm to face and brushed my hand over it. "I think I'm copper, like a penny. What do you think?" I held out my arm to them. The boys glanced to one another but it was the girl that took the first step. She slowly placed her fingers on my arm and caressed them over my forearm. She stared at my skin with childlike wonder and I grinned at her. She giggled and moved to touch my hair; I had untied it from its braid and allowed the locks to fall past my shoulders. She brushed her fingers through the stands, "why do you have hair like a girl?"

I chuckled, "we believe that our hair holds magickal properties because it has unbreakable link to us. We also believe that if our hair ever fell into our enemy's hands then they would be able to curse us."

"Then wouldn't it make sense to keep it short?" Walter questioned.

"True but we take great pride in our hair, to cut it would make us weaker."

"That's really strange," James proclaimed.

Then several women cried out for them to return home for dinner. Walter gestured for Audrey to follow him as the other boys ran off into different directions. Audrey waved goodbye and I waved back.

They seemed like good kids.

July 17, 1957

Alfred woke up early and was already at the table, eating breakfast when I entered the kitchen.
“Morning,” he nodded to me as he drank his coffee.

“Good morning,” I paused at first, “are you feeling any better?” I asked.

“Yes.” he said crossly.

I inhaled through my nose and decided to stay quiet as I ate my breakfast, which he had prepared on the table. After another minute or so, I said, ”So, you’re going to meet your brother today, what’s he like?”

Alfred snorted, ”A disapproving, believes he’s right about everything ass.”

I chuckled, ”he sounds delightful.”

A smile crept over his face, ”very.”

After breakfast Alfred was rushing around the house, searching for his paperwork. He then tore open the boxes, scanning through reference books. Several of these books were the subject of racial studies, racial political views and educational essays about the segregation in American society.

I picked up a thick book that was on a stack, ”you have a lot of reading to do.”

He groaned, ”That’s the problem, I was supposed to read these yesterday but,” he sighed.

I scanned through the pages, ”I’m sure we can make some notes.”

Alfred rubbed his hand over his face, ”not much but it will be better than nothing.”

I quickly got dressed, wearing khakis, a white button down shirt and a borrowed tan suit jacket from Alfred. The jacket hanged off my body in a floppy mess, and I had to pin up the sleeves to my elbows. I tied my hair in a low pony tail as Alfred handed me book after book, stacking them into my arms. We climbed into the car and as Alfred drove, I sped read through the pages, writing down quick notes for him.

Books and research were my biggest strengths, note-taking, writing and knowledge seeking came easy to me.

Alfred side-glanced to me, ”well aren’t you a scholar.”

”Clay was more of the scholar; I just imitated him.”

He rolled his eyes, ”just take the damn compliment.”

I ignored him and continued to make notes.

When we got to city hall, both of us carried a stack of books as Alfred made his way into the building and I followed. Security guards had tried to stop me but all Alfred had to do was wave his ID around and everyone left me be. Whatever this man was, he was important.

When we got to the meeting room, Alfred sighed in relief, ”thank god no one’s here yet.”

We laid out the books as I placed sticky notes into pages.

A voice spoke from behind, ”I see you are not prepared as usual.”
Alfred cursed under his breath and turned around with a weak smile, "Artie, it's good to see you, it's been so long."

"Arthur," the British man hissed, "my name is Arthur, Alfred."

Alfred nodded and whispered to me, "Don't look directly at the eyebrows."

I gave him a look and subconsciously glanced to the blonde's brows, they were massive and thick. I turned away, quickly. Arthur then noticed my existence, he analyzed me with a critical eye, "who are you?"

"Uh, I'm John Hawkfeather, Alfred's assistant," I introduced myself as I gave him my hand.

He shook it, "Arthur Kirkland, a pleasure." He didn't at all sound like he was having a pleasurable time.

"Johnny," Alfred cuts in, "this is my brother."

"Older brother," Arthur added.

That tone in his voice reminded me too much like Tristen and Clay when they wished to point out who was youngest. At that moment, a spark of sibling rivalry and rebellion thrived within me. "Well, it's clear who the biggest brother is," I jeered.

Arthur's massive eyebrows fell forward and Alfred held his lips together, trying to conceal his laughter.

"Bonjour!" another voice sang from the doorway.

Both Arthur and Alfred groaned in annoyance.

A tall man with shoulder length blond hair and blue eyes strolled in. He wore a stylish suit that was most likely made with expensive fabric and shoes that looked like they were Italian made. He gave everyone in the room a dazzling smile, "Alfred! It's been so long," he greeted as he kissed him on both cheeks.

Alfred stepped back, "Please don't do that."


"The kissing, men here don't do that and most will take it the wrong way."

He waved Alfred off, "you Americans are so uncultured." His bright blue eyes slid to my direction and he smiled. "Now, who is this," he asked as his eyes flickered over my body.

The look he was giving me made me uncomfortable but I tried to be polite and introduced myself. "I'm John Hawkfeather."

He held my hand and kissed my knuckles, "I'm Francis Bonnefoy, tell me are you free later on tonight," he winked.

I froze; I had no idea how to react to his . . . advances. Luckily I had Alfred to help me. He yanked Francis's hand away from mine, "Francis, I mean it. This is neither the place nor the time." He turned to me, "Johnny, you can go, wait outside okay."

He didn't have to tell me twice, I speed walked out of the doors and sat myself at the bench beside
the door. As I sat there, two more men in suits entered the room. One was tall with combed back blond hair and blue eyes. The other was a thin, young man with auburn hair and eyes. The thinner man was jumping around the bigger one, saying excitedly how he never came to the southern part of America before. The blond would only nod but clearly he was too distracted to pay any attention to the Italian.

Then Alfred came walking down the hall and I blinked at him; wasn't he already in the room. "Alfred, what are you doing here? I thought you were already inside?"

The blond blinked, "uh, I'm not, eh-"

I took a moment, this man wasn't Alfred. He was about the same height, had the same blond hair and blue eyes but he's hair was longer and he was leaner, more like me. I took a step back, "I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else."

The man scratched his head, "yeah, I get that a lot."

"Matthew," Arthur called for him from the doors, "come in," he gestured to the room.

Matthew nodded to me as a farewell and left me alone in the hall.

An hour passed, then another, then another.

Then a loud crash echoed from the room and I jumped to my feet. I got close to the door and heard bits and pieces of their conversation.

"America, the violence between your people have caused quite the stir," a smooth voice proclaimed, most likely Arthur. "Several of our companies such as automobiles and stock holders wish to branch out to America but with these segregation laws and most being different in each state, this causes a bit of uncertainty. Plenty of these employees would be moving themselves and their families to the states but they won't bother if the violence doesn't settle down."

"We dropped segregation from public schools," Alfred said to his defense.

"Not all of your schools though."

"And what is with these white and colored sections?" Francis questioned. "What is the point of these?"

"It's for everyone's safety, if their too close together it will only make them angry."

"Who? The blacks or the whites?"

"Both."

"I highly doubt that," Arthur added. "This type of behavior will only grow if you don't handle this now."

"We're changing the laws," Alfred proclaimed.

"You can change the law as many times as you want but it won't change the people."

"And I'm sure you understand that, especially with all your kings and queens of drama."

Arthur's voice grew hostile, "you will not speak ill of the royal family."
"Royal family," Alfred snickered, "they're puppets being pulled by the strings of Parliament."

"Why you ignorant little-"

"Now, now, England, don't get so upset," Francis cuts in.

"You stay out of this frog!"

"Enough," a new voice rolled in, it was deep and commanding and it sounded German. The rustling of chairs echoed as this voice said. "America, this type of violence and anger is not good for your people."

"And you're the perfect example," Alfred remarked.

The German's voice continued, "Yes, I am, for I have experience in these types of situations."

"Oh, so I should take advice from a Nazi."

An eerily silence followed, causing the air to thicken and my muscles to tense.

I stepped back as someone said that they should break for lunch. I rushed to my seat and tried to act normal.

The men walked out and my existence was completely ignored. But Alfred wasn't among the group. I rose and found him still in his seat with the books scattered around him. His face was in his hands and his shoulders were slumped forward.

"Alfred," I called to him and he instantly straightened.

"Johnny hey," his voice sounded strained and frustrated.

I knelt down to pick up the books; I couldn't stand the thought of books being thrown to the floor so carelessly. I stayed quiet as I stacked the books, cover to cover.

Alfred spoke up, "You don't have to do that."

"It's not for you, it's for the books," I countered.

He didn't say anything as he rose from his seat and aided me in the task. Once the books were settled on the table, Alfred turned to me. "Tell them I'm not coming back," he said this as he handed me the keys.

"What?!" I exclaimed, "But you can't just leave-"

"I have to," he tried to say this calmly as he rubbed his head, "I'm not," he paused, "I'm not well."

"You call yourself America, I figured you weren't all there," I pointed to his head.

He gave me a sad smile, "you still believe I'm delusional." He handed me a list, "make sure to tell them this when they return and don't mention the America thing."

Before I could make a comment, Alfred walked out of the room. "Alfred you can't leave me here!" I called after him but he started to run and slammed opened the front doors. "Alfred!" I yelled, ran to the doors and stopped at the steps.

He was gone, no trace of him was left, not even a figure in the distance. I groaned to myself and
walked back inside. I sat in Alfred’s seat and read his list.

This is what it said.

Tell them to stay out of trouble.

Tell Feliciano (the happy one) to not be so affectionate, that means no kissing or hugging Ludwig (the large blond man).

Also tell Francis to not kiss, hug or flirt with any men. I mean this.

Tell Arthur if he decides to go drinking make sure he has Matthew (our other brother) with him.

Tell Francis and Arthur if they plan to be together, make sure they get a room before they do anything.

I had no words for this.

When the men returned to the room, most were not happy to find out that Alfred left early.


Francis sighed, "Maybe it's for the best; we can pick this up tomorrow." Then a grin spreads over his face as he took two long strides to stand beside me. "Do you care to join me for a drink Monsieur Hawkfeather?"

I stepped back, "That also reminds me," I pulled out Alfred's list and read out his rules: Ludwig and Feliciano didn't seem too insulted with his demands; it was Francis and Arthur who got annoyed. "Also tell Francis to not kiss, hug or flirt with men."

"He does not mean that," Francis waved this off.

"He said: I mean this. Bolded and underlined," I remarked.

Then after I told them of the last rule, everyone looked to Arthur and Francis as the British man flushed in anger and embarrassment. "What the bloody hell does he mean by that?!"

"I don't know," I exclaimed.

"Of course you don't," he sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Leave us."

I will agree with Alfred on one thing, Arthur was dramatic.

When I got home, I found Alfred sleeping on the couch. Is this why he left the meeting? So he could take a nap.

I carried the first stack of books and dropped them on his mid-section. He awoke with a groan and I stomped to my room, not saying a word.

July 18, 1957

Last night was. . .
I have no words. . .

I don't know how to write this, the events of last night will forever haunt me.

It all started with a bang at the door, I was avoiding Alfred, hiding in my room. But I couldn't ignore this banging at ten in the evening.

I stormed over and slammed open the door, "what?"

It was a white man, he was middle age with graying hair and I recognized him as the security guard earlier that day. He asked for Alfred, saying it was an emergency and he came storming in. Before I could say anything Alfred ran out of his room. His suit was wrinkled, like he slept in it.

He rubbed his eyes and removed his jacket, "What's wrong?"

"You told me to keep watch over them but," he paused, "I couldn't stop them."

"Stop who?"

"The Klan, they found your brother and the Frenchie," his cheeks turned red, "in the alleyway."

Alfred cursed and ran back to his room to grab his shoes. "Get the police-"

The security guard snorted, "Bull ain't going to lift a finger for those faggots-"

Alfred moved like lightning, curling his fist into his shirt and slamming him against the wall. "Never call them that again."

The man nodded slowly and Alfred tossed him aside. "Tell Bull that they're foreign ambassadors and if anything happens to them we'll have an international crisis on our hands. So if he wants to keep his job, he'll send the police."

"What if he doesn't," the man asked.

Alfred's eyes burned with rage, "then it's his own damn fault if he has to bury some Klan members."

He grabbed his car keys and I followed him out the door. He turned around, "get back in the house John."

"You can't go up against the Klan by yourself!" I exclaimed.

"Watch me," he hissed. "Get back inside."

"No!"

I don't know why I cared so much. I was terrified of the Klan but that fear was overrun by my concern for Alfred. He wasn't himself, he was acting reckless and he didn't seem to care if he got hurt.

"At least wait for the police, or get help from the other men from the meeting-"

"I'm not dragging them into this," he stated as he climbed into the car.

I continued to follow, climbing in and shutting the door. Alfred gripped the wheel, "Get out of the car."
"Make me."

He leaped over me, forced opened the door and tried to push me out. I shoved him back, "You're not going there alone!"

"Goddammit! " he screamed and banged his head on the wheel. He took a deep breath and steadied his voice, "I'm not well John; I can't control my actions." He turned to me, his blue eyes glistening with unshed tears, "I don't even know if I can save Arthur and Francis. I can't put your life in danger for us."

I should have left the car, gone back into the house. I would get in the way, I knew this and it would later be proven but right at that moment, I couldn't stand the thought of leaving Alfred to go up against a group of hateful, angry men while I hid in the house like some kind of coward.

I refused to be a coward again.

"I'm. Not. Leaving."

Alfred took another deep breath, "fine."

The blond drove like a maniac. He ran red lights, weaved around cars, sped twice over the speed limit and took quick turns that almost felt like the car would tip over every time. I clinged to my door handle and prayed for our lives.

Alfred finally slowed down and came to a stop in a middle of an empty field, miles away from the city. "Where are we?"

"The meeting place of the Klan," he answered, gesturing to the flickering lights in the distance.

They looked like fire torches, my eyes widened. "Are they going to burn them?"

"Most likely," he didn't seem fazed by the thought.

That made me angry, "You're brother is about to be burned alive, don't you care?"

He snorted. "It's already happen to him twice."

I tried to ask what he meant but he handcuffed me to the wheel. He smirked, "stay here." He climbed out the car and walked to the trunk. He pulled out a white sheet, but I soon realized that sheet was a hood and a robe.

"Why do you have that?!"

"It's called a disguise," he remarked as he slipped on the robe. He walked off towards the lights as I yanked myself from the wheel, screaming at him to free me.

Ten minutes passed and I gave up on yanking my arm out and began to search for the key. "It has to be in here," I mumbled.

"Well look what we have here," a thick southern voice proclaimed.

I froze and turned to face two white hooded figures. "We got ourselves a little Indian all nice and hogged tied for us."

I tried to lock the door but I wasn't quick enough.
They opened the door and I started to kick at them. They held my legs down and one of them broke the chain of the handcuffs by snapping the link with a knife. He used the same knife to place under my chin, "step out slowly, boy," he threatens.

I did what he said as they brought me to my knees and slid the blade across my face, slicing skin. I bit back a cry as the men laughed. "I guess you're right he is a man."

"Could've fooled me, with all this hair," the other pulled at my dark locks as he shoved me to the ground.

One held me down as the other with the knife brought the blade close to the side of head and ripped off a lock of hair. I cried out in pain as they continued chop away my hair in chunks. Warm liquid ran down my face and neck. Anger surged and I took my chance to slam the back of my head into the Klan member's face.

He yelled out a curse as the knife slipped out his hand and sliced my ear. I ignored the pain and grabbed the knife. I cut the other Klan member in the face ripping the hood apart.

A moment passed just with me standing against them with the knife in my hand. They came at me and I defended myself as best as I could, but it was two against one.

One had surprised me with a punch to the face as the other tackled me to the ground. The knife flew from my hand and I struggled to kick him off. Once I did, I tried to search for the knife it in the dark but I found a tree branch instead. I swung the branch, making full contact at his head.

He fell back, out cold.

The other came charging, howling some type of battle cry. I lost track of what actually happen, all I do remember was that I was towering over the fallen Klan member beating him with the branch till he stopped moving.

I was panting and when I looked up to my reflection, my heart stopped. My hair was chopped in uneven lengths, only a few thin stands contained the original length. Blood was clotting around my scalp and lines of red had dripped down my face and neck.

Rage rumbled inside of me as one thought engulfed me. That thought was to find the knife and scalp the Klan members like the savage they thought I was. As I was wielding the man's head and holding the blade to his forehead, a raven's cry echoed from a distance.

It was as if Kai was calling out to me, telling me to be the bigger person, to prove that they were wrong. I dropped the man's head and walked away, but not before I stripped them from their robes and hoods. I ripped one apart and used them as bandages, wrapping them around my head to stop the bleeding. I slipped on my own disguise and ran towards the flickering lights.

What I saw was a nightmare.

Dozens of men, dressed in their white robes and hoods, celebrating like it was party; that they weren't here to kill two people. It disgusted me.

I scanned for Alfred, till I realized I couldn't tell any of the members apart unless they had their hoods up, most didn't.

Others held up torches, chanting, "Burn the faggots! Burn the faggots!"

Soon everyone joined as they parted for a group of men that wielded the Confederate flag and snare
drum. Someone called them the colored guard; behind them were four to five men that were half carrying half dragging two men in suits. Their clothes had been torn apart with rips and slashes and their bodies were covered in bruises. The Klan was dragging them to two wooden crosses that were standing over piles of wood, just waiting to be set on fire.

Terror filled my gut as I realized that the men they were carrying were Arthur and Francis.

The only thought that crossed my mind was where was Alfred?

I pushed myself to the front of the crowd as the Klan brought down the crosses and tied Arthur and Francis to them.

"Is this really necessary," Arthur shouted, "all we did was snog! And I didn't even like it!"

The French man snorted, "I wasn't the one trying to get my shirt off."

"Shut up, frog!"

"That's his pet name for me," Francis smiled to a Klan member, earning himself a sucker punch in the face.

As they rose a man walked out, his robes looked different and I had a sick feeling that he was the leader. "Man shall not lay with man!" he roared over the crowd, commanding them to be silent.

Once nothing could be heard but the crackling of the torches, he continued. "The men that stand in front of us tonight are poison. Poison that is leaking into our country, into our fellow man, and into our pure white blood." The crowd roared in anger and when they settled down, their leader proclaimed, "These two are just the beginning, only if we let it!"

The crowd cheered.

"I plan to nip this in bud! I plan to end this here!"

The cheering rose in volume and I was getting nervous of the people that held the torches. They were itching to set them on fire.

Arthur must have been thinking the same thing because he began to mumble, "they'll gonna set us on fire, they'll gonna set us on fire. . . ."

Francis said something in French and Arthur glared at him, "it still hurts dammit!"

"Shut up faggot!" someone grabbed a rock and threw it at him; it made its mark on his forehead. This started a frenzy among the Klan cheering and hauling in excitement.

The leader lowered his hands and the crowd settled, but I could feel the men around me twitch. They wanted this to happen, and they wanted it now.

"Who wishes to cleanse us of this poison? Who wishes to send these abominations into the burning depths of hell?!

"I do."

My knees wobbled but I caught myself from falling. I knew that voice. I spun to my right, Alfred was walking forward, his hood was up so I could his face and he was carrying a torch. For a second I was glad, but as I studied his face I realized that something was off.
His blue eyes were dark and glazed over. His face was pale against the glow of the fire and he was wearing the most disturbing smile I had ever seen. It was cruel, sadistic and hateful.

Whoever this was, it wasn't Alfred.

He strolled over as the other members parted for him, chanting, "Burn the faggots! Burn the faggots!"

"Alfred!" Arthur exclaimed, "thank god, tell them to stop this."

Alfred ignored him and walked closer to the pile of the wood. The men flinched as Francis tried to laugh it off, "oh, come now Alfred, no need to tease."

He waved the torch over the wood, slightly brushing the two elements together.

"Alfred?" Arthur questioned, his voice rising in fear.

A part of me hoped this was all a ruse that Alfred will slowly reach out to set them on fire and then turn around and strike the Klan's leader in the head. But the fear and panic that was growing on Arthur and Francis's faces killed that hope.

"Mon dieu, he's not himself!"


Alfred finally looked up to them, "Burn. They wish for you to burn," he paused, "and so do I."

"Alfred, snap out of it!" Arthur screamed, "This isn't you, fight it!"

He ignored him and was about the plunge the torch in till I did the most idiotic thing in the history of the world.

I tore off my hood and yelled, "Stop!"

Alfred's head snapped back to me, blinking away the fog in his eyes. "John?" he whispered.

The Klan surrounded me, tackling me to the ground and holding me up on my knees. The members shouted, demanding for my head. The leader stepped forward and looked to me then to Alfred. "Do you know this Indian?"

Alfred shook his head, trying to shake away the confusion. The leader grew impatient and pulled out the gun that was holstered around his waist.

He shot him, point blank in the face.

Alfred's body fell to its knees and collapsed into the dirt. The torch rolled away, its flames dangerously close to the wood.

I released a silent cry as the leader proclaimed, "Did you see my brothers; how he hesitated. There is no such thing as hesitation when it comes to our right to cleanse our country, to keep the Negros in their place and to," he slid the barrel of the gun under my chin and forced me to look at him, "kill off a dying race."

I saw my death and it was him.

The only reason, the only miracle that I'm able to write this today was because of one man; Alfred F.
Jones.

I was about to close my eyes, to wait for the bang, to be united with my family. But a slight twitch from a hand that wasn't supposed to move, received my attention. I stared in horror and disbelief as Alfred slowly pushed himself up.

When the Klan noticed that my look wasn't towards them but something behind them, they turned back. Members cried out curses, shouts of the devil and the color guard that was recently beside Arthur and Francis ran to stand beside their leader.

As Alfred rose to his feet, the bullet wound was closing, healing rapidly, not even leaving a scar. He chuckled, it was dark but it sounded more like him. "I have to thank you that blast in the head finally got those voices to shut up."

Everyone was stunned but the leader was the only one able to stutter out one phase, "What are you?"

Alfred grinned, "I'm a monster and I'm afraid that your bullets can't help you now."

Two of the Klan members rose and charged at him but in a flash, Alfred snatched them by their necks and smashed them together; the back of their heads colliding in a loud, sickening crack. Alfred dropped them, stepped over their lifeless bodies and gazed to me and to the white robed men. "Let him go," he ordered.

Instead of listening, another group of men came running and Alfred grabbed a torch from a Klan member and kicked him off. He slammed the flame into a Klan member's face, setting the hood and robe on fire. He then moved to whack another member in the face setting that one on fire as well. This routine continued, Alfred throwing around the torch, setting these men on fire.

Till someone was able to knock it out of his hand but that didn't stop him. He punched and kicked men with ease, tossing them aside with monstrous strength. He then came charging, freeing me from my captors by yanking them up into the air and throwing them half-way across the field.

The leader moved fast, pulling the gun to my head, "Stop or I'll-"

He didn't finish, Alfred had gripped his wrist and snapped his elbow backwards. The leader screamed in agony and Alfred squeezed his mouth shut, forcing the Klan leader to look at him. "It's not your job to take out the trash," he lifted him over his head. "It's mine!" He sent him flying across the field, crashing back first into a truck.

"Get the guns! Get the guns!" someone shouted.

Alfred moved quickly to cover me, "stay behind me; don't move."

"But-"

My voice couldn't be heard as the Klan moved fast to grab their shotguns and aimed for Alfred. A series of gunshots exploded, blazing past me, leaving me unharmed. Alfred on the other hand was taking the full hit, but no matter the number of bullets he kept me covered.

I still got hit, but they were grazes, nothing that couldn't be fixed with a few stitches.

Alfred was covered in bullet wounds, but as quickly as he received them his wounds disappeared. He whispered to me, "Pretend to faint."
"What-" I barely choked out the word.

"Just do it, I'll explain later. Trust me."

This man saved my life twice, why would I hesitate. I closed my eyes and fell back; I crashed to the ground, biting back my whimper of pain. I watched the scene through the slits of my eyelids. The scene of Alfred standing tall, with his head up high, "is that the best ya'll got?"

The Klan members were shifting backwards, preparing to run.

Alfred stepped forward with ease and the men screamed and ran to their trucks. They climbed into their vehicles in a panic, not looking back for anything, not even for their leader who was probably dead beside that same truck.

Once they drove away leaving behind bodies of fallen Klan members, guns, and flamed torches that were licking at the dry grass. Alfred ran to the torches, setting most up right and smothering others out.

I heard Francis speak up, "Um, Alfred could you-"

Alfred spun around and he cursed. I found out afterwards that the torch that had fallen out Alfred's hand when he got shot by the Klan leader, made its way to the pile of wood below Francis and it was starting to burn. He tried to put it out with the robe he was wearing but in the words of Francis-

"Stop! You're making it worse!"

Then Alfred pushed the cross down, shoving it away from the flames. I heard Francis yelp in pain and Alfred sighed, "Don't be a baby; it's better than being cooked alive."

He moved to break Arthur's cross and gently placed him down to the ground. He then untied them from their wooden crosses, and poked fun at them as he did. "Ah, doesn't this bring back memories? Well, mostly for you two."

"Ha, ha, well aren't you funny America," Arthur hissed.

"Are the police on their way? Did you call them?" Francis asked.

Alfred sighed, "They're not coming; Bull most likely thinks he can brush this under the rug like he's done for so many."

"This has happen before?!" Arthur exclaimed.

"Yes."

"And you haven't done anything about it?!"

"See!" Francis exclaimed, "America you have a huge crisis on your hands! Your government needs to handle this."

Alfred sighed again, "Is this the thanks I get for saving you."

"You were about to set us on fire," Francis remarked.

"Alfred, are you hearing voices again?" Arthur asked, concerned. "Are you splitting in two?"

He was quiet till, "No."
"Don't lie to me -"

"I got a handle on this Artie."

"Don't call me that."

"Besides, this is all your fault!"

"My fault?" Arthur said.

"Yours and his, I told you two to not do anything in public."

Francis jumped in, "It's not our fault that your citizens are uncultured."

"Uncultured," Alfred laughed harshly. "This is not a burlesque club in Paris or the back alleyways of London. This is Birmingham, Alabama and they will kill you if you act like this. You are lucky I had someone tailing you for if I didn't you two would've been killed and come complaining to me about it the next day."

A moment of silence passed between them and Alfred took a deep breath. "I'm glad you two are okay," he said calmly.

The crackling of the fire roared and Alfred would tell me afterwards that he took that chance to pick up the fallen Confederate flag and toss it into the flames.
I felt someone shaking me, "Amy, wake up."

I jumped, shouting, "Fire!"

"Fire?" Peter gave me a questionable look, "where?"

I blinked and rubbed my eyes and face. I looked down to my lap, with my grandfather's journal laid out on my legs. It finally came to me; I was reading the journal last night, about Alfred and his . . . problem. "Nothing. I just stood up late, reading."

"What were you reading?" he made a grab for the book and I snatched it away.

"It's nothing, just," I paused, "history."

"O-kay," Peter dragged out the word. "Everyone's waiting for us in the dinning cart, we're about to hit the train station in about an hour."

I nodded, "yeah, I'll catch up."

He gave me another questionable glance but shrugged and walked out of the cabin. I was left alone with my nagging thoughts. The idea of Grandpa and Alfred facing off with the Ku Klux Klan was so unreal but yet there was evidence. When I was a little girl maybe five years old, I had a fascination with my family's dark hair, mostly because mine was the complete opposite. I was combing my fingers through Grandpa's hair, just as Audrey was doing, and when the tips brushed against his scalp I felt tender skin.

Before I could explore further, Grandpa gently pushed me away and tried to change the subject when I asked what was wrong. He would only smile and say, "It was long time ago Amy-bear, nothing you need to worry about just yet."

I subconsciously touched my head; I tried to imagine the pain my grandfather endured. That a knife would slice through my locks, taking shards of flesh with them. I shivered.

I now understood why Grandpa preferred to keep me in California. He was so worried when I went to visit our extended family in Texas. Maybe for the exact same reason Alfred avoided the south in the late 1950's and early 1960's. The supposed voices in his head; was Grandpa afraid I would hear them too?

The only voices I heard were screams, but that was only when a national disaster hit the country; being natural, a mass shootings or a fast spreading disease. I figured I was just emotional or I played them off as white noise. But there was an incident. I was thirteen and it was 2014; I thought people were okay with homosexuals, well at least in California, but I was wrong. When the Quake hit, we had a lot of church groups come out to help us.

Most were nice but there was this one group, they were deeply religious. When they found out Michel was gay, along with most of the members in our community. They disapproved but were tolerate but their younger members were cruel, especially two boys; Jose Lopez and Oliver Taylor. My blood boiled when I recalled their ugly, hateful faces. Even after five years, they were still able to get under my skin. Most of our gay citizens were older so the only victim they could have was Michel. They tortured him for weeks. He had bruises, black eyes, split lips and he made an excuse for each one. Carlo and Gemma were so worried, they had no idea what was going on for Michel.
only told me and Jamie that he was gay. One day Jamie and I followed him and found him cornered by Jose and Oliver.

They were pushing him to the ground, calling him every cruel gay slur they could think of. I wanted to crush them, but I hesitated. Voices echoed, shouting, 'Faggots are running this country!' 'Man shall not lay with man!' 'Abominations! All of them!'

I thought it was the boys but now I realized those phases were in my head. I was frozen; I didn't know what to do. I was scared, frustrated but mostly I was angry. But there was also fear and guilt mixed in. I was tempted to join Jose and Oliver.

Then I heard Michel cry, silencing everything else, leaving the only sound of me screaming like a banshee and tackling Jose to the ground. I received bruises all over my mid-section and face but I was the one that came out on top. I gave Jose a bloody nose and broke his hand while I kicked Oliver in the groin and choked him till he passed out. Jamie cried out for our parents and Dad had to pry me off as I bit and clawed at the boys.

The church group was not happy and my parents kept asking why I did it. I made a promise not to tell them about Michel, so no one was talking, till Oliver woke up. He said that Michel was gay in front of everyone and Carlo stood for his son's defense, claiming that he wasn't. Then Michel exclaimed, "Dad, I am gay!"

It was awkward as everyone watched him run out of the rec-center. Jamie and I immediately ran after him as the adults fought over who would pay for Jose and Oliver's hospital bills. The whole ordeal ended with Grandpa threatening the pastor with a call to abc news, "I'm sure they would be interested to learn about two sixteen year old boys beating on a thirteen year old, just because he was gay."

"Then getting their asses kicked by a thirteen year old girl," Christopher added with a smirk, "who would be the pansies then?"

The church group left without another word. Jamie and I never left Michel's side earning the nick names: 'guard dogs' or 'pittbull' in my case. Michel and his parents had a long talk soon after. I was nearby, watching and standing by for support. Grandpa sat with me and ruffled my hair, "I personally don't approve of violence but when it's used to protect someone in need, I can overlook it. You stood up for what was right, I'm very proud of you Amy."

My heart squeezed at the image of Grandpa smiling at me with fondness and pride.

Everyone met in the dinning cart; luckily the booths were large enough for all of us to sit at one table. Ludwig, Elizabeta and Gilbert sat on the left side and I sat between Peter and Raivis on the right. We ordered our breakfast as the boys and I shared inside jokes with our TV shows.

I pulled out my phone and login into my tumblr account, "I just followed Doctor Who, and I gotta say I'm so far behind."

"Yeah you just started on the reboot season with the ninth doctor," Peter informed.

"How many doctors are there?"

"Thirteen, they are all the same person, don't worry you'll find out about the regenerating cycle at the last episode of season one and the first show of season two."
I nodded, "okay, but you guys are gonna have a ball with Teen Wolf, just wait till you find out who the monster is, oh and Kate, o-oh Kate."

"Hey!" Raivis proclaimed, "No spoilers."

"Okay, okay," I rolled my eyes, "tell me when you guys are on part two of the third season, it's my favorite."

"When Stiles is possessed by the Japanese demon," Gilbert rolled in, "That was a pretty good season."

I gasped and the boys stared at him with shocked wide-eyed expressions. "No spoilers!" they warned as I clapped my hands, "you like Teen Wolf!"

He nodded, "it's a good show."

I reached for his hand, "Gilbert, I never thought I would say this but I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship."

Ludwig rolled his eyes in annoyance, "I have no idea why this generation of people prefers to be brain washed by television."

"You're just jealous because I connect with our young people and that I'm awesome," Gilbert smirked.

"Sure you are," Elizabeta said sarcastically.

He whispered loud enough for us to hear, "you certainly weren't complaining about how awesome I was a night ago."

A sight blush dusted over her cheeks as everyone turned away, embarrassed for her. She clutched her glass, "Die." She said in a low voice as she shoved her glass to his lips, trying to drown him with the cup of water and she was succeeding.

Arthur was in his parlor room, sitting by the wrap around windows and drinking his gray earl tea. He relaxed into his seat's green cushion and watched as the rain tapped against the window pane. Its days like these his thoughts wonder back to the time he and his friends would have parties for tea and cakes. Now when he said friends, he didn't mean the nations or the human kind.

He has known these friends since he was child. They were bright, colorful and magickal. Humans would call them the fiction of folklore, but he knew better. During their parties, unicorns would graze in the fields as rabbits hopped to the table, pleading with big brown eyes for small tokens of food. Fairies of every color would flutter around the table, snatching chunks of pastry treats and giggling in their high-vocal tones. A mint shaded bunny with wings would join them, till he would land on Arthur's shoulder and nuzzle his face into his cheek.

Arthur sighed; it's been ages since he has seen his mythical friends. They haven't revealed themselves for almost twenty years. He may never admit it to anyone, but he feared that he had lost the ability to see his friends. The thought saddened him, without them he had to face the fact that he was absolutely, completely, alone.

A knock came from the front door and he blinked, bringing him out of his thoughts. He rose from his
seat and answered the door with a polite, "yes?"

"Bonjour my little Angleterre," an all too familiar voice announced.

Arthur slammed the door in Francis' face and spun around to walk away.

Francis called out from behind the door, "Arthur, open the door."

"Go away frog!" he exclaimed.

"Oh but I come bearing wonderful news."

"I don't care."

"It's about our delightful little niece Amy."

Arthur sighed once again and reluctantly opened the door. "Did she decide to run away with the circus?"

Francis cracked an eyebrow, amused, "no, she's visiting Italy. It seems Germany has decided to take a vacation and cancelled this month's meeting."

"Germany cancelled the meeting," Arthur blinked, slightly shocked. He had received the email alert earlier that day but didn't really question it; he figured other more important issues came up. Now that he had found out that the person that called off the meeting was Germany and that he did it for a holiday, Arthur felt like he had entered an alternate universe.

He quickly reclaimed his posture, "well, good for them. If that is all you wish to inform, then this is goodbye." He tried to close the door again but Francis pushed his way through.

"Not yet mon ami," Francis removed his rain coat and brushed through his wet locks. "Ugh, I don't know how you can stand all this rain."

"It's relaxing, unlike you."

He ignored the Brit as he tied his locks with a spare hair tie, "Arthur I would like to invite you to come along with me to Italy."

Arthur snorted, "No," but Francis ignored his rejection and sat himself at the table in the parlor room. Arthur slacked his shoulders in defeat and stomped into the kitchen to grab another tea cup. He came back to the table and placed the cup in front the irritating Frenchman, "tea?" he asked with narrowed eyes.

"Oh Arthur so much the gentlemen," Francis smiled.

"Shut it."

He chuckled and slipped his tea, "So Angleterre will you come away with me for a romantic trip to Italy?"

"You do realize I'm holding a pot filled with scorching hot liquid."

Francis quivered, "so violent, we see where Amy gets it."

Arthur's eye twitched and sat himself back in his seat. "I don't want to go anywhere with you frog."
"But Feliciano invited me to stay at his villa in Rome, and he said that I could invite anyone to come along."

"I doubt he would want me there," Arthur recalled for years how the Italian man would run for the hills, literally every time he spotted the Brit.

"I'm sure you won't scare him, you've mellowed over the years."

He rolled his eyes, "still, the answer is no."

Francis leaned forward, "But Matthieu is coming, and the tourists are leaving. This is our perfect chance to spend some time with Amy and I'm sure she would want to see you."

"I highly doubt it," Arthur turned to face the window, "I haven't spoken with her since Berlin."

Francis raised his brows, "you two haven't patch things up?" Then he sighed, "Oh Arthur is this why you have locked yourself away, drinking tea and letting your ill feelings bottle up inside of you."

Arthur didn't answer him and he continued, "Tell me, did Amy try to contact you?"

Arthur winched, remembering that the young girl had called him three times after the incident in Berlin. She stopped after the third call, leaving one voice message: "Hey Arthur… um I'm sorry if it's late or too early but I just… want to say I'm sorry, for everything…. See you at the next meeting." He can still recall her words and tone; she was nervous and sounded, almost wounded.

Francis narrowed his eyes, knowingly, "she called you and you ignored her. Bravo mon ami."

"Sarcasm is not your color, frog."

"And clearly compassion is not yours." Francis sighed, "Are you going to do the same thing with Amy as you did to Alfred? You two had your falling out and then when Alfred tries to reach out, you slap his hand away. And, yet you were shocked when the roles were reversed."

Arthur opened his mouth and Francis raises his hand, "Let me finish." Arthur crossed his arms and glared at him as he continued. "You two carried this on for decades and what have you gotten out of it? Regret," he let the word hang for a moment. "Regret for all those years you two could've been brothers but instead fought."

"Are you really going to treat Amy the same way? When she makes you mad or does something you disapprove of, you will shut her out?" Francis shook his head, "I know where this leads Arthur, she will give up trying to reach you just as Alfred did and when you finally decide to come to her, she will snap at you and you will run back into your rabbit hole and never come out."

Arthur breathed in deeply through his nose, hating the fact that Francis could read him like a book. The Frenchman always saw through him, his joys, his quirks, his insecurities, it was all mapped out for the bloody frog. Oh, how Arthur loathed it.

They allowed a few moments of silence to pass between them, the only sounds that could be heard were their breathing and the ticking of the grandfather clock across the room.

Then Francis pulled out a plane ticket from his pocket, "My plane will be leaving in three hours," he placed it in front of the Brit. "If you don't want history to repeat, I suggest you come with me." His eyes flickered over to his homemade scones, "or you can stay and eat whatever you call that. At least in Rome you can actually have some good cuisine."
Arthur snapped; insulting his cooking had pushed him too far. He rose from his seat and slammed his hands on the table, "Get out!"

Francis raised his hands in surrender and moved to grab his coat and opened the front door. "I'll be waiting," he winked at him and closed the door behind him.

Arthur flushed in anger, "what makes you think I would follow you!" He flopped back into his seat and muttered a curse. His eyes glanced to the ceiling as his thoughts were once again his only company.

He closed his eyes and found images of Alfred waiting for him. The moments they shared before their war; the time they built a snowman during a winter in Virginia, giving him piggy back rides through the fields, and crafting him toys, which would lead to him beaming his bright, dazzling smile. That smile always contented Arthur, but as the years passed and Alfred gained his independence, that smile became bittersweet.

Arthur's breathing hitched slightly, the war had passed and his wounds were nothing but fading scars. But his heart was a different story; the hurt was always fresh when he replayed the memory of that night. That blasted night, the night that broke his heart.

He rubbed his eyes, trying to snuffle out the stinging in the back of them. His relationship with Alfred was never the same afterwards, all those years of avoiding each other (when they could) and when they finally were on speaking terms, they did nothing but argue. It was true what Arthur had told Amy, that Alfred wished to stop their fighting, saying that, "Brothers shouldn't fight." And he tried on more than one occasion to rebuild their bridge, but it was Arthur that turned his back on him each time. He was still hurting and for the once colony to come offering his friendship like history can be wiped away, it angered Arthur.

It angered him that Alfred could move on so easily from the war, could move on so easily…from him. It wasn't fair to Arthur that he had suffered while Alfred thrived. The growth of his nation increasing by the decade, all without Arthur; and the harsh truth he realized, was that he held Alfred back. But still, he wanted to inflict a small fraction of the pain and rejection he had felt on that night. He wanted Alfred to be crushed, defeated, just as he was.

Arthur had got his wish, after several attempts from Alfred, the young country gave up. More years passed and when Arthur finally realized his mistake, he offered his hand to Alfred. Arthur shouldn't have felt so distraught when the young boy rejected him, shouting that he didn't have the time to entertain his whims of brotherly affection. That was just before America's Civil War.

He cursed, all those wasted years.

His eyes subconsciously slid across the room, finding his most recent pictures on the narrow tables. Alfred was in a few, most of his photos were taken in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Anything older had to be hidden, in case of curious of eyes. After the first Great War, the brothers were finally able to rebuild their relationship, granted, it was a slow process but they had time.

Well, Arthur thought they had time.

Next to one of Alfred's pictures was an image of Amy, beaming the same brilliant smile he carried. Arthur and she were at Johnny and Celine's wedding, sitting together with Francis and Matthew at their table. All three of the older nations were smiling and it had been a long time since their smiles were genuine.
Francis' words echoed in his ears, *if you don't want history to repeat, I suggest you come with me.*

Arthur groaned loudly, almost admitting that Francis was right. Before doubt and uncertainty could sink in, he sprinted upstairs and packed a duffle bag filled with clothes and the necessary toiletries. He grabbed his passport and the plane ticket, slipped on his rain coat and opened the front door.

Francis was leaning against the column of the porch, "about time, do you realize how much that taxi will cost now?"

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When we finally reached Civitavecchia, the air was warm and humid with the sun blazing overhead. I stretched out my arms and craned my face up so I could feel the tingle of the sun's rays on my skin. For a split second, I almost believed I was back in Summerland. I breathed in the familiar scent of saltwater and scanned the area, "is there a beach nearby?"

"Yes," Ludwig answered as he pointed off into the distance. "The beach is just across the street."

"Amy!" a familiar, high-spirited voice called out.

I spun, "Feliciano!" I ran and jumped into his arms.

Greetings and introductions were exchanged as we followed Feliciano to his blue van. We loaded our luggage into the trunk and climbed into our seats. Ludwig persuaded for Feliciano to sit in the passenger seat but he complained, saying he wished to drive. Gilbert and Elizabeta sat in the next seat behind them and I sat between Peter and Raivis in the back.

Once we were settled, Feliciano grinned, "everyone ready!" I noticed that Ludwig, Elizabeta and Gilbert had tightened their seatbelts and were clutching their door handles. The boys and I shared a look as the excited Italian slammed his foot on the gas and sped out of the parking lot.

I now know why Ludwig wanted to drive.

Feliciano was a reckless driver, pushing well pass the speed limits and weaving around cars with swift lane changes. He took wide and fast turns, almost hitting incoming traffic three times now but that was when I decided to open my eyes. After about five minutes, Ludwig started shouting for Feliciano to pull over. Feliciano refused, saying that the German drove too slow. His eyes were off the road for moment, but that was a long enough moment for him to run a street light.

Cars and trucks came to a streaking halt as we passed in full throttle. Everyone but the Italian screamed. Gilbert and Elizabeta were holding hands, Raivis was praying and Peter was whimpering, "we're gonna die, we're gonna die."

Ludwig yelled "Italy stop the car, now!"

"But you don't have a license to drive in Italy."

"I don't care, pull over!"

I looked up to find another red light and people crossing the street. "People! People!" I shouted, frantically pointing to the road.

The arguing nations turned to face the street; Ludwig cursed as Feliciano honked his horn and shouted for people to get out of his way. The people dodged the van, shouting at us as we passed.
Then as another intersection came into view, we noticed a large, white transportation truck about to get the green.

"Oh god," I whispered and screamed, "Feli, stop!"

"I can make it," he smiled.

"No you can't!" Ludwig and Gilbert shouted in sync.

Gilbert wrapped an arm around Feliciano's neck as Ludwig leaped over him, took the wheel and stomped on the breaks. We jerked to a stop and the white truck sped by. Everyone was panting and unclutching their hands from their door handles. I was holding onto the boys, my nails had dug into their shoulders almost drawing blood. I released them, apologizing for their marks.

Ludwig moved quickly, unbuckling Feliciano's seatbelt and forced him out of his seat. Much to Feliciano's complaints and whines, he and Ludwig switched places. I instantly relaxed and leaned against cushion of the seat.

The hour long car ride was filled with the beautiful landscape of the beach coast and old fashion brick buildings with tiled roofs. Further down the highway we took, the scenery became ordinary, where we mostly saw flat plains of glassy fields and small towns off in the distance. We entered Rome through the outskirts by a freeway with the number code A91. Ludwig drove us up into the city, I almost thought we would be able to see the heart of it, but Feliciano quickly advised him to get on a road called Viale Erminio Spalla.

This road lead us into a neighborhood with large houses, narrowed roads and towering trees aligned with the streets and surrounding most of the houses. Ludwig slowed to a stop beside a black iron gate with fifteen foot tall dark brown brick walls surrounding the property. Once Feliciano opened the gate, we drove in and parked the car in front of the house, or villa as Feliciano called it.

It was built with the same colored brick as the walls, it had two floors and a large square shape tower attached on the left side of the house. The yard was wide and had countless space as olive trees colonized the landscape. Planted flower beds and pots of herbs were spread along the villa while patches of wild flowers were scattered through the yard. Large, square shape concrete tiles were placed on the ground, being used as sidewalks and my best guess was that they were used throughout the property.

I had grabbed my carryon and walked along the sidewalk. The villa was massive and the yard seemed to be of equal value, possibly more. I discovered two stone brick stair cases, one that went down and wrapped around the villa. That flat of stairs lead to a side door that connected to a level of the house below the ground floor. So the villa was three stories, four if the tower was a floor.

The second stair case lead up to a brick patio that was built beside the ground floor, most likely this area was the backyard. The patio was widespread with pots of plants outlining against the walls and at the corners. Stylish, ivory wired patio furniture was causally placed around area. They were black with white cushions and had matching tables with clear, glass tops. Across from me was an outdoor chimney that was built into the wall of the patio. Then there was another flat of stairs, they were diagonal from the ones I entered from. I stepped closer and found that these steps lead to a pool.

"Yes," I whispered excitedly.

"Who's there?"

I jumped to the sound of a new voice. I spun to face a boy with tan skin, dark hair and golden eyes.
He was dressed in khaki shorts with a loose maroon tank top and his hair was in disarray, as if he just woke up from a nap.

"Hey," I said awkwardly.

The boy blinked, "Oh, America you're here already." He looked around, "where's my brother?"

"Uh," I stuttered as I raked my brain for his name. "He's just down that way," I gestured to the area I just came from. "You're Lovino right? Or was it Romano?"

"Both; Romano is like my country title and Lovino is my human name. You can call me whatever you wish," the boy said as he walked down the steps, leaving me behind.

When I started to hear shouting, I ran back to the van.

"I only agreed that America could stay with us, but you went and invited that ass and the potato bastard!"

"But Lovino, their house needs to be fixed and they wished to go on vacation, so-"

"It doesn't matter!" Lovino hissed, "I don't want them here!"

Gilbert cuts in, "Lovino-"

He glared, "Its Romano to you!"

"Lovi, please, we came a long way," Elizabeta added.

His eyes soften, "You can stay Liz but these two," he went back to glaring at the Beilschmidt brothers, "I forbid."

Ludwig sighed, "Can we at least spend the night-"

"No!" Then Lovino found Raivis and Peter. "And who are these two?"

Raivis flinched and stepped back but Peter was the braver of the two. "I'm Sealand and this is Latvia."

Lovino lifted a brow in question, "Sealand? What is a Sealand?"

Peter glared but continued in calm voice, "I'm the nation of Sealand, Peter Kirkland."

"Kirkland?" Lovino cursed, "You're related to that damned, know-it-all Britain."

"I was once, but the only thing we share is the last name, nothing else."

Lovino snorted, "You got the eyebrows."

Before Peter could defend himself, Lovino narrowed his eyes at Raivis. "And then we got the Baltic, I don't like you either."

"Y-you don't e-even know me," Raivis stuttered.

"I know you have ties to Russia and I don't like Russia."

"And who does," I proclaimed as I stood protectively in front of my friend. "Feliciano invited all of us to come and stay so deal with it."
Lovino gave me a challenging look and I met his gaze with equal intensity, neither of us backing down.

Gilbert snickered and whispered to Elizabeta, "how much you bet they'll gonna kiss?"

Both Lovino and I blushed and turned away from each other to shout at the albino in sync, "shut up."

After several minutes of arguing and begging (on Feliciano's part), Lovino reluctantly agreed.

Peter and Raivis would take the room in the basement. This floor also had a storage room and a bathroom. The rest of the floor was a comfy den, with a fashionable couch, two recliners, a flat screen and a pool table.

The ground floor held the living room; it was painted white with ivory green furniture. They were part of a set, all of them styled with polished wood trim and legs. They were vintage but, most likely the Italian brothers must've had these couches and love seats for years. The kitchen had wrap around windows and was fashioned out of the Renaissance age but yet it was modern. Brown wooden cabinets were laid out on the wall beside an elegant stove, there was multicolored marble counter tops and silver sinks. There was even a table in the center used for chopping and dicing vegetables, like most kitchens I've seen in movies. The dining room was styled just as the kitchen and was next door, on the right. Further down, there was a small bathroom, a spare bedroom and the master bedroom. Lovino and Feliciano were already using the rooms so we moved on to the next level

The second floor had a small parlor room beside a large window. Two love seats sat across from each other with a table in between. Three bedrooms were on the floor along with another bathroom. Two of the bedrooms were on the right side of the parlor room while the last room and the bathroom were on the left. Two of the remaining four would have to share a room unless someone wanted to have the last room in the tower.

My curiosity peaked, "What does it look like?"

Feliciano gestured me to follow him and we walked up a flat of stairs beside the bathroom. The stair case was narrow and spiraled upwards into an office. The walls on my left and in front held windows but above them, right under the ceiling were bookshelves. They connected along the ceiling till they hit the wall on my right, where everything was covered, from floor to ceiling with shelves of books, art profolios, and photo albums. In the center was a small work desk with sketch paper, pencils and paint scattered over the surface.

"I'm sorry about the mess," Feliciano said embarrassed.

"Its fine, Michel is the same way."

He smiled and gestured to a door behind the stairs. The room was tiny, only having enough room for a twin sized bed against the wall on the right and a dresser beside the door. Feliciano quickly displayed the bathroom, which was behind the door on the left. The bathroom was just as small, but it didn't look cramped. It was cozy just as the bedroom and I was happy to notice that there where small rectangle shaped windows surrounding the entire room and bathroom; letting in a lot of natural light.

"The reason why no one wants the room is because it's small and the air conditioning doesn't reach up here," Feli explained.

"I like it," I reassured him, "can the windows open?"
He nodded, "si."

"Then I'll stay here, besides I get my own bathroom," I grinned wickedly.

"Feliciano!" Lovino yelled his voice almost a whisper in the tower.

We ran back down stairs to the ground floor; where Lovino was glaring at us through the embrace of a dark haired, tan skinned man. "You invited the tomato bastard too," he hissed as he tried to pry the man off.

"But Lovino it's been so long since we spent time together," the man, that I now recognized was Antonio proclaimed.

"Get off!" he shouted and shoved him away.

"Lovino calm down," Feliciano stepped between them. "We haven't been with our brothers in such a long time, so I figured."

"Wait, did you say brothers," Lovino groaned, "you invited France!"

Feliciano laughed nervously, "yes."

Lovino pulled his hair in frustration, "why?" he whined.

"Because they're our brothers-"

"Our adopted brothers," he said harshly.

"Oh Lovi, why do you have to be so cruel," Antonio leaned against Gilbert and the Prussian patted his head, "he didn't mean it buddy."

He rolled his eyes and turned to Feliciano, "call France, tell him we don't have the room."

"But we do Lovino, you and I can share the master room and Antonio and Francis could have the spare, or Ludwig and Gilbert could share a room and they could have the other."

"Okay, then just tell him not to come!"

"It's too late; he should be on his plane by now."

Lovino groaned as Antonio proclaimed, "I guess this is a bad time to tell you that Francis invited Britain and Canada along."

The Italian boy snapped, "He can't just invite other people into our home, especially Britain!"

"Um," Feliciano was fidgeting with his hands, "I told him he could."

Lovino's eyes blazed, "You're making it really hard for me not to slap you."

After more arguing and pleading (this time done by Antonio, Elizabeta and Feliciano) Lovino gave up. It was decided that the Italian brothers would share the master room so Antonio could have the spare. Then Ludwig and Gilbert would share one of the rooms on the second floor, leaving one open for our incoming guests.

The entire situation was exhausting to watch so I snuck back into the tower. I opened the windows; the air was warm but the gust of wind made it pleasant. I stretched, breathing in the air and absorbing
the sun's rays. I lay back onto the bed and yawned, I didn't even realize that I was tired till now. The late-night reading and the near-death experience was taking its toll. I closed my eyes; *a nap wouldn't hurt.*

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Lovino sat outside, sitting on the wall and mumbling a string of curses. Excited shouts and laughter could be heard from the kitchen. He glanced back to find his younger brother in the center of everyone's attention. A spark of jealousy tingled in his fingertips as he spun back to face the sky and tried to ignore Feliciano and his guests. Anxiety rippled through him, he wasn't a social person and to have so many nations over at the same time agitated him. He had no idea how to act or what to do. Feliciano was always the friendlier one; he seemed to have an affinity for people, being nation or human.

He groaned, angry with himself, even after hundreds of years he still carried a tiny sliver of jealousy towards his younger brother. Wasn't he over all this, he thought. He knew he shouldn't focus too much on their differences but he couldn't help it, especially when all of Feliciano's traits were thrown into his face. Veneziano was kind, friendly and creative while Lovino was rude, hostile and couldn't draw a single picture to save his life.

The kitchen door opened, "why so down Lovino?"

"Go away bastard." He may be lonely but he certainly didn't want the annoying Spaniard's company.

"Oh, cheer up Lovi," Antonio walked over and sat beside him, "come and join us, we're making zuppa Toscana, you're favorite."

"Are you trying to bribe me?"

"That depends, is it working?" he grinned.

"No, now leave me alone."

A moment of silence passed till Antonio asked, "What's wrong?"

Lovino mentally groaned. It irritated him when Antonio didn't get his hints; even when they were spelled out for him. People that didn't know the Spanish man would mistake this as stubbornness but Lovino knew it was just stupidity. "Nothing," he hissed.

Antonio sighed, "Lovi, I may not be your boss anymore but you know you can come to me when you have a problem."

"I don't have a problem," he said.

Antonio smiled knowingly and waited.

Lovino sighed, "You are an irritating man."

He ignored his comment, "I know you're not entirely happy about all this."

Lovino gave him a look, "what was your first clue?" He shook his head and mumbled, "Dumbass."

Antonio chuckled lightly, "you're not use to so many people here, and its making you nervous isn't it."
The Italian grumbled and turned away from him to hide his flush of embarrassment. Antonio continued, "You already knew that America was coming, so why are you so upset?"

"Because that one person turned into seven, soon to be ten," Lovino sighed. "It would've been fine if it was just you and Liz."

"Oh Lovi—"

"Before you get emotional, realize I only said that because I can tolerate you."

"I'll take it," he smiled.

Lovino rolled his eyes but continued, "But I can't stand that potato bastard and his asshole of a brother. Then there is that Sealand boy," he shook his head, "I don't trust anyone that's related to that bastard England."

"He doesn't go by England anymore, mostly Britain," Antonio informed.

"England, Britain, it doesn't matter it's the same damn thing." Lovino turned to him, "and why are you so calm about this, don't you hate him too?"

Antonio shrugged, "we've had our problems but I wouldn't call it hatred."

"He burned down your navy fleet and made you the laughing stack of Europe."

"Rubbing salt into the wound, Lovino, rubbing salt into the wound," Antonio mumbled till he proclaimed. "You must learn to let go; besides it's just for two weeks-"

"Yes, two weeks! Two weeks with them," he pointed to the kitchen. "At least with America, she would've spent all of her time with Feliciano, going to the museums and sightseeing. But everyone here has been to Rome countless of times, they'll just spend their time here."

"Not all the time, Rome has some amazing night clubs," Antonio smiled.

Lovino cursed under his breath, he needed to find new clubs so he could make sure to avoid them.

"So you weren't planning to get to know America?" Antonio asked.

"Veneziano likes her and she seems to like him," he said. "I was just gonna leave them be."

"Lovino don't be like this, you have some amazing qualities. You are funny; when you want to be. Kind; when you want to be."

"I get it, I have the potential."

Antonio gave a mischievous smile. "Sí, you must, to have such a way with the señoritas," he winked.

Lovino gave a soft huff of air that could almost be counted as a laugh. "I did learn from the country of passion."

Antonio beamed as Feliciano opened the door, "fratello, the soup's ready."

Everyone took their seats at the dining table and they were about to eat till Elizabeta proclaimed, "Where is Amy?"
"She must've gone to her room to hide from us," Gilbert said as he took a spoon full of his soup.

"I would too," Ludwig added.

"I'll go get her," Feliciano moved to walk out of the room but Antonio spoke up.

"Wait, Feli you have been on your feet all day, let Lovino go."

Lovino gave him a quick shake of his head but he ignored him and nudged the boy out of his seat. "Go, go, go," he said excitedly.

Lovino tried to object but Antonio wouldn't hear it. The other nations swiftly grew annoyed with their petty fight and also agreed for him to fetch her. He was ushered out of the room and guided to the stair case. He couldn't really call her down for it would use all of his volume just for a whisper to get through and if she was asleep she would never hear. Lovino sighed once again and headed to the tower.

His nerves were bundling deep inside of him and with every step he took these knots would tighten. *Relax, Lovino she's just a girl.* When he reached the American's room, he knocked and was answered with silence. "America?" he opened the door and found the girl on the bed, fast asleep just as he assumed.

He stepped closer, "America?"

She didn't stir and Lovino moved closer, his eyes subconsciously glancing to her naked legs. She was wearing a pair of shorts that came to her mid-thigh and a baggy graphic tank top. The straps were thin with deep, hanging openings that revealed her bra and rib cage. His eyes continued to roam over her body till they settled on her face. Her curly locks surrounded her head like a halo, her eyes flickered under her lids and her mouth was slightly open.

He finally realized he was staring and he cursed at himself. He was watching her as she slept, what was he? France? When that thought crossed his mind, he winced.

America mumbled and Lovino jumped, she didn't wake up only continued to murmur. Curiously builds as he moved closer to make out her string of words.

"No…" she whispered. "No… Kai…"

Lovino knitted his brows together in wonder but he put aside his questions and shook her by the shoulder. "America, wake up."

Her eyes shot open as she sucked in a quick intake of air. Lovino flinched back and she sat up, covering her face in her hands and brushing her fingers through her sweat soaked hair. She uttered a curse and rubbed her eyes before she turned to face him. "Lovino, what's going on? Why are you here?"

"Um," Lovino stuttered for a moment. "I came to get you for lunch."

She nodded, "right, I'll be down soon."

Lovino knew he should leave but his curiously could not be ignored, he had been like this ever since he was a kid. "You had a bad dream?" he asked, but when the phase left his lips he wanted to slap himself. *Of course she had a bad dream, stupid.*

But the question didn't seem to bother her, "yeah," she sighed, "I thought I was over them." Then her
blue eyes widened as if she remembered something. She grabbed her bag and dug through, pulling out an item that was carefully wrapped in tissue paper.

Lovino observed as she unraveled the paper to reveal a brown circle with a tied web in the center. The string used for the web was decorated with colorful stones. Clear crystals hanged by the thin leather stings under the circle, along with beads, brown and white feathers and small wooden carvings of wild animals. It was a dream catcher.

She stepped back onto the bed and hanged the object in front of the window, right above her bed. "I guess this thing works better than I thought," she mumbled.

"Do you always have nightmares when you sleep without it?" Lovino asked.

She looked to him, surprised. She probably thought that he didn't hear her mumbling. "Well no, it's just," she sighed, "it's comforting."

They were quiet for a while till America changed the subject. *It seems her dreams are a touchy subject*, Lovino thought.

"Have you ever had a dream catcher?"

"Once," he recalled, "Spain brought one back to me when he came back from the New World."

A spark of interest shined in her eyes, "Really?"

"Yes, Spain was one of the first countries to visit. Didn't you take history in school?" Lovino asked rudely.

America snorted, "I know that, I'm just surprised that Antonio went."

"Of course he did, he was one of the armada's captains."

She nodded, absorbing the information, "could he have met-"

She didn't bother to finish her question. She leaped off the bed and sprinted out of the room, leaving him behind.

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I jumped the stairs taking two at a time, using my sudden burst of energy to see Antonio. When I reached the dining room, they were all sitting around the table having a soup of some kind.

"Oh Amy, did you have a nice *siesta*?" Feliciano greeted as I entered the room.

*Siesta* meant sleep or nap in Italian and I nodded, slowly. In truth, I didn't have a nice *siesta*. It was peaceful and dreamless at first till I found myself in Ludwig's attic and had a pair nunasishs haul me away into a dark corner, after they had pulled in Kai. Throughout all of these dreams, there was a connection. No matter the scenery, the concept was always the same. I would be kicking and screaming as I was dragged into a pit of never ending darkness.

*Yeah, I'm never sleeping without that dream catcher again.*

During lunch I never had the chance to bring up my question for the Spaniard. Too many other questions were being answered, such as 'where should we go first?' 'What do we see first?' and 'which restaurant severs the best gelato?*
Afterwards, I was helping Feliciano and Lovino clean up. Feliciano tried to stop me, saying I was guest, along with Ludwig who just had to do the dishes, but we didn't mind. Besides everyone was in the kitchen enjoying themselves. Elizabeta, Peter and Raivis were looking through travel books, highlighting which places we should visit. Gilbert and Antonio were catching up as they also added their suggestions for sightseeing.

It reminded me of home, of how my family would sit at the table in our kitchen, talking and laughing with one other. Our friends, being my parents', my siblings' or my own would drop by to join us. Some didn't even have to knock, they would just stroll right in and we didn't mind it. Mostly we would greet them with a hug and ask them if they wanted anything to drink or eat, but some of our better known friends, such as Michel and Jamie didn't have to ask. They knew where all the food was.

Any moment the doorbell would ring and Francis and Matthew would walk right in. I was excited to see them, mapping out a great vacation in my head to make up for my disappearance in Berlin. The only one I was nervous about seeing was Arthur. He never returned my calls and he was pretty pissed at me the last time we spoke, but it had to be a good sign that he was coming, right?

I sighed and focused on my sweeping till I realized this could be my chance to ask. "Hey Antonio," he looked to me with a smile and I jumped to my question with no hesitation. "Did you ever meet the America before Alfred? You know before colonization?"

His eyes widened and his face grew pale, "you want to know about North?"

Everyone grew silent and turned to glance to us but I ignored them and continued. "Yeah, did you know this nation?"

He sighed and brushed a hand through his hair, "Yes. Did-did Francis or Britain speak to you about her?"

"No I just figured that Alfred was the colonized America so there would have to be an America before him."

Antonio nodded and spoke awkwardly, "si, si, there was."

"What was she like?" I asked.

He took a moment, "well she was beautiful. She had long dark hair with matching eyes and her skin was deep shade of copper just as the people we met when we crossed into, what is now known as Texas." Everyone in the room was leaning in, listening to Antonio's story. "She lived in the wildness of the land, along with the animals."

"She sounds like Snow White with all her little animal friends," Peter remarked.

Antonio chuckled, "She was nothing like the fairytale princess. She was strong, mystical and terrifying, a warrior of her people."

"I like her already," Elizabeta smirked.

"Some of the tribes even called her a goddess," Antonio added.

Gilbert sighed, "Ja, all the ancients were treated like gods, what happened?"

"Christianity was founded," Lovino countered.
"Oh, right."

"Go on," I nudged Antonio.

"Well there's not much-"

"Not much," Gilbert gave him a look, "she scalped you."

"Why?" Raivis asked with wide eyes.

"He was moving in on her land, she told him to leave, he didn't," he made a hissing noise that was meant to be a cut. "Slice went his scalp."

Antonio shrugged, "it wouldn't matter what she did. Her time was over."

"Did you ever talk to her?" I asked.

He shook his head, "She hated me; besides most of her time was spent with Francis and Britain in the east. If you want to know more, you're going to have to ask them."
It turned out that Arthur, Francis and Matthew wouldn't be arriving till dinner. I spent that time checking out the pool. It was a simple rectangle shape, massive in length and had only one stair entrance on its right. It was surrounded by brown multicolored tile and light tan lounge chairs. The depth started at three feet, to five and finally to nine; the only down side, was that it didn't have a driving board.

I was wearing a strapless bathing suit that hooked in at the back. It was a one piece and white around the breast area but it was styled to fade into blue at the bottom. It was my favorite of my bathing suits. I dived into the deepest part of the pool, performing underwater back flips and swimming down to see if I could touch the floor.

When I came up for air, Elizabeta said, "You're like fish."

I leaned against the edge, "when I was kid I went to the beach nearly every day, and most times I pretended I was a mermaid." I grinned at the memory and she smiled back. She was wearing a green bikini and a pair of large stylish sunglasses. Her hair was tied into a messy bun, a few strands slipping out but she made it work.

"I'm guessing that The Little Mermaid was your favorite Disney movie while growing up," Peter commented. He and Raivis had joined us and were swimming along with me.

"Nope, Lady and the Tramp, I'm a huge animal lover, so anything that had dogs, cats or horses; I couldn't get enough of."

"Did you like the Lion King?" Raivis asked.

"Hells yes; guys, I had siblings that grew up in the 90's and our parents brought us every Disney movie there was and we still have them as VHS tapes. I may have been born in 2001 but Melissa and Johnny made sure I understood their references."

"It sounds like you had a pair of wonderful siblings," Elizabeta proclaimed.

I snorted, "I was Melissa's doll; she dressed me up in frilly outfits and put make up on me. Johnny played pranks on me and would pop out of my closet wearing a scary mask."

Raivis smiled sadly, "I wish I had siblings."

"Aw," I swam over to him, "I can make you wear dresses and put make up on you."

"And I can wear a scary mask and pop out of places to scare you," Peter added.

Raivis gave us a look, "thank you, I certainly feel your love."

"You would make a pretty girl Latvia," Feliciano said as he walked down the steps to join us. He was wearing a very short, very tight speedo.

"Oh my god," I turned away, trying to hold in my laughter.

"My eyes," Peter hissed, "they burn."

"Please tell me he's the only one to wear that," I whispered.
"Do you want me to lie?" Raivis asked.

I peeked through my fingers to find Lovino and Antonio wearing their own pair. Both Feliciano and Lovino were scrawny but now that I actually paid attention, they were toned. Their limbs were thin but there was some muscle, they had flat stomachs and their waists were slim and slightly narrow. The difference between the two was that Lovino was tanner than his brother. Antonio had a soccer player’s physique; his legs and core were taut and muscular. His arms and chest were defined and had four pack abs.

Peter whispered in my ear, "You're drooling love."

I splashed him, "I am not!"

He jumped back but didn't hide his smile, "I see the truth now, the quirky, funny guy isn't your type," he pointed to Antonio, "that's your type."

"I have to admit, the way you were staring at Mr. Spain was somewhat shallow," Raivis commented.

I flushed in embarrassment, "I was just looking; there is no harm in that." I narrowed my eyes at them, "besides I wouldn't ask a guy out just based on his looks."

"Uh-huh, sure you wouldn't," said Peter.

I smacked him on his arm, "you guys are just hating because you two are scrawny and pale."

A gloom came over as Raivis's shoulders slumped and Peter crossed his arms and mumbled a string of curses. I realized I hit them below the belt and apologized, "I'm sorry guys." I placed myself in the middle and rubbed their naked backs, reassuring them. "Peter, you are funny guy. Raivis, you are adorable and if any girl says otherwise, I will smack them."

"But you're right, I mean dear god, you have bigger biceps than we do," Peter remarked.

I flexed, revealing a palm size muscle, I glanced to their noodle arms. "Well you guys have a point," I stood in front of them and held up my arms up, "Can't stop this gun show."

The boys shared a look and both splashed me in the face in sync. I wiped the water from eyes, glared playfully and shot out my hands, splashing water rapidly.

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Lovino watched from the sidelines as Amy, Raivis and Peter rough-housed in the water; splashing and dunking one another. They were laughing and calling each other names in a joking matter. His eyes slid to Elizabeta as she applied sun lotion on her arms and legs. Her body was just as curvy and tone as he remembered. The Germans were beside her both dressed in loose swim trunks, they too were applying sunscreen. He glared at them till he turned his attention back to Liz. Her silky hair was twisted together in a bun on the top of her head and her white milky skin shined against the sunlight. He took a moment to admire the curve of her back and bottom. The strings of her bikini top were so thin that with one little tug would undo the knot and allow her breasts to be free.

Lovino smiled as the memory of Elizabeta in his bed came rushing back. The two entangled in each other, their arms draped around their necks and backs as their legs hooked around their waists. Elizabeta was aggressive and dominating, but Lovino didn't complain. It was refreshing and an incredible surge of confidence when he was able to dominate her.
His smile quickly faded when she turned to Gilbert asking for him to cover her back. The albino grinned and was more than eager to apply. Lovino observed their movements with an envious eye. Gilbert roamed his hands over her shoulders, massaging her and tickling her behind the ears. She giggled like a school girl and blushed just like one as his hands traveled to her waist.

Lovino sighed; *it seems they're back together, again.* He knew that he and Liz were a causally fling from time to time, but still he cared about her.

He removed his eyes from the couple and glanced to his brother and the potato bastard. Both were talking and lounging under the large umbrella. He muttered a curse at their behavior and decided to turn back to the three teenage nations in the pool. Their water fight was over and the three were showing off at the edge of the pool.

Peter cannoned balled in, splashing him and Antonio. "Hey! Watch it," Lovino hissed as Antonio shrugged it off and jumped in at the shallow end, cheering along with the trio. The Baltic was next, diving in with a spin in mid-air.

"Is that the best you guys got?" Amy smirked and climbed out. She was all leg; the limbs were long and firm. Her waist was slim and her shoulders and arms were thin but muscular; definitely a dancer's body. Her training was going well, her neck and jawline was thinner and her thighs were strong and tight. When his eyes found her face, she was looking at him.

He was caught red handed.

Amy covered her arms defensively over her chest and speed walked to the deep end. He cursed under his breath; *I was gawking at her like a damn preteen.* His face flushed in embarrassment as he turned the ground, self-conscious that everyone was looking at him. They weren't of course; all eyes were on Amy as she turned her back to the pool and flipped herself in, feet first.

The boys cheered and Antonio clapped, "Fantástico!"

Amy swam over and gave quick bows, "thank you; thank you."

Gilbert snorted, "We can do better! Come on Liz!"

"Wha-" she yelped as Gilbert carried her bridal style and leaped in. The water rose like tiny waves, crashing against the edges of the pool.

"Gilbert!" Elizabeta smacked him over his head as she tried to gather her hair that fell out its bun. She flipped her hair back as he smirked and she slapped water at him. Feliciano pulled at Ludwig's arm trying to get him to the pool. The blond shook his head and when he tried to walk back to the villa, Lovino's brother jumped into action. He launched onto Ludwig, wrapping himself on the blond like a monkey.

Ludwig stumbled and together they fell in with a splat. Everyone laughed as Ludwig swam up for air and tried to strangle the Italian. Feliciano dodged him, "let's play Marco Polo! Ludwig's it! Polo!"

"I'm not playing-"

"Polo!" Feliciano continued, swimming away.

"Feli-"

"Polo!" Everyone chanted along.
He groaned and Lovino smirked.

Ludwig once again, tried to get close to Feliciano but he ducked. The blond moved on to his brother but he too backed away. "I'm not playing this game," he sighed.

"Fine, kill joy," Amy proclaimed and closed her eyes, "I'm it," she held up her hands. "Marco."

Everyone but Ludwig chimed in "Polo."

Lovino shook his head and leaned back in his chair. They continued with this game for what he guessed was twenty minutes. His eyes glanced to the cool, inviting water. The need to relieve his burning skin grew. He plunged into the deep end to avoid the others, instantly his skin was cooled causing goose bumps to form over his entire body. When he came back for air, he found that Amy was it again and was swimming after Antonio and Raivis.

"You are looking Amy," Antonio called out.

"I'm not," she said tip-toeing towards them, losing the surface of the floor as she moved into the deep end; she dog-paddled, searching for them with her hands, "Marco."

Antonio and Raivis separated leaving Lovino in her way. Before he could react, Amy lunged, grasping her hand out at the open air. She collided into him as her hand, by some godly fate was able to clutch onto his curl. Her arm fell, pulling the curl; hard.

His jaw dropped in a silent cry as every nerve in his body burned and yet trembled at the same time. The lower half of his body immediately twitched. "Cazzo!" he hissed through gritted teeth as he tried to force his legs to move.

Amy kicked away from him, "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

He trended water till his back hit the wall and his hands were able to grip the edge. "It's nothing," he looked away from her, trying to control his breathing.

Antonio chuckled, "you touched his curl."

"More like tried to yank it out of his head," Gilbert added with a chuckle.

"What's the big deal, it's just hair," Amy proclaimed.

Everyone glanced to one another, waiting for someone to explain; well everyone besides Peter and Raivis for both carried the same confused looks as Amy. Lovino quickly noticed that the Prussian was more than happy to answer but he beat him to it. He didn't want to be even more humiliated than he already was.

"My curl is sensitive," he said.

"It's just a strand of hair," she countered.

Lovino ground his teeth together in annoyance but kept his cool, "it's connected to a certain amount of nerves that-

"For god's sake," Gilbert exclaimed, "he gets aroused when his curl is touched."

That son of a bitch, Lovino glared at him.

"What?" Amy gave a soft laugh, "Are you serious?" she asked in a joking matter.
Gilbert nodded; his face stern.

Feliciano stepped forward, "It's true Amy, both of us have the same-" he paused for a moment, "trait."

She stared at him, "really?"

Feliciano, Gilbert, Ludwig, Antonio and Liz nodded their heads.

Her eyes widened in shock as she slowly turned to face Lovino again. Her cheeks instantly flushed and he covered his face with one hand. "I'm so sorry Lovino, I-I didn't know," she fumbled with her words.

"Should we just leave you two alone then," Gilbert smirked.

Both of them stared at him in embarrassment and irritation but they didn't need to say anything for Elizabeta came to their rescue. She slammed her hand onto his head, "I think you need to cool off." She plunged him into the water, bubbles quickly formed but Elizabeta still kept him under.

Later after a shower and a change of clothes, the boys and I decided to watch a movie on cable in the den. All the channels were in Italian but we were able to set the subtitles on for English. My Italian was a little rusty but just like riding a bike, the words and phrases came rushing back. I didn't even need to look at the subtitles anymore.

The afternoon of swimming had taken its toll on the boys; they were lying on the couch on either side of each other. They had recently bathed and their clothes clinged to them like second skin. Peter had his bath towel over his head and Raivis was groaning slightly as he moved his limbs.

They were also badly sunburned on their cheeks, chests and arms. I had spent the last ten minutes applying after-sun on their backs and shoulders as well.

"Why aren't you burned?" Peter asked, lifting his towel to glare at me.

"I wore sunscreen like you’re supposed to. Also, I’m a badass that don’t get burned."

Raivis laughed and Peter narrowed his eyes, "yes you were certainly a badass when you tackled Romano and pulled on his sensitive curl." He slurred 'sensitive', like it was dirty word.

I flushed in embarrassment as the memory replayed. I didn't mean to yank on his curl, my eyes were shut tight and when I made the leap I thought I would grab either Raivis or Antonio but instead I caught Lovino. "It was all an accident."

"Uh-huh, sure it was," he wiggled his eyebrows at me.

"Don't make me smack you where the sunburn hurts," I threatened.

The doorbell ringed and I perked up; I heard Feliciano open the door, "Big brother France!" he squealed happily.

I jumped out of my seat and ran up the steps to the ground floor. When I slid into the living room I found Francis hugging Feliciano at the front entrance.

"Oh Feli, it's been too long."
"You just saw him a few weeks ago, frog," a familiar British voice said behind him.

Francis ignored him and looked up to me; he smiled and opened his arms.

Feliciano stepped out of the way so I could hop into the blonde's arms. "I missed you."

Arthur sighed, "It hasn't been that long."

"Ignore him, he doesn't understand feelings," I whispered in Francis's ear.

"I already do," he whispered back and I giggled.

"Can someone help me here," Matthew was dragging two massive suitcases, "please."

"Hold on," I grabbed one of the cases and lifted it with ease. "This is not so heavy."

He gave me a look, "don't rub it in."

Kumajirou, Matthew's small, adorable polar bear came waddling in on all fours. He patted a paw on my ankle, asking to be carried. I bent down and scoped him up, "you are so cute." He nuzzled his snout into my neck and grumbled sickly.

I turned to Matthew, "what's wrong with him? He doesn't look good."

"He's not used to the heat," he said as carried his suitcase with both hands.

"Why didn't you leave him in Canada?"

"I can't," he gazed to the bear, "we've always been together."

I nodded and then suggested, "We have a pool in the back; he can use it."

"That sounds good," he smiled but that smile didn't last as he continued to have trouble with the suitcase.

I noticed that he had a duffle bag draped over his shoulder, "why did you bring all this? You're only going to be here for two weeks."

He stopped, panting against the case, "the duffle bag is mine; the suitcases belong to Francis."

I turned to Frenchman, "what the hell do you have in these?"

Francis counted off his fingers, "clothes, hairdryer, body lotions, colognes, hair care," he stopped when he noticed us gazing at him with cocked eyebrows. "You think all this just happens," he gestures to himself.

Arthur shook his head, "you are unbelievable."

"Francis!" Antonio exclaimed as he walked in from the kitchen, "I knew I heard the sound of dragged, overstuffed suitcases." They shared a hug as Gilbert cuts in, side-hugging the Frenchman.

Arthur turned to me, "where are we staying?

"Well you guys have a choice; there is one room left and another one that can take one person in. You can either share a room with Antonio or share the empty room with Francis or Matt-"

"Matthew," Arthur looked to him, "come along we're going to be staying in the empty room."
He nodded, "I'll be there in a sec; I'm gonna cool down Kumajirou in the pool." Feliciano gestured for Matthew to follow him to the back.

"Oh Angleterre, why not share a room with me?" Francis winked.

"In your dreams," he hissed and strides to the stairs. A moment passed, till he asked, "which one is it?"

I ran up the stairs, "the one next to the bathroom."

He nodded and I followed him into his room. He begins to unpack and I sat on one of the twin beds, observing him, waiting for the right moment to ask him about North.

He glanced to me and lifted a thick brow in confusion, "why are you staring at me?"

I pulled my knees into my body, "no reason, just, um-"

Arthur massaged the bridge of his nose, "what is it?"

Now or never, "What was North like?"

He froze and slowly turned to look at me, his face pale. "How do you know about North?"

I disregarded his features and rolled my eyes, "Arthur, I've taken history. Everyone knows there was life before the Europeans arrived. But if you must know, it was Antonio."

Arthur cursed and avoided looking directly at me. "What did he tell you?"

I shrugged, "that she was beautiful, lived in the woods and she scalped him."

He snorted, "That was her."

"But I want to know more," I proclaimed, "you and Francis would have known her better right?"

He continued to sort his clothes, "Not really."

My nerves tensed and my gut twisted, he was hiding something. "Come on Arthur, I want to know."

"There's not much."

"What was her human name?"

"She never told me."

"Did you ever spend time with her?"

"No."

"Did she ever live with any of the tribes? She must've right?"

He shrugged his shoulders, "I wasn't really paying attention. I was too preoccupied with trying to save my settlers from dying of starvation."

I groaned, "Why are you being so frustrating? North is part of my culture, part of Alfred's-"

Arthur shoved the drawer with a loud slam, "She led her people to raid my settlements and killed dozens of my settlers. She was a dangerous, spiteful woman that I would prefer not to speak of."
"But-"

"Enough! I refuse to talk about that damn savage!"

Air-suffocating silence formed between us as I stared at him with shocked eyes and he blinked, realizing what he just said. That word sparked a fiery pit of heat that rapidly surged through my body.

"Did you forget who my dad is or my grandparents?" I hissed, through a controlled voice.

Arthur tensed at my tone, "Amy I didn't mean them, I meant her."

"But she represents their ancestors, so you pretty much meant them." I was breathing heavily through my nose and my hands were clutched into tight fists. Afraid of what I might do, I rose off the bed and stride to the door.

"Wait-"

"Don't." I warned him with piercing eyes and walked out of the room.

I sprinted out of the villa, trying to find somewhere to be alone. I dashed around on to the right side of the yard, which was scattered with more olive trees. I was panting, my nerves were bundling into a tight ball and my hands were burning and swelling, begging to hit something. I stumbled onto a rock and kicked it. It soared across the yard and landed in the distance. When that wasn't enough I began stomping on the bark of a tree.

After a couple of hits, I stumbled back and leaned against another tree. My nerves unwound, and I released a clam breath.

"Are you done with your little tantrum?"

I looked up to Lovino, who was glaring at me disapprovingly. He then glanced to the tree I was just kicking; the bark was completely torn away and the soft tan wood under that bark was covered with red lines like it was bleeding. "Next time, would you mind not going on a rampage on my trees," he snapped.

I sighed, not really having the strength to fight. "I'm sorry; it was either the tree or Arthur's face."

"Well unlike my tree, I'm sure he deserved it." He stepped forward and placed a soothing hand on the wound.

I gathered my knees under my chin and closed my eyes, "I'm sorry."

A moment of silence passed till Lovino asked in a softer tone, "What did that jerk Britain say?"

I gazed to him, his eyes held no anger or irritation just simple curiously and concern. I bit my inner cheek, "he called North a savage, and I just," I sighed. "They thought just because Native Americans lived off the land and had different customs than the Europeans that it made them less human." I shook my head, sadly, "People have called my grandfather the same thing and it just... hurts you know."

He nodded as he lowered himself to sit across from me. The sun was low in the sky, revealing the vivid colors of twilight. The bright orange rays shined through the open patches of the branches compelling me to see everything in a yellowed red haze. I breathed in the crisp earth scent and said, "My family is so proud of their heritage and I remembered when I was younger I used to be so
jealous of them because their heritage was not mine to claim." I smiled slightly, "Now that I know I'm America, it is."

My smile faded, "and when Arthur called North that, I felt like he was disrespecting me and my family, both human and nation."

Lovino was silent for a few minutes till he decided to change the subject. " Aren't there legends of her or records of some kind?" he asked.

I shook my head, "the tribes passed along history and myths through storytelling. I've listened to every story my grandparents told me and I don't remember them ever talking about an immortal woman. And the whole idea of North being worshiped is confusing for different tribes believed in different spirits."

"Maybe she went by another name," he suggested. "My grandfather was sometimes referred to as the incarnate of the war god Mars."

I blinked, "who was your grandfather?"

"Rome."

My eyes widened, " The Rome?"

"Yes."

"Wait, you remember him? How old are you?"

He shrugged, "I lost count but I would be over two-thousand years old."

My jaw dropped and he snorted, "it's nothing compared to China he's over four-thousand."

"Wow."

He nodded, "I know, I was found in the late BC era, so was my brother and France and Antonio were just a little bit older."

"So did you guys see the birth of Jesus Christ?"

He laughed, "No I'm afraid not."

"Did you meet him?"

"We were children, we only heard rumors. Grandpa Rome would know but," he sighed, his golden eyes losing their light, "he's gone."

I took a moment to look at Lovino, his head tilted to the side and his eyes glazed over, he seemed wounded. "I lost my grandpa a few months ago," I said. "Sometimes when I'm alone I expect him to walk through the door and greet me with a hug and smile, like he always did."

He gazed at me for a few minutes before he said, "When I walk through this city, sometimes I think I see him in the crowd. Sometimes I chase after that figure but it's never him."

I gave a sad, knowing smile, "But you still hang onto that hope to that sliver of chance that you can see him again."

He nodded, remaining quiet.
"Lovino! Amy!" Feliciano's voice echoed from the front door. "Dinner's ready!"

We looked towards the villa and rose to stand. We walked side by side, very much aware of each other's presence.

The next morning Feliciano announced that we would take the Hop On-Hop Off Rome Bus Tour. The first tour was at seven and Feli said that we would want to beat the massive crowds of the afternoon. The tour bus was like the double decker buses they had in Britain but the enormous vehicle was red with colorful graphics. Feliciano had gotten us all reserved tickets, which made wonder, did he plan to have so many people staying at his house?

Even though it was a Tuesday morning, the bus was filled with Japanese and French tourists and American back-packers. Our group sat together on the upper level of the bus; Feli said it was the best way to see the landscape. He was right; we were able to see every nook and corner and get a quick lay out of the city. The tour had eight stops and during these stops we were able to see the Colosseum and the Arch of Constantine, mostly just passing by them. But we were able to spend some time at some of the sites like the Vatican City, St. Peters Square, Vittorio Emanuele II Monument and the Fountain of the Four Rivers. Each of these places had a stop and we were able to take a swift ten minute walk around the area. This allowed me to take tons of pictures; most of these photos had me and the other nations standing in front of these ancient buildings. I also took plenty of video, recording some of what Feliciano had said about the sites and our group walking around and interacting with the locals and each other.

During all these free moments from the bus, Feliciano became our tour guide, spitting out facts about the buildings and locations. Before we knew it, even the tour groups and the back-packers were joining us to listen in on our enthusiastic guide.

After we had lunch we took the tour bus back to the Colosseum, (the buses ran all day and they would let you back on as long you had your ticket) Feli wanted us to take a closer look at the Colosseum, the Arch of Constantine and the Roman Forum.

The Colosseum was just like what I've seen in movies but grander. No matter how many times you see it in a photo or in a film, it never really lives up to the real thing.

It was amazingly well persevered. The outside of the building features several arches some of which led inside corridors from the base of the stadium. The arches around the upper floors were each filled with sculptures of gladiators. The interior contained wood floors that covered a complex set of rooms and passages where the elaborate show scenery, the gladiators, and the animals were housed. Doors in the floor allowed the men and animals to get to the 'stage' on a counter-weighted elevator of some kind.

I remembered from all the gladiator movies I've seen that spectators sat in sections within the Colosseum according to their class with the least important citizens at the top and the Senators and the rich near the bottom.

The Arch of Constantine sat right outside the main entrance of the Colosseum. Flocks of photographers and wedding couples were surrounding the area, taking their photos in front of the beautiful arch.

I must have carried a questionable look on my face for Lovino said, "It's a custom for the bride and groom to take their picture in front of the arch and Colosseum and give them out as wedding favors."
"That's cool, all I got from Johnny's wedding was candy and a candle well at least it was better than what Melissa gave out."

"What did she give?" he asked.

"Little jars of dirt." I allowed that statement to sink in.

"A jar of dirt?" he cocked an eyebrow.

"Yes, I know, I had the same look on my face when Mel told us about the favors but she explained that it was supposed to symbolize our families coming together. Each vile contained soil from Spain, Mexico, Hawaii, Oklahoma and India, it represented that no matter where we were from we were all the same, for the earth was the same."

"Isn't the earth made up of different minerals in different locations across the world," he proclaimed.

I nodded, "that's what Johnny said and Melissa told him to shut up and smacked him."

He chuckled, "that sounds like your family."

"Yeah, sometimes I think we're a sitcom but," I smiled, "I wouldn't change them for the world."

Lovino glanced to Feliciano and nodded.

Later on, we headed to the Roman Forum. "It was once the heart of ancient Roman civilization, the place where the central government of the Roman Empire was seated and was the central hub for economic and commercial activities." Raivis said as he read from his recently brought book called *Rome Past and Present with Reconstructions*.

It was a small red book that a vendor was selling outside of the forum. The book had detailed pictures of what the ruins looked like two thousand years ago. Amongst the ruins were countless temples and sanctuaries; rows of columns and arches commemorating people and battle victories, and Senate buildings. All this of course was according to the book in the Latvian's hands.

"Is this your first time in Rome?" I asked him.

He flushed, embarrassed. "Yes, I never had the chance to visit for my country was never on good terms with Italy and then when I was part of the USSR, it only got worse." He looked up to the ruins in awe, "but now I can go where ever I wish."

I smiled and Peter wrapped his arms around our shoulders, "Hey guys Feliciano just said that the temple over there," he gestured to a crumbling temple in the far-off distance. "It's called Casa delle Vestali, House of the Vestal Virgins."

"Maybe you should join them," I proclaimed as Raivis chuckled.

Peter ignored me and continued, "The six priestesses that were selected, were from patrician families, the girls would be between the ages of six and ten and they would have to serve in the temple for thirty years. If the flame in the temple went out, the priestess responsible would be flogged, and if she lost her virginity she would be buried alive, since her blood couldn't be spilled. The offending man would then be flogged to death."

"Well at least the men also got punished; most times it's just the ladies." I said the next part with pure sarcasm, "now that is true equality."
Raivis sighed, "There are seven billion people in this world and I'm friends with you two," he mumbled.

"Doesn't that question your character more than ours?" Peter smirked as I laughed.

We spent the rest of the day in the ruins, poising together as we took pictures. Gilbert, Peter, Raivis and I did our best gladiator battle cries as Matthew recorded it on my phone. The next round of pictures and video was filled with me, the nations and the ruins. Antonio, the Italian brothers and I took our picture in front the Temple of Saturn. Francis, Matthew and Arthur stood behind me as another photo was taken in front of a crumbling arch and I surprised Ludwig in a selfie. The final image was of me and Elizabeta with our arms draped around each other in front of the Casa delle Vestali, home of the virgins who tended the sacred flame to the goddess Vesta. Gilbert then commented, loudly that Elizabeta should step away from the temple before the goddess smites her.

That earned him a good punch in the jaw.

Francis shook his head, "when is he ever going to learn."

"How are they together again?" I asked.

Matthew sighed, "It's a long, dragged out story."

Kumajirou moaned in his arms, "hot. . ."

I flinched, checking if anyone had heard our talking bear but the tourists were too preoccupied with the site. Matthew quickly pulled out an ice cold water bottle from the small cooler he had swung over his shoulder. He poured half of the liquid over the bear's head and offered Kumajirou the rest to drink.

"How's the little fella holding up?" I gave him some of my water and scratched him under his chin.

Matthew's eyes filled with worry, "he needs an AC."

"Then we should go back to the villa," Arthur suggested, "besides we've seen plenty of Rome for the first day."

I stepped away and avoided making eye contact with him. I haven't forgiven him for the savage comment and I wasn't planning on doing it anytime soon.

"No we can't leave just yet, I've saved the best event for last," Feliciano exclaimed.

"Feli, we've been out all day." Ludwig added, "It can wait tomorrow."

"No it can't, the newbies," he gestured to me, Peter and Raivis, "need to see the Seven Hills."

We had taken two cars, the van and a red convertible that belonged to Lovino; our group splits up and followed Feliciano's directions to the outskirts of the city. We parked and continued to follow the excited Italian up a flight of stone steps that were aligned to curve with the earth. Busts of people were scattered along the pathways, Feliciano said they were national heroes. At the very top of this hill, looming over everything was a gigantic statue of the great bearded hero Giuseppe Garibaldi on horseback. He was charismatic figure in the Italian Risorgimento, the 19th-century movement that unified modern Italy.

But what was truly stunning and breath taking was the view. Gianicolo, also known as Janiculum or the city of seven hills, was completely enchanting; the rooftops of the domes and spires overwhelmed
the landscape. The city was a wave of brown, tan and red buildings aligning perfectly along the distant mountains and the blue skyline.

I glanced to Peter and Raivis, both were just as captivated as I was. I turned to each nation; they were gazing at the scenery, enjoying the breeze of the late afternoon and the silence away from the city.

The next day we visited the Galleria Borghese, the gallery was in a magnificent seventeenth century villa. It was gigantic and sat in Borghese Garden Park, one of the few green places in Rome. The mansion contained twenty rooms and each room held antiquities, sculptures and paintings. The villa was divided into two parts: the ground floor maintained fantastic sculptures, sophisticated Roman floor mosaics and over-the-top frescoes; and the upstairs carried the picture gallery.

As we entered the building, we were greeted with floor assortments of fighting gladiators and a gravity defying 3D pop out of a horse and rider falling into the void. It was called the Marco Curzio a Cavallo by Pietro Bernini and it was like a sculpture built into the wall and it looked like it would fall on top of us, it was definitely cool.

"The Galleria Borghese is said to house the queen of all private art collections, and I personally agree. The gallery carries paintings by Caravaggio, Botticelli and Raphael, as well as some spectacular sculptures by Gian Lorenzo Bernini." Feliciano announced.

I nodded as we strolled behind him, eying each life-like, white marble statue that passed our way. These sculptures were vivid and mesmerizing; some portrayed images of Greek myths. The Apollo e Dafne was beautifully detailed and captured the scene of Daphne transforming into a tree in order to get away from the Greek god Apollo. She was lifted in mid-air as one of her legs became bark and the other dangled, still in flesh. Her hands and hair were morphing into branches and leaves and her face perfectly displayed the fear of the god behind her. Another one showed Pluto with his hands gripped around Persephone as she tried, desperately to get away. The lord of the underworld had his hand pressing into the flesh of Persephone’s thigh, it looked so real. The fingers sinking into her seemingly soft skin, leaving dents under his fingertips; it was called the Ratto di Proserpina, the Rape of Persephone.

Then Feliciano led us to a half-naked woman laying out a cushion with a silk wrap around her lower half. "This is Antonio Canova's depiction of Napoleon's sister, Paolina Bonaparte as Venus Victorious."

Gilbert slapped Francis on the shoulder, "doesn't this bring back fine memories."

Francis gave a faraway smile, "oh yes Pauline was quite the little minx."

Antonio chuckled, "she had such stamina, rivaled even against ours."

I lifted an eyebrow at them, and Lovino answered my silent question in my ear. "Those three were once Pauline's lovers."

"Really? Did she know about," I didn't need to finish, he knew what I meant.

"Yes, she was Napoleon's favorite sister and part of the court. She knew of the secret and was interested in our kind, mostly because we were young and beautiful. Paulina had a hobby of collecting pretty things and lovers; Francis was one of her favorites."

I blinked, "how many did she-"
He snorted, "I lost count."

We continued to the second level, which was where all the paintings were stored. Snapshots of extraordinary European Renaissance art covered the walls. Several art pieces I recognized from art appreciation class; Bernini's self-portraits, Raphael's The Deposition and his Lady with a Unicorn, the Adoration of the Christ Child by Fra Bartolomeo and Perugino's Madonna and Child.

There was even Correggio's Danae; the painting displayed a fair skinned woman leaning on a stack of pillows with only a thin sheet barely covering her lower regions. She wore nothing else as her hand was stretched out to a naked boy with brown angel wings. Then there was Titian's early masterpiece known as Sacred and Profane Love; it showed two women across one another, one naked except for the slip of cloth across her hips and another one draped over her arm. While the other woman was fully dressed in a pale blue dress and had baby beside her.

I stood in front of the painting, taking in the colorful image. I inhaled through my nose, feeling completely at peace till Arthur stepped forward to stand beside me. My attitude instantly soured. He twitched, sensing my mood but he swallowed his nerves and said, "Lovely isn't it?"

I ground my teeth together and glared at him with a side-way glance, "yes it is, but I'm sure a savage like me doesn't appreciate it as much as you do."

He blinked as his face fell and his green eyes revealed his hurt but I ignored his features as I turned my back to him and walked away.

Thursday was a shopping day.

We strolled along the street called Via del Governo Vecchio, which holds most of the best-known Italian designers. These towering stores stood along a narrow dark gray brick road, each of these buildings had four to five levels filled with clothes, jewelry, bathing suits, and even fur. These items were being sold by designers like Prada and Gucci, meaning I couldn't afford any of it.

I mostly stood at the sidelines, watching as Francis, Antonio, Gilbert, Elizabeta and Feliciano browsed around the stores. Everyone else was back at the villa, avoiding a hot morning outside. Later on at the other side of town, we were able to find stores that were more in my price range. I used this chance to purchase birthday gifts for Gael and Lali, they were both August babies. Gael was my little warrior and he has been begging for an archery set. I was able to find him a bow that would last him for years. The handle was long and black with matching child safe arrows. Lali was a girly-girl, she loved stuff animals, tea parties and dresses, so when I spotted an eighteen inch doll wearing a Renaissance dress, I couldn't pass it up.

"Aw," Gilbert smirked, "look at little Amy, playing with her little doll."

I narrowed my eyes at him, "you do realize I'm holding bow right."

He snorted, "It's not like you know how-"

I gently placed the doll down and stretched an arrow across the bow, "finish that sentence I dare you."

He held his hands up, "okay, put down the bow before you hurt yourself." When I didn't move, he turned to Elizabeta, "can you please talk some sense into her."
She glanced to me, "Aim for his big fat head, you'll never miss."

I grinned as he exclaimed, "Hey!"

After we had the gifts wrapped up and packaged in the post office, we returned to the villa, to spend the afternoon in blissful air conditioning. Feliciano announced that we should rest for he planned to take us out to Trastevere, a neighborhood in the south of Vatican City. He said that the neighborhood offered a more authentic look to the life of a Roman.

I decided to wear my new mini dress that I brought in Berlin. The dress allowed my back and legs to be naked against the hot Italian air. My hair was returning to its natural string curly form, giving me enough hair and ease to fix a small French braid to run over my head, creating a headband design. I pulled some strands out to land against my face, giving me a messy, fun look. I applied some makeup, simple stuff like eye-liner, mascara and a light shade of pink lipstick.

I was strapping on my brown gladiator sandals when a knock came from my door. Elizabeta was leaning against the door frame. She wore a tight, strapless green top with fashionable black capris and sexy, high heeled sandals the color of iron. Her makeup was flawless, and her hair fell free in soft waves around her curvy waist.

I whistled, "You're going to have to beat the men away with a bat."

She laughed, "I think these heels would be a better weapon." She glanced to my dress, "that looks amazing on you, especially showing off those long legs."

We walked down stairs to find the guys waiting for us. Most were dressed in casual dress shirts and jeans, like Arthur, Ludwig, Feliciano and Lovino. While others were flashier; Francis wore a pair of white pants with a purple dress shirt, over that was a vest in a deeper shade of violet. His tie was white with light purple stripes and was purposely loosen. His hair was combed in a low pony tail and his dress shoes were light tan.

Antonio was in a pair of graphic dark green plaid pants and a light pink dress shirt, over that was a slimming black jacket that he kept buttoned. He also wore a trendy fedora hat with a single strip of cloth that matched his pants. Gilbert was the simplest of the three, wearing black jeans, a white shirt and a black jacket.

All eyes were on Elizabeta and me as we reached the bottom of the steps. Gilbert couldn't keep his eyes off Elizabeta. I bumped her arm, gestured to him and we both giggled under our breaths. Then, at the corner of my eye, I was able to catch both of the Italian brothers and Antonio gawking at my legs.

Francis was the first to speak, "All eyes of Rome will look to us in envy tonight, for we are in the company of two beautiful ladies." He kissed both of our hands, "You both look absolutely beautiful," he finished in French.

I blushed as Elizabeta beamed, "Oh Francis, you know how to make a girl feel special, unlike someone."

Gilbert winced and I bit my lips together to keep from laughing.

We all piled into the cars and headed straight to Trastevere. The streets were paved between stunning apartment homes, fantastic restaurants and affordable shops. Some roads were wide enough for cars, but if we wanted to get to any of the bars or dance clubs, we would have to walk. I didn't mind so much, the air was humid but the sun was down, allowing us to keep our cool. The neighborhood
was full of life; all of the lights from the streets, stores, restaurants and clubs were bright. People were walking by; having a good time with friends and family, and music could be heard in every direction.

"This place sure is lively," Raivis proclaimed as he walked closer to me, trying to control his nerves. His violet eyes were flickering to every direction as if something would pop out and attack.

"Yeah," Peter sighed also stepping closer. The boys didn't have 'club clothes' so they settled with something casual. But their term of 'casual' wasn't the same as the others. Peter was dressed in a t-shirt with his flag plastered on it, jeans and sneakers; while Raivis only wore a red t-shirt and jeans. Both thought they were underdressed, even though I had told them that Matthew was wearing the same thing; they still felt out of place.

I scanned the area, all the men were wearing gaudy clothes with fancy labels and the women were thin, wearing short, sexy designer dresses. But I also noticed that some of the local young girls were looking at Peter and Raivis; their eyes gazing at them with interest.

I smiled, "guys, it doesn't matter what clothes you wear, all that matters is the attitude." I gestured to the girls, "see, they don't seem to mind."

When we stopped, the girls stunt forward; all of them were thin, dark haired and extremely gorgeous. "Are you three foreigners?" one of them asked.

"Yup we sure are, this is Raivis and this is Peter. Aren't they just the cutest," I grinned.

Another girl took a step towards Raivis, slipping her fingers through his hair, "Sì, sì, very." The Latvian flushed as her hands traveled down to his arm and squeezed.

Peter was also caught in the net of girls as two played with his hair and kept asking him to speak so they could hear his British accent.

I gave them a little push as I stepped back, "Ladies, I would like you to take them out, show them a good time."

"Wha-"

"Am-"

"Sì, sì, we will show them a good time," one of the girls giggled.

The girl that held Raivis' arm smiled to him, "I take you dancing."

"I-I'm not a-a good d-dancer," he stuttered, embarrassed.

She stood on the tips of her toes to whisper in his ear, "I will teach you."

He turned even redder and I grinned, "I'll call you guys when we're leaving."

The girls began to pull them away as both Peter and Raivis gave me anxious looks. I gave them a thumb's up and mouthed, "You'll be fine."

The rest of us bar hopped till we found one with excellent alcohol and amazing music. I immediately hit the dance floor, swaying with the melody. Several young men approached, calling me 'bella' and 'blondie' and asking to dance with me. It seems Italian guys were not afraid to flirt so openly, most guys I knew back home would take their time, play games. This was refreshing.

I agreed but before I could take any of their hands, Antonio slapped his hands on my shoulders.
"Sorry, I get the first dance," he smiled and pulled me deeper into the crowd.

He held my hand as he twirled me and shuffled our feet to the up-beat tune. He moved to place his hand on the small of my back, guiding my hips to sway with his. I caught on quick, moving in time with the rhythm.

"Having fun, señorita," he grinned.

"Yes, very," I smiled back as he spun me, wrapped his arm around my waist and dipped me.

"Good." he winked and I laughed.

When he pulled me back up the music changed to an old Ke$ha song. It was pop and I figured Antonio would leave the floor but he stayed. He shook his limbs to the beat and bobbed his head to the music. I smiled and joined him, crisscrossing my feet and waving my arms in the air. What I liked about Antonio was that he was silly and fun; he, Francis, Matthew and Gilbert were definitely the easiest nations to get along with. Well, scratch that Gilbert was rarely easy.

Antonio also reminded me of Johnny. When the next song came on, I knew it instantly. It was Katy Perry's 'Roar', my feet picked up the pace as I whispered the lyrics under my breath. He heard me and started singing along, but louder. I grinned and followed his lead as we danced and sang together. Johnny and I always did this, whenever he was home or when we were in the car, we would sing along to the radio, sometimes badly. But we didn't care if people stared, we were having fun. It was the same with Antonio; we sang, clapped our hands and wiggled our bodies to the rhythm.

The next song was slower and he tugged me into an embrace, swaying me to the soft pulse of the music. We were laughing from a natural high, trying to bring down the throbbing of hearts.

Someone tapped Antonio on the shoulder, "May I cut in," Francis asked.

"Sure," he gave a tired smile and kissed my cheek, "till we meet again señorita."

Francis stepped in, grabbed my hand and placed his free hand on my back. We waltzed in sync, but it felt awkward. I looked up to him and found that his eyes were on someone else. I turned back to Arthur, who was at the bar. He was drinking heavily, slouching over the counter and asking for more.

Francis glanced to me, "why are you being cold to Arthur?"

I sighed, "He called North a savage," I whispered.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "What am I going to do with you two?"

"Hey, all I wanted to know was what North was like. Antonio didn't give me much, so I asked Arthur and he went all crazy," I exaggerated.

He leaned his cheek against my head, "you two are exhausting me; this is supposed to be a vacation, not a war zone." He held me closer and whispered in my ear, "I know how you feel, Karen was your grandmother, she is your heritage, and for him to call her that was uncalled for."

I jerked away to look up at him, "You knew her name?" I asked this question more in curiosity than anything else.

He smiled, "Oui, she and I were close."
I lifted a brow, "how close?"

He chuckled, "she saved my life. Amy it was true what they said about her, starting the raids and killing people, but that came after we betrayed her."

I twitched slightly, "what do you mean?"

His shoulders slumped, "our people, most didn't understand the natives and they didn't bother to. Violence quickly followed and the colonies were so large that neither Arthur nor I could be there, but it wouldn't have mattered. Karen saw this as our doing, no matter how many times we told her otherwise."

I remained quiet as the music changed, it was some fast paced song in Italian but we didn't bother to keep up with the fast beat. We continued to sway at our own pace till Francis spoke, "When she disappeared, Arthur chose to forget her, to erase her from his heart and soul for the pain was too much."

I gave him a confused look, "did he love her?"

"We both did."

"But why would he call her a savage?"

"To hurt her," Francis sighed, "I'm sure you've noticed Amy, when Arthur is hurt by someone he loves, he tries to take that pain and throw it back."

My heart squeezed and I felt an uncomfortable lump form in the back of my throat. Francis dipped his head low to say, "Arthur can't handle this right now. He's had a rough couple of years, losing Alfred, his most treasured little brother nearly destroyed him."

I bit my inner cheek as he slid his hand over the outside; caressing the bone with his thumb, "please, forgive him." He was looking at me with big, pleading eyes.

Before I could say anything else a loud crash of glass collided against the floor, causing me, Francis and the crowd of dancers to look towards the bar.

"I'll tell you when I'm bloody done! Now give me another damn pint!" Arthur shouted at the bartender.

The bartender shook his head, "no, you've had enough."

"Why you-"

"Arthur calm down," Matthew held him by the shoulder, trying to pull him away from the bar.

Arthur didn't budge. "Do you know who I am?! I'm the bloody Unit-"

Matthew covered his mouth, "I'm so sorry, we'll leave now."

Francis swiftly moved to stand at Arthur's free side, "now, now mon ami, come on we can have wine back at the villa. That would be nice oui?" He was smiling trying to settle the drunk.

"It's not just the wine!" Arthur slurred, pointing at the bartender. "It's his assumption that I can't hold my liquor!"

Gilbert cuts in, "You can't."
Francis glared at him, "Gil, you are not helping."

Francis, Matthew and I were trying to yank the Brit out the door as our party followed us. Arthur fought against us every second of the way, "Let me go you damn wankers! I'm the UK I deserve to be treated with respect."

"You're making a fool of yourself, now shut up!" Lovino exclaimed.

"What do we do now?" Elizabeta proclaimed.

Francis sighed, "We'll take him to the villa in the convertible."

"Oh no not in my car," said Lovino.

"But they still need to find Peter and Raivis," I proclaimed. "The van has more room for them."

Lovino crossed his arms and glared at the wasted nation. He grumbled a curse, pulled out his keys and gestured for us to follow him. We climbed into the car with Francis, Matthew and Arthur in the back while Lovino and I sat in the front.

Lovino started the car and sped out of the neighborhood, the older Vargas brother was the better driver but still he had a heavy foot. "If he pukes in my car, I'm sending you the bill," he snapped at me.

I rolled my eyes, "chill Lovino." I turned back, my hair whipping around my head. "Arthur, how are you feeling?"

"Oh now you care?" he slurred as his eyes blazed with anger and pain.

I bit my lip and sat back into my seat as Arthur exclaimed, "I want another!" He forgot where he was and tried to stand.

"Arthur!" Francis shouted as Lovino swerved slightly and cursed.

"Get that bastard under control!"

Matthew and Francis yanked him back down and Arthur shouted, "I want another!"

"You've had enough," Francis forced the seat belt over his waist.

"Don't act like you care," he glared.

"Angleterre-

"Don't call me that," he hissed, "I'm not your angel; you've lost any claim to me after you slept with them!"

Francis gave him a look, "Whose them?"

"Everyone! You pounce on anything that moves!"

"I am the country of love; I express this love in any way possible."

Arthur dropped his head low to face his lap, mumbling, "But it's all meaningless, it's never special."

"Ang-" he was cut off with a kiss. I stared wide-eyed and mouth opened as Arthur smothered
Francis with his lips. Francis was frozen, completely in shock of the Brit's move. Arthur took that chance to drive in deeper. Intertwining his fingers into Francis's hair and flickering out his tongue against blue-eyed man's lips. It wasn't long before that said Frenchman closed his eyes and kissed back.

I looked to Matthew but he was avoiding everyone's gazes to look at the sky. I turned to Lovino and he waved his hand at me, as if to say, 'don't get me involved.' I turned back to the front as my cheeks and ears rose in heat. After a minute or so, I heard someone shifting away, "now that is special." Arthur proclaimed, proud with himself.

I spun back; Arthur had his arms crossed over his chest and Francis was gawking at him in astonishment. He blinked, regaining his composure, "he is very drunk."

Matthew gave him a look, "You think."

When we arrived at the villa, Arthur had calmed down a bit, mostly just mumbling under his breath about how Italian beer wasn't as good as his beer and such. I followed Lovino as he walked to the front door and unlocked it. Matthew and Francis were on both sides of Arthur, half carrying half dragging him to the house.

I quickly gave a hand when they started to have trouble trying to get the Brit up the stairs to the second level. Once we reached his room, we tossed Arthur onto his bed and he grumbled about us being wankers and nuzzled his face into the pillow.

"I'll get the aspirin," Matthew proclaimed, leaving the room.

Francis undid his pony tail and brushed his hand through his hair. "I'm going to bed," he placed a kiss on the top of my head, "goodnight."

"Night," I sighed and glanced to Arthur; he was face first into his pillow and looked like he was sleeping. Well that's what I thought till he mumbled something I didn't understand. "Arthur? Did you say something?"

He sat up slowly and I found to my surprise that tears were streaking down his face. "Why do you treat me like the bad guy?"

I blinked, completely speechless.

His tears pooled in his emerald eyes, glaring at me, "answer me!"

I shook my head, "Arthur I don't mean to-"

"Yes you did," he hissed, "I see you with Matthew, the frog, the others, you like them, while you tolerate me." His jaw quivered, trying to hold back his whimpers but it didn't stop his voice from breaking. "You don't know what they have done! You only know mine! I may have done terrible things but so have they!"

I flinched at his tone, it sounded like someone that was about to break.

He looked at me and when I remained silent, more tears fell. "If they did tell you, what would you do? What would you say?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat, trying to find my voice but couldn't.

Arthur gave a sad, twisted smile, "Would you hold it over their heads? Like you do with me?"
I felt a stinging pain in the back of my eyes as his shoulders slumped and his eyes glanced to his hands in his lap. "I don't think you would, not to them." Small drops of tears landed on the back of his hands as his shoulders shook. "Why?"

"Arthur-"

"Why?!" he screamed, "Why can you forgive them but not me?!

His words bounced off the walls, repeating in my ears. I tried to speak but he cuts me off by sucking air through his gritted teeth and muttered. "Heh, but if you knew what I've done just to hurt Karen, you would hate me just as Alfred did."

I gazed to him, so many questions swarmed in my head but I could ask one. "What did you do?"

He winced, "I," he whispered before he cleared his throat. "I murdered your natives; most was in self-defense but other times I did it just to smite her."

I took a shaky breath and he continued, "I even came up with an idea to give a tribe blankets infected with smallpox." He curled his fingers into the sheets, "so many infants died and it was all my doing."

My eyes widened but he didn't notice, for he kept his face down. "I'm a monster," he said, then repeated in a whimper as he covered his face with his hands, "I'm a monster."

Silence followed, only the sound of Arthur's choked back sobs and my soft breathing could be heard. My body felt heavy and my mind completely shut down, refusing to think, but it did come up with one final question. "Do you regret it?"

His entire body trembled, "yes . . . yes," he sobbed. "I regret so much . . . so much."

As I stared at him, I'm gravely reminded of the darkness that lurked inside of him, of each nation. The truth behind it was that this darkness doesn't go away; it only hides, waiting for when we are weak, waiting for its chance to plunge us into our guilt and self-destruction.

I stride through the room and slid my arms around Arthur's shoulders, pulling him close. He released a tiny gasp, taken by total surprise at my actions. He hesitated at first but soon, he too returned my embrace, clutching on to me like a life line. He cried harder and I too felt my own share of tears fall as he wept on my shoulder.
Chapter 20

I was dreaming through Alfred's eyes again.

It was just like the dream I had back in New York, except it was in another time and place. Alfred was in a relaxed manner, well more like relieved. We were in some type of bar and everyone was drinking and dancing as a jazz band played on a stage. We spotted Arthur, Francis and Matthew at a far off table; all them were drinking but neither of the three looked at one another. Each nation was simply staring out into the crowd, their minds everywhere but here.

Alfred strides forward and sat in the empty seat in front of them. He lifted a cup to his lips, which was recently filled with French wine.

At that moment Francis glanced to his direction, "How do you like my wine?"

He held the cup up, "its amazing Francis, perfect for the hero," he grinned.

Francis gave him a nod, "you certainly are," he smiled at the rest of the table, "you all are; thank you."

Arthur narrowed his eyes at the Frenchman, "don't confuse things frog. The only reason I saved you is because I will be the one to kill you."

Matthew, Alfred and I as well rolled our eyes on cue.

Francis simply nodded and petted Arthur on his head, "of course you will."

Before Arthur could say anything else, Matthew spoke up, rising his glass, "Vive la France!"

Alfred quickly followed, "Vive la France!"

Francis smiled even wider, "Vive la France!"

Arthur sighed, but he too raised his glass and mumbled, "Vive la France."

The voices in the bar exclaimed next, "Vive la France!"

They sat at their table and watched as French citizens and Allied soldiers danced and cheered together in celebration.

That's when it hit me; I was witnessing the Liberation of Paris. Well the after party most likely.

I tried to control my body (that was also Alfred's body) to at least take in more of the sights of this event but Alfred wouldn't move. It was very strange, like I was viewing everything with my own eyes but yet not. No matter what I did or said, nothing changed Alfred's actions. His mind was also active, creating thoughts along with mine.

He took in no notice of me; I was invisible, merely observing the events through his eyes.

I continued to watch as Alfred was pried away from his family to dance with a beautiful French girl. He waltzed with this girl for two to three songs, but his mind was only on one thought: that he had to get to Berlin before the Russians did.

Russia and his army were on the march to Germany and Alfred was here, dancing like the war was
over. His commander had told him to relax and enjoy the night, maybe with a pretty girl but Alfred couldn't untangle the nerves and tension that was burning in his gut to appreciate the night of celebration.

Then the scene blurred as if Alfred had spun himself with the speed of a carnival ride. Lights and vibrant colors smeared together like a splattered painting till they finally settled to a meeting room which was filled with uneasy nations.

Alfred was seated at a round table along with the Allies; Britain, France, Canada, China and Russia. They had won. Hitler was dead and Germany had no choice but to surrender. That said nation and his brother Prussia were currently locked in a holding cell.

"I wish to tear that boy limb from limb," commented Russia. His voice was childlike but yet cold, "He has taken much from me and I wish to return the favor."

The others were silent; they knew that this nation suffered with great lost. Over twenty million Russians were killed and he wished for retribution but Alfred knew that it was nothing but hellish revenge.

Everyone has heard of the Red Army's acts of justice, I realized that when Alfred thought of this, he was filled with anger and rage.

I quickly recalled that Russian soldiers had raped at least fifteen million German women during the last months of the war and even afterward, till the years of 1947 to 1948. They even had raped girls as young as ten and even Russian and Polish women, who were held in the concentration camps.

I shivered as Alfred proclaimed in a strong voice, "you've done enough."

Ivan narrowed his violet eyes; a fierce tint glowed within them. "Do not tell me when I've had enough. You, Mr. America have no right to. My men have suffered, most lost their homes, wives and children; they need this."

"They're raping elderly women and little girls!" he exclaimed. "I've heard the rumors Russia; your men have even raped Polish and Russian women who were held as prisoners in German work camps! It's not just some sick revenge against Germany anymore, especially when your Russian army is raping Russian women."

Ivan rose from his seat, "you will not drag my army's name through the mud," he threatened.

Alfred followed suit, staring at him with unwavering eyes. "You're men are nothing but animals."

"Enough!" Arthur's voice rose in volume, taking command of the room. "America it is called spoils of war, it happens. We must move on and discuss what we need to do about Germany and Prussia."

Alfred's rage cooled but still a part of him couldn't agree with Arthur's comment about 'spoils of war'. The Russians were hurting women and young girls. What could girls do to deserve that? Was the reason just for being German? No, it was just pure evil. The soldiers no longer looked human to Alfred; all he saw was the immoral darkness that lay underneath the skin. He always believed that the monsters that had scared him as a child would look like devils, with horns, fangs and claws. But he was wrong.

The true monsters were not clawed or horned. They lay hidden, lurking behind an angelical face.

At that moment the transmitter radio sparked to life and a human answered the call. He wore a US uniform and his skin was the tone of a penny. He had dark eyes and his hair was cut to a buzz cut,
but his dark hair had grown fast, giving him a small pony tail and long bangs that slapped his forehead. He looked up and I was stunned.

Just as Alfred said, Grandpa was a splitting image of his uncle; the very first John Hawkfeather.

"The world leaders have come to a decision," he announced. "German generals and soldiers were be trailed for their crimes and the country would be kept under a watchful eye by the Allies. Germany would also pay retribution to the Allied nations and . . ." John paused catching the last bit of intel.

He blinked, his brows arching up as he turned to face the nations. "They said that they wish to dissolve the nation of Prussia."

My heart sank along with Alfred's.

My vision blurred again and settled into a hall. It had tall ceilings, red carpet, long windows with silk curtains. The Allied world leaders and ambassadors stood along the right side of the room with their nations beside them. While the Axis stood on the left; Italy and Germany stood side by side, Alfred caught the Italian holding the large blonde's wrist. Hungary and Austria were there as well, both covered in bandages and dirty clothes, which was unusual for the aristocrat. Hungary didn't bother about her looks; she was a warrior first and foremost, but that didn't hide the fear and uncertainly she had for the white haired man.

Prussia stepped forward, his walk was confident and his smile was cocky but his eyes betrayed those traits.

Alfred instantly felt everyone's eyes on him. It was decided that the nation that would dissolve Prussia would be America. Alfred closed his eyes and stepped out from the line.

The albino held his chin up, "so it's you, heh," he shook his head. "It must be fate; the nation I personally trained will be the one to end me."

Alfred gritted his teeth, "it was either me or Russia and knowing him, he would beat you till you couldn't walk."

Gilbert glanced to the Russian and was met with a glare. His red eyes slid back to Alfred's blue, "I promise to be quick," Alfred continued.

The Prussian gave him a sad expression, "You have no idea how this works, do you?"

Alfred blinked and Gilbert continued, "This is all just a formality, but I can feel it." He looked to the Allied world leaders, "they're cutting up my land as we speak."

"Gil-"

He held up his hand, "do it." He rolled his shoulders back and lifted his head up.

Alfred's anxiety flooded my senses; he was terrified of what would become of Prussia. How does a country truly disappear? Was it slow? Fast? Agony filled? Painless?

Alfred curled his hands into fists, trying to keep his voice even. "Most of the east will be given to Poland and the west will be given to the German states."

Gilbert let out a shaky breath as his shoulders fell.
Alfred inhaled through his nose, "With that said, I hereby announce," he pushed aside his stress and painted on a blank, stern face. "That the Königreich Preußen is officially dissolved."

The former kingdom fell to his knees, taking in deep breaths as his fists shook. The room chilled and a shudder streamed down Alfred's spine. Everyone inhaled in sync, waiting for something, anything to happen.

Nothing did.

The papers were signed and the Second World War was over. Alfred watched Gilbert from across the room, checking for any sign of strain. Aside from the anxiety filled look on his face, the albino was fine.

But this uneasy peace didn't last.

"Prussia will come live with me," Russia proclaimed.

Alfred spoke up, "you can't take him-"

Everything happened so fast.

The Russian wrapped a large hand around the blonde's neck and slammed him to the wall. "You have no say in this, he is mine now."

Alfred shoved him off, "he's not something you can own!" Alfred knew he was being irrational, well for a nation. Their kind were always meant to be own, either by their government or by another country. But he owed Gilbert; he helped him earn his independence and his freedom.

He needed to at least fight for Prussia's.

"America," Gilbert gave him warning look, "It's been decided." His voice was controlled and steady, "I'm a spoil of war after all."

Again the world blurred and I found myself outside. Alfred was staring up into the night sky, taking in the bright stars and warm atmosphere. Berlin was silent, nobody was celebrating.

A hand slapped him on his shoulder and he turned around to face John. For a slight second, I mistaken him for Grandpa but I quickly remembered that Grandpa was only a little kid during the 40's.

"How did it go?" he asked concerned.

"He didn't disappear," Alfred sighed, but his relief didn't last. "But Russia took him," he slid a hand through his hair, "for he's a spoil of war," he hissed those words that he hated so much.

"War is hell," John said.

Alfred flinched, "don't say those words." He hated that phase even more.

They were silent for what felt like an eternity but in truth it only lasted a few minutes.

"They said I could go home," John proclaimed. "I'm going to be shipped out tomorrow."

Alfred gave a small smile, finally some good news, he thought. "That's great John."

"You should come visit," he smiled, "I'm sure my brother and my nephews would want to meet you."
America sighed once again, "I don't think that's a good idea. I've done so much to your people-"

"Alfred, we are your people, you know that."

The nation shook his head, "but all my life Arthur told me you weren't till the First World War, when I finally connected the dots." He rubbed his face, "I'm so stupid."

"You're not," John said softly, "you just believed what your brother said."

Alfred snickered harshly, "I remembered the day I confronted him, asking about the natives of my land and how he could hide it from me.

"He became defensive and refused to answer me," he took a deep breath. "I don't remember much of what we said, but I do remember the rage I felt, the betrayal." He looked to his tightly fisted hand, "I wanted so badly to smash his face in and I almost did, but I redirected my arm and hit the wall instead."

"I've seen your strength," John proclaimed, "I bet you destroyed the wall."

He chuckled, this time it was genuine, "I did." Then he closed his eyes, "Arthur was so scared."

"You two seem to be on better terms-"

"Ha! As long as I don't ask questions about my origins, he's his perfect gentlemen self." Alfred sighed, "I have so many questions."

"Then you need to visit my tribe, there's this man, his name is Kai Two Crow and he's-how do I say. He has a way with people, he and Tyee could help you."

The world spun once again but this time I was in my own body. I was wearing the same white summer dress and I was lying in the same forest with the same towering trees and crystal clear pond. The only difference was that I was alone.


"Amy . . ." a voice whispered.

I spun around to the pond; the water was no longer clear blue but thick and murky. I almost thought it was tar but I quickly released it was hair. Then a claw like hand sprang out and attached itself to my face.

I gasped for air and glided a hand through my sweat soaked hair, instantly getting my fingers tangled in my curls. I sat up as I pulled my hand free, undoing the braid. I silently moaned as I massaged my scalp and glanced to a large lump that was under the covers. I peeked under the blanket and found a messy mop of blond hair attached to a slim body.

The figure was Arthur, softly snoring and mumbling under his breath. I blinked and rubbed my eyes, which were sore and red from crying. I quickly recalled last night's events; Arthur getting drunk, arguing with everyone, and bawling in my arms. But the only thing that really surprised me was that Arthur kissed Francis.
I crawled out of bed, grabbed my shoes and tip-toed out of the room, making sure not to wake up either Arthur or Matthew. The house was quiet as I strode to the kitchen for a glass of water. It was early morning and the sun hadn't yet risen, but the soft glow can be seen through the horizon.

I snatched the small battery powered radio from the window shelf and stepped out onto the patio. I skimmed through the radio channels, trying to find any songs that I would recognize. After a couple of morning talk shows and opera stations, I discovered a radio station that was hosted by a group of students from Trinity College. The hosts were a mixed of Italian, French and American. Most were men, but there was one girl in the mix, she was one of the Americans. Together they put in an amazing mix of bands from all over Europe and North America.

I sipped my water as I sat on the wall of the patio and made a mental list of bands that I needed to look into. I breathed in the warm morning air as the scenery and music engulfed my senses. Pulling me away from the night terrors and allowing my mind to go peacefully blank.

Then a song from one of my all-time favorite bands came booming through the speakers, it was 'Counting Stars' by OneRepublic. I grinned to myself and tapped my fingers to the slow beat as my legs dangled and swayed to the rhythm. It wasn't long till I cranked up the volume and jumped down to a free patch of land that was in between the pool and the small cluster of olive trees. The grass was wet with dew and soft under my toes.

As the melody picked up tempo, I kicked up my leg, lifting my knee to touch my shoulder and quickly dropped it to spin into a perfect pirouette. I swayed my hips and arms along with the rhythm, acting out a story as I listened to the lyrics and lost myself in the music.

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Lovino was an early raiser; the habit was drilled into him when he lived with Antonio. He untangled himself from his brother, who was very much a cuddler and rose to get dressed. Once he was in pair of worn out jeans and a faded t-shirt, he walked out the front door.

He rounded the house, towards his small vegetable garden that was placed right along the brick wall. Lovino got straight to work, pulling out weeds and checked if the leaves were being eaten by bugs or parasites. He was pleased to find that his plants were healthy and growing. He grabbed the hose and moved around the villa, watering his garden and herb and flower pots as he passed.

He muttered in irritation when he discovered that most of his plants were writhing due to the extreme heat of the summer. He sighed and decided to move these pots closer to the porch, allowing them to have some shade when the afternoon sun sets in. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, the mud streaked across his skin and he didn't care. He loved the crusty feel of dirt on his fingers, the natural smell of the soil and the sweet taste of a perfectly grown tomato or herb. This gave him the reassurance that he wasn't completely useless and that he was actually good at something.

When the sun's glow was just a sliver in the morning sky, he began to hear a faint whisper. This was not just one voice, but a series whispers, talking and then singing. The singing grew louder and Lovino cocked a brow, he knew of the song. He followed the sound, circling around the patio and stumbled upon Amy, dancing.

The young blond spun herself in a series of twirls and waved her limbs with the grace and strength of a ballerina. Chasseing her feet to the tempo and shifting to the balls of her feet when the pace slowed. Then as the rhythm increased again, she would move her hips to the beat and shuffle her feet with a quickstep. She added to these ballet moves were a mix of contemporary. Lovino always found interpretive dance a bit foolish, not many people could really pull it off, but Amy was a different
She glided her arms and legs with elegance and swayed her waist with passion. She whirled, twisted and stepped her body in sync with the music. When the beat was slow, she twirled and became a lithe ballerina but when the tempo rose to life, she would append a tiny dash of hip-hop into the choreography, creating her own style.

During her dance the sun was rising in the distance, just above the horizon. The sky was fading from pink to orange as the light became her spotlight. The scenery only increased the beauty of Amy's movements. The sun beamed through the branches, revealing small rays that scattered around the blond. The grass shined with dew and the wild flowers seemed to sway along with her. She was like a nymph from an old Greek myth, dancing with and becoming one with nature. Amy was successfully telling a story through her movements and Lovino couldn't keep his eyes off her.

At one point of the song, when the artist repeated a line for four times, Amy would twirl into fast pirouettes, lifting her left leg every time she did. As the tempo rose, so did she and when the song once again slowed, she collapsed to her knees. Amy slid her hands over her neck and shoulders as she leaned backwards. Her shoulder blades were able to touch the ground as her feet laid by her sides. Then the music jumped back to a fast pace and Amy spun on her knees in a quick fashion to leap to her feet.

She then combined all of her ballet, contemporary and hip-hop steps into the last sequence of the melody. She continued to move with grace, speed and style till the song came to its end.

Amy panted softly as she looked up to find Lovino watching her. She straightened, "Hey, um, how long have you been there?"

"Uh," he stuttered for a moment, trying to form words. "Not long," he scratched the back of his head, nervously.

"Ah, okay," she grinned, amused. "What did you think?"

He blinked, "of what?"

"My dancing." Lovino could see that she had to control herself not to roll her eyes. "What did you think? Any advice?"

It was his turn to give her puzzled look. "None; you are an amazing dancer."

She blushed, and then beamed, proud of herself, "thank you, it's nice to know I still got it." She strides back to the patio to drink the rest of her water and to turn the volume of the radio down.

He followed as his curiosity grew, "what made you think that you didn't?"

Amy's eyebrows rose, slightly taken back at his question. "Well, it's . . . the only thing I'm good at."

When she noticed his confused expression, she explained. "I mean when it comes to life goals, my counselor was not happy with me. I mean, I was good at actives that involved survival skills and horseback riding. Those skills weren't counted as 'accepted work skills'," she made air quotes. "I wasn't a genius; I scraped through school with a B to C average and let's not even get into my SAT scores." She sighed, "I hate math but science was fun till I almost exploded the chemistry lab."

Lovino's eyes widened and Amy gave a crooked smile, "it also didn't help that I was acting like a witch from Hamlet."
He chuckled as he took a seat beside her, "you think?"

She stuck her tongue out, "hey the liquid was glowing green with smoke, it was practically begging for it."

He covered his mouth to stop his laughter. Once he was sure that he would be able to speak, he said. "Didn't your family worry?"

"Nah, my family supported my dream," she smiled, possibly to the image of her beloved parents and siblings.

"What makes you think that dancing is all? There must be other things?"

"Yeah," she shrugged, "but dancing is different. It always made me feel special, you know?"

He nodded, for that was same feeling he experienced when he nurtured his garden. He gave a side-way glance and found Amy resting her head back, the sun hitting her white skin as she breathed in deeply. Lovino quickly noticed that she was wearing the same mini dress from the night before; revealing those legs that seem to drive him crazy.

Last night, when Amy had strolled down the steps he was completely captivated by the smooth skin. The dress didn't help that it was loose on her slim frame, making it so easy for the garment to be removed.

Lovino turned away, hiding his flushed face in his hand.

I decided to make breakfast after Lovino hurried to the bathroom, saying he needed to shower. I thought nothing of it as I brought in the radio and turned up the music. The station was playing an old Beyoncé song and I rocked my body to the beat. I worked as the melody blasted in the background.

After several attempts I was finally able to find the toaster. I tied an apron around my waist and pulled out two skillets. I gathered herbs from the pots outside and placed them beside the stove. I chopped up mushrooms, onions and tomatoes to have them ready for the omelets. I broke the eggs and whisked them in a bowl as I waited for the pan to heat up.

It wasn't long till the house began to stir. Raivis and Peter were the first to enter the kitchen. They were both sleepy as they tried to rub the sleep from their eyes.

Peter sniffed the air, probably catching the bacon and sausage. "Please tell me that's for us."

"Of course, what do you want on your omelet?"

He didn't hesitate, "mushrooms, plenty of cheese and onions."

"Do you need any help?" Raivis asked.

"Can you make coffee and tea?"

"Yes."

I gestured to the coffee maker and kettle pot, "it's all yours."
He nodded and strides forward to brew beside me as Peter sat at the table.

"So guys, how was last night?" I winked.

The Baltic instantly blushed and Peter smirked, "Raivis was snogging with Isabella."

"I didn't mean to," Raivis mumbled. "She was all over me."

I laughed, "Way to go Raivis," I slapped him on the back.

He knitted his brows together in confusion, "but I don't want to be with Isabella, I wanttobewithErika." His words ran together as he muttered.

"I know but you needed a confidence boost. Did you have fun?"

"Before or after the kissing?" he asked.

"All of it."

He flushed a deeper shade of red, "yes."

"Then don't be ashamed, if it felt good, it felt good. No need to read too much into it."

Then the radio played another Beyoncé song and I practically squealed. It was favorite, 'Love On Top', "I'm official in love with this station."

I started to sing along and Raivis raised his brows when I started to use the spatula as a microphone. I narrowed my eyes suspiciously, "you know who Beyoncé is right."

He quickly said, "Yes, everyone does."

"Good, cause if you didn't know who the queen was, I was gonna smack you with this." I wielded the spatula to his cheek.

He took my comment in offense, "I may be over six hundred years old but I'm not stupid."

Peter cuts in, "You didn't know who Beyoncé was till 2014."

My jaw dropped, "You seriously need to borrow my iPod."

Later on, when the tea and coffee was ready the nations started to gather around the dining room table. Most were happy and grateful that I made breakfast but Gilbert just had to make a comment. "I hope you have better taste buds than Alfred did."

I cocked a brow and shoved his plate to him, "eat it."

He took a bite and everyone could read his face straightaway. He enjoyed it but he was trying hard not to show, "it's not bad."

"It's delicious and you know it," I exclaimed.

"Why do you all have to be so loud," Arthur was the last to arrive. He was still in the same clothes from last night, his blond hair was messier than usual and his eyes were red.

"He didn't die from alcohol poisoning," Lovino cursed and turned to Antonio. "I owe you forty euros."
The Spanish man grinned, "Let's all give England a round of applause for making through the night. We knew you could do it." He clapped and we quickly followed his example.

Arthur moaned and massaged his temples, "you all are bloody pricks."

Once the nations were finished with breakfast, Feliciano hurried them out the door for he planned another day of sightseeing. They were to see the Pantheon and the Piazza Navona.

Arthur was deeply ill. He wished to stay behind but immediately regretted it when Francis volunteered to watch him.

"Don't leave me alone with him," he begged Matthew as he was rubbing sunscreen on his face and arms.

"Why? You looked like you wanted some alone time last night," the Canadian gave a sly smile.

Arthur roughly remembered the kiss he gave Francis and groaned. "I was drunk."

Matthew rolled his eyes, "how many times are you gonna use that excuse?"

The Brit threw a pillow at him but Matthew closed the door before it could make a direct hit.

Arthur watched from his window as everyone climbed into the van and spare car. He noticed that Amy decided to join Lovino and Antonio in the convertible. He knitted his thick brows forward; if either of the two laid a hand on his niece he would release his most powerful, hell born curse on their asses. At least she wasn't wearing that blasted dress, it was too revealing but if he had said something, it would only encourage the girl to wear it.

The thought made Arthur smile, just like Alfred.

"Angleterre," a voice sang from behind the door.

"Go away," he threatened.

Francis opened the door, "but I brought water and aspirin."

Arthur mumbled a string of curses but took his offerings.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. You can leave now."

The Frenchman ignored him and sat on Matthew's bed. A moment of silence passed between them, Francis's face becoming serious. "I overheard what you told Ami last night."

Arthur's eyes widened slightly and he turned away, "was I that pathetic?"

Francis snorted, "You don't need me to answer, I'm absolutely sure you remember."

Arthur sighed, "Yes I do."

"You really think that was the worst thing you did," Francis hissed through gritted teeth.

"You were no saint either," Arthur glared.
Francis's blue eyes blazed, "you're the reason why she died."

Arthur's voice cracked, "It wasn't just me! We all played a part in it. Don't place all the blame on me, just to lessen your guilt."

Francis closed his eyes, allowing his anger to cool but another flame quickly sparked. He rose and moved in close, his face mere few inches away from Arthur's. "Did you already forget that day; what she told us."

Arthur ground his teeth together and glanced to his hands; they were clutched and shaking. Francis slipped his hands over Arthur's cheeks and curled his fingers through his dirty blond hair. He caressed his thumb over the cheek bone, "look at me."

He and Francis gazed into each other's eyes; both were filled with anger for the other but there was something deeper. Familiarity of one another, compassion for each other's pain and lust for the other's touch. Francis placed a soft kiss on Arthur's lips, a test to see if he would respond.

Arthur did; desperately wishing to leave the subject of Karen alone.
We spent the next day at the San Luigi dei Francesi; a church that featured more art by Caravaggio. Feliciano said that once we had a taste of the Galleria Borghese, we couldn't leave Rome without seeing this building; saying that it contained the artist's most powerful works.

Such as the Calling of Saint Matthew, this image displayed a group of men sitting around the table. Again, just as Caravaggio's other pieces, this painting's design was realistic like a photograph. It hanged in the Contarelli Chapel of the church. Along with this piece, were two other works; the St. Matthew and the Angel, and the Martyrdom of St. Matthew, these two pieces were just round the triptych.

I didn't go to church often, maybe once or twice for weddings or funerals. I also wasn't religious; I guess it was because my family was mixed with Catholicism, Native American spirituality and the newly added Hinduism that neither side wished to enforce their views on me. Mom and Dad pretty much told me that I was free to choose any religion I wanted, for most carried their own concept of the golden rule: treat others as you would like to be treated.

I jumped to the chance to be part of my father's culture, just as Melissa and Johnny had but I was teased constantly by the other kids in the local tribe. Mostly to the fact that I was white and was trying to take part in their dances and traditions; the teasing didn't last long, especially when I gave that same group of kids' black eyes and split lips. Once everything was cleared up, my family decided we would create our own traditions.

Mom always said, "You don't need a building or a large group meeting to worship your god."

This sort of attitude and ease with the subject left me very open minded but not being religious didn't stop me from appreciating the beauty of the church. I sat in the pew, taking a moment to stare at the ceilings. A large painting was in the center, filled with vivid colors and was surrounded by gray marble and gold designs. I was so enchanted by view that I didn't notice Francis sitting beside me till he asked.

"Enjoying yourself?"

I nodded, "yeah, but if we're visiting churches, I would really like to see the Notre Dame."

He grinned, "Maybe for the holidays."

"Not possible," Gilbert took his seat beside him, "she'll be heading to Denmark in the fall and soon after to Sweden."

That snapped me out of my trance, "why?"

"The Nordic's are fierce snipers, especially Tino."
"But Matthieu is better," Francis remarked.

"Ja but Amy will head to Greece in the spring, she'll be closer if she stayed in Sweden."

"How many nations am I visiting?" I asked.

"That's all I know so far."

"But those countries only cover the military training," Ludwig cuts in as he sat in the pew in front of us and turned to face me. "There will be some countries you'll visit for cultural and volunteering purposes."

I lifted a brow in question and he answered, "For your college applications."

"Si, like now," Feliciano smiled, "it's true I wanted you to visit but your boss said you needed some cultural material to write your essays on."

"In the next year, you'll visit London, Paris, Barcelona and Kyoto for the same reasons," Arthur added.

"And that's not even counting the world meetings," Elizabeta proclaimed, "I believe the next one will be held in India."

I looked back to the ceiling, tuning out everyone's chatter as I tried to lose myself in the painting again. It didn't work.

Later we moved along to the Sala One gallery, this gallery was filled with contemporary art; hosting shows such as an exhibition of South African art from 1993, and projects from Iraq and Bangladesh from the years 2011 to 2014. Truthfully, I wasn't paying any attention to the art; my mind was far off, thinking about the countries and cities I would soon visit.

When I thought of Denmark, I thought of Mikkel and how easy-going he was. While Berwald, the nation of Sweden was a quiet fellow and had a serious face but deep down I could tell he was a good person. I quickly recalled how he picked up Gael with care and gave the most affectionate smile towards the boy. Then I remembered Mikkel, Berwald and the other Nordics having drinks with Grandma, Johnny and Celine telling them stories about their Viking days.

I smiled, they seem like good people.

On Sunday we visited the Monti's market. The market was a blend of modern creativity and vintage fashion: from handicrafts to cutting-edge designers and retro clothing, furniture and home ware items. Sales were always active on the weekends, and it was the perfect excuse to explore the other independent stores and galleries that dotted around the area's small streets.

Now, the next three days became a huge crash course of museums and sightseeing.

We visited the San Clemente Basilica; built in 1100 on the ruins of a fourth century Christian church which was also built over the ruins of a first century pagan temple. Again this church was filled with color, paintings over the ceilings along with gray marble and gold accents. The golden Triumph of the Cross was placed in the dome area and it was unbelievably stunning. The entire thing was constructed with little square pieces of mosaic.

Underground was where the ruins of the two other churches remained. The catacombs were made of dark stone and the air was filled with the scent of the earth. The pagan temple intrigued me most of all. The carved out stone altar of the old god sat at the end and the carving of a warrior was on a
small column in the center, both were made with the same white stone. The soldier was standing over some kind of beast, possibly a bull.

My fingers caressed over the column, the stone was cold and smooth. I could feel the centuries radiated off the rock. Even the atmosphere felt ancient and magickal.

Next we took a tour at the Vittorio Emanuele II Monument and the infamous Glass Elevator. The big white marble building was completed in 1935 as a monument to Vittorio Emanuele II. The massive monument sat on a hill right next to the ancient Roman Forum and Capitoline Hill. The location and architecture have left a severe distaste in the mouths of the Roman citizens. Even Feliciano and Lovino didn't care for it; Feli said that the only good thing about the monument was the glass elevator that took us to the top observation deck. This deck held the perfect view for some amazing snapshots of Rome and the ancient ruins.

Then Feliciano lead us to a studio home that was converted into another museum, like they didn't have enough already.

This art-nouveau villa between the river and via Flaminia was filled with two hundred sculptures, two hundred paintings and three hundred graphic works. But everyone came for the works of the sculptor Hendrik Christian Andersen.

"He was a Norwegian-American artist that moved to Rome at the end of the nineteenth century where he lived for over forty years. When he died he left all his works to the Italian state, where some are now displayed here." Feliciano announced.

Next was the Burcardo Theatre, another freaking museum that was filled with costumes and artifacts from the history of Italian theater. It opened to the public in 1932; the collection included a number of beautifully crafted sculptures, plaster busts depicting writers and actors from the past two centuries and a photography archive with thousands of dramatic black and white images of thespians in action.

We finally took a break at the Spanish Steps, one of the timeless, classic sites in Rome. These steps rose into a steep slope from the Piazza di Spagna to the church of Trinità dei Monti at the top of the hill. The site was always filled with people so all we could do was grab a section of steps for our group to sit at and eat a cup of gelato.

The day was waning down, the sun was sitting and the sky was fading into a darker shade of blue. The street lights and the fountain at the bottom of the steps were beginning to glow. I sat in between Peter and Raivis and savored my double chocolate gelato.

Peter was reading Raivis' travel book, "Hey did you know there are one hundred and thirty-eight steps here in total."

I cocked a brow, "People actually counted? Talk about having no life."

Feliciano perked up and was about to make another speech about the subject, till I groaned, "Feli, enough. My brain is running on fumes here."

He pouted and Ludwig proclaimed, "Feli, you did all you could but there was no possible way you could pack in everything in two weeks."

I gave the German a wide-eyed look, "we didn't even see everything?"

Antonio laughed, "We only scratched the surface."

"There's a saying among the locals," Elizabeta said, "You can spend a lifetime here and still wouldn't
have seen everything Rome has to offer."

"Good thing we're immortal," Lovino muttered bitterly but then said, "well sort of."

Everyone was silent as I glanced to Alfred's family. Matthew was holding on to Kumajirou a little too tight. Arthur was scowling; his green eyes alive with a rage filled blaze. Even Francis had his jaw clutched, and carried an intense glare in his usual calm blue eyes. All three nations looked ready to shove Lovino down the stairs.

I forced out a laugh to ease the tension, I had enough practice to make it sound real; I really should thank Jamie for dragging me to her drama club meetings. "Lovi," I shoved his arm with my foot, "I'm supposed to be the funny, sarcastic one. Stop stealing my material," I flashed a dazzling smile and changed the subject by leaning against Raivis, looking over his shoulder to see the iPod's screen.

He's been borrowing my device for the last few days, allowing him to listen to the many genres of music that I had to offer. "You've been making your playlist?"

He removed my bright blue beats headphones from his ears and turned to me with a questionable look. Clearly he wasn't paying attention to our group's recent conversation, "Hmm?"

"Have you been making your playlist," I asked again.

He nodded, "but you have a lot of music; it's going to be a while for me to finish."

"What do you have so far?"

He clicked back to his playlist, "I really like American Authors, Coldplay, Chemical Romance, and OneRepublic."

"Have you listened to Of Monsters and Men?" I asked, "You would like them."

"Oh, they sing 'Little Talks' right," when I nodded, he said, "Yeah I got them."

"If you like those guys try The Fray, Maroon 5 and Imagine Dragons."

"Okay," he began the search and I continued.

"But you need some girl power," I counted off my fingers, "Beyoncé is a given."

He nodded, "I got her."

"Good. You also need to hear Lorde, Adele-"

"Adele is brilliant," Arthur added as he ate a spoon full of his dessert.

I grinned, "Up top Arthur." We shared a quick high five as Elizabeta said, "Raivis should try Ingrid Michaelson, her music runs along with those artists."

"Make sure to try Nickelback," Matthew spoke up.

I giggled, "You are so Canadian."

"But you need some pop," Antonio exclaimed, "try Katy Perry."

"Lame," Gilbert snickered.
The Spaniard narrowed his green eyes at his friend, "Don't even start Gil, you listen to Taylor Swift."

Everyone burst into gut wrenching laughter; it took us a good minute before anyone to make a comment. "What are you? A teenage girl?" Peter chuckled.

Gilbert's cheeks were red but he still carried himself with his usual cocky attitude. "Hey, it doesn't matter what I listen to, I can make anything awesome."

Peter shrugged, "Well that's still better than Amy, the Justin Bieber fan."

Every nation whipped their heads around to face me with a disturbed expression. I could feel my face turn into a million different shades of crimson. "I was eleven!" I smacked Peter over his head, but that didn't wipe away his smirk.

Francis carried on with the music discussion, "have you tried Ellie Goulding, I like her."

Raivis smiled, "I like her song 'Ritual'."

The older nation smiled back, "that one is my favorite too."

"'Burn' is good," Feliciano added, "techno is very popular right now." He turned to his brother, "What was that singer you like? I think he's British."

Lovino gave him a dirty look, almost like this singer was supposed to be a secret but he got over it. "Ed Sheeran," he grumbled.

Arthur nodded in agreement, "he's-"

"Shut up."

During this, I had grabbed my iPod and added these artists to the playlist all with a few clicks. "Alright, anything else?"

"West hasn't suggested anything," said Gilbert.

Ludwig avoided everyone's eyes, "leave me out of this."

"You must know at least one artist," Francis proclaimed.

Ludwig pulled his cap down to hide his face, but we could tell he was embarrassed by the bright pink that was forming on his ears. "I like Christina Aguilera."

Everyone was quiet as a wicked grin spread over my lips and I pulled out my portable speaker from my backpack. I connected the devices together and cracked up the song, 'Candyman'. I leaped to my feet, "sing along Ludwig it's your song!"

The blond hid his face in his hands as Feliciano patted his shoulder, giggling but comforting him at the same time.

I grabbed his hand and pulled him to the bottom of the steps. He tried to jerk his arm away but I was stronger, which made me smile even wider. I tapped my feet to the beat, and swayed my hips with a swing flare. Well I was trying to do swing, but Ludwig was shaking his head and covering his mouth to hide his laughter.

"That is not how you swing."
I smiled, "then show me."

His embarrassment was gone and replaced with a confidence that could only be gained from experience. He pulled me into a twirl and held me at arm's length to show me how to move my feet. It was almost like the quickstep, but I had to twist my waist and hips as my feet crisscrossed rapidly to the rhythm. Through the song, Ludwig was able to teach me the basics of swing dancing, which included touch-stepping, triple-stepping and kick ball changes.

"You learn fast," I almost thought he would give me a full blown compliment but it was back-handed. "If only you could be like this during your training."

"I can kick your ass if you want me to," I smirked playfully.

He laughed as he twirled me again. I beamed, I was glad to see that he was finally having some fun.

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Lovino watched with a frown as Amy danced with the large German. He grumbled a string of curses at the sight of their smiling faces. It also didn't help that everyone was cheering them on. It only worsened his mood, but in retrospect he had no one to blame but himself. He was one that made the immortal comment, which lead Amy to a hasty subject change.

He groaned at the quick memory flashback of his statement. He wasn't thinking, he was trying to be humorous but it only came out bitter and the 'sort of' added to the end did not help his case. A shiver ran down his spine as the thought of Britain's and France's glares replayed in his head. Even sweet-tempered Canada looked like he would rip the Italian apart.

Caught up in his own frustration and regret Lovino didn't notice Feliciano taking a seat next to him till he asked. "Lovi, why the long face? Everyone seems to be having fun why not you?"

He groaned, "Veneziano, I'm not in the mood."

The younger brother sighed, "What else is new."

Lovino narrowed his eyes but his attention was reverted back to the pair of blondes, dancing in the street. At one point, Amy asked if Ludwig knew any of the more advanced steps of swing. The German was more than happy to display as he wrapped an arm around the girl's waist and leaned her back. Amy read his moves perfectly and hooked her leg around his spare arm as Ludwig held her up in a horizontal line across his chest.

Amy squealed but continued to kick her other leg up as Ludwig flipped her back to her feet. They're group, along with a crowd of tourists and locals clapped and cheered. The whole scene was making Lovino nauseous.

Feliciano noticed his irritated expression towards the pair, "Lovi are you jealous?"

"No," he hissed defensively.

"That look says you are."

"Shut it."

Feliciano glanced back to Amy and Ludwig and smiled knowingly. "You like her don't you?"

Lovino clutched his jaw as Feliciano said, "I see why, she is alluring, fun and very pretty."
"Are you going somewhere with this?"

Feliciano's smile fell, "I know you're very lonely Lovi; especially with Liz and Gilbert back together."

He groaned, louder this time, "We don't need to discuss this."

Feliciano arched his brows up in distress, "but I don't like to see that look on your face fratello. Whenever Elizabeta, Bella or any other nation come to you, seeking comfort you give it to them and never ask for them to love in return. But I could see that gleam in your eyes every time Lovi, the hope that this time would be different. That they would stay and not go back to the men they love, but it never happens."

Lovino massaged his temples, hating the fact that his brother was right. He and like so many of the other nations always continue to forget that Feliciano wasn't as imprudent as they believed. The younger nation continued, "This seems to be your slot in life, always being the man they run to when the other is missing from their beds."

Lovino inhaled through his nose, "All the nations do this not just me."

"But they always have that one nation to go back to," Feliciano proclaimed. "I mean if you allowed yourself to open up to the male nations."

"I don't like men." Lovino hissed. "I prefer women, Feli."

"I know but there are already such slim pickings," his eyes slid back to Amy. "But this could be your chance."

Lovino followed his brother's gaze, "don't you like her?"

"If she wants me, she can have me but Lovi you need all the help you can get." Feliciano smiled. He narrowed eyes at him, "are you applying that if you were trying, I wouldn't have a chance."

Feliciano grinned, "Maybe." He then turned back to the top of the stairs, where he noticed a small band. His grin grew wider, "time to work some magic." He jumped to his feet and ran to the band.

Lovino watched his brother with an irritated but slightly amazed expression. In less than five minutes, Feliciano was able to persuade the band to loan him their mandolin and join him for a song. The band followed the nation to the bottom of the stairs, each of them carrying an instrument; a guitar, two violins, a drum, a tambourine and an accordion. Feliciano streams the small instrument and with a steady beat of drum, he and his temporary band began the melody called, 'Sott'er Celo de Roma' or in English, 'On an Evening in Roma'.

Lovino shook his head in disbelief as the nations and crowd of humans began to clap to the rhythm. Veneziano's voice was suave as he sang with smile and caressed the mandolin as if it was made of glass. The band was quick to harmonize with the cheerful nation and when the song called for backup singers, the locals were more than willing to join.

Room was made for dancers and Amy and Ludwig was in the center of it. Lovino could no longer watch as the potato bastard swayed happily with Amy. The German had already taken his brother, he did not need Amy. He struts forward and cuts in front of Ludwig when he wasn't looking.

Lovino moved in fast, pulling Amy close and whirled away from the confused blond.
"That was kinda rude," the girl raised a brow but she was smiling, so Lovino didn't think much of it. He smirked, "he'll get over it."

Amy laughed and turned her attention back to the music, swinging her body with the beat. Lovino gently tugged her closer, coaxing her to lean herself against him. She didn't object and placed her head into the nook of his neck. Goosebumps formed every time she breathed, causing Lovino to twitch and his toes to curl. His heart was pounding against his rib cage and he was praying to God that Amy wouldn't hear, or at the very least not comment on the subject.

She did nothing but closed her eyes and hummed along with the song. He relaxed and tilted his head together with her's. She sighed peacefully and Lovino smiled content for the moment.

On our last day in Italy, Feliciano took us to the Casa Del Cinema, also known as a movie theater. This theater was the most modern cinema in the city. They take pride in screening classic original language films, but there were some movies from that came from that year's Venice film festival. There was even a film library and a café, practically a dreamland for movie fans.

But truthfully the only thing that I was really excited to see was the cat sanctuary. These cat homes were set among the ruins of the Torre Argentina. This area contains the remains of four Republican temples as well as Pompey's Theater: the site where Julius Caesar was believed to have been assassinated.

Feliciano explained, that cats began hanging around when the archaeological site was first opened in 1929, making themselves right at home in the below street level ruins. These felines may have come for the shelter but they stayed for the friendly gattare or cat ladies, for most of the cats were fat. They weren't missing any meals. The sanctuary was short on land but the cats didn't seem to mind for most would lie about on the ruins, taking in the sun. Others would rub up against the tourists, knowing perfectly well that they would at least get some sort of affection for their troubles.

The sanctuary has been run by generation after generation of locals from the neighborhood and they take care of the cats through their own pockets. Luckily tourists have always spared some money for the donation box. I made sure to add a twenty. I knew from personal experience that raising money for animal shelters was frustrating and besides, just imagine all the good karma I'll receive later down the road.

The moment I saw the fluffy felines, I started jumping excitedly and squealing like a little kid. It only got worse when Feli announced that several of the mother cats had kittens and the women were trying to find homes for them.

I squealed again and tried to move in a calmly fashion towards one of the mother cats. A sweet looking elderly woman had given me a feathered toy. I thanked her as I waved the colorful feathers over the small adorable kittens.

I was overdue on some kitten love. I scratched them on their heads, behind their ears, and under their chins. I even played with some the older, active cats as some would jump on my shoulders or leap into my lap to lounge.

It wasn't long till I started using my baby talk, saying phrases in a sweet voice. "Hi there," I scratched a solid black kitten under his chin. "You're so beautiful, yes you are," I cooed as the tiny creature mewed and I melted, "Aww."
"Amy we have to go," Arthur called out.

"But we just got here!" I whined.

"It's been an hour," he proclaimed.

I continued to complain, "But, why?"

"Our tour guide wants to take us to another museum." By 'tour guide' I'm sure he meant Feliciano.

"But, but," I held the kitten closer, "I don't want to go."

He sighed, "Amy, come along, the cats aren't going anywhere."

"Can we stay a little longer? Please." I begged sweetly as I batted my eyes and tilted my head.

He blinked, completely speechless. "Uh, well-"

"Please Arthur," I said in a young tone and brought out the Bambi eyes, "please."

He brushed a hand through his hair nervously, "I'll uh, go ask."

I beamed, "thank you."

He stuttered but no words came out as he walked back to the group.

Arthur was still in a daze when he came face to face with the nations.

"Why isn't Amy following you," Ludwig asked this more as a statement than a question.

"Well," Arthur rubbed the back of his neck nervously, "uh-"

"She used the Bambi eyes on you didn't she," Matthew proclaimed.

"Bambi eyes," Gilbert asked with interest.

The Canadian nodded, "Alfred had the same trick. Whenever it came to Arthur all he had to do was bat his big blue eyes and Arthur would melt."

Before Arthur could defend himself Francis proclaimed, "Don't deny it, you know it's true."

The Brit sighed, defeated. "She just looked so much like Alfred when he was child," he flushed. "I couldn't say no."

Ludwig rolled his eyes, a habit he seemed to have picked up from Amy. "Clearly I need to handle this."

Arthur and the others watched as Ludwig struts forward. Amy was preoccupied by a litter of kittens and didn't notice the large blond till he spoke.

The group was too far to hear but they were still able to follow their conversation by sight and expression. The chat was short and it seemed Amy had won, for Ludwig walked back with his head hanging slightly to the side.
Antonio gasped dramatically as he said in a mocking tone, "what happened?"

"I thought you said you would handle it," Francis jeered.

Gilbert shook his head in disappointed, "That was so not awesome."

Ludwig tried to defend himself, "she had the help of a small cat." He cursed, "I swear it meowed on cue."

"Sure it did, potato bastard." Lovino smirked.

Feliciano grinned as he hugged Ludwig, "you're just a big softie, admit it."

Elizabeta giggled, "I guess we're gonna be here a while. I'm going shopping, anyone care to join?"

The awesome trio followed Elizabeta as Ludwig and Feliciano sat at a bench, simply enjoying the warm afternoon. Peter and Raivis were captivated by the kittens and played with them beside Amy. Arthur and Matthew couldn't stand the heat for much longer and ventured into a book shop with a relaxing café attached to it.

I continued to play with the cats, petting them, holding them and loving them with all the affection I could give. The felines ranged from black to white, brown to gray and multicolored with the texture of stripes and splattered spots.

I waved the toy around the kittens causing them to jump and snatch the feathers in between their claws. I cooed and giggled at their antics, falling even more in love with them.

"I thought you were a dog person."

I glanced to Lovino as he sat himself beside me and lifted a mild tempered kitten into his arms. He scratched the brown stripped kitten under her chin and she purred.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, you have that cocker spaniel," he stated. "What was her name again?"

"Lady and she's the most beautiful dog in the world."

He grinned, "See, that's why I think you're a dog person."

"I'm an animal person; I love all types of animals."

He cocked a brow, "even pigs?"

"Yes, have you ever watched *Babe* or *Charlotte's Web?* The pigs they used were adorable."

"Rats?"

I made a face, "some rats but mice are cute."

He chuckled, "*tu sei pazzo.*"

He called me crazy and I exclaimed, "thank you, I take great pride in that."
His chuckle turned into a laugh and I placed my attention back to the kittens. He was silent as I fussed over the felines.

"Why don't you have a cat?"

"Hmm?"

"You have a dog and three horses but you don't have a cat."

"My mom's allergic, so are my brother and sister it kinda runs in the family. I couldn't go anywhere near cats because they were super sensitive to their hair. If they got close to it, their eyes would water and turn red and their faces would puff, believe me it's not a pretty sight."

Another cat meowed, asking for attention and I was happy to apply. "When the Quake hit, a lot of animals were left to roam the streets and the animal shelter was destroyed. The library was the only place left that wasn't completely damaged or occupied by large groups of people.

"The dogs were kept at the bottom floor while the cats were on the second level. Any dogs that were friendly moved to the hospital or rec-center mostly to entertain the kids and comfort the elderly. Summerland had so many homeless dogs we were putting all our efforts into finding them homes. The cats on the other hand, we didn't have as many so most ended up becoming library cats."

I smiled at the memory of the calm felines that kept me company in between the rows of bookshelves. "At first I was a volunteer, I would feed them, groom them and play with them. Dad would come along to keep an eye on me and he also likes cats." I chuckled, "Every time we came back to the rec-center our family wouldn't come near us till we took a shower."

"Then when I got older, I continued to visit the cats and Mom was so annoyed by it but she didn't complain; much. She only asked that when I came back, I would have to stand out in the front yard as she hosed me down."

He gave me a confused look, "with water right?"

"No with Kool-Aid," I said sarcastically.

Lovino narrowed his eyes at me and I laughed even harder, "don't be mad, you open yourself up to that one."

He continued to glare and I smirked, "you're like Mel, so sensitive." I lifted a multicolored kitten to my face as it rubbed its head against my cheek. The mention of my family brought back the homesickness that I thought I had gotten over with. This only revealed that I must've been keeping it dormant to focus on other issues.

I wondered what my parents were doing at that moment; it would be morning in Summerland by now. They would be rising for the day and I was pretty sure school had started so Melissa and Sanjay would be up too. Blair and Blake were fourth graders now and little Raiden would join his mother at the shop so he would be adored by all the costumers. A small lump began to form in my throat and I tried in failed attempts to swallow it.

"Are you alright?"

I looked up to Lovino, his eyes held such genuine concern that I didn't have the heart to brush off the subject. I inhaled a long breath and turned my focus back to the cats, avoiding his eyes. "I'm just . . . home sick. I really miss my family and talking about them is only making it worse."
He didn't say anything as I picked up another kitten and held it close to my chest for comfort. "I can't even handle two months without them." I snorted bitterly, "what the hell am I gonna do when they're gone."

Lovino was silent till he said, "you really love them."

I cocked a brow, "well that's new. The advice I usually get is pretty blunt. Such as, 'get over it' or 'don't think about it.' Oh, and my personally favorite, 'you will live forever, they won't. It's best to sever your ties now."

"Well, you've been talking to a bunch of assholes," he proclaimed.

I smirked slightly but the flutter of this new found amusement didn't last. "But is that all you have to say? You're not going to tell me to get use to the idea of them being gone?"

He shrugged, "there would be no point. It won't stop you from being with them; frankly I think it only encourages you."

I blinked, completely taken by surprise as he continued. "It would also be hypocritical for us to keep telling you to stay away from them even though we don't follow our own rules." He sighed, "Maybe, they're hoping it will lessen the pain but it is fool's dream. Your family; the people that raised you will always be a part of you. It doesn't matter how many times we tell you to forget them, it won't stop you." He looked to me with unwavering eyes, "it just won't."

"We all had people we cared about at one point of our lives," he continued, "men and women that have stayed with us through the years. We knew how it would end, we always knew but we never seem to learn." He sighed once again, "and when that fateful moment comes, we turn to each other. That's when most realize the truth; in this life we only have each other, unfortunately."

His last sentence made me smile, granted it was sad but a smile none the less. "It's nice to know I'm not alone."

"Amy!" Peter called out, "there's this kitten you have to see." In one swift move, he snatched my hand, hauled me to my feet and yanked me across the yard.

When I found there was no kitten waiting for me but Raivis. I became very annoyed. "What's the deal Peter? There's no kitty."

"Sorry, but I had to make up something to get you away from Romano."

I gave him a confused look, "why?"

Peter cocked a thick eyebrow as Raivis shifted his eyes to me and back to Peter. The blond was the first to speak, "seriously, you don't notice?"

"Notice what?"

Raivis fiddled with his fingers, "we may not have the skill but we can see it in action."

"See what?" I asked irritated.

"Flirting," Peter exclaimed as my eyes widened in surprise and he sighed. "Wow, you're just as oblivious as Alfred."

I shook my head, "nah, not Lovino, I mean he's just being nice."
The boys gave me the 'really-you're-denying-it' look.

My mind quickly recapped me on Lovino's behavior from the past two weeks; how sweet he's been acting, how he preferred to stay near me when we visited the museums and then our very intimate dance at the Spanish Steps. "Oh my god," it finally hits me.

"It really flew over your head," Peter jeered.

I glared, "shut up." But my death glare didn't last as I rubbed my temples. "Ugh, I don't need this."

"I'm still confused," Raivis jumped in, "how could you not notice?"

I groaned, "I just thought he was being a good host you know, being in his country and all." I sighed, "I never notice people flirting unless Jamie and Michel tell me." I looked up to the boys, "I guess you guys are they're replacements."

"I call being Jamie," Peter raised his hand and then pointed to Raivis, "you will be the flamboyant one."

Raivis glared, "well at least I'm not a girl."

"Well, at least I don't like boys and have to take it up the ass," Peter smirked.

Raivis shoved him and Peter almost tripped but caught himself. I shook my head, "guys, stop, please." I sighed once again. "Do you think he's doing it for the bet?"

Peter and Raivis froze, "what?"

"Don't play stupid," I snapped, "you guys must've heard."

Raivis sighed, "Yes."

"Nations love to see who's on top just as much as they love to gossip," Peter noted.

I sat on massive stone block, "great; just great."

Another older cat leaped into my lap and rubbed its face into my arm. I scratched it behind the ears and held the feline close. Raivis took his seat beside me, "that's why we warned you. Mr. Romano is very popular with the female nations. He's dated Ms. Hungary, Ms. Taiwan. . ."

"Raquel," I added, remembering the drinking game.

"Ms. Belgium," Raivis proclaimed.

"And Victoria. . ."

"What?!" Both Raivis and I looked up to Peter, whose eyes carried a wounded look.

I slapped a hand over my mouth, "I'm sorry, I-"

Peter clutched his jaw and crossed his arms, "forget it. She's got a past. He's got a past. She's got a past." He turned his glare on Lovino, "but if he thinks he can have you for a bet he's got another thing coming."

Raivis spared a cautious look towards the Italian before he turned to me. "We got your back Amy."

I smiled, "Look at you two, my own personal bodyguards."
Both of them flushed, embarrassed and I leaned against Raivis, "thanks guys."

We were silent till Raivis began to hum the song 'Time Machine' by Ingrid Michaelson.

Peter grinned, "you gonna give us a performance?"

His eyes widened like a scared deer caught in the headlights. "No, no, I don't like to sing in front of people."

"Yeah, I know. The only time I can hear you, is when you take a shower."

Raivis grew pale, "you've been spying on me."

"Hey, I didn't have to go far. You got a pair of lungs on you."

I rose off his shoulder, "you can sing?"

"Uh-uh, um, uh," he stuttered.

"Dad always said that Estonia and the other Baltics were amazing," Peter proclaimed. "Estonia was the boastful one but Dad said the real gem was Raivis."

Raivis turned red, "I'm not."

"I want to hear, please Raivis," I plead.

He shook his head, "I don't like singing in front of people." he repeated. "I mean, it was bearable when I had Eduard and Toris with me but," he swallowed a lump in his throat. "When it came to singing in front Mr. Russia," he was beginning to tremble and I held his hand to comfort him.

Peter closed his mouth, losing his teasing nature when the topic came to Russia.

"He made you guys sing for him?" I asked in disbelief.

"And dance," Raivis added. "He forced us to learn ballet so we could perform Swan Lake and the Nutcracker for him." he said bitterly.

I tried to find the good in this, "hey male ballet dancers are pretty fit, I mean have you seen their legs?" I whistled, "They're sexy beasts."

Peter laughed, "Raivis? A sexy beast?" he laughed harder.

He sighed, "I don't know if you could call me that when I'm dressed in a tutu."

Peter stopped laughing as I asked, "what?"

"He-" Raivis glanced to his shoes, "Mr. Russia would dress us in tutus when we performed the female roles, and those were his favorite."

I was pretty sure Peter and I thought the exact same thing: of Raivis twirling on stage in a white tutu and a sparkling crown on his head. We both shared one look and started to laugh. And it wasn't a chuckle; it was a full on, gut-wrenching laugh.

Peter fell to his knees, holding his gut, "I can't," he choked out between gasps. "I can't."

I tried to stop but then my mind decided to show Raivis curtseying to me and asking if he looked
pretty. I laughed harder, "I-" *gasp*, "can't-" *gasp*, "breathe."

Raivis rose to his feet, face flushed and eyes filled with embarrassment, "it isn't funny!"

When I finally caught my breath, I coughed, "I'm sorry, I just, I just," I dissolved into giggles.

"I have to ask," Peter chuckled, "are there pictures?"

Raivis didn't have to answer; his bright red cheeks said it all.

We howled like a pair of hyenas.

At early evening Feliciano takes us to Ristorante Al Presidente. This restaurant was one of the best in Rome; with the nicest terraces. This building was in the center of town, under the shadow of the Quirinale presidential palace. We sat outside at one of the long tables; I took my seat at the end. Raivis and Peter were quick to take their seats at my side as Matthew, Elizabeta and Gilbert sat in front of me. Arthur sat by Raivis as Francis was in front of him and by Mattie. Feliciano and Lovino sat at the head with Antonio and Ludwig by their sides.

I figured the Italian brothers came here often, for when we entered waiters were on their feet ready to serve. One had called in a middle aged man dressed in a three piece suit; he walked out from a back room and beamed in our direction. He and the brothers took a moment to greet and hug each other as the smiling owner ushered us to our table.

Plates and silverware shined against the streetlights as they were set while one waiter was instructed to bring forth the finest bottle of wine they had.

The head waiter was quick to bring us water and hand us our menus. Then another waiter stepped forward showing the wine to Feli and Lovino, seeking their approval. They smiled and gestured for them to serve. The wine was poured and a glass was passed to each of us as we ordered our food. I asked for pasta with fresh sardines and pecorino cheese.

Once the waiter wrote down the orders, they were off to inform the cooks.

The owner turned to his favorite costumers, "Is everything to your liking?"

"There's no need to ask, Luca," Feli smiled, "you never disappoint."

Luca grinned, pleased and turned to set his eyes on me. "They tell me it's your first time in Italy."

I flushed but gave a small smile, "yes it is."

His grin widened, "well there is no need to worry. You are in Rome and in good hands," he slapped Lovino on his shoulder, lifted a wine glass and announced, "Cin, cin!"

Everyone followed his example, glancing to one another as we clicked our glasses together and repeated, "Cin, cin!" Then we all took a sip of the red liquid.

From what Carlo and Gemma told me, when Italians gathered for dinner, they thank for the meal by saying "Cin, cin," which was supposed to mean the chime of the wine glass. You gave thanks with all your five senses, you have to look at your guests in the eye, touch the glass as you toast, hearing the click and say 'cin, cin.' Then you complete the toast by tasting the wine.
I smiled to myself when I remembered Jin Chen, Jamie's grandfather explaining that the Italians got this tradition from the Chinese. Carlo didn't argue, he grinned and said, "Well, that only brings us closer together no?"

After dinner, we took one final drive through the city, stopping two blocks away from the Trevi Fountain. In truth, you can't turn a street corner in Rome without seeing a gorgeous fountain. But the Trevi Fountain was the largest baroque fountain in the city and Feli said we could not; under any circumstance miss out on this breathtaking sight.

The massive fountain was in alignment with a towering building, everything made with aging white marble. In the center was Neptune and at his sides were two fully clothed women and below him were men and horses. Water gushed from the center and flowed down in a stunning waterfall. The sculptures, like every other sculpture I've seen in Rome were crafted in amazing detail and so life-like.

It was late so all underwater lights were on, this feature only enhanced the beauty of this once Roman aqueduct.

"The Trevi Fountain was completed in 1762 as a collaborative effort between many artists," Feliciano announced. The tourists were gone; leaving couples seeking alone time, but Feli kept his voice low so he wouldn't disturb them. "Including Salvi, Bracci, and Pannini. It was also built on the site of an original fountain fed by the Roman Aqueducts just like most of the fountains in the city."

Ludwig placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, "Feli that's enough, Amy please tell him you've learn something."

"Oh yeah," I nodded, "tons."

Feliciano grinned, "What did you learn?"

"Uhhhh," I nibbled on my bottom lip nervously. "I learned. . ." I stepped backwards, "about the San Luigi dei Francesi, the pagan temple and art and culture and stuff."

Everyone was quiet; giving me either amused or annoyed looks. Ludwig sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

There was a silent agreement to spend our last few minutes at the fountain. I made sure to take plenty of photos with the nations, using this structure as the background setting. Once my camera was halfway filled, I sat on the rim of the fountain right at the center, allowing myself to absorb every curve and flex of the sculptures into memory. Because truthfully no matter how many pictures I took, they would never catch the astounding beauty of the Trevi Fountain.

"Legend says if a visitor tosses a coin into the fountain over their shoulder, they are assured to return to Rome someday."

I flinched at Lovino's voice but I kept my cool as I craned my neck up, "neat." Neat? Really, that's all you have to say? I mentally groaned; a part of me was annoyed that Peter and Raivis informed me about Lovino's intentions. It was making me nervous and second guessing everything I was thinking.

Lovino dropped himself beside me, "did you enjoy your time here?" He sounded just as anxious as I felt. I think he believed that he had done something wrong and was trying to maneuver through landmine field.
I instantly hated myself, why should I change how I act with someone over what my friends had said. I didn't feel like I was being pursued by Lovino, not then and certainly not now. Besides, he's Italian; he might not even realize he was flirting.

Clearly, I was making excuses. I should have realized that when Peter and Raivis bothered to warn to me, it was made with genuine concern for my well-being not to play mind games. Unfortunately, I discovered this all too late.

"Yes," I beamed, "I had an amazing time Lovi and I can't wait to see every part of Italy. Venice, Tuscany, Florence and I would really like to see the Island of Sicily." I narrowed my eyes at him playfully, "you better be my tour guide, because if I end up kidnapped I'll make sure to leave a detailed letter for everyone to blame you."

He snorted, "you're kidnapper would have to kill me first."

"I'll still leave the letter. You'll come back to life after a day or so."

He shook his head, "I can't win with you."

"Best to face the truth now," I said.

He gave me a happy, childlike smile as he caressed his thumb over my knuckles.

My insides immediately twisted into a knot. Peter and Raivis's warnings began to echo in my head and I couldn't help but wonder was I flirting back.

That was the last thing I needed.

I jumped to my feet and changed the subject. "Let's see if this legend is true," I dug into my short pockets, searching for a coin.

Lovino beats me to it and hands me a new, shiny euro. I thanked him and tried to act normal but my body didn't want to listen to me. The instant his fingers touched my palm, my nerve endings were on fire as I sucked in a rapid breath for air. I side stepped away from him and tossed the coin over my shoulder.

I was about to suggest that we head back to the villa for we all had planes to catch in the afternoon. His hand on my shoulder stopped my train of thought as he bent low allowing his lips to be mere inches away from my ear.

"This fountain also goes by another name, do you wish to hear?" he whispered. He didn't give me the chance to answer only said in the same soft tone, "la fontana dell'amore."

A shiver ran down my back as his spare hand slid to my cheek and gently tilted my head up to face him. He was so close, that our foreheads were touching and our noses were brushing against each other. My mind drew a blank on what to do, I was completely frozen. My hands were sweating, my legs wobbled and I'd forgotten how my lungs worked.

Lovino leaned in and it was like time slowed, allowing my brain to scream at me: do you want to end up on his list of conquests?!

The memory of the sleepover's drinking game came flooding back into view as Kim carried on with the game.

"Never have I ever. . ." she glanced to Mei, "Slept with either of the Italian brothers."
Mei pouted and swallowed her liquor along with Raquel, Bella, Elizabeta, and Victoria. The girls shared a look, "Romano?" Mei questioned.

They nodded as Bella giggled, "Boss taught him well."

"No!" I shoved him, hard.

All in a blink of an eye, he tripped over the rim and fell backwards into the Trevi Fountain with a splash.

For one dreadful second, everything was quiet. No one said anything as I stood there like a statue with a terrified expression. It took me a minute to gather my wits, "Lovino," I choked, "I'm so, so sorry. I just-just," I stuttered.

His head was low, so all I could see was his wet hair and shaking shoulders. I almost thought he was cold but I quickly realized that he wasn't cold but angry. He jumped to his feet, cursing, "What the fuck! Why?! Why would you-" he groaned as he racked his hands through his hair in frustration. "I thought-I thought-" he groaned again and then glared at me with his fierce golden eyes. "All you had to say was stop not push me into the damn fountain!"

I winced at his harsh tone, "I just freaked, I'm so-"

"I heard you the first time," he hissed. "All you had to say was stop. I would have stopped. . ." his face fell. "Did you think I wouldn't?" I wasn't quick enough to answer and he shouted, "what kind of person do you think I am?! I'm not like that bastard France!"

"Um, I have an objection," Francis tried to defend himself as my eyes shifted around the area, the nations and a few of the couples were watching and I flushed; we were making a scene. I closed my eyes, begging to be anywhere but here.

Lovino cursed at Francis in a mix of Italian and English, "Fatti i fatti tuoi! This has nothing to do with you, idiota!"

I snapped my eyes open, feeling a protective flare burn inside of me. "Well at least he owns up to being a player!" I shouted, "Oh by the way, don't get mad at him because I wouldn't kiss you, that's just sad and pathetic. Oh wait you're Italian, that's pretty much everything you have to offer; that and being a huge man-whore!"

Everyone was dead silent as Lovino's jaw dropped and Gilbert laughed, "This is awesome."

I turned to him, along with everyone else to see him holding up a phone. Antonio narrowed his eyes at him, "are you recording this?"

"Ja," he nodded, "this is YouTube gold right here."

The Spaniard nodded, "oh, really, can I see?" He asked sweetly at first and then snatched the phone from Gilbert's hand and chucked it into the fountain.

The ride back to the villa was quiet and uncomfortable.

When we arrived at the house, Lovino had beaten us; disappearing through the front door the instant Ludwig pulled up into the driveway. Antonio, Matthew, Arthur and Elizabeta were climbing out of
the convertible as my group stepped out of the van.

"Lovino!" Feliciano ran after him.

As if on cue the other nations turned to look at me. I flushed in embarrassment and speed walked around the corner, planning to enter through the backyard.

Elizabeta chased after me, "Amy wait!"

"I don't want to talk about it!" I exclaimed.

"Then just listen. Lovi is not what you think."

I snorted, "I remember the drinking game Liz, he's been with you, Mei, Raquel, Bella, Victoria and who knows how many humans-"

"Only because we came to him," she snapped.

I arched an eyebrow, "is there a difference?"

"Yes, there is." she sighed, "Our relationships . . . they're not stable. Some can make it work but others are like roller coasters, you have your ups and downs and sometimes the ride rails off the tracks to crash and burn.

"Lovino was always the one we ran to when we needed a warm body to sleep with at night." She laughed sullenly to herself, "I was one of those regulars. After a nasty breakup I always ran to him. Lovino never turns any of us away," she paused to look at a flower pot filled with bright purple violets; it must've belonged to Lovino. "He is too sweet to say no. But what makes him truly a catch is that he is loyal."

She turned back to me, "he is faithful to any girl he's with being nation or human. He would comfort a crying woman but he would never betray the one he is with."

"Then why does he have so many? I mean are your relationships that bad?" I asked, with sincere curiously.

She snorted, "Yes. Relationships between nations are already complicated as it is. Then once you add the wars, the years, it drains you."

"But yet you're still with Gilbert."

She shakes her head, her green eyes filled with sadness and knowledge. "I could never shake him off. No matter how many times we curse at one another, fight one another or kill one another. We just can't let the other go."

"That doesn't sound healthy," I proclaimed.

Elizabeta smirked, "that's pretty much all we have."

We stayed quiet for moment, allowing Liz to sort through her thoughts. "Believe me, if I could love Lovi the way he wants me to, I would but-"

"You just don't feel it."

She nodded, "right."
"Does he still love you?" I asked.

"Yes and no. He loves me but he loves the idea of being with me or any other nation. It all boils down to what Feliciano has."

"Ludwig," I connected the dots, "he wants what Feli and Ludwig have."

She nods, "and you've noticed Amy, there are not that many women to go around."

"There are plenty of male nations."

"You've seen how he treats them."

"True." I crossed my arms, "but he seems to like Antonio."

Liz giggled, "Lovi loves Antonio like a brother; he just won't admit it."

I smiled, "sounds like him." Then I inhaled through my nose, "is he chasing me because of the bet?"

"No," she proclaimed, "Lovi would never pursue a girl for something so petty."

"Then what does he want from me?"

She was silent, taking a moment to think. "It is because you're new."

I moaned, "Seriously? We're gonna get back to that nonsense?"

"Now hear me out," she said, "think of the nations as students in a high school."

I gave her a look, "a high school scenario, really?"

Elizabeta narrowed her eyes, giving me a warning. "Could you save your comments for when I am done," her voice was soft but a threatening nature was laced with the tone.

I gulped and nodded.

"Thank you," she smiled smugly and continued. "Well like I said, think of the nations as students in a high school. Everyone has known everyone for years, ever since they were kids. During these years cliques have been made, couples have come and gone while others continue to come running back to each other over and over again.

"Now think of Lovino as a the odd ball-"

"Odd ball? Really?"

"Did I not say to save all comments after I was done," she glared.

"Right, right, sorry," I muttered.

She huffed but continued, "Picture yourself as Lovino, you don't have that many friends and you don't talk much because you are afraid people won't accept you. You may have friends but they're mostly your brother's friends. You may have two friends that like you but deep down you know that they would be fine without you. You have girlfriends but they never stay, always preferring to go back to the assholes that hurt them in the first place." Elizabeta made a face, as if she was mentally kicking her own ass for loving Gilbert.
"Then this new person, being you," she points to me, "transfers to Lovino's school. You have no idea who Lovino is and you certainly don't have any connections to the other students. This would be a fresh start for Lovi. It would be his chance to have someone like him, not tolerate him."

I processed her words and I understood. Lovino was lonely and he sees me as his chance to be his companion. I brushed a hand through my curls; this was all seriously screwed up. Why should all this pressure be thrust upon my shoulders? I have other more important issues to deal with and besides, Lovi sounded like he needed a friend.

Which, I would be more than happy to be but he wanted more. "Liz, what should I do?"

She shrugged, "I can't give you an answer; it's all up you."

I shook my head, "What makes you think I can fix it?"

She glanced to the violets, "because, you have that spark; the kind that brings the dead back to life."

She turned back to me, smiled and walked away, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Elizabeta entrusted me to fix this but she doesn't realized that I'm stubborn. I didn't want think about the situation anymore. I was done; physically and mentally. I dragged myself to the top of the patio and dropped onto the patio couch, staring up into the starlet night sky.

"Alfred if you have any advice, I'm all ears," I whispered to the sky.

I was meant with silence.

Lovino took a quick shower, cursing through the process of bathing, drying and dressing. The same sequence of events continued to plague him. The connection he believed he had made with Amy at the cat sanctuary. Then that damn Baltic and meddling port got in way, causing the American to act differently around him, avoiding him at dinner.

Shockingly Feliciano noticed which boggled Lovino even more than Amy's distance. After he got over the fact that his brother was able to read the atmosphere, for what could've called been a damn miracle. Lovino decided to listen to Feli's advice; taking a huge, massive risk to be romantic.

Unsurprisingly it back-fired; now Amy thought he was a complete asshole or in her words a man-whore, far from being romantic as he could possibly be.

Lovino fell back onto his bed and groaned.

Feliciano sat beside him, "don't beat yourself up Lovi, everyone makes mistakes."

"I should've never listened to you!" he glared.

"Lovi!" an irritating voice sang from the bedroom door.

"Go away!" Lovino threw a pillow at Antonio.

The Spaniard ducked and smiled, "Is that anyway to treat your amazing best friend?"

He shouted, "Mannaggia a te!"

"There's no need to use such language," Antonio tsked his finger.
Lovino sighed; he did owe the tomato bastard. He was the reason that his embarrassment wouldn't be shared with the entire world. "What do you want?"

"There's some freshly picked tomatoes waiting for you in the kitchen." he grinned. "There nice and juicy, just the way you like them."

He turned to walk out of the room but Lovino stopped him, "Wait Antonio." The older nation stopped and turned to him with a shocked expression. Lovino barely ever called Spain by his human name. "For today," Lovino looked away as he blushed, "grazie."

He beamed and tackled Lovino into a hug, "Oh Lovi, you know I would do anything for you!"

"Get off of me!" He tried to shove him away but the Spaniard took his chance to pull Lovino out the bedroom and towards the kitchen.

Where Lovino found no tomatoes, "Spain, what the hell is going on?"

"Oh, nothing much," in one quick move, he opened the door and tossed Lovino outside.

Lovino spun around as the door was slammed close.

"What's going on?" He then turned to his right to find Amy rising from the couch.

Lovino instantly winced and tried to open the door but it was locked. "Bastard! Open this door!"

"Not until you make up with Amy," he smiled through the window.

"What?! No! Open the door, now!"

He stepped back, "nope."

Lovino cursed and sprinted to the front door, it was also locked. He began to slam himself against the wood, but the door would not budge. "What the fuck?!" He ran back to the back door and continued to kick that the entrance.

"Once I get in there," he hissed in Italian and then exclaimed, "I'll break your fucking legs!"

Amy pulled at his arm, dragging him away from the door, "What's happening?!" "They locked us out," Lovino panted.

"What? Why?!"

"They want us to make up."

"Oh god," she groaned and banged her fist on the wood. "Let. Me. In!" When no one answered she turned to Lovino, "Do you like this door?"

He knew what she was asking, "not really."

She gave a wicked grin that made his heart flutter and kicked the door with all her strength. The attack did nothing; the wood wasn't even marked with a scruff. Amy kicked again but still the door would not give. She then began to body slam herself against the entrance, "I'm," slam, "going," slam, "to," slam, "kill." slam, "them!" Slam.

She placed her hands on her knees, gasping for air, "okay that door should've been in pieces by
"We knew this, that's why there's enchantment on the house," Arthur explained from the window. "The spell will break once Ms. Hungary believes you've learn your lesson."

"This was all Liz's idea?" Lovino exclaimed.

He nodded, "yes."

Amy's eyebrows fell forward, "and you went along with it?"

"She is very persuasive."

"She threatened you didn't see," Lovino stated.

Arthur ignored him and focused his attention to Amy, "the only way you can come back inside is to patch things up."

"Fine," she grumbled and turned to the Italian, "I'm sorry. There, Liz, are you happy now?"

Elizabeta stepped forward, "that didn't sound like you mean it."

She groaned, "What do you want from me!"

"You already know," the older girl smiled as she and Arthur walked out of the kitchen.

Amy tried for the door again, twisting at the knob, "Elizabeta! Arthur!" When they ignored her, she glanced to one of the patio chairs and back at the window. "Do you like that window?" she asked Lovino.

"No," he answered bluntly.

"Good," she lifted the chair over her head, "move."

Lovino stepped back as she threw the chair against the glass. The chair bounced back and Lovino jumped to cover Amy as they both ducked. The chair flew over their heads and crashed against the brick patio wall.

He stared at the window, glanced to the chair and then to Amy. He muttered "that damn British bastard."

Twenty minutes passed and Lovino and I were still locked out of the house. This enchantment had completely covered the villa, being doors and windows. I grumbled a long string of curses as I hoped, no prayed for Arthur's spell to bite him in the ass; locking him and everyone else inside. Then the villa should screw with them like the mansion did back in Vienna.

I was sitting by the pool, soaking my legs in the cool water and staring at the glowing liquid. The pool lights were on, allowing us to see through the darkness. The villa was quiet, no movement or sound was made. Lovino was on the steps, with his back against the wall and his face hidden in his hand. We haven't spoken to each other since my failed attempt to break the window.

He also hasn't spoke to me or even looked in my general direction. The entire situation was awkward and I didn't think either of us knew what to do or say. My mind was quick to remind me about
Elizabeta and her nation/high school analogy; which only brought forth the thought of the nations at school, wearing uniforms, taking exams and playing sports or taking drama. Then I'm reminded of their personality traits and antics and instantly shook my head; sounded like a failed Fox TV show.

I looked back to Lovino, only to catch him gazing at me. He jumped, mumbled something that could have been an apology and rose to walk up the stairs.

I tried to chase after him, "Lovi, wait-" the moment I pulled my legs out of the pool. I ended up tripping and falling back in with a squeal.

When I came up coughing for air, Lovino was standing over me, laughing. "Ha, I get wet, you get wet. It's karma no?"

I glared but I quickly forgot his jeers, "Okay, okay, now help me up." I held out my hand and he immediately grabbed it. I grinned and yanked him in. He yelped like a girl.

Now it was my turn to laugh, "I can't believe you fell for that. I mean that's like the oldest trick in the book."

He narrowed his eyes and splashed me, "shut up."

I held my arms up to cover myself but I was still grinning. "Don't be mad old man."

"Old man?" He gave me a look.

"Do you need me to repeat?" I smirked, "the hearing is the first to go, you know."

He slapped his hands over the water to splash me but I jumped back. "Are you tired Mr. Vargas? You really shouldn't stay up so late, it's bad for your health."

His left eye twitched, "call me old one more time, see what happens."

"I ain't afraid of you, grandpa."

Lovino leaped at me and I dived into the deep end. He chased after me but I was too fast for him. I tread circles around him, "oh what's this? Can't keep up? I'm too quick for ya huh?" I mocked.

My taunting didn't last long. Lovino snatched my arm and jerked me close so my back would collide into his chest. He leaned in low, his lips finding my ear again, "you talk too much."

The tone of his voice was smooth and soft as he loosened his grip and turned me around to face him. My arms tingled as if every nerve ending was on fire and his hand on my elbow wasn't helping. I avoided his eyes, deciding to look everywhere but him. My anxiety was building; my thoughts were running a mile a minute. Mostly, my head was filled with questions on what I should do and how I should handle this situation without hurting him. Before I could take any sort of action, Lovino brushed aside a stand from my face and tucked it behind the ear. I stiffen, taking in slow and steady breaths. My heart on the other hand was ramming against my rib cage.

Then he caressed my jaw with his thumb, lifting my chin up so I would have no choice but to look at him. His gold eyes found my blue as he bent down, allowing our foreheads to touch. "You're blushing," he grinned.

I shoved him away, treading water till my back hit the wall, putting at least four feet of distance between us. "You're an ass." I growled and crossed my arms over my chest.
Lovino's grin fell, his face taking on the resemblance of a wounded puppy. I bit my bottom lip, feeling guilty. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that; and for pushing you into the fountain and then calling you a man-whore that was uncalled for."

He sighed, "No, I'm sorry." he whispered loud enough for me to hear. "I should have never forced myself on you."

"I wouldn't say force," I stated.

"But you acted like I did."

"I was caught off guard," I exclaimed. "I just," I paused, taking a deep breath, "I don't know what to do."

"You never kissed anyone before?" he asked this with an amused smirk.

I narrowed my eyes at him, "I have kissed other people, but I'm not talking about that." I sighed, "What do you want from me Lovino? Because, if you're only interested in me just to prove a point to the other nations. You can just-"

"I would never do that," he said calmly. "I've been used by people before," he looked at me with an unwavering gaze. "It hurts, and I made a promise to myself that I would never put a person through that kind of pain."

"But you still love them," I said, remembering what Elizabeta said, "Even when they hurt you."

He sighed deeply, "It's complicated."

It was now Lovino's turn to avoid eye contact with me as it was mine to gaze at him. Water was dripping from his brunette locks, down his cheek to his tanned torso. His shirt was tight over his chest, revealing his slim but yet muscular build.

I flushed when Lovino caught me checking him out. He gave a confident smile as I said the first thing that came to my mind. "Why me? Is it because I'm the new student?"

"Student?" his brows dropped forward in puzzlement.

I slapped my forehead, "I mean the new nation, technically, somewhat-uhhhhh! You like me because I'm new right? But is that the only reason? Because if it is; it's shallow."

His face fell as his shoulders slumped, "you're right, it is shallow and also very selfish." He closed his eyes for a moment, "but just as Britain said, you don't know what we have done."

"You were listening?"

"Si," he sighed, "and if you think that what he did to your natives was bad." He shook his head as a sad smile spread over his face. "He's done much worse . . . but we all have done things, things that left us in our own personal hell."

He looked up to me, his gaze filled with pain. "Sometimes it's difficult to pull yourself out of the abyss and if you can it still wouldn't matter, it lingers. Even in the light, the darkness just becomes your shadow."

"Lovi, I'm not innocent," I proclaimed.

"Compared to us, you are."
I remained quiet as he continued, "You have not experienced hardship, you have only lived in the sunlight and I think that's the reason why I want to be close to you." His eyes soften, "I also like the way you think and how easy it is for you to smile."

Lovino brushed a hand through his locks, "I just wish that I could join you, to be with you in that light." He rubbed his eyes, taking in a deep breath, "stupid I know-"

"It's not stupid," I swam forward and pulled him into a hug. I nuzzled my face into the nook of his neck, "I get it."

Lovino inhaled through his nose deeply, second guessing himself if he should even hold me. I squeezed him, granting him permission to do so. He wrapped his arms around my waist and leaned his cheek against my head. I turned and gave a friendly peck on his cheek. He froze and looked at me with a surprised expression.

Though, his expression didn't last as he moved in to brush his lips against the corner of my mouth. "Please," Lovino whispered, "please, just one kiss."

I took in a rapid breath of air and nodded, not trusting my own voice. I closed my eyes as he held my face and caressed his lips against mine. His kiss was sensual and chaste, coaxing me to relax. I curled my fingers into the back of his shirt as he teased my bottom lip with the tip of his tongue. The newly discovered sensation caused me to flinch back. Lovino noticed, eased back to lean our foreheads together and soothed me with sweet words in his native language. My flushed cheeks burned as I hid my face into his shoulder, taking comfort in his presence.
I was following a young girl dressed in black. She was small and slim with brown hair tucked under a white cap.

We were running, she had to keep hiking up her long skirt just to sprint but still she was faster than me. She pulled me by the hand, hissing at me to keep up. I was shorter than her, my height only came to her chest but I had the advantage of pants.

But deep down I knew that no matter where we go, she would find us.

The brunette yanked me towards a tree with a gaping hole in the trunk. She shoved me inside and instructed, "Stay here!"

"But-

She pushed me back down, "She's after you, not me." Her brown eyes softened, "please just stay here, I'll be right back." With those final words, she turned and ran in the opposite direction.

My knees buckled due to exhaustion as I collapsed into the mud. My small hands were trembling and tears were threatening to spill from my eyes. I curled myself into a ball, raking my hands through my hair, trying to make sense of this world that I have entered.

A girl screamed in the distance, breaking me from my thoughts. I leaped to my feet and shouted, "Sarah!"

I chased after her screams, desperately yelling for her as I weaved around trees. When I came into the clearing along the cliff's edge. I scanned the area and found Sarah on the ground. I slid to her side and shook her by the shoulders, "Sarah! Sarah are you okay?"

"Get away from her!" I whipped my head around to find Sarah shouting, "It's a trap!"

Before I could process the situation, the mystery girl clutched my throat and shoved me to the ground. She pressed her knee into my hip and tightened her hold on me. This young girl had pale skin with black hair and eyes. Her hair was freed from her cap and bun, allowing the locks to cascade down in wild waves.

She smiled as her dark eyes glowed red, "are you ready to have some fun?"

I tried to push her off but she summoned her specters. These dark mist like creatures wrapped themselves around my wrists and ankles, leaving me defenseless under her. She pulled out a knife from her white apron pocket and started to chant in a foreign language I couldn't place.

Sarah tackled her to the ground, gripping her hands together. The specters hissed as one released my ankles and hooked itself as a noose around Sarah's shoulder. The specter threw her aside and circled around its mistress protectively.

The dark haired girl narrowed her still glowing red eyes, "that one, you can eat."

The specters dive for her as I cried, "No!"

Sarah threw up her hands, creating a violet shield around herself. "You're not the only one that knows magick, Abigail."
She cursed, “Tituba taught you?”

“She was more than happy to,” Sarah proclaimed. "You did throw her to the council when she refused to teach you stronger spells."

"But she taught you?! A farmer's daughter?!

Sarah glared, "Tituba saw in me what you didn’t have. Her hands sparked with purple flames as she hauled this colorful fire at the specter around my wrists.

The phantom hissed in agony as it was absorbed by the fire; but this heat never once burned my hands. "I have compassion for others, unlike you."

Abigail laughed, "Compassion? I prefer power."

"Yet my magick is stronger," Sarah smirked, "Well, isn't this quite a predicament?"

Abigail's eyes blazed a darker shade of crimson as she screeched, "Die!" A bright scarlet flame formed in her palm as she shoots it towards Sarah.

She tried to dodge but the fire grazed her midsection, burning away her clothes and flesh. In an instant, a specter following Abigail’s command rises and stabs itself clean through Sarah's chest.

I screamed out for her as she fell back. Blood leaked from her mouth and chest, staining her own white apron with drops of scarlet.

Abigail moves towards me, "come here," she beckons me.

I tried to crawl away but she yanks me back, using the invisible power of her mind. The same power that sent nineteen innocent people to the gallows. Abigail narrowed her power hungry eyes at me, analyzing me, "is this all you can do? I thought your kind would be more of a challenge."

She sighed, dismissing the thought and placed the blade of her knife against my throat. "Now, where were we?"

Before Abigail could recite her spell, Sarah came from behind and whacked Abigail with a fallen branch. The red eyed girl yelped and turned her focus on Sarah, but Sarah was too quick. She thrusts her hands out, sending her own blast of invisible waves at Abigail.

She flies across the field landing only mere inches away from the cliff's edge.

Sarah falls to her knees, breathing heavily as I supported her. "Are you alright," I asked in a meek tone.

She nodded as she held her chest. In the distance we heard the treading of men; church men searching for Abigail. Sarah turned to that said girl, "they're coming Abigail, they're coming for you."

She clutched her jaw as her eyes shifted from side to side, seeking an escape.

Sarah raised her red stained hand to the eleven year old girl, "It's not too late. You can come back, just confess."

"No!" she yelled, "You may be happy with living under their thumbs, living under their whims but I refuse! I've tasted power and I. Want. More." She took a step back and disappeared over the edge.
Sarah and I gasped. All we heard was the whistling of the wind and the thrashing of the waves below. There were no screams or cracking of bones, just the cry of seagulls in the distance.

Before I could even process these events, my eyes immediately turned to Sarah, who was bleeding heavily from her chest wound. "Sarah!" I held her closer, "hang on they're coming." I craned my neck up for the men, "Over here! Hurry! Please!"

Sarah slowly lifted her bloody hand and caressed my cheek, wiping away my tears. I hadn't even realized I was crying. "There, there," she whispered. "You're safe now . . ."

"Don't speak," I begged, "save your strength."

She coughed, choking on her own blood till she spat it out. "Alfred . . ." She whimpered.

"Don't speak!" I hissed, "You'll live from this! I know you will, you have to. Please Sarah," I sobbed, "I cannot lose you. Please live . . . if not for me then for Elizabeth. Think of your sister!"

Her mouth trembled as she said, "I'm sorry. . ." Her eyes grew dull as the light vanished and her breathing finally ceased.

"Sarah?" I shook her, gently at first. "Sarah?!" I yanked at her sleeves, "Sarah! No!" I sobbed even harder, "Wake up! Sarah, wake up!"

"Sarah!"

I jumped, panting as I subconsciously touched my chest, dreading a discovery of a stab wound. When I found nothing but my soggy, wrinkled shirt and cold, sweaty skin I sighed and tried to stop my hands from shaking.

Lovino stirred and propped himself up, "Amy," he whispered uncertainly. He gently placed a hand on my shoulder and I flinched at the contact. He pulled back his hand slightly, "What's wrong?"

I glanced to him, his hair was in disarray but yet adorable, which was not fair. My curls were a frizzy wild mess and I was pretty sure it looked like a bird's nest and the humidity was not helping. At least his clothes were just as wrinkled and soggy as mine; due to the fact that we slept outside on the patio couch. Surprisingly, the enchantment hadn't worn off; note the sarcasm.

I sighed, "It's nothing Lovi."

"Nothing?" he cocked a brow at me, skeptically, "You were moaning in your sleep and it wasn't the good kind."

I gave a short laugh at his small joke but it didn't last. "Don't worry Lovi it was just a bad dream. They don't mean anything."

I didn't notice that my hands were still shaking till Lovino wrapped his around mine and kissed my fingers. "They look like they mean something." He intertwined his fingers with mine as he looked up, "it helps to talk."

I closed my eyes and pulled my hands away, "I don't remember." It wasn't like I was lying. Every time I tried to picture the scene of the cliffs or the faces of Abigail or Sarah, they blurred. The longer I was awake, the harder it was to remember.
I heard him sigh but he didn't push the subject any further. I side glanced to him, he was scratching the back of his head, carrying a look of annoyance but his eyes were filled with concern.

"Lovino," I placed a hand on his to comfort him. "I really don't remember. If I did, I would tell you," now that was a lie.

He sighed once again and leaned himself against me. I swallowed my nerves as I felt his breath on my neck and his nose on my cheek. His closeness brought back the events from last night; our intimate time in the pool, the embrace we shared and the kiss.

I felt my ears and cheeks burn at the thought. What was I supposed to do now? Was I ready for this relationship? If I had to be honest, no.

My mind was a whirlwind of emotions. I was happy that I was special to Lovino and excited to know that he was attracted to me and that he wasn't pursuing me for bragging rights. But I was also anxious and stressed, anxious to the idea of having a relationship where clearly, I had issues to work out. Stressed, because Elizabeta expected me to save him from his loneliness.

Was that a reason to be with someone, just because their lonely? That didn't seem fair to Lovino or to anyone for that matter.

Mom's words of advice came in like a flood.

"You should date someone because you want to, not because you feel obliged to."

"Amy, you don't owe a boy anything, never feel like you do."

"Don't let anyone try and pressure you into doing something you don't want to do."

Her advice always ended up at the same conclusion.

I inhaled a calming breath, I needed make myself clear. "Lovi, about last night-"

"Nothing good comes after that." He said this in a playful tone but I could tell he was preparing himself.

I decided it was best not to stall, "Lovino, I like you but I'm just not ready for a relationship. I'm going through some changes and I still need get my bearings. I know, it's been months, I should be used to it already but I just-sometimes-I still need to wrap my head around a situation. And it's not like this happened once or twice, this happens every fucking week-" At this point I was running my words together and forgetting to breathe.

I was light headed but I continued to rant till Lovino grabbed my shoulders and said in a calm voice. "Amy, breathe."

I inhaled deeply through my nose, "thanks, I needed that."

He gave an amused smile, "where did all this pressure come from?"

"Liz," I confessed, "she wants me to be what she couldn't be for you."

He sighed, "Oh Liz."

"She really cares about you," I proclaimed.

He didn't say anything, instead he gently lifted my chin up to meet his eyes. "If Liz didn't lock us out
of the villa, would you have forgiven me?"

I nodded, "yes," and it was the truth. I cared about Lovino but having a relationship with him means letting him in. He had already opened himself up to me about his insecurities. I, on the other hand barely scratched the surface and truthfully, I didn't see myself going any deeper. I mean, if I wasn't comfortable enough to share my nightmares; how was I supposed to explain everything else. The night of the sleepover, the girls and I agreed not to speak of it ever again and I was thankful. The nations assumed that the whole nunasish business began and ended with the Ouija board but I had a feeling it started way before that and it wasn't over, not by a long shot.

I was getting a headache just thinking about it, but one thing was certain, I couldn't drag him into this. Hell, I don't think I could drag anyone into this fucked up mess I called a life. Was that the reason why I haven't told anyone about this? I haven't even confided to my family or friends. Maybe it was because they were half way across the world or I was afraid that they would get hurt or maybe I thought I could fix it on my own. Whatever the reason, I wasn't comfortable enough to let anyone know what was going on with me.

After I answered, Lovino did something I did not expect. He grinned, "Then that gives me a chance."

I blinked in surprise, "Huh?"

His grin widens, "we live a long time Amy, sooner or later you will fall for my charms."

I laughed, "Can we try and be friends first?"

He smirked, "it all depends on you." He gestured to himself, "Can you resist this?"

I laughed harder, "Oh, someone's self-centered. Just so you know I've resisted several foreign fellas and they were hot. I've turned down French guys, Italian guys and even the sexy Brazilians."

He narrowed his eyes at me, playfully, "are you saying that I'm not hot or sexy?"

"Oh no sweetie you're cute," I used the word to mock him. "I'm just saying you need to bring you're A-game."

In one swift move, he grabbed my face and kissed me. He pulled back and grinned, "How was that for an A-game?"

I blushed but still gave him a look, "you've won this round."

"Aww," we both jumped to sound of a new voice. It was Antonio and he was watching us with a happy grin on his face. "Does this mean we have a new couple?"

Lovino rose to his feet and cracked his knuckles, "you're a dead man."

Antonio inched back, "Lovi why do you look so angry?"

"You locked me out of my own house!"

"I see, well, I'll give you a few minutes to calm down," he looked to the door but Lovino slammed it shut.

"Oh I'll calm down by beating on your stupid face!"

Antonio figured that talking was no longer an option for him and jumped the wall. He sprinted across
the yard as Lovino chased after him, shouting, "Get back here you fucking coward!"

"How can they be this lively in the morning," Arthur yawned and I glared at him. "What?"

"Your spell didn't wear off," I hissed. "We had to sleep outside while the mosquitoes ate us alive."

He crossed his arms, "the enchantment should've worn off after a few hours."

I scratched my arms and legs, bringing up the mosquito bites only reminded me of the annoying inch.

"Well it didn't."

He sighed and whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Hm," I had heard him but I wanted him to say it again.

He glared, "you heard me." He threw a tube at me and exclaimed, "Now go take shower, you smell like a wet dog."

He walked back into the house as I glanced to the tube, it was ointment. I smiled in spite of myself. *He's a jerk, but he's my jerk.* "Love you too Arthur," I whispered.

The rest of the morning was spent with packing and arranging our plane flights. Elizabeta had found out that her house was termite free and was able to go back home. The nations also needed to return back to work, for a world meeting was just around the corner. Ludwig was determined to get be back on my training schedule before then. Peter on the other hand, had family waiting for him.

"Papa and Dad really want me home, they said I've been gone for too long," said Peter.

We were at the airport now, waiting for our flights to board. I gave him a wide-eyed look, "Papa and Dad? You were raised by a gay couple?"

He nodded, "And I'm not gay; shocking right."

"Give it time," Gilbert sang as he sat behind us with his back in front.

I smacked him over his head and I turned back to Peter, "who are your parents if you don't mind me asking."

Peter cocked a brow, "You met them, Berwald Oxenstierna and Tino Väinämöinen." Then he lowered his voice, "Sweden and Finland."

"They raised you? But I thought you were Arthur's port?"

"I was till he forgot about me and my people and just left us in the middle of the ocean without any supplies."

"Damn, that's a dick move."

He nodded in agreement, "anyway some time passed and I decided to sell myself on eBay."

I arched an eyebrow, "okay, that could've gone bad in so many ways."

"But it didn't," he grinned, "Papa bought me, Berwald I mean. He took me in and Tino was more
than happy to play house. Even though around that time I was almost fifty, I had the appearance of a
twelve year old." His blue eyes dulled as he stared off towards Arthur who was chatting with Francis
and Matthew. "Arthur wasn't keen on affection so to be around those two that had so much love to
give was at first strange."

He turned back to me with a small smile on his face, "Then add Mikkel, Lucas and Erik into the
equation and it just became even stranger. They were so open with their emotions and unlike the
Kirkland family they displayed their affection to one another. It was all so bizarre to me and sad that I
didn't even understand the emotion."

We were silent till he grinned, "Actually the Nordics are a lot like your family."

"Crazy?" I joked.

He laughed, "I don't know about that, your family is pretty normal."

"Really? My family took me in the nation of America and didn't bat an eye to what I was. My
grandpa saw Alfred's ghost as he gave me to him and didn't question it. My parents, siblings, their
spouses and their children accepted the fact that I was some kind of immortal being without
complaint. My friends never cared and they along with my family would've fight against the world,
literally to have me in their lives. Then there is Blake the miracle child. Yeah, they're all there." I
pointed to my head, "totally sane."

He grinned as the intercom announced, "Flight thirty-eight now boarding."

"That's us," Raivis said as he handed my iPod and headphones to me.

"You finished?" I asked.

"No," he sighed, "you have a lot of music."

I gave a proud smile, "This amazing collection took me years and I hope you realize that me letting
you borrow my iPod is a great honor." I cuddled the device close to my face, "It's my baby."

He smiled sweetly and we hug each other goodbye. "Remember make your iTunes account so I
could send you the playlist."

"I know, can you also send me some of your jazz collection."

I smirked, "ah, we got a cool cat here."

"I think I'm the opposite of a cool cat, especially when I need you to catch me up on current music."

"You know the twenties slang?"

"Toris told us some of the meanings when he came back from America."

"Wait he lived with Alfred during the twenties?"

Before he could answer, Peter grabbed his arm, "Raivis we gotta go."

He nodded as the boys waved goodbye and ran towards the boarding deck.
Later when I was in the restroom stall, a woman walked in talking on her phone. I know that this wasn't so uncommon but what caused me to freeze and hold my breath at the same time was the fact that the woman behind the stall door was Elizabeta.

"So they are not together?" a voice from the other line asked. A voice that I recognized was Bella.

"No," Elizabeta sighed, "I really thought last night would've worked. Even Antonio believes that we had a new couple, but it's Amy. She backed out before it even started."

"We still have the world meeting to look forward to, Lovi will be there and India is beautiful. With the right timing and atmosphere, we will have her saying, yes."

"Right."

I slammed the door open, "ahem."

She jumped and spun to face me with a nervous smile on her face. "Amy, how long have you been there?"

"Long enough," I strutted forward and grabbed her phone. "She'll call you back." I pressed the end call button and shoved the phone back to her.

"You really shouldn't glare, it leaves wrinkles."

"We're immortal," I said in a harsh tone. "I believe I can glare as much as I want." I inhaled calmly, trying to lessen my temper. "What the hell Liz? Last night was all planned?!

"To be fair, last night was an impulse," she proclaimed.

I rolled my eyes, "How long were you playing match maker?"

She shrugged, "I wouldn't say that. I was more like a record keeper."

"Till last night," I proclaimed.

"Till last night," she agreed.

I massaged my temple, "okay, I already have two match makers in my life, I do not need a third. So back off."

"I'm only trying to help-"


Her eyes widened in shock but she quickly reclaimed her composure. "I'm afraid you're mistaken."

"No, I'm not. The only reason you want me and Lovino to be together is so it can lessen your guilt." I stepped forward, holding my head high. "I'm not a puppet Liz, you can't make me be Lovino's girlfriend just because you couldn't be his."

She stayed quiet, which I took as my chance to continue. "It's not fair to Lovi, like you said he needs someone that likes him."

"Are you saying you don't?"

"I do, but not like this. I'm not ready for a relationship, I need some time for myself."
"Still-"
"Yes, still! I need to know myself before I could get involved with someone else."

She arched a brow, "what exactly do you need to figure out? You've spent eighteen years with yourself."

"As a human!" I exclaimed. "How long will that take to sink into your fucking skulls. I identified myself as a human, I planned my life as a human." I took a deep breath, "I know it's been six months, I should just drink the Kool-Aid and join ya'll, but I need time to figure out who I am as America. Can you understand that?"

She closed her eyes and leaned against the sink, "Yes." She raised her chin up, "I think I might be one of the few people that can understand what you are going through."

"You mean about being raised as a boy," I sat myself on the counter beside her.

Elizabeta smiled and I said, "It must've been quite a shock. But didn't you notice the differences?"

"I was pretty gullible. I believed what my leaders told me, that my penis would grow in."

I laughed, "Seriously?"

"I was young, I didn't know any better." She shrugged, "I didn't really question it till I grew these," she held her breasts out.

I chuckled, "I'm sure that raised plenty of questions."

She nodded, "I understand why they did it. They were afraid because I was a woman, the other nations would see me as an easy target."

"Easy target?" I blinked in disbelief, "I've seen you fight Liz, you are a badass."

She grinned, "All those years of my people treating me like a boy really did pay off. They made me into a warrior, a nation that wouldn't be so easily underestimated." Her smile faded as she stared off in the distance, probably reminiscing in a time much different from mine.

"That's the thing Liz, you know who you are as a nation," I pulled her attention back to me. "I don't."

"Well, how are you going to know who America is when you cling to Amy," her voice was steady and wise.

I chewed on my lip, "aren't they the same?"

Her eyes grew sad, "yes and no. There are moments when you need to shed your humanity to be a country, but humanity is what makes you a nation." She laughed bitterly, "this has been the eternal debate for us, but there is one thing we can agree on, both are needed but at moments it's best to keep them separate."

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Elizabeta's words continued to haunt me as I said my goodbyes to the others and boarded my plane back to Berlin. The weeks of training that followed didn't push away the thoughts, it seemed to only make my brain work over time. As Elizabeta's words repeated the phrases of humanity and nation, it
brought forth the memories of Paris and my transformation into a killing machine. The sensation of numbness spreading through my body, allowing me to feel nothing.

Was that what it felt like to strip yourself of humanity?

It wasn't long till Elizabeta's speech was mixed in with Lovino's. The light and the dark in every nation. The light I supposedly live in while his darkness became a shadow that hovers over him. Then to Elizabeta's claim of me saving him from his darkness.

How can that be done? What was the first step?

Again, this reminded me of Alfred's comment about the darkness that lingers in every nation and how he wished for me to share my happiness; was that my light?

The image of Arthur enters next, his face shedding tears as he confessed to me about his past. Yet, according to Lovino, it was only a sliver that he had done much worse. That all the nations have done much worse.

"Even in the light, the darkness only becomes your shadow."

"I'm a monster."

"But who are truly gods? And who are truly monsters? Or could we be both?" 

The memory of the Aberration named Kakwatt completely stunned me. Stopping my fist from making contact to the punching bag. His battered head/body took form in my mind, showing me my handy work. His blood was splattered over his tattered figure that I had personally tore, stabbed and ripped to pieces.

My knees buckled and collapsed to the ground. I curled my fingers into the thick fabric of the bag as the red skinned alien continued to taunt me with his words. Followed by what Lovi said about his grandfather being treated as a god, just as Karen was.

Monsters or gods . . . what were we?

I found my shadow through the limelight of the basement. I stared at it, seeking clues to myself.

"Did I say you can take a break?"

I snapped my head up to meet with Ludwig's glare. "Sorry," I mumbled as I rose to my feet and slammed my tightly clutched fist into the sand filled bag.

I was quiet at dinner, mostly listening to Ludwig's plans of how we would travel to Delhi, India. He explained which plane we will take, which hotel we were be staying at, etc. I nodded along and pushed my food around with my fork.

My behavior must've worried them, for Gilbert asked, "Amy, are you okay?"

His question snapped me back to reality but only for a few minutes. "Yeah," I proclaimed in a monotone. "I'm just tired, can I go to bed?"

Ludwig frowned, I could tell he was concern about me but he just couldn't understand why and I think that's what bothered him the most. None the less, he excused me and I walked out of the room.
He didn't even complain that I had left my dirty plate on the table.

Before I climbed the stair case I was able to catch Gilbert hissing at Ludwig, "What did you do now?"

"What makes you think it was me?"

Their voices died out as I entered my room, which was recently installed with a brand new door. Once I was inside I collapsed into my comforter. I didn't have the energy to change out of work out attire, all I wanted to do was curl up and disappear into the world of dreams. But my mind would not rest, continuing to plague me with the same thoughts as if on repeat.

I groaned and sat up, rubbing my eyes in frustration. I looked up to the ceiling, "any advice Alfred?"

Again, I was met with silence.

I cursed, "Asshole."

I fell back onto my pillows and flipped onto my side, coming face to face with Grandpa's journal.

Later on, July 18, 1957

I don't know when I fell asleep, all I remembered was Alfred lifting me into his arms and sliding me into the back seat. I tried to stay aware of Alfred and his companions but my exhaustion won in the end and before long I was out cold.

I woke up in my bed in our rented house in Titusville. My head was pounding and my body was drained of energy. I touched my newly bandaged scalp. It was wrapped with clean white lines and under those wraps were taped pads that were pressed against my cuts.

I avoided looking at any mirrors as I walked through the house, calling out to Alfred. All I found was a note, stating that he was in a meeting and was planning on seeing the others off afterwards. He will be back later in the afternoon and instructed me to redress my wounds.

The first aid kit was in the bathroom and I was then forced to see my reflection. I had a dark shadow around my left eye, with a fresh cut above the lid, most likely Alfred bleed me to ease the swelling. My lip was split, bruises were forming on my shoulders and by the sore, stiffness of my body I was pretty sure I was covered in them. Along with deep graze cuts that slid across my rib cage, arms and legs. I peeled back these patches to find clean black stitches.

But that didn't bother me.

I've been in my fair share of fights and I was no stranger to stitches.

What really bothered me was my hair, or lack of hair.

Someone, obviously Alfred, had shaved my head leaving nothing but black peach fuzz. Angry scarlet sores and slashes were scattered across my scalp, they were disorganize and chaotic.

The images of those Klan men blinded my sight with red-hot anger and hatred to match.

I found myself hissing at the mirror, repeating one phrase. "Those bastards. . ." at first it started as a whisper as I brushed a hand over my head and hissed in pain when the wounds screeched. "Those
"bastards," I stated as my reflection bore into me. Every second that passed the image of my old self faded as this new one told the truth.

They humiliated me.

They took away what made me Hupa and Miwok.

They took away a connection I had to my past, my family and my tribe.

"Those bastards!"

The next thing I knew my fist was slammed into the glass, leaving it cracked and broken. I looked to my reflection again; my eyes were dark and crazed, my teeth were beard as I panted and fresh blood was dripping from my knuckles.

At that moment I wanted to kill those men; make them less as a man as they made me. I began to wish that I had scalped them, that I shouldn't have listened to some stupid mating call that could been a damn crow for all I knew.

A knock from the front door interrupted the flow of my thoughts. I chose to ignore it and wait for them to leave but the knocking would not stop.

I stride towards the door, swung it open and screamed, "What?!"

I was met with four startled expressions. It was the group of children that I had met two days ago.

I froze; I literally didn't move or say anything. I just stood there with my jaw hanging and my eyes wide.

Walter was the first to act, "James get my mom."

James tore his gaze from me to him and sprinted across the street, crying out, "Mrs. Landry! Mrs. Landry!

A tall, slim woman ran out of a house as James pulled on her wrist and pointed to me. This woman turned to him and then to me. She struts forward, taking on the image of a female lynx that found an intruder crossing into her territory and threatening her cubs.

In one swift, professional move she grabbed my chin and turned my head to the side. She analyzed my wounds and asked, "You don't need any stitches but it's best to cover these. Do you have a first aid kit?"

"Uh-uh-uh," I blinked, clearing my vision and my mind. "The bathroom."

She gestured to her son to fetch the kit as she guided me to the kitchen and bended me over the sink. I was able to catch the children in the corner of my eye, standing around nervously as they took in their surroundings.

Before I could question anything on what she was doing. She twisted the knob and water blasted out of the faucet. I hissed as the cold water made contact.

"Keep your eyes closed," she instructed.

I did what I was told as she poured alcohol peroxide over my head. I gripped the counter and gritted my teeth, "fuck."
She smacked my shoulder, “watch your mouth, there are children here.”

"Sorry," I muttered.

She then draped a towel over my head and sat me in a chair. She patted my scalp and face dry with gentle hands as Walter set out bandages for her. She began to place pads against the sores and wrap them in tight and firm. I stayed quiet and avoided eye contact with everyone in the room.

Audrey came forward and held my wounded hand, "does it still hurt?"

I looked into this small girl's eyes, they were big, brown and doe like. Those innocent eyes bore into me with such concern I was defenseless against it. I curled my fingers around her palm, "I'm okay," I gave a tiny ghost of a smile.

"Did he do it? The white man?" Devin asked.

"Devin." Mrs. Landry tsked her finger at him and I spoke up, "no, it wasn't." My shoulders slumped slightly as the relief I felt coaxed me to relax. "Alfred saved me."

"Is that his name?" James asked.

"Yes."

"And you live with him?" Devin questioned, "Are you his slave?"

"Boy, do you want me to call your mamma?" Mrs. Landry snapped and pointed to the phone on the wall. "Because I will."

Devin shook his head and hid behind the wall to escape her wrath.

"No, I'm his assistant, he works for the government," I explained.

Mrs. Landry finished my head and moved on to my hand. "This looks fresh," she stated.

"I punched the mirror in the bathroom," she narrowed her eyes at me and I looked away.

"You know that's seven years bad luck right?" said Walter.

I smirked, "yes, I know."

Mrs. Landry stretched my fingers up and I ground my teeth together in annoyance. She then bended them down, "seeming that you ain't screaming in agony, your hand isn't broken, just bruised."

"Good to know," I watched as she patted a peroxide-soaked towel over my split knuckles.

Once she done, she crossed her arms, "Now, how did this, Alfred save you?"

The truth didn't seem practical, especially when I witnessed Alfred rising to his feet after a gunshot to the head. Besides, the best lie always carried some truth. "I was attacked by two Klansmen."

Mrs. Landry flinched as the children paled, as if I told them that I met the boogeyman.

"I was gonna be dragged to their meeting till Alfred stopped them." I stared at the floor, "he saved my life."

"Aw shucks, Johnny you making me blush."
I snapped my head up to find Alfred in the doorway. Devin and James immediately ran to hide behind Mrs. Landry as Walter placed an arm in front of Audrey protectively.

Alfred was either oblivious to their fear or chose to ignore it. He grinned, it was the same childlike smile he always wore. "Ya'll gonna stay for dinner? I make a mean gumbo."

Mrs. Landry squared her shoulders, "No sir, I already have dinner ready for my family."

"Then tomorrow, that's the last day we're gonna be here." His blue eyes shined with a playful tint. "We can have a barbeque and invite the neighborhood while we're at it."

She blinked, completely taken back. "We'll think about it." She gestured the children out the door and gave us a polite goodbye.

Alfred looked at the closed door for a long time till he turned back to me. His smile was gone and his eyes lost their shine. "Are you alright?"

I nodded, arguing with myself on what to say to him. The question was, where do I start? I decided to thank him. "Alfred." He looked to me with dull eyes, "thank-"

"Don't thank me," he sat himself on the couch, "not until you know the full story."

"What do I need to know? You saved me, Arthur-"

He snorted, "Did you forget the part where I almost set them on fire?"

I did remember and I didn't understand what had happen to Alfred. "What was that? It was like you were a different person."

He removed his glasses, rubbing his face, "I was." I moved to a chair in the living room, waiting for him to continue. "When I'm around a large group of people that think alike, they begin to influence me. Sometimes I can ignore it, other times I can't. It also doesn't help that I have history with the Klan."

"What kind of history?" I asked.

He looked to me with unwavering eyes, "I was once part of the Ku Klux Klan."

My eyes widened as my jaw dropped to the floor. I was too stunned to say anything and Alfred took that as his chance to explain. "Now please don't think of me like those men. When I was part of the Klan, it was charity."

"A charity?" I remarked.

"People forget." He sighed, "When the Klan was founded it was just a club for Confederate soldiers to come, to drink and to share stories. It helped them to remember and honor their fallen friends. They even raised money for families that lost someone in the war. But when they got involved in politics, that's when everything changed."

"So you fought for the south," I stated, "you fought for slavery."

"No. I couldn't fight for anyone."

"Because you were America?"

He snorted, "Because I wasn't all there," he tapped his forehead. "During the Civil War Abraham
had to keep me locked inside my room for fear that I might act out. And there were times that I sided with the south. I would usually just shout out of turn, favoring the Confederates. Other times I would act out in congress, I even threw a chair at Nathaniel Banks." He smirked at the memory, but it didn't last. "One day, I woke up in my room, chained to the bed as Union soldiers stood outside my door, telling me that I had tried to kill the president."

Alfred slipped his hands together, gripping them tight. "I had no memory of this but again, no one was taking any chances. Well, everyone except Abe. He continued to visit me, and some days were good. . . Others not so much." He leaned his forehead against his hands with his elbows on his knees. He kept his eyes closed, squeezing them tight.

He was silent for so long, I almost thought he was done. But deep down I knew he had more to say, so I waited.

"When the south lost, they lost everything. Their homes, their buildings, their culture . . . wives lost their husbands . . . children lost their fathers . . . sisters lost their brothers . . . and mothers lost their sons." He blinked, keeping his tears back. "Their economy was completely destroyed, they relied on agriculture . . . without the slaves and the crops being burned," he shook his head. "They were devastated."

He sighed again. "We should have handled it better, we should have found another way to end slavery. But it only got worse after the war was over, and the radicals pushing to punish the south. If Abe had lived . . . if I was only . . . there," he hissed to himself. "Things would have been different."

When he spoke of Lincoln, the south and the radicals, it revealed his true age. He was old. In his speech, his eyes and the way he held himself now, it was truly something to marvel at. What kind of beings are these nations? How could they live for so long without falling apart?

He continued, "I joined the Klan to help the south. I figured it was the least I could do after I did nothing during those four years."

All my sympathy disappeared when he mentioned the Klan. "But the Klan is filled with hateful, cruel men."

"Not back then," he said defensively.

"They are now! Are you saying that the only reason they became a bunch of racist assholes, was because of politics? That's just ridiculous!"

He rose to his feet, "you were not there. It was the Democrats, they focused on the white population. Johnson sided with them and didn't push for equal rights. The radicals fucking lost it. Johnson, the Democrats, the radicals-ruined everything Abe had planned. He wanted to heal the south but with him gone and Johnson's betrayal; radicals stepped in and took the south over, keeping them pinned under their boots."

"The south deserved it! Those bastards should be treated like dirt!"

"All it did was increase the south's resentment for the north, giving Democrats fuel to run the south."

"The south had to change, even if it had to be done with them kicking and screaming."

"You think the north was any better?" he laughed bitterly, "They were just as racist as the south. They would fight for the slaves' freedom but they would never treat them like their equals. Respect them as a people but not as an individual."
He didn't give me chance to speak as he remarked, "And yes there's a difference. If you think the north was the golden city for the Freedmen, then you are wrong. The Freedmen were treated unfairly in the north and were hated by Irish, riots always broke out between the groups constantly." He brushed a hand through his hair in frustration, "here's a brief history lesson about the past, everyone hated each other. Being rich, poor, a Republican or a Democrat. Being black. Indian. Irish. Italian. German. Polish. Russian. Chinese. Japanese—there was always a reason, petty as it was but a reason none the less."

He panted, allowing his words to sink in. "Hate... is a strong emotion, but we gotta be better. I got to be better." He paused, "that's why I went west," he smiled. "Now the west was a place that you could prove and earn your respect. I joined the Union Pacific to work on the railroads, my strength certainly came in handy."

Alfred took a deep breath, "To see the Freedmen and Irish work side by side was," his smile grew wider, "was something to see. Granted they had their problems but they pushed that aside, thinking of their families that were back north. The Chinese were added and it was difficult at times; the Irish always made it difficult." he sighed, "But when you work with mountains and explosives, you have to put that ignorance aside. Some days were better than others but I never gave up. I was kind and respectful to everyone, hoping it would catch."

"It worked with some," his eyes watered, "they were my friends." He had a faraway look in his eyes as he spoke, "and I watched at least half of them die. Due to Indian raids and mountain cave-ins." He ground his teeth together in angry, "no one kept track of how many died, because they were Freedmen, Irish and Chinese; no one cared, but I cared. I wrote their names in journals, and most times the entries were just lists. I didn't get every name, but what I got was more than the company ever did." Angry tears fell then but he continued.

"I wanted to build a memorial for them in Utah, but no one listened, not even the government. Back then, all of the politicians were owned by the elite, by the industries and the Union and the Central Pacific. They did not care."

"Before long everyone forgot, but I didn't. I never plan to forget about the Civil War, the Klan or the people that built those railroads. I need to remember those moments, it helps me understand them... and it gives me hope that it will get better. They're all I have to keep me sane, but there are times when I slip."

His gaze was now focused on me, "I didn't save you last night. You saved me."

I stared at him, again processing his words and replaying the events of last night. He says that anger and hate was what influenced him; what had turned him into them. I remembered his struggle during our time here. His distance from me and his brother, the long hours he kept himself locked in his room, was he fighting all this time? "How?" I found myself asking, "How can I be any help? I hate them." I exclaimed, "I hate what they do and I hate what they did to me!"

"And I feel it," Alfred stated, "I feel your hate, I feel their fear," he nods towards the front door, gesturing our neighbors. "I know you're angry, but there must have been a reason why you didn't kill those men."

"How did you-"

"They were still passed out beside my car, you were wearing one of their robes and I found a bloody knife. I'm not that stupid. If you hated them so much why didn't you kill them? After everything they did to you, why?"
I took deep, calming breaths, "I heard a raven. I took it as a sign from Kai," my eyes began to water as I tried to hold back the tears. "That I needed to prove to them that I was more than what they thought of me."

"And you are," Alfred proclaimed.

The tears flowed freely as he continued, "Every day is a struggle against your inner demons and every day you fight them. Now they never go away but you have to keep fighting, for when you give up is when you lose."

I wiped my eyes and inhaled shaky breaths, nodding my head because I couldn’t trust my voice.

We spent dinner in silence at first, but when I had to explain the broken mirror in the bathroom. It broke the tension as Alfred smiled, "that explains the hand."

He became his old self, chatting about his brother and the other nations. I didn’t want this Alfred to leave, I may never admit this to him but I liked him better when he was an optimistic fool. I moved the conversation along and asked about my stitches and he said that Arthur took care of that, "his sewing does come in handy."

He then quickly discussed that if Arthur or Francis talk to me about last night, that I’m supposed to say that I don’t remember anything.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's to keep you safe," he said.

Later, when he started to make a list of food to buy for tomorrow's cook out. I gave him a worried look, "are you really serious about the barbeque? I don't think they will come Alfred, and it would be waste to buy all that meat."

He returned my gaze with a care free grin, "They'll come, they won't let their fear win."

July 19, 1957

Surprisingly, Alfred was right.

They did come; Mr. and Mrs. Landry along with their children Walter and Audrey were at our house at six that evening. Once they crossed our lawn, the others slowly followed. James and Devin’s families joined us, bringing with them small offerings of stream vegetables and corn bread.

Alfred set out tables and chairs, inviting them in with a smile as he offered each woman a seat and a man a beer. He was a generous host, always asking his guests if they were comfortable or not. He also cooked and served all the food, always finding a topic to discuss with all his guests, being man, woman or child. He acted so familiar with them as if they were family.

When the front yard was filled, he opened his house to them. Always giving his seats away, insisting that he would eat while standing.

After everyone was finished, Alfred continued to make small talk with everyone. Our neighbors grew bold and began to ask him questions. Mostly to his reasons for holding this barbeque and what his situation was with me. He didn't bat an eye, he was quick with his answers.
"I thought this would be the best way to say goodbye. Johnny and I are heading down to New Orleans, were reporters and we follow where ever our stories take us."

Everyone believed him.

Alfred truly amazes me. He was able to gather his neighbors under one roof, when only a few days ago they wouldn't even dare look at us. Unless it was with worried or cautious looks.

It wasn't long till they turned their questions on to me. They asked which Indian I was or if there were any differences between the Indians. I didn't mind these questions, all my life I educated people about my culture, and this was no different. Now when they moved on to my hat and injured head, I proudly said, "Alfred saved me from the Klan. We were following a lead and we wondered in on a small meeting." I took on the role as a storyteller, describing our daring fight and barely escaping with our lives.

Devin and the other children asked for other stories. I told them the legends of the Miwok and the Hupa. I also told them others from different tribes, such as Raven's Great Adventure, The Girl Who Married the Moon, and the Origin of the Buffalo. But the last story was the one that received everyone's attention: the Tale of the Two Wolves.

I had left the tale open, waiting for someone to ask which wolf wins. Audrey raised her hand, and I smiled, "Yes, Audrey?"

"Which wolf wins?" she asked.

"Ah, well that's what the boy asked and do you want to know what the old Cherokee said?"

Audrey and the children nodded their heads as the adults waited.

"'The one you feed,'" I answered.

Our guests left shortly after, saying their thanks and wishing us a safe night. I waved to Audrey and her friends as they walked back home, watching as their smiles and laughs faded into the night.

Alfred placed his hands on his hips and grinned, "I told you their fear wouldn't win."

We remained silent, enjoying the comforting sounds of the night. Who knows what tomorrow has for us but at least we can say we won today.

I closed the journal and cuddled it close to my chest as I stared at the ceiling. My thoughts randomly jumping to my memories to Grandpa's entries. Everyone had problems, being darkness, demons or wolves. What mattered was that you overcome them. Some vanish as others don't, but you prepare yourself for the next battle. Being if it's the next day, the week after or a decade. The main concept was not to give up.

But, what was I fighting?

And for what purpose?

Grandpa's question repeated: "What kind of beings are these nations?"

I wish I knew.
"Where is he?" Ludwig tapped his foot, impatiently.

Gilbert sighed, "He must be glued to that damn piano of his."

I yawned, "He still has time."

Ludwig shook his head, "he doesn't understand the process of security, who knows how long the line will be or if his paper work is in order. That's why you always need to show up at least two hours before your flight, remember that Amy."

I rolled my eyes, "oh yes wise airport guru, I shall take your advice to heart." He didn't bother to glare at me for my sarcastic tone. Instead he looked to his phone and stood aside to make a call. I plugged in my headphones and curled my knees into my chest, trying to drown out the bustle of the airport.

It was five o'clock in the morning when we caught our first flight from Berlin to Vienna. It was short flight, about an hour and half long but we had to stop for two reasons. One, there were rarely any non-stop flights to Delhi and two, Roderich Edelstein (a.k.a the nation of Austria) wished to travel with us. We were in the boarding lobby, waiting for our flight to India.

I glanced to my phone, it was eight-thirty. I made a face at the screen, two hours down, two more to go.

I spent those next hour watching videos on YouTube, mostly cat videos, which pretty much rule the site.

Gilbert looked over my shoulder, "what are you watching?"

I giggled, "This kitty is cuddling up with this huge Swiss mountain dog. Aww, look he just licked the little kitty, so adorable."

He covered his mouth, trying to hold in his laughter. I cocked a brow, "what?"

"Nothing, it's just you remind me of Ludwig when he was kid, all bright eyed and giggling."

"Ludwig giggled?" I glanced to the large man in question. "Yeah, sure."

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders, "he may look all tough but really deep down, he's all mushy. You must've seen it, when you won him over at the cat sanctuary."

I grinned, "It was the Bambi eyes," I batted my eyes for good measure. "No one can resist."

He smirked but that cocky grin didn't last. "You know ever since you came around, he's gotten better. Granted we got off on a rocky start, but he's smiling more and you make him laugh."

I blinked, "I do?"

He nodded, "remember that day you were playing football with the neighborhood children?"
"You guys were watching?"

"You were gone for over an hour, we thought you had escaped."

"Once. God, are you guys ever going to let that go?"

"Never," he grinned. "You didn't go far, we only had to follow the sound of your terrible bat screeching you called German."

I shoved him, "my German is just fine, thank you very much."

Gilbert caught himself and swung his arm around my shoulders, pulling me towards him. "We didn't even know there were even kids nearby but you found them. You attract people towards you, even our citizens." He breathed in through his nose, taking a moment. "It had recently rained but that didn't stop them from playing and you happily joined. You were slipping and tripping over your feet, and every time you fell, West and I couldn't help but laugh."

"Oh, so Ludwig only laughs when I'm falling on my face." I stated.

"It wasn't just that. It was because you had this big grin on your face, you looked so happy at that moment, you looked like your usual self. Not this," he shook my shoulder and moved his hand to my head, brushing his fingers through my hair. "This little Ms. Gloom and Doom here."

I gently pulled away, "what do you mean?"

"Don't try and play this off Amy, you haven't been acting like yourself ever since we got back from Rome." He shifted in his seat, looking straight at me with a serious expression. "What happen? Did," he paused, "did Romano try anything?"

My eyes widened, "No! No, Lovi didn't do anything like that."

Gilbert narrowed his scarlet eyes, analyzing my features. "If it's not Romano, then what?"

I looked away from him, "it's nothing; I'm just worried about the meeting. I messed up in Berlin so I just want this meeting to go smoothly." It wasn't a total lie, I was stressing over the world meeting but I was still having an inner conflict with myself and my nation-self. If that made any sense.

Gilbert didn't push, he only held my hand and squeezed it affectionately. "You'll be fine, just don't run away."

That earned him a smile but it only lasted a second. "I won't."

He sighed, "God, you may have never met Alfred but you are so much like him, it's almost scary."

I turned to him, "did he run away from his meetings?"

"Sometimes, usually he skipped with me," he smirked. "But what I mean is that you try and boarder all your problems, whatever they are, on your own. He was just like that, never relying on anyone." He shook his head, "don't push away the people that care about you. No matter how strong you are, you always need someone." He squeezed my hand again, "You have that; you have people that you can trust."

"Don't trust anyone."

I flinched at the sound of Karen's voice. It was so close; as if she was right beside me. I turned to my left, but no one was there.
The work day was coming to its end in Summerland, California. Aponi Hawkfeather was watering her herbs in the back of her shop, Spiritual Path. The name still made her grin, whatever possessed her late husband to name their shop with that ridiculous name was beyond her. He was so proud of himself when he presented her the sign, she didn't have the heart to tell him how she felt.

The thought of John's smiling face only brought forth the harsh reality that he was no longer with her. Aponi blinked back the tears, *no use crying*, she thought to herself.

Once she turned off the hose, she walked back inside to find her granddaughter, Melissa Arora updating the books. "Grandma, I know how much you love paper but it would be easier to go digital."

Aponi wrinkled her nose at the thought of some cold machine taking the place of her record books. "I'd rather die. These records have character, they've been with us since the very beginning."

Melissa gave her a hopeless smile, "I know Grams, but-

"No buts. We will use these books till the day I die."

"That won't be long," Melissa said in a joking matter.

Aponi narrowed her eyes at her, "watch it girl, words have power."

She nodded, "yes, I know." She returned to the accounting books as James Reed walked in.

"Hello ladies," James tipped his fedora hat to them. "I've come to pick up my medicine."

"Mister James," Melissa greeted with a smile, "it's good to see you."

"Oh Mel, you're as pretty as ever," he grinned. "But you can't beat that Grandmother of yours."

"Still the same old flirt," Aponi moved to her drawers along the wall, gathering dried marijuana leaves and juniper berries. She then squeezed the juice into the weed and grounded them together, chanting a prayer for health and youthful life.

"Doing some that hocus pocus Aponi? You know you don't need to cast a spell for me to love ya," he winked.

"Don't make me call your daughter, she doesn't like it when you replace your pills with our natural remedies." She playfully threatened.

James groaned, "Don't do that to me doll. You know I can't afford that overpriced pharmacy stuff."

"Doesn't your Medicare cover it?" Melissa asked.

He shook his head, "We may have free health care now, but that doesn't stop those damn companies from finding ways out of it."

"That's why you need to vote for Isabella again, she'll take care of them."

He nodded in agreement, "she's a god send."

Aponi packed the plant into a plastic bag, zipped it up and handed it to James, "that will be twenty-
five, ninety-five."

James pulled out his wallet, "by the way, where has Spitfire run off to? The package I got from her says she's in Germany."

Spitfire was his nickname for Aponi's youngest granddaughter, Amy. "She's doing some traveling, earning credit for school and such."

"She'll be coming back for the holidays, ain't she?"

"No," Melissa sighed, "she won't be back till 2021."

James shook his head, "that's too long, I miss my little Spitfire."

"Yeah, I do too."

Aponi watched as the gloom formed over their heads. It's been a rough couple of months not being able to see Amy's smiling face every day. The girl was a spirited creature, free in more ways than one. She was as bright as the sun and for her to be so far away, only caused an invisible cloud to hover over the family she left behind. "She'll be back, she couldn't stay away if she tried." Aponi gave them both her bravest smile, the one that was created when she had lost John. "Amy will be back."

He grinned, "Then I better make sure to stay alive, I don't want her to return to only find my grave stone."

"You're not that old Mister James," Melissa proclaimed as she made change and said her farewells.

James was their last costumer of the day. Melissa began to dust and straighten the shelves as Aponi took the record books to the office. Once everything was in order, Melissa offered to drive Aponi home.

The old woman declined, wishing to organize the herbs and restock them. Her granddaughter then offered to stay behind and help but Aponi would not hear of this.

"Raiden needs you, I'm sure Sanjay is this close at pulling out his hair," she placed her index finger thumb a centimeter apart.

Melissa left, leaving Aponi to her work. This was what aided her through the months, diving herself into her plants and stones were what kept her thoughts of John alive. She was the one that taught him of their properties when they had met. Back when she was living in Oklahoma and engaged to another man.

Their story was complicated at first and her parents never approved, but she couldn't deny their bond. Even at the tender age of eighteen, she knew that John was her soul mate. Even when six years of separation passed between them, they still found their way to each other.

Restocking the drawers took longer than usual. She blamed Melissa's mislabeling, but truly, it was just an excuse for reminiscing about John. She missed him dearly and every day was a struggle to not dwell on him. Aponi had to remind herself to eat, luckily the Russos delivered. The hours ticked away as she wrote in her journals. Most were a collection of remedies that had been passed down from her family, others were from friends and experimentations that she had made into a success.

There was one that contained far more, this journal was massive, almost the size of an encyclopedia. It had been passed down from her great-grandfather, who was the first to write his experiences as a
shaman. It was then given to her grandmother, then to her father and now it was her's; till she deemed Blake ready. It accounted the mystical and unexplained anomalies of the world. The teachings of the ancients and the stories of old magick have been written into its pages, keeping the secrets of the shamans safe and hidden from prying eyes.

The journal was almost completed, it only had around twenty pages left. It saddened Aponi, it was like saying goodbye to her family all over again but she knew that was time for the new generation to take over.

She looked to the clock, it was ten minutes pass midnight. She yawned and rose from her seat to turn the hot plate on. She left the office for her kettle pot and when she returned, she found a figure in the shadow of her lamp light. Aponi dropped the kettle and stepped back, towards the door.

"Wait! My daughter, I'm not here to hurt you," a calm, soothing voice proclaimed.

Aponi blinked, focusing in on the young, mysterious woman. Her hair was long and the color of onyx, with the same skin tone as her's, if not darker. She was also bare foot and only wore a deer skinned dress that dropped to her ankles.

"Who are you?" Aponi asked, cautiously.

The beautiful woman lifted her head high, "I am a simple spirit but I was once the protector of this land and of all the tribes that lived here. I've had many forms and many names." As she spoke, her features and clothes began to glow; her dress became white buffalo pelts as a white shell headdress took shape around her forehead. "The Navajo knew me as Estsánatlehi, the Changing Woman." Then the pelts were replaced with a short deer skinned dress, with a gold like design scattered over her. It took a moment for Aponi to realize that it was corn. "While the Cherokee knew me a Selu, the Corn Mother." Once again, she changed, morphing into a large fox the color of silver. "And your husband's people of the Miwok called me Silver Fox."

Aponi leaned back on the door, covering her mouth in shock. "Why are you here Great Mother?"

She sighed as she shifted back to her original form. "It is Amy, she's in great danger and I can no longer reach her. Iya has grown too powerful and is able to keep me and my son at by."

"Monster-Slayer?" Aponi questioned.

Estsánatlehi giggled, "He would like the name but he prefers Alfred." She tapped her finger to her chin, thinking to herself. "That would mean Matthew is Born for Water," she smiled, "it does make sense, both are twins and each are quite heroic." She flicked her wrist, dismissing the thought, "but that's beside the point. Amy needs our help." She waved her hand, summoning a bracelet with multiple brown leather strands, braiding together along with turquoise beads. "Here, I need you to take this to her."

"But she's in Europe."

"No, she is in the air, heading east."

"I don't understand," said Aponi, "why can't you give it to her."

"Iya," she whispered. "She has blocked me and Alfred from her, creating a barrier. Iya's using the nations to string a web around her. Amy may not realize but she's placing her trust in the people that will be her undoing."

"Arthur and the others would never hurt her."
"They wouldn't even know. The darkness of their past is what gives Iya strength, allowing her opportunities to get close to Amy in any shape or form. I've tried my best to warn her but Iya has grown so strong," she shakes her head, sadly. "She is able to corrupt our fellow spirits. It won't be long till she can use humans and nations as her puppets."

Aponi bits her thumb nervously, "I can mail the bracelet to her."

"No, I need you to give it to her now. She is in the air, the element you were born under and she is heading east, the natural direction of wind."

Aponi's eyes widened in realization, "you wish for me to astral project." She brushed back her graying hair, "I haven't done that in years."

"I know daughter," Estsánatlehi stepped forward and caressed Aponi's cheek lovingly. "But our granddaughter needs you. The bracelet will protect you till you reach her and once you hand the bracelet over, I will pull you back."

"Let me gather some protective herbs-"

"There is no time, the farther she goes the harder it will be to reach her."

Aponi saw the desperation in the woman's eyes, she was terrified for Amy. The old woman nodded and reassured the spirit with soothing hand. Estsánatlehi exhaled a breath she didn't even realize she was holding and guided Aponi to sit in John's chair. Aponi leaned back, clutched the bracelet tight and closed her eyes.

She channeled her aura, gathering the indigo shade to spread over her body. Evoking her element to pull and lift her out of her body.

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"I was dreaming."

"I knew that, but somehow deep down, this felt real."

"I was in Grandma's shop. The sun was blazing, casting its golden rays throughout the store; highlighting the carvings of animals and allowing the crystals that hang beside the windows to shine their rainbow shades. The air smelled like lavender and the atmosphere was warm and inviting."

"It felt like home."

"So, you understand this is more than just a dream."

"I knew that voice all too well. "Grandma!" I instantly leaped into her arms, holding her in a tight embrace. "I missed you so much."

"So have I, and everyone else back in Summerland." She pulled back, "they miss you terribly. Your parents are doing everything they can to distract themselves. James is wondering when his Spitfire will come back and Midnight and Lady haven't been themselves."

A guilty lump formed in the back of my throat, "I should come over for the holidays, if I have to sink over on a cargo ship, so be it."

Grandma smiled, "No, no, you can't make any trouble for yourself. Don't worry about them, Blair and Blake have been visiting them every day. They're content. What really bothers everyone is the
time zones. Jamie and Michel always have to think before they call you, wondering if you're sleeping or not."

"Call me any time, I don't care."

She snorted, "That's what you say now, but the moment we wake you from your sleep, you will whine about it."

I laughed, "True."

Our moment of peace was broken by the front door being slammed open. The sun was disappearing, fading away as the night rolled in.

Grandma cursed, "They followed me."

"Who?!"

"The vapors. Quickly, take this," she thrusts a leather bracelet into my palm. "It will protect you."

I looked to the bracelet and back at her, "Grams this isn't real, it's just a dream."

"That's what you think," she pushed me into the back and exclaimed. "Now wake up."

"But Grandma-"

She grabbed me by the shoulders, "please realize what I do now, I do because I love you."

Before I could question anything, she slapped me across the face.

I snapped my eyes open, awaking back into reality. I was on a plane, sitting at the window with Gilbert napping beside me. Ludwig and Roderich were quietly reading in front of me and the light was still beaming in through the window; proving that it was still daylight.

I rubbed my cheek, which oddly enough felt like it was stinging. "Freaky," I mumbled. At that moment, my eyes slid to my clutched fist. I released my grasp to find a brown leather bracelet twined with turquoise beads. The same bracelet that Grandma had given to me in my dream.

I stared at the piece of jewelry and whispered, "Too freaky."

Once we arrived at Indira Gandhi International Airport, I called Grandma. It was five minutes till six in the afternoon in Delhi, meaning it would be close to six-thirty or six-forty in the morning in Summerland.

She answered after the first ring, "Good morning Amy or should I say good afternoon?"

"Grams what was that all about?" I asked as I glanced to the bracelet. "Seriously Grandma what did you do?"

She took a deep breath, "Have you ever heard of astral projection?"
"Yeah . . . what a minute you can do that?"

"Yes. Granted has been a couple of years but your grandma still has some skills," she chuckled.

I leaned against the restroom stall, "Grandma, how do you know about the vapors?"

"Well for one I didn't know they were called that, my people always referred to them as dark spirits, but they seem to be one of the same. Estsánatlehi said they were targeting you."

"Wait, who's Estsánatlehi? It sounds familiar."

"It should," her voice grew defensive. "She is Changing Woman, gosh child have I taught you nothing?"

"Changing Woman?" I blinked, "are you saying you were visited by a goddess?"

"Yes, but she said you were granddaughter and that Alfred was her son-"

I connected the dots, "Karen; her name's Karen."

"Karen? Who gave her such a boring name?"

"I have feeling it's because Francis and Arthur didn't know how to pronounce Estsánatlehi."

"So she was nation?"

"Yeah, she represented North America before Alfred and Matthew took over."

Grandma was silent for a moment. "Can other nations change their appearances? Or shift into animals?"

"No. It seems the body we have is what we're stuck with; but she's a spirit now and they can change whenever they want."

She paused again, "She must've been a powerful nation. To have so many tribes believing her as their goddess, even when they had a human or animal form."

"Lovi did say that the ancient nations were treated differently than we are now."

"Who's Lovi?" she asked curiously.

"He's a nation of Italy."

"I thought that Feliciano fellow was Italy."

"He represents the north while his brother, Lovino represents the south," I explained.

"Hmm . . ."

"What?"

"Do you like him?"

I blushed, "Grams, he's just a friend."

"Just be careful," a bell ringed, which I guessed was the shop's door. "I have to go, please Amy, wear it. It will protect you."
Aponi slid her phone into her pocket as Hayden Miller walked through the front door. Hayden was a tall teenage girl, with short pixie cut black hair and green eyes. She usually dressed in colorful net skirts, graphic design tights and vintage band t-shirts. She also painted her nails black, wore heavy makeup and a leather jacket. Most adults would not hire this young girl, for her multiple tattoos and piercings, but as others saw a 'rebel' or 'troubled teen'. Aponi saw a girl with a heart of gold.

"Good morning Ms. Aponi," she greeted.

"Good morning," Aponi smiled.

The young girl grabbed a stall from the wall and moved to the front desk. "So is there a special reason why you called on my day off?" She smirked, reassuring Aponi that she was joking.

She apologized again, "Sorry about that, it was urgent."

"No worries, seniors don't have to show up till noon. Underclassmen are taking some exam."

Aponi wasn't one to bet around the bush. "I need to ask you about your grandmother, the one that's Sioux."

"She prefers to be called Lakota," she added before she continued. "What about?"

"Did she tell you stories about the tribe's gods?"

She nodded, "yeah, I think there was like twelve? I think." she shrugged.

"Does Iya mean anything to you?"

She nodded again, "yeah he's like made out of pure evil, that's what Grandma always said anyway."

Aponi frowned, confused. "Iya is male?"

"Well . . ." Hayden bit her lip nervously. "There is an older story, one that you can't find in any book or website. But if you want me to continue, you need to burn sage. That was the promise I made with Grandma if I ever told the story to anybody."

Aponi did as she was instructed and set the burning sage beside them. They waited as the smoke covered the room with a gray haze before Hayden spoke. "Inyan was the primary source of life, he created the earth from himself; creating the rock from his body and the water from his blood. He then named Earth Maka, creating another goddess. Inyan is the Lakota's version of Wakan Tanka."


"Yeah . . . Anyway, he had a son named Iya. Iya is the source of all evil and he desires nothing but destruction and woe. That much people know."

"What do you know?" Aponi asked.

Hayden took in a deep breath, "Long ago Iya was jealous of Inyan's power; Inyan was the source of life and there by worshiped by all. He was Iya's exact opposite, for he thrived in chaos and no one
wished for his presence. Iya had no place to call his home so Maka, taking pity on him, created an abyss for him in the ocean. There he could be the ruler of the creatures that lived in the dark, but that wasn't enough for him.

"He then gathered an army, drawing darkness from human's hearts and actions and morphing them into mist-like creatures he could use under his command. As his army grew, so did his power. Before long he was able to corrupt humans and other spirits. Iya was even able to turn Maka against mankind, causing earthquakes, hurricanes and volcano eruptions.

"The lines between the Spirit World and Earth were blurred, causing the use of magick to go rampant and the creatures of darkness to roam freely. They could become as light as air, but when there is enough negative power, they could shift into animal or human form. The only difference between them and the spirits that were turned was that they had no face, no identity.

"The Lakota called them soul-eaters, for they were born from envy, hate and anger. All they knew was how to eat and that's all they wanted. Humans were easier to kill but spirits were the main targets."

"But weren't the spirits turned so Iya could use them?" Aponi asked.

Hayden sighed, "That was the cruel fate of it. Once Iya's minions turned a spirit, they use that spirit for all its magick and energy. Slowly eating away at them till it either dies or tries to fight back. But fighting them off only encourages them to eat the spirit faster."

"How was Iya defeated?"

"Inyan knew the only way he could save his creations, was to kill his own son. It brought much sorrow to him but it had to be done to save the lives of his fellow spirits and humans. He gathered his army, calling forth spirits, humans and animals alike to fight against Iya. After three nights of countless battle, Inyan won and tore his son apart. Scattering his remains into the abyss and commanding Maka to seal him away."

"Was that the end of him?"

"No, merely the beginning. The pieces of Iya were eaten by his creations, fusing together with them. Slowly but surely they gathered their numbers again, taking bits and pieces of darkness from mankind but they are only truly powerful when they have someone to sit on the thrown."

Aponi's eyebrow arched, "I don't understand."

"The soul-eaters, they whisper in your ear, luring you to them. They would promise to make all your wishes come true, give you power, wealth, fame, love, anything to get you close to them. Most times, they just eat you but there are some they choose to keep. Whoever they keep, being spirit or human would make a deal with them, promising the soul-eaters anything they wanted. In return, they would lend that person their power so he or she could grant their wish. The soul-eaters would then give them the title of Iya, Chief of all Dark Spirits."

Hayden stretched and yawned, "I think this story was to teach kids not to be jealous or something like that. You know, because envy and hate will eat away at you, leaving nothing left but pieces."

Aponi nodded in agreement, remembering what Estsánatlehi had said.

"Iya has grown too powerful and is able to keep me and my son at by."

This worried Aponi deeply, if this new Iya could block Estsánatlehi and Alfred already; how much
I apologize in advance to any of my Native American fans (if I blessed enough to have any) if I had offended you in anyway possible. I respect your culture and only wish to interpret them into my story. I will also apologize if there wasn't enough Amy in this chapter. I promise, the next one will be ALL about her.

Anyway, I'm sure most of you are wondering how the Native American myths play a role in how Aponi describes Karen. For one, Estsánatlehi (Changing Woman) is a highly praised goddess for the Plains Indians. She had a pair of twin boys, Monster-Slayer and Born for Water. Monster-Slayer was the older twin, he was strong and fierce and wished for nothing more than to kill any monster that threatened the human race. Kinda like a super hero, *cough, cough* Alfred. Born for Water was the calmer one, thinking before acting- a.k.a Matthew.

Now about the Lakota and their gods. There were several spirits that took part in their stories and myths. Inyan was another version of the Great Spirit, Maka was the earth and Iya was the chief of all dark spirits. But the whole story about Iya's jealously and his war with his father was born from my imagination.
Water droplets splattered against the surface of our white cab as the humid air fogged our windows. The heavy rain fall came in quickly, tapping against the roof of the car like bullets. The roads were crowded with cars, people, and animals, but yet traffic kept moving; even when the wheels of cars and bikes fell into water filled pot holes. Other drivers would just go around, even ride on the sidewalk to get to their destination.

"Does it always rain like this?" I asked the driver. I was crammed between Ludwig and Roderich in the back while Gilbert sat in the passenger seat.

"It's slowing down," he smiled, "you all came during the last week of monsoon season. The rain will last for about ten minutes if not, no more than an hour."

Roderich grumbled, "Doesn't change the fact that my shores are ruined."

As we drove to our hotel, I leaned over Ludwig, taking in the sights of the city. The clouds and the rain left everything in a gray haze, so all I could see were the outlines of buildings in the distance. I did witness the hustle and bustle of the downtown market, the street vendors sold everything from clothes to pottery to meat; which I guess was anything else but cow. Even on the account of the rain, people continued to shop. The weather only seemed to enhance the cheeriness of the public; children were playing as women were walking without umbrellas, some, mostly younger girls were twirling around and jumping into puddles, along with the children. I even spotted a group of young men dancing beside their car with the radio blasting.

I never liked rain. Whenever it did, it would mean a day spent inside, which would only remind me of my days being confined to my bed. I loved being outside, hanging by the beach, riding my horse, walking around town and along the boardwalk; I could never get enough.

Yet, watching as the locals seemed to celebrate and rejoice in the downpour made me smile.

We arrived at the Leela Palace in under twenty minutes and even through the gray atmosphere, the hotel still radiated light and elegance. The building was massive but yet, compacted. It's as if the architects put more space into the width besides length. The colors of white, light brown and gold completely covered the building, along with dozens of windows.

Inside was just as spectacular; high ceilings with hanging crystal chandlers and stylish furniture were the first to be seen in the main lobby. Polished tile floor shined against the lighting, barely showing any ware or tear. While dozens of plants were placed everywhere. Yellow roses were in the center of the round tables while red lilies were aligned with the vanity mirrors against the walls. Small potted trees were in every corner, while some were placed beside the huge white pillars. Hotel staff dressed in black, greeted us with smiles as they offered towels and bottled water at the entrance.

This hotel screamed luxury and it left me stunned. The only function I seemed to have at that moment was to gawk at every detail.

"Here you are miss," a young man in a black uniform stepped forward and gave me a hot pressed towel.

"Thank you," I smiled as I dried my hair.

"Is it your first time here in the Leela Palace?"
"More like first time in India."

"Oh," his grin grew wider. "Are you here for vacation?"

"No, business."

"You seem really young."

"I age well."

"What do you mean there is only two?" Ludwig's voice pulled me away from the man to the front desk. "I've reserved three rooms on the same floor."

"I'm terribly sorry sir, but I can only found two rooms under your name," the woman behind the desk proclaimed.

"But that's impossible, I know I called for three," Ludwig argued.

I stood beside Gilbert, "what's up?"

He sighed, "It seems West forgot to rent you a room."

"I didn't forget," Ludwig remarked and turned back to the woman. "Check my credit card, did I pay for two or three?"

The woman named Nami, which I read from her name tag, clicked her fingers over the computer keys. "You only paid for two sir," she said politely.

"May I have another room then?" he asked calmly.

She glanced to the screen, "I'm sorry, there are no other rooms left."

Ludwig sighed and I proclaimed, "It's not a big deal, I can just stay with one of you. Or I can stay in one room and you two can share."

"Sure, but it would be troublesome," Gilbert pulled me aside to whisper in my ear. "You see, the world meeting isn't just for the nations to discuss their issues, it's also a time for the nations to build more on their relations." He wiggled his brows, "if you know what I mean."

I rolled my eyes, "Yes, I know what you mean."

"So it would be difficult for you," he continued. "Feli would come over and stay with West while I would have Liz or possibly some other join me in bed."

"You do realize I can't un-hear this."

"But I'm sure Romano would be more than happy to share his room-"

Roderich cuts in, "enough of your vulgar remarks. It's clear now that she can't stay with either of you. Ms. Hawkfeather, you can stay with me."

"At least I'm honest, you always put up that facade of being a fancy-pants aristocrat but we all know you're cheap. You're also the kind to restrain your sexual urges, so you would be the most likely person to wiggle yourself into Amy's bed."

Roderich's face flushed in anger and embarrassment while I pulled away from Gil's arm. "Again,
cannot un-hear this." I turned towards the door to find Arthur, Francis and Matthew walking inside. "Oh thank god," I smiled and greeted them with tight hugs.

"Mattie can I stay with you?" I asked.

He knitted his brows together in confusion, "don't you have your own room?"

"Ludwig forgot to get me one-"

"I didn't forget," he hissed.

"And now there's no other rooms and I need to stay with someone, so can I stay with you, please."

"Well, uh-"

"Oh what's this Birdie, you're blushing. Don't tell me, you were actually planning on bringing someone to your room later this week?" Gilbert smirked.

Matthew blushed harder, "n-no."

I sighed and glanced to Francis, "I won't even bother to ask."

He was about to object, till he shrugged, "Heh, true."

Arthur shook his head at the Frenchman's answer and proclaimed. "You can stay with me."

"And babysit him when he opens himself to the hotel's bar," Francis commented.

Arthur curled his fist into the collar of Francis's shirt, "watch it frog."

"Stop it," I yanked Arthur's hand back.

"If you need a place to stay, you can stay with me."

I and everyone else turned to face the nation of India as he placed his hands together and bowed slightly, "Namaste."

I quickly copied his greeting, "Namaste." When I realized that no one else had joined me, I was worried that I had done something wrong.

Akram Verma beamed, reassuring me that I had caused no offense. "I couldn't help but over hear. I'm so sorry Ms. Hawkfeather, I was certain that we had enough rooms for everyone."

"It's cool, I'll just stay with Arthur-"

"No, you should have your own room like everyone else. Please let me make this right, come and stay with me."

"You have a room here?"

"No, I have a house in Sainik Farms, near the Neb Valley. It's not far from here," he said.

"Uh, well," I wasn't trying to be rude. It just didn't seem like a smart decision to stay at house with a person I barely even knew. Then of course it wasn't like that thought didn't cross my mind when I went to stay with the Beilschmidt brothers.

Arthur must've been able to read my mind, for he proclaimed: "There's no need to worry Amy,
Akram is a fine gentlemen. He'll treat you well."

It was settled, "okay."

"Perfect," Akram smiled even wider and took my carry-on from the bell hop. "Come along Ms. Hawkfeather," he gestured me out of the hotel as I waved goodbye.

Akram's car was small and compacted, it was the color of blue with simple gray interior. The radio was tuned in to a station where everyone spoke in a language I didn't understand. There were times they would speak in English, but it usually ran along with the foreign dialect. The rain stopped, allowing the sun to peek through the clouds. I pulled down my visor to shield me and found a beautiful woman with eight arms taped inside.

Akram noticed my fascination with the picture, "That's Durga, the Mother Goddess."

"Why does she have eight arms?" I asked.

"She was created when evil forces threatened the existence of the gods. Each god offered their radiance to her creation, each taking on a different part of her body. It is also to represent the eight quadrants in Hinduism. This suggests that she protects her devotees from all directions."

I nodded, "Why does she have a weapon in each hand?"

He was more than happy to explain, "Durga was a combination of the gods and a symbol of the gods united against evil. Each hand wields a weapon to fight against that evil, Durga had done just that, defeating the demon known as Mahishasur. Durga's name actually means 'Durgatinashini,' which translates to 'the one who eliminates sufferings.'"

I glanced back to the picture of Durga, "so in summary she's just a kick-ass goddess."

He chuckled, "there's more to it, but yes."

The car ride wasn't so awkward after that. I asked questions about Delhi, figuring it would be easier for him to talk while I listened. He stated that poverty had gone down, thanks to alternative fuel opening up more jobs in the work force. Education was taken to the next level, opening more schools for children and trade schools for adults. A reformed act had taken place a few years ago in India, as their economy grew, thanks to their success in space travel and exporting more goods to the world. They were putting that money towards the city slums and the villages out in the country side. The Indian government focused on manufacturing better plumbing systems and repairing old apartment complexes and buildings.

"It's been a slow process," Akram stated, "it took close to a decade to get things moving but I can feel it. My people are happier and it's all thanks to you."

I blinked, "it is?"

"Well your president, she was the one that enforced the expansion of alternative fuel, giving people jobs and reducing pollution."

*I think I read an article about that. I tried to remember the magazine but the memory was blurred with a night spent at a bonfire with my friends. It was clear that I didn't pay much attention to world affairs. I mean my motto was if it didn't involve me than I didn't care. I mentally groaned and banged*
I was exhausted. The plane ride drained me of my energy and all I wanted to do was sleep.

"Are you hungry?" Akram asked, "I could fix you something."

"No, thank you. I'm just really tired."
He nodded, understanding. "Goodnight then, Ms. America. Come Hani," he ushered the dog out and closed the door behind him.

I kicked off my shoes and crawled under the sheets, allowing my muscles to rest as my eyes drift to a close.

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I woke up to the sound of a knock on my door, "Ms. America, breakfast is ready."

When he mentioned the subject, my stomach growled and my nose tickled at the aroma. I followed the mouthwatering scent straight to kitchen table. Where I found two bowls of warm soup and a plate filled with round, thin bread. They looked like biscuits but they were so thin, that they kinda reminded me of sopapillas.

I figured my way around the exotic food, picking up the biscuit and dipping it into the soup. I never shied away from new food, or from anything really. Being from music to going on the Superman ride at Six Flags, I was willing to give anything a try; which was my family's motto: 'you never know if you don't try.' Again, this implied to anything.

The soup was rich in spice, causing the tips of my fingers to tingle and my toes to curl. I grabbed the spoon and swirled it around to find tiny pieces of potatoes that were sinking to the bottom.

Akram sat in the empty chair in front of me, "Do you like it?"

"Yeah, it's really good." I looked up and froze when I realized he was wearing a suit. "Shit!" I jumped from my seat and ran back to my room, frantically searching through my carry-on for my own suit. But I was greeted with t-shirts, tank tops, jeans and shorts instead. "Where is it? When was the last time-" Then I remembered the shopping bag, the one that held my one and only suit; the one that was left behind in the ally way when I was abducted by aliens. "Fuck. How could I forget? Stupid, stupid, stupid."

"What's wrong?" I spun around to face Akram at the door frame.

I sighed, "I don't have a suit. . ."

"Didn't you wear one at your school?"

"Yeah, but I'm sure you know about my little disappearing act at the G9 meeting. Long story short, I lost it. I had planned to get another but things kept happening." I raked a hand through my hair in frustration, "Maybe I can wear a pair of jeans with a blazer . . . but I didn't bring any good-looking jeans . . . then of course I don't have a blazer." I tore through my bag again, tossing one t-shirt after the other. "This is bad. This is so bad. Ludwig is going to kill me."

As I was desperately searching for anything to wear, Akram stepped forward to pick up the sari that Melissa and Sanjay had given to me for my birthday. "You can wear this."

"Uh, no." I set the cloth aside, "All I want is to wear something decent and then fade into the background. After the last two meetings, all I want is to say hello, sit, listen and get the hell out. I don't want to do anything that will cause too much attention."

"That's never going to happen," he said bluntly. "No matter what you do or what you wear, you will always be in the center of attention."
I sighed through my teeth in irritation. "Why? Because I'm America. News flash America isn't the center of the world."

"But you are," Akram stated, "America is always on the news, when anything happens in the US, everyone around the world hears about it."

"I'm sure it's the same way with other countries."

"Oh really? Did you know Hong Kong protested against the Chinese, resisting the influence of the communist government in 2014?"

I blinked, "No."

"What about Scotland voting for his independence in the same year?"

"I know that, they voted to stay with the UK," I beamed at the thought of proving him wrong.

"Good, then you would also know of the riots that took place afterwards."

My smile fell, "no. . ."

"Hmm," he tilted his head to side, "well at least everyone around the world will always know who won the latest season of American Idol."

I wanted defend myself; I wanted to shout at him that that was the year the Quake hit Summerland. That my family, friends and community had bigger problems to deal with than Hong Kong and Scotland. But I held back my tongue, because that sounded like a pitiful excuse. The ugly truth was, I was ignorant.

I didn't even know about Delhi's progress or the fact that Isabella was one of the reasons behind it. Also, I've been living in Germany for about three months, and I had no idea what was going on. I never watched their news, I always figured that if anything did happen either Ludwig or Gilbert would tell me; but it wasn't their job. Shouldn't I keep myself informed, I mean what was the fucking point of being on social media? Cat videos? Memes? Zombie pranks?

Yeah, I definitely suck as a nation.

"Do you think I can call in sick?" I asked, inching towards the bed.

"I'm afraid not," he gestured back to the sari. "I'm sorry if I was harsh, I was only trying to prove a point. You will always be in the spotlight America wither you like it or not." He lifted the garment, revealing the brilliant blue and elegant violet accents, "Why not give them something to look at?"

I was reluctant, but I didn't have a lot of choices and it wasn't the time to be picky. He left the room shortly after, so I could change into the blue pleasant skirt and bright purple blouse. The sleeves of the blouse came to my elbows while the hem stopped an inch away from the skirt, revealing a sliver of skin. The neckline circled around my shoulders, giving a small peek of cleavage.

I looked to the mirror, smoothing out the skirt and tugging the blouse down, which only resulted with me yanking it back up to cover my chest. I glanced to the sari and began to wrap it around my waist.

"What are you doing?"

I jumped when Akram reentered the room, "goddammit, do all the nations have to sneak up on me?"

He smiled apologetically, "forgive me." He walked forward and gently took the cloth from my
hands. "Let me," he insisted. He unwrapped me and began to measure the cloth with his fingers, pulling one section out and folding it in between his fingers. He then grabbed the first section and held it right under my breasts. "Stand straight," he instructed.

I did what I was told as he adjusted the bottom of the sari to simply brush against the floor and tucked a portion of the cloth into the skirt. "If you don't mind me asking, haven't you worn a saree before? With your sister being married to an Indian man, you should have worn this for family gatherings."

"I don't really take part in Sanjay's family, his parents . . . don't like me." I confessed.

Akram arched a brow, "why?"

"Well I shouldn't say that, they just don't understand the idea of me. They believe in blood and for my parents and siblings to dote on me, someone that isn't related by blood, just doesn't make any sense to them. They see me as an outsider. If I wasn't born from my mother's womb, they didn't count me as a member of the Hawkfeather family." I sighed, "To them, blood is family."

"I see, they are older, more traditional," he proclaimed.

I nodded, "but it was harder for Mel, always trying to prove to them that she would be a good wife to Sanjay."

"Did your parents have any problems with him?"

"They only asked two questions," I said, "'Does he respect you?' and 'Is he good to you?' If you can say yes to both of those questions then that's it. My parents came from mixed heritage themselves so they felt like they didn't have the right to discriminate against who we married. My mom even told me that she didn't care if the person I loved was male, female, black or white. She wouldn't give a damn if they were purple as long as they treated me right."

Akram continued to work at my sari; wrapping it around my waist, smoothing it out, making it tight against my back side and then tucking it in once again. "Your mother and father are good people." I smiled and he asked, "What finally got those two married?"

"Melissa got pregnant with the twins." He blinked in surprise and I grinned, "That's when Sanjay grew a pair and told his parents he would marry Mel with or without their consent. We had a very classy shotgun wedding. It was held at the family beach house, which became Melissa's so she could move out of her apartment. We almost thought that Sanjay's family wouldn't come but they did, turned out his cousins were more open-minded than his parents."

I paused for a moment, "Around this time, I was just getting over my illness. I could feel myself getting stronger and I wanted nothing more but to be part of the celebration. One of Sanjay's cousins, Jasmine was putting together a dance for the reception. She and most of the women began to practice their dance routine at the beach house and I would show up every Thursday just to watch them. One day, Jasmine came up to me and asked if I wanted to join." I smiled at the memory, "you should've seen me; I got all excited and said yes over and over again.

"Jasmine took me under her wing and made extra time for me, so I would know all the moves. She even got this especially made sari for me. It was pink with gold designs with matching shoes. It was so beautiful and it made me feel like a . . ." I blushed, "like a princess."

Akram chuckled, "Every girl should feel like that at least once in their lifetime."

My cheeks increased in heat as I faced the mirror, but I was only able to catch a glimpse as he turned
me back to him, "no peeking."

I watched as he gathered the cloth, measuring them again as he reached the outer corner. He swung this portion around me and piled the corner edge together. He drapes this piece over my shoulder, adjusting it so it reached past my bottom. He was then left with a lope of excess cloth; he smoothed out one side, pinning it to my waist. The other half was folded together; he made sure that each fold was the same length. He shook these ruffles, measuring once again with his fingers as he tucked the top of this portion into my skirt. This time, his hands traveled lower as he spread the cloth out evenly.

I flinched when his fingers brushed against the lower half of my belly. I instantly stepped away to avoid his touch and Akram gently pulled me back, "don't more, I'm almost done."

He grabbed the remaining piece and pinned it to the back of my shoulder, allowing the rest of the cloth to cover my chest, waist and left arm. He then gestured for me to hold my arm up, so he can tuck the rest of the sari into the nook of my elbow. "There," he led me by the fingers and presented me in front of the mirror. "What do you think?"

The sari ruffled in the front creating these graceful waves of blue and violet to dance and merge together. The print of the cloth was displayed as white spirals twirled along the cloth in carefree motions. The colors made my skin lighter and my eyes brighter, while the skirt made me lean and slightly curvy. It was just like on that day. Jasmine dressing me in that pink sari as Mom braided my hair. It didn't annoy me like when my cousins would force me into dresses. Yes, the sari did make me feel pretty but also proud in some strange way. It was like, not just Melissa was being accepted into their family but me as well.

Then I grimly remembered how it all came crashing down.

"This won't work," I said as I tried to unpin the safety pin from my shoulder. "Thank you Akram, really, but this is too inappropriate."

"How is this inappropriate? Plenty of Indian women wear sarees to meetings-"

"Indian women. I'm white," I bit my bottom lip to stop it from trembling, "it's just doesn't look right."

"That doesn't matter."

"Yeah, it does. I can't wear a sari; it only causes..." I stumbled for the right word, "problems."

"Then why bring it if you weren't going to wear it?"

"I was going to wear it in the privacy of my hotel room. That way I can say I wore it and not hurt Mel's feelings and I wouldn't have to worry about offending anybody."

"How would you offend anyone by wearing a saree?" Akram asked.

His brown eyes held nothing but compassion, urging me to explain so he could understand. I didn't want to tell him, it was too personal. Yet, the words seemed to only spill out of me, "When my mom told me that I was going to enter public school as a fifth grader, I was so excited. I was even going to be in the same school as Michel and Jamie. I had already pictured all of the field trips we would take and all the games we would play at recess. But... I just didn't stop to think about the other kids.

"On my first day, I told Mom I wanted to wear my sari." I exhaled through my nose, "I really loved that sari and it made sense to me, I mean you're supposed to wear a sari for special occasions." I felt the need to explain myself, hoping that Akram would understand that even at the tender age of ten I held nothing but love and respect for my sari. "It was my very first day of school... it was
something that I was excited for and happy. . . " my gut cringed at the memory.

I continued the story, "At the time, I didn't notice how Mom got all quiet but she said it would be okay. She thought it would be a pretty outfit for my first day at school and if Mom was okay with it, I thought everyone else would be too.

"Everything was fine when my parents ushered me to class; kids and their parents were looking at me but I was used to that. Being a white girl with a Native American father and a Hispanic mother, you tend to get a few questionable stares. Once I entered my classroom, I immediately circled the room . . . admiring the colorful posters on the walls, the tiny desks that were pushed into groups and the cute pure white bunny that was placed beside the window. I was too busy taking in my surroundings that I hadn't notice my teacher pulling my parents aside and commenting on my clothes.

"All I do remember was my mom hissing at her, saying that I could wear what I wanted. Adding several swear words in Spanish before my dad gently persuaded her to calm down. The moment my parents left, an Indian girl in my class walked up to me and said, "Western girls shouldn't wear saris. It's part of my culture, stop trying to take what isn't yours."

"I was stunned, I had no idea what to do or what to say. Before I could do anything, my teacher came in and told us to sit at our desks. And of course, I just had to be seated with that same Indian girl, which I learned was named Sasha. I was also grouped in with a Latino boy and an African American girl, both were giving me strange looks as Sasha stared daggers at me."

I tried to laugh, but it came out as a tired sigh, "It only got worse when we had to go up to the front of the class and talk about ourselves. When it was my turn, my teacher was the first to ask me to explain my sari. I was happy to tell them till Sasha shouted, "And it better not me because it's pretty, thief!" The class went wide-eyed as the teacher threatened Sasha with a phone call to her parents. Mrs. Ruth told me to continue but I was too embarrassed to say anything else.

"But it didn't stop the kids from asking questions later on. They asked why I wore a sari and why I didn't look like my parents. And they only got confused when I said that my dad was Native and my mom was Hispanic. They would say that I didn't look Hispanic or Native so I had to explain that I was adopted. Then the Latino boy that was seated next to me said, "then you're not really Hispanic because you're not really their daughter."

I clutched my teeth and dug my nails into my palms, the memory still made me angry. "At that moment I wanted to slam his head against the table and force him to take back what he just said. But I had made a promise with Dad not to lose my temper, so I stayed quiet." I breathed in deeply, "Later at lunch, I had gotten a hamburger, keep in mind that public schools don't give you variety. You eat what they give you or bring your own lunch. Anyway, the moment I picked up the burger, a girl, one of Sasha's friends slapped it out of my hands and told me, "If you're going to steal a culture at least know about it. Indians don't eat cows, weirdo." Again, I wanted so badly to punch her in the face, but I kept my cool and walked back to the line to see if I could get more food. The lunch lady said I couldn't have seconds.

"I tried to find Michel and Jamie during recess but it turned out that the fifth grade was too big that year, so they had to cut the classes in half. We wouldn't be able to have the same lunch or recess, so I was on my own. I tried to keep to myself but Sasha and her friends wouldn't leave me alone. They continued to provoke me, calling me a thief and saying that because I was white, I thought I had the right to take anything I wanted.

"I told them they were wrong but they didn't listen. They began tugging and yanking at my clothes. I begged them to stop but that only encouraged them. Once they got the sari off, Sasha ripped it. Her and her friends tore it apart right in front of me." I inhaled through my nose, "that's when I broke my
promise and broke Sasha's nose in the process. It had to take three teachers to pry me off of her. The school called my parents to meet with Sasha's parents and it was decided that I would be suspended for a week while Sasha got two days."

Akram finally spoke, "Why did she get a shorter time?"

"Because I hit her and her parents said I provoked her by wearing a sari. The school wanted to keep this private, so they did everything they could to please them. On the other hand, my parents were blindsided; my principle said they should have known better, that a girl with my heritage should have worn clothes that were suitable for me." I sighed, "Later my parents sat me down and told me that people like Sasha, when they wear clothes from their homeland; it's seen as old fashion and foreign... like an outsider. All of sudden, if a white person wears it, it's trendy and fashionable or at worse a costume.

"After that I always wore t-shits and jeans, those don't offend anybody." I took a moment to close my eyes, trying to keep the tears back. "That's when I realized that I had to be more mindful of what I do or what I say. Even when it felt good to wear that sari, people would see me as being ridiculous or just another 'white girl nonsense' you know?"

Akram nodded, "yes, but if your parents had only explained-"

My frustration and angry poured out of me, I couldn't stop. "It doesn't matter! The wedding was the only appropriate time to wear it."

"Why?"

"Because I had permission."

He tilted his head, "do you need permission to wear a saree?"

"Yes, cause if you have to see it from their point of view. When a culture is all you have claim to, you get pretty mad when some air-head white girl decides to wear a sari to her first day of public school and for everyone to say she looks cute."

I groaned as middle school came trotting in to ruin my mood even more, "You know, one time I wanted to join my middle school's step team. I thought they were so cool and I thought it would be fun." I sucked in air through my teeth to calm me, but it didn't work. "Nobody told me that stepping was for black people. I mean, most if not all step teams I saw were black but I did see some white members once so I thought why not? I took tap and I thought stepping was another version of tap so I tried out when they had a spot open."

I tried to laugh at myself but it came out forced, "I didn't get in and I thought it was because I wasn't good enough, till I overheard the team talk about me; saying that I was some white bitch trying to steal their style, trying to be something I wasn't. I went to the coach and told her this and do you want to know what she said to me?

"You were the best stepper out of all the girls that auditioned but the team was the one that voted and they wanted someone that was more like them. Besides Amy, a girl with your upbringing should participate in events that are suited for you. I would suggest you'd try out for the cheer squad."

I shook my head, "At that moment, I completely forgot what my parents told me and I told her to screw it. That I wouldn't even bother, because clearly my skin tone had a limit on what I can or cannot do. . . I also told her to go and fuck herself with a dildo." A red-hot flush rose to back of my
neck, I tried to rub the embarrassment away but it remained, "that earned me a week and half of suspension. My temper always did get the better of me."

"What really makes me frustrated, even now was the fact that I was told that I should or shouldn't wear this because I'm white or I should or shouldn't do this because I'm white. People put me in a box, told me how I should act or who I should be. It confused me but I stayed quiet, cause I don't have a right to call out on it. Because I look like the race of people that colonized those very countries. That almost killed off a race of people while enslaving another. Whatever we have to say is irrelevant, yet a part of me wants to speak out-like I have the right to, but I know I don't." I ground my teeth together, "it's like I understand but I don't-it's something I blocked, and-am I making any sense?"

Akram simply smiled, "yes."

I blinked, "really?"

"You are multi-cultural nation, you are bond to have clashes within yourself. Many nations are going through this in this day and age, even me. Granted, it's mostly about religion. You have to find a balance within yourself, find what is purely you and not the voices of your people or at least try to focus on the ones you value more. That's what your father did."

I remembered Grandpa's journal, "note to self, avoid the deep south."

"What?"

"Nothing. Trying to make myself laugh, but it's not working." I sighed and thought for moment, "But Akram, who am I? For the longest time I thought was just some white girl adopted by a multi-cultured family. Yes I was raised by them, but I had my place. I had people judge me, told me as a joke that I should act whiter and I'm-just-I don't know." I threw up my hands in frustration, "What is white? I don't know, should I just be obsessed with cheese? I mean I already love cheese but that's because my mom loves it and puts it on everything. Most Americans love cheese but...but what is American? The First Nation? White? Black? Hispanic? Muslim? Asian? It's all of them, everyone under the fucking rainbow, but am I white? Black? Hispanic? Asian? Muslim? It sounds right, it feels right but-aaaaaggghhh!

I yanked my hands through my hair, the stress finally hitting a breaking point, "just who am I?!"

"Amy, calm down-"

I ignored him and kept going, "I should have been raised as a nation. At least I would know how to deal with my identity. How to avoid being influenced by the wrong people. I would know how to present myself as a nation. How to talk with proper nation etiquette and probably remember that I need a godforsaken suit for the godforsaken world meeting!"

The tears flowed freely now, "Why am I here? I can't even remember to bring a suit to a meeting. How am I gonna handle everything else?" I dropped my head into my hands, "I'm so stupid."

Akram offers his handkerchief and I mumbled, "Thanks." I wiped my eyes and dabbed my nose, "it's really something huh? How one little cloth and one missing suit can lead to you having an identity crisis."

"But you're not alone," Akram stated, "we all have gone through this and for better or for worse, we get through it." He sighed and almost sadly added, "unfortunately, it doesn't get any easier. Most times it gets worse before it gets better."
"That's not what I want to hear."

"But its the truth."

He was silent for a moment, "You said that when you wore the saree it made you proud, why?"

"I don't know," I shrugged, "it just did."

"It's because your Indian American people were taking pride in their culture but still embracing their nation. That's why you wanted to join that step team because it's not what black people take part in, it's what American people take part in."

"Black American," I reminded.

"Still American."

"But."

"What your people seem to forget is that yes, they came from different countries and cultures but they had created something else. In America, you all have different holidays that aren't celebrated back in their original countries. Holidays like Thanksgiving, Labor Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and the Fourth of July; do you see anyone, being white, black, Asian, Native, Indian, or Latin backing out of those holidays? Maybe they don't celebrate it at the same level as another but they'll take the days off, they'll spend time with their families and they'll go and watch the fireworks. Your people are diverse but they are still Americans. No matter what they are or where they're from, they're all a part of you and you are a part of them."

I snorted and looked away; he then lifted my head, gently forcing me to look at him, "do you hear voices?"

My eyes grew wide and I was about to lie till he said, "Amy, we all do. It's rather strange but we can hear our people, mostly during great crisis or change but it's normal for us. You may hear your people say awful things about their own neighbors, how they couldn't possibly be true Americans," he sighed through his nose and added, "or true Indians."

He gave me a knowing smile and continued, "But deep down you know that they're wrong that anyone that was born within your boarders or wished to be part of your nation is American." He held my hand, giving me a reassuring squeeze, "you say you should've been raised a nation but remarkably you learned a nation skill all on your own."

I cocked a brow, "And what is that?"

"Blocking out the voices; now all you need to do is focus on the ones you prefer."

"But what happens if I'm surrounded by a group of people I don't agree with, will their views affect me?"

"Yes," he admitted honestly, "but you just need to be stronger. It's not about who you are but what you wish to be."

I gave a slight nod and he smiled, "and if you ask me maybe this Sasha was jealous. You do look stunning in a saree."

I smiled even wider as he continued, "And if the nation of India is perfectly fine with you wearing one, then you should wear it." He clapped his hands together, "now let's see what I can do with that
Akram worked quickly on my makeup and hair, going for a natural look as he braided from the sides of my head and pulled them together in the center. The rest of my hair was left loose, cascading down an inch past my shoulders. The braids were held in place with a butterfly designed clip as he tugged out a few strands to land gently against my face. That's when I noticed that my bangs were longer, the ends were now touching my cheek bones. Akram also created a subtle butterfly effect around my eyes, using beige and light tan-brown eye shadow. He finished by coaxing my lips with shimmer pink lip gloss.

"Wow, you're really good with makeup," I stated.

He thanked me and then realized, "Oh, one more thing." He sprinted out of the room and when he came back five minutes after, he was wearing a long bright blue tunic shirt with deep violet detailing around the collar and ends of the sleeves. He also wore a pair of white pants, simple ivory green shoes and a long radiant blue-green scarf draped over his shoulders. "I thought we could match," he grinned.

"You look amazing," I said.

"Also," he lifted up a pair of gorgeous blue slippers. They were flat, closed toed shoes, with exhaustive flowers and swirls embroidered in gold. He bent down in front of me and gestured for me to give him my foot.

"I can put on my own shoes," I blushed, embarrassed. He nodded, not fazed by my reaction and left the slippers beside my feet. They fit like a glove, "okay, you can do makeup, fix hair and have women's shoes in your closet. I'm starting to think that you actually do cross dress."

He laughed, "No, no, I keep a pair or two around whenever I have guests."

I cocked a brow, "are these guests usually women?" I teased.

His smile was confident, "I do have some charm." He offered me his arm, "shall we?"

I beamed and hooked my arm around his as he escorted me to the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the official home of the President of India.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

If you are re-reading from FF, you will notice some changes, but don't worry most was just history cause I wrote these chapters in 2014-so I'm just editing a little nothing big. The major plot points are still there.

The Rashtrapati Bhavan was a massive brick building with round arch windows and passage ways. The building stretched in length and had two elevated sections on each side pulled out in front with thin pillars. A long dirt driveway was paved on one side of the building while a huge grand garden stood on the other. I couldn't see much from my point of view, but what I could see was that the Rashtrapati Bhavan sat on a large plot of land, filled with green lawns, elegant fountains and flowers ranging in various colors and styles.

"Does the president of India live here?" I asked.

"No, he lives on Race Course Road, and by the way, Narendra Mobi is my prime minister not a president." Akram answered.

I nodded, "noted."

The streets were once again filled with cars, vans, cabs, animals and people. Turns out that this was an everyday occurrence in India. Vehicles drove side by side in close quarters; barely missing each other by mere inches as they drove past one another. I almost had three freaking heart attacks when any of the drivers got too close. They didn't even use turn singles, they communicated through their car horns, beeping at each other as they turned and switched lanes.

Akram parked the car a block away from the building. We climbed out as I glanced to the intimating structure. I bit my lip nervously, "is it too late to go back and change?"

"Yes," Akram stood at my side, looking to the Bhavan with affection and pride. His brown eyes slid to me and he smiled. "Now chin up," he placed his fingers under my chin. "Back straight," he adjusted my shoulders and lower back, "and walk as if you are goddess."

I chuckled, "can I be a warrior goddess?"

"Even better," he smiled as I followed him inside.

The interior was magnificent; with stunning hallways, detailed paintings and high ceilings, it looked more like palace than an office building. Different names were given to separate halls; the Marble Hall was a room filled with massive oil portraits of what I guessed was royalty. Two statues stood at each side, one was a king the other was a queen, while the center of the room held a crown. The Ashoka Hall was again massive, with red floors, exquisite windows and crystal chandeliers. The Banquet Hall was pretty self-explanatory; filled with one large table and dozens of chairs but again quite luxurious. Half of the building was even a museum for tourists, seriously this place was enormous.

"This is insane," I muttered to myself.
As we grew closer to the Durbar Hall, familiar voices were beginning to bounce off the walls. I clutched my fists and began to chew on my bottom lip. Akram noticed my anxiety and whispered in my ear, "Remember, you are warrior goddess."

I couldn't help but grin, "And what are you?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm your consort."

I laughed, "Okay, take it down a notch."

"But laughter is the best way to get rid of nerves."

I nodded, feeling relaxed till Arthur said, "What are you wearing?"

The tension in my shoulders returned but I hid this fact with a smile. "It's a sari," I gave a quick twirl and winked, "don't I look pretty?"

"Yes, you do," Francis proclaimed and narrowed his eyes at the Englishman, "what happen to being a gentleman Britain?"

Arthur spared Francis a glare before explaining, "She looks lovely. I am only stating that she should wear clothing suitable for a meeting."

"I think she looks nice," Matthew added, "besides a lot of women back at my place wear saris for business meetings."

"But this is India not Canada, she should wear suits like the rest of us."

"I'm right here folks," I waved my hands in the air, "right here."

"What are you wearing?!"

I sighed and turned to face Ludwig and Gilbert, "It is clothing, Mr. Germany."

"Don't be coy," Ludwig hissed, "why aren't you wearing your suit?"

"I lost it," I said innocently.

"What? When?"

"Around the time of my little detour from the G9 meeting."

Ludwig inhaled and exhaled through his nose, forming a rumbling sound in the back of his throat that he didn't even realize he was making. He rubbed the bridge of his nose for a moment and looked at me with a piercing glare. "The moment we get back to Berlin, we are heading straight to the Mauer Park."

I saluted him, "yes sir, we'll go shopping, sir," I remarked sarcastically.

The vein in his forehead throbbed but he decided to leave me be and walked into the Durbar Hall.

Francis said, "He is the only man I know that can make shopping sound threatening."

Toris Laurinaitis loosen his tie to shake out his collar, trying to cool himself off. The humidity was
uncomfortably high that day, causing the heat to increase and the air to thicken. Being inside only made these problems worse, especially when the air conditioner was broken.

"Ugh, why does this like, have to happen today?" Feliks Łukasiewicz complained, leaning back on his chair. "God, why does India have to be so hot?" He fanned himself with his folder, "I mean, like seriously, why can't we have our meeting at the hotel? It's only ten minutes away and the A/C works."

Toris pulls out a hair tie from his pocket, "It's not that hot Poland."

"Says the guy that's putting his hair up in a ponytail," the blond mumbled.

He ignored his friend, arranging and rearranging his papers.

Feliks pouted and then smirked, "well look who just walked in."

He raised an eyebrow curiously and turned around to find a group of nations entering, which wasn't surprising or interesting, but the center of that group was an entirely different topic. Amy Hawkfeather, the successor to the United States of America. Once again, this young girl reminded Toris of how remarkably similar she was to the late America. Not just in her looks but in her character; being surrounded by the nations as she was now, laughing and poking fun at each of them. Her smile continuing to dazzle them and attract more to her light.

He smiled fondly, just like Alfred.

"What's this?" Feliks wiggled his brows, "are you checking her out?"

"What! No," he snapped.

"Uh-huh, sure," the blond smirked, "You'll looking at her like you used to look at Belarus. Oh god, please tell me you are finally over her, cause with America you," he took a moment to think. "May, somewhat have a chance."

Toris blushed in embarrassment, "It's not like that! She reminds me of Alfred, that's all. And what do you mean by 'somewhat'?"

"Have you seen the competition?" Feliks gestured the brunet to look back at the group. It had grown larger, adding the nations of Hungary, Austria, Spain and Italy. "You got Romano," the elder of the Italian brothers was making his way towards Amy, greeting her with a hug and a kiss on both cheeks. "Then we have Turkey, practically undressing her with his eyes," Feliks guides Toris to the masked nation.

"How can you tell? He's wearing a mask."

"I just can," the Polish man exclaimed and continued. "Then we got Denmark, being the huge flirt that he is. Norway will try and get in the way, just to one up him. Even some of the girls want a chance with her," he pointed to Brazil.

Toris looked to each one of these nations; all were creative and intriguing in their own ways. They were exciting and adventurous while he was shy and nervous. His stomach twisted into a knot as he held himself by the sides. "I get it Poland, I'm not like them and that's fine. I only wish to watch out for Ms. America. Look after her like Alfred did for me."

"And denial isn't just a river in Egypt."
Before Toris could counter back with his own snarky comment, Feliks exclaimed, "She's coming this way!" Toris tried to turn around but Feliks stopped him. "Don't look. Don't look. Be cool, be cool."

"Calm down Poland, this is not a big deal."

"Of course it is," Feliks hissed, "I mean, hello, she's not here to see me, but you."

Amy sprinted through the aisle of desks to wrap her arms around Raivis who was sitting in the desk in front of them.

"Or I could be wrong."

Toris sighed and hid his face in his hand. No matter how many years pass, he will never understand what goes through the Polish man's head.

"So what's the main topic of the day?" Amy asked Raivis as she sat beside him.

The boy shrugged, "mostly small economy issues in East Europe. Everything else is more like a checkup."

"That sounds exciting," her voice was filled with sarcastic venom.

Feliks cleared his throat loudly, making sure both nations would hear. Toris looked away, feeling once again embarrassed by his friend's actions. "Are you like, not even going to bother saying hello to us?"

"I don't know, why don't you just whack me with a stick? That's usually how you get your way," Amy grinned and Toris couldn't help but smile.

Feliks leaned against Toris and asked in Polish, "What do you see in her?"

"Clearly the question I need to ask myself is, what do I see in you?" he snapped back in his native tongue.

"Are these two always like this?" Amy looked to Raivis as he said, "yeah, pretty much."

"I guess I'm the only gentleman here. Hello Ms. America," Estonia stood from his chair beside Raivis and offered her his hand.

"Hey," she dragged out the word as she smiled nervously. Toris could see the wheels in her head turning, searching for a name. "Edward."

Feliks giggled and Estonia corrected her, "My name's Eduard."

"Well at least I was close," she smiled awkwardly.

"That was actually his nickname for five years," Raivis added.

Eduard groaned, "Do not bring that up. We are over twilight."

"Speak for yourself!" Feliks hissed, "I mean the way it ended was too rushed and then that kid?! Like what the fuck. That kid was just thrown in, like, oh, look kids see what happens when you have sex for the first time, you become pregnant and die. Like that coach said from Mean Girls."

Toris stood and whispered to Amy, "whatever you do, don't bring up Harry Potter."
She nodded, "done."

As Eduard comforted Feliks over the *twilight* series and movie industry. Raivis changed the subject and asked Amy, "So, do you have your report?"

"Huh?"

"Everyone has to give a report, you know like current events."

Amy's eyes widened and hissed, "fuck."

"And isn't like, America one of the first to go," Feliks added, completely discarding *twilight*.

She pulled out her smart phone from her small clutch purse. "Phone, don't fail me now!" She pressed the on button and her smile fell, "No signal?! How the fuck could there be no signal?!"

"Everyone, please take your seats, the world meeting will begin shortly," Germany announced.

"I'm so dead. . . Raivis hold me," she leaned against the brunette.

He patted her on the back, "you're gonna be okay."

"That's what you think. You don't have to go home with him."

Feliks glanced back to Toris, "they sure are friendly, huh."

Toris rolled his eyes; Feliks was being incredibly persistent on the subject and it was beginning to annoy the Lithuanian. But still, he couldn't deny that these two did seem to be at ease with one another. Amy was confiding to Raivis, treating him like he had known him for years, when in truth it was only a couple of weeks. Toris had heard from Eduard that the Latvian had spent some time with the American. First joining her on her training sessions with Germany and later, taking a trip to Rome.

In this short period of time Raivis seemed to be a completely different person. Usually the boy would get flushed around members of the opposite sex. He would fumble with his words and stare at the floor. Belarus was one of the worse for he was terrified of the nation. He wouldn't be able to say a single word while desperately looking for an escape route. That was not the Raivis Toris was seeing now. He wasn't stuttering or trembling with nerves. This Raivis was relaxed and confident in what he said. He stood tall, made full eye contact and even cracked a few of his own jokes towards Amy.

Toris smiled; Raivis was no longer that shy little boy he knew. He was maturing, becoming a strong, respectful nation.

*Gosh, I sound like a mother.* He rubbed the back of his neck, hoping to ease the blush that was forming.

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I sat there, literally freaking out. What was I going to do? *Oh god, why did no one tell me about this.* . . . Then I remembered what Ludwig had said to me weeks ago.

"Make sure to have a report ready. It doesn't have to be big, something small like economy updates or changes to politics would be fine."

"Uh-huh, yeah," I mumbled as I texted Michel.
Oh fuck.

I leaned forward to press my head to the desk, mentally chanting, *stupid . . . stupid . . . stupid.*

After twenty minutes of panicking, hiding my phone under the desk, and frantically waving it around for signal. I decided it was time to take my chances outside of this dome shaped room. I had plenty of exits, they were all around me but I couldn't just run out. Each nation had around eight to ten minutes for their speeches. If they had bigger issues and questions were tossed around, they would talk longer. Luckily the nation of Korea didn't have much to say except for the new video game program that would be taking virtual-reality to a whole another level.

In the next five years we might be able to have home game stations like from the animes of *.hack* and *Sword Art Online*. I nodded, liking the idea, but then I remembered how the plots went. Especially the part where when you die in the game, you die in real life. No thanks.

I raised my hand, "Um, Mr. Germany, can I go to the restroom?"

"No. Who's next?" he brushed me aside and looked to the room, searching for another volunteer. If no one volunteered, he would pick someone; this reminded me too much like high school.

"Seriously? Ludwig, come on."

"No," he said sternly, "You are not running off again."

"Running off to where? We're in Delhi, I have no idea where anything is."

"That's what we thought about Berlin," Gilbert proclaimed.

I gave him a look, "I had friends in Berlin. I don't know anyone here." I turned back to his brother, "Germany, please I need to go."

"Fine," Ludwig sighed, "but you will have an escort."

"An escort? To the restroom? Really?"

"It's either that or you stay."

I groaned, "Fine."

"Hey Potato Bastard," Lovino rose from his seat, "I'll go."

"We want America to come back, right," Gilbert smirked, his eyes shining with a mischievous glint. His suggestive tone made me blush; I knew what he was hinting at. My ears burned as several nations chuckled and grinned at my embarrassment. "Wouldn't it make more sense for my escort to be a girl," I stated calmly.

Raquel raised her hand, "I'll take her." She turned to me and winked.

"Anyone but her."

Ludwig groaned and pointed to Feliks, "Poland, take her."

The blond cocked a brow, "why me? I'm not a girl."

"You act like one," said Gilbert.
"Well, at least I'm not an asshole."

"Enough," Ludwig exclaimed, "just make sure she doesn't run off."

I whined, "I won't," as Feliks flicked a hand to Toris, "you take her."

"What? No I-"

"Screw it," I jumped to my feet and walked out through an exit on my left. After a minute of hesitation, Toris fell into step beside me. "This is so stupid. I don't need a babysitter to go to the restroom. I mean seriously, I'm not going anywhere."

Toris gave an apologetic smile, "they're just worried."

"Controlling is more like it," I muttered.

"They don't want anything to happen to you," he persisted. "You were off the grid for nearly two days, they were afraid something had happen."

*Oh, they had no idea.*

The restroom wasn't far, I mean it was just around the corner. I leaned against the wall and began to search for signal. Toris didn't ask any questions, he figured that my excuse was a ruse. I scrolled through the search engines, looking for articles or facts that would save my ass. After passing through the photo-shoot of Kim Kardashian and her now seven year old daughter North, Jennifer Lawrence's latest movie trailer, and a release date for the *Chain of Thorns* movie. I was able to find Isabella Garcia's address to Congress about the pharmacy companies and their unlawful loopholes that were undermining the health care act and charging people with unusual shipping taxes.

I continued scrolling, not finding much else. Then an email alert from Michel took my attention. The subject of the email was written in capital letters: YOU NEED TO SEE THIS. I opened it up to find an article about Alabama and how they had elected their first gay man governor.

I blinked, "Holy shit."

"What is it?" Toris asked.

"Alabama elected a gay man as their governor."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"Yeah, but its Alabama. Have you ever been to that state?"

"No," he said, "but I do know the history. Did you know Alfred marched with Martin Luther King in 1965?"

"He did?" but it didn't make any sense, Grandpa wrote that Alfred left for Vietnam after his wedding day, which was in 1964. He didn't come back till 1968. "Wasn't that also around the time of the Vietnam war?"

"After a year on the field he came back to speak with his president. I remember him telling me how irritated he was of the fact that he had to leave his men behind and all for a meeting he had no interest in. Then when he returned to his capital he saw the television broadcast of Bloody Sunday."

"Did he know about Civil Rights Movement?"
"Yes, and he was a big part of it, he also protested in Birmingham in 1963."

"Wasn't that the children's march?"

"He had a young face, it was easy for him to play the role of a seventeen year old. But his involvement was one of the reasons his Congress sent him away. He was all over the newspapers and television broadcasts, he was becoming too well known."

"But if people had known that he was America, it would have brought them together."

Toris sighed sadly, "Unfortunately the people in his Congress saw the activists as a disturbance of the peace."

"Bullshit."

"That's what Alfred said, and some were worried that they were losing their control over him. He was siding with King, so they decided to send him away, let him focus on the war instead."

"Did it work?" I asked.

"Yes, you see Amy when . . . we enter into a war and take part in that war, we lose sight on what is happening at home. We enter this . . . battle mode, you could say. We forget those things so we could protect our men that are fighting beside us. It's not like Alfred didn't care, it's that he had to take care of his men. Being white or black, he wished for all to go back home to their families."

"Why did they bring him back after a year?"

"A report, but that was all a ruse. They just wanted to prove that Alfred was back on their side."

I smiled knowingly, "But it didn't work. He ran straight to Selma after he saw the broadcast."

He nodded, "he joined King and the activists in March but he was followed. Members of his Congress sent agents to bring him back to Washington, they even tried to charge him of desertion if he didn't return. But Alfred was a rebel at heart and didn't back down. His Congress tried to play at his heart, proclaiming that he was letting his men down." He gave a half smile, "And he told them that he didn't have the right to fight for democracy in another country when members of his own people were treated like second class citizens."

"But still he was sent back to Vietnam for another three years."

"A punishment for making some of his members of Congress look like fools."

We were silent for a moment, till I asked, "Why was Raivis sent to Vietnam?"

Toris, didn't ask how I knew. He simply inhaled a calming breath, "He foolishly assumed that Russia would allow us to have friends and then asked if he could be friends with Alfred. I'm sure you could imagine how angry Russia was."

"What happened to him?" This question was meant for the large country, but I didn't have to explain. It was like Toris could read my mind, for he spoke of Ivan not Raivis.

"He had difficult leaders and the revolution didn't help." He closed his eyes, "I stopped trying to understand him a long time ago."

When he said this, I couldn't help but think about Alfred. How he seemed to split within himself and become a different person. No matter how many enemies he had to face, he had to fight against
himself most of all. Overcoming the racism of the Klan and the prejudices of certain members of Congress. Alfred fought against all that and sometimes he was on his own but most times he had someone to bear his problems to, being Grandpa or great uncle John or . . . "Did Martin Luther King know about Alfred?"

"Yes, and he was a dear friend to him," he said.

Friend.

That was powerful word and from the pages of Grandpa's journal I had realized that people could only do so much on their own. Sometimes, another person was needed in order to save someone from their own despair.

My phone vibrated, shaking me out of my thoughts. It was a text from Michel, "A GAY governor?! Damn Alabama, who knew you could be so progressive! To honor you, I shall marry in your state and you'll be my best man. No backing out! It is my day of course. :P"

I grinned at the screen and Toris asked, "What's so funny?"

"Michel just invited me to his future wedding in Alabama. Do you want to be my date?" I asked playfully. "I cannot show up to a gay wedding by myself, none of the guys will pay for my drinks."

He laughed, "Is that all?"

"Well, can you dance?"

He clutched his hands into fists and started to spin them around each other in front of his mid-section. It was a move that I've usually saw in disco. I laughed harder, "oh god, never mind. I'm taking Antonio."

"Well it is a gay wedding, you would have a hard time keeping him to yourself."

I snorted as Lovino popped in from around the corner, "Hey, what's taking you so long?" He took a moment to glare at Toris before turning back to me with a smile. "We've been waiting."

"Right, right, I'm done." I looked to Toris, "We were just working on our dance moves." I spun my fists just as he had done and began to hum the song 'Shake It Off'.

Toris covered his mouth to hide his smile as I continued to sing in a high pitch tone, "Shake it off, I shake it off. Whoa-ho, whooo."

Toris and I laughed as Lovino frowned, "come on, everyone's waiting." He turned and began to walk back into the meeting room.

"What crawled up his butt," I mumbled.

Toris shrugged as we followed behind him. Nothing changed at the meeting, I and several other nations said their piece. I ended mine with the statement: "Alabama has elected a gay man as governor! Yay!" I borrowed a small rainbow flag from Matthew and waved it in the air. Some nations, I won't name names, glared at me. The number of countries that had outlawed homosexuality had gone through some major changes over recent years; India and Egypt being a few. Twenty-fourteen was a huge year for protests, fighting against the oppressive laws and governments; it was an emotional time for everyone around the world. Slowly but surely things got better, justice was served, apologies were made and memorials were built. There's more work to be done, as Michel always stated after a win for the LGBTQA but we're making steps in the right
direction and that's what counts.

The day ended with Akram announcing that there would be a dinner for us the day after tomorrow. It will be held here, for this place was massive enough for everyone to eat and dance.

"Great, another ball," I mumbled as I stared out the car window. It was raining, again. The droplets came down at average speed, tapping at our windows softly.

"You do not like balls?" Akram asked with a smile.

"I'm more casual. Give me a baroque with a radio on the beach any day."

It was pouring the moment we arrived at the cottage. I sprinted to the door, waiting for Akram to open it. Instead he stood out there with his palms out, allowing the water to splash against his skin.

"Seriously?! Come on, open the door." I screeched.

"It's just a little water," he grinned, "it won't bite."

Music began to play next door; the sound of drums and bells started the beat as small string instruments and exotic flutes brought out the melody. Someone, a man, began to sing and Akram grinned and moved his feet to the beat.

I looked out to the street, finding a group of women and small children dancing together. They waved their arms in the air as their feet splashed water. For a moment, I forgot about the rain and tapped my foot to the rhythm. One dancer, around my age made eye contact with me and gestured for me to join her. I shook my head but Akram grabbed me by the hand and pulled me towards the girl. I squealed when the rain touched my skin but I ignored the urge to yank my hand away.

The girl lifted up her skirt, showing me her feet as they shuffled to the beat. She stopped and looked at me, waiting. Realizing that she wanted me to mimic her, I retraced her steps in my head and moved my feet to the song in perfect sync.

She beamed and swayed her body to the beat, shaking her hips and twirling a long scarf around her. I mimicked her moves to the dot; shuffling my feet as I swayed my arms and torso to the rhythm. I lost myself in the music and dancers. All of my nerves and anxiety from today were completely washed away. My mind went blank, falling under the song’s enchantment. That's what I loved about music and dance. They silenced everything, blocking out the problems of the past and worries of the future. Allowing a person to only focus on the present and to enjoy it.

When the rain stopped, the dancers and musicians packed up their things and scattered to their homes.

I raised a brow, "okay when it rains they dance, but when it doesn't they stay home?"

"It's because of the mosquitoes," Akram proclaimed as he swatted the bugs away.

Now that he had mentioned them, I began to notice black, buzzing dots flying around. We ran back into the house, both of us soaked to the bone. Hani greeted Akram by jumping on him and licking his face. He grinned and scratched the mix behind his ears. The scene reminded me of Lady and my heart squeezed at the thought.
Akram pulled out some towels from a drawer and draped one over my head. "I'll run a bath, give me a few minutes."

He turned the corner and I glanced to Hani, "he's a nice guy, you're a lucky dog."

Hani panted through his mouth, with his tongue out. He almost looked like he was smiling.

"The bath's ready," Akram called and I followed his voice to the bathroom. The scent of jasmine hit me like truck, overwhelming my senses. He watched me as I blinked my eyes and rubbed my nose, "Too much jasmine, let me add some vanilla. It will calm the scent."

He added three drops and instantly the aroma settled. He stood, pointed to the silk robe and an empty hamper beside me and walked out the door. I unwrapped the sari, unfolding the tucks and nicks that Akram had made. The cloth was wet, cold and beginning to smell. I placed it carefully inside the hamper, along with the top and skirt and practically dove for the tub.

When I got out twenty minutes later, I found Akram in the living room, sitting on the floor and burning incenses. He sat cross legged, with his back straight and eyes closed. He was breathing calmly through his nose and Hani was lying beside him.

"I'm done," I said softly.

He looked up and nodded, "good, I left some clothes for you in your room. And before you ask, no I didn't have them already in my closet. I borrowed them from my neighbor."

I cracked a smile, "it's okay if you're a cross dresser, I won't judge."

"I may believe that all life is sacred but if you call me a cross dresser one more time, I will smack you," he said this with a smile, so it was hard to tell if he was joking or being serious. I decided it was half and half.

"Okay, okay, no need to be violent." I joked as I entered my room.

I changed into a bright teal tunic with a V-neckline that was festooned with white lace around the collar. It came to my mid-thigh and the sleeves were loose around my wrists. The matching pants were too short, leaving my calves exposed but I didn't really care. It was too humid to be fully clothed and it was nice to have my legs breathe after wearing a skirt all day.

Once I jumped into bed my phone ringed, it was a video call from Michel. I answered with a huge grin, "you saved my ass this morning!"

"Tell me something I don't know," he smiled.

"What did you do to your hair?" His head was shaved at the sides, leaving the remaining curls flow freely at the top.

"You like?" he brushed a hand through his hair, "my roommate Aiden talked me into it, nice right?"

I nodded, "you look fierce," I snapped my fingers.

"Don't do that. How you've been? How was Rome? Come on don't be holding out on me!"

"What time is it over there? Don't you have class?" I asked.

"Nah, got all of my classes scheduled for the afternoon. God, I love college." Then he redirected the subject back to me, "now tell me what's been going on?"
"Running laps, eating sausage, learning how to kill a man in a hundred different ways." I shrugged my shoulders, "the usual."

He narrowed his eyes, "now you know that is not what I am asking. How did the trip go? What did you see? What did you do . . . or who did you do?"

I rolled my eyes, "no one. I'm not you."

"You know you want to be," he winked. "But I'm serious, you told me about Berlin and your little detour with your *friends.*" He said this word with a cocked brow, making a look that said: *I know you're hiding something.* "I just want to know what went down in Rome."

"I stayed at Feliciano and Lovino's villa, swam in their pool, ate their food and went to nearly every museum that Rome had to offer."

"Yawn," he placed his palm over his mouth.

I sighed and summed up the whole story about hanging out with Raivis and Peter, venturing through the city and dancing at bars with Antonio. Then I told Michel of Karen, the America before Alfred. I also added that when Arthur was drunk he told me of his sins towards Karen and her people.

"Holy shit," Michel whispered. "Well I don't want to rub salt into the wound but the English did more than that."

"I know Michel," I hissed, "But one demon at a time okay. Arthur isn't really the sharing type."

"Yeah but I'm taking a world history class and oh my god, there is a ton of shit nobody teaches you in public school."

"History? Aren't you in an art school?"

"Yeah, but the government has required us to have at least two semesters of the cores. So I'm getting it all done in my freshmen year, all that math, science, and English junk but history has been interesting. I mean, I just keep picturing the nations being part of that history and its just mind blowing, you know. It's even inspired some of my art, check it out."

I checked my email to find three sketches; one was of Francis with shorter hair and dressed in armor with a long red cape. His hand was over a young girl's face; this girl was also wearing armor and wielding a sword in front of her chest. This girl was Joan of Arc. The background was colored blue and white with red splattered over it.

The other two were drawings of Toris; his hair was tied back in both sketches but he wielded different weapons. One sketch had no background, showing Toris at his front, kneeling on the ground and holding himself up by a staff. He wore a chest plate with a yellow tunic underneath and a green cape draped over his shoulders. He was covered in splattered blood and his blue-green eyes were in a fierce warrior trance.

The second picture had a black background with tiny red embers sparking at the corner. There was no fire in the drawing but Michel had brought the shadows alive by shading the light against Toris. The nation was drawn by the side with three wolves next to him. He was wearing full body armor with gray gloves and a matching cape. The wolves were black with sharp white teeth and bright gold eyes. They were all snarling, bearing their fangs as Toris stringed an arrow through a bow and gave a smile that sent cold shivers down my spine.

I slid back to Michel, "I see you had Toris on your mind. Seriously man if you have a crush on him,
"just tell me."

"That ain't it, we just finished learning about the medieval era. You know with knights and princesses and stuff; did you know that Lithuania and Poland were once part of a commonwealth and had defeated the Teutonic Knights."

"Dude, I live with the former Teutonic Knights, so yeah I know."

"Well sorry, Miss Know It All. Anyway I saw your reaction to the second picture of Toris, you had that face that said: Oh Toris, take me now!"

I laughed, "You're delusional. I was just surprised by his smile, it just didn't look like him."

"Oh," he wiggled his eyebrows, "so you two are close?"

I sighed in annoyance, "No Michel."

He groaned, "Come on, there had to be some flirting."

"The only flirting that really went on was Lovino and I didn't even notice till Peter pointed it out."

"Wait," his eyes widened, "Lovino? When? Where? Tell me now!"

I continued the story of my vacation in Rome but added the parts with Lovi. My mistake on pulling his curl, our little inside jokes during the tours of the city and the night we drove Arthur home and he kissed Francis.

"Wait, Arthur kissed Francis?! You know I'm not that surprised, those two, they have something," Michel proclaimed.

"I'm not gonna try and understand that, there are things people should leave alone." I recalled the morning Lovino found me dancing in the yard and then both of dancing at the Spanish Steps while Feliciano singed.

He chuckled, "seriously, that sounded like a movie scene."

"Well it happened and later on when Peter told me he was flirting with me-"

"Girl, it took you that long?" He moaned, "you poor thing, I didn't realize how much you needed me!"

I rolled my eyes again and finished the story, "Anyway, I got nervous cause I'm not ready for a relationship and there's a bet going on-"

"He's doing it for the bet!" Michel exclaimed, "Oh hell no, where's this bastard? I'm gonna punch him in the face."

"Dude chill, he's not, but I thought he was. So when he tried to make a move, I pushed him into a fountain."

"Yes! Team Toris for life!"

"That's not the end," I stated, "the end is with me and Lovino making up and then . . ."

"And then, what?"
"He asked me to kiss him, so I did-"

"No way?!"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Things got emotional, and Lovi is a sweet guy and he's just lonely-"

"Then tell him to go on a dating site, like normal people."

I gave him a look, "you do realize he's a nation and over two thousand years old right?"

"Okay, okay, I see your point but Amy do you even like him?"

"I don't know. I told him we should start out as friends and see where it leads."

"In other words 'no'."

"It's not. He's been with other nations and they don't stick around for long. He needs a friend not a girlfriend."

"How do you know what he needs?"

"Elizabeta thinks I know what he needs," I sighed, "Michel, it's all very confusing and I can't get involved with that kind of drama. Besides I'm perfectly fine with being single."

"You've been single you're entirely life. Come on be free. As James would say, 'let your freak fab fly'."

I shook my head, "no."

"Well, whoever you end up with, I just want this guy to be good to you. And if its girl," he wiggled his brows once again, "you know this is around the time girls experiment with their sexuality, maybe you should take Brazil on her offer. You know, now that I think about it, you two would make a cute couple."

"How about you go fuck yourself," I snarled.

He held up a dildo and winked, "I already got that covered."

I covered my eyes, "I did not need to see that."

"Hey Michel you home?"

"Who's that?" I asked.

Michel grinned, "That's Ethan we're kinda, seeing each other. Do you want to meet him?"

"Sure," I smiled.

Michel jumped to his door and opened to reveal a very handsome young man. This guy had short auburn hair, dark eyes and had the physic of a swimmer. Michel jerked him over to the computer and proclaimed proudly, "Ethan meet Amy, my best friend; Amy meet Ethan, my soon to be boyfriend."

Ethan flushed but smiled, "it's nice to finally meet you. Michel talks about you non-stop, if you were
a guy I would be kinda jealous."

"Well no need to worry, I got a vagina," I gave a thumbs-up, "you're okay."

Ethan laughed and asked awkwardly, "Where are you going to school?"

"I'm traveling, school can wait you know."

"Really? Where are you now?"

"Delhi, India," I answered.

"Oh wow that's so cool, what's it like?"

"Humid, crowded and traffic is insane but the people are nice."

"Have you tried some of the food?" he asked, "You gotta have some Kati rolls and momos; they're amazing."

"I'll make sure to ask Akram where we can get some."

Michel jumped in, "who's Akram?"

"You don't remember? He came with Arthur to my house," when he continued to give the same puzzled expression I said, "the Indian guy."

"Oh, right," he winked. "You see Ethan Amy's a little vixen, gathering the hearts of men and putting them in her little jar."

"Michel!"

"I have a feeling you're talking about yourself more than her," Ethan smirked.

"Do you wish to find out?" he smiled playfully.

"Okay," I dragged out the word, "I'm just gonna leave you two alone."

"Wait Amy," Michel waved out his hand for me to stop and then blew me a kiss. "I miss you."

I smiled, "I miss you too."

"Make sure to call Jamie, she'll get off from her classes at three and if I do the math correctly it will be eleven for you."

"Try twelve-thirty."

"Don't be smart!" he grinned, "love you."

"Love you too."

With those final words we ended the call.

I killed time by spending it with Akram, playing with Hani, watching TV and learning how to cook these Kati rolls and momos and I gotta say they were pretty amazing. I was starting to like this Ethan.
Akram even got me to meditate with him, he said it would help relax me and improve my focus. The meditation was definitely relaxing but I couldn't help but think about Aang and Korra from the Avatar series. I had to keep stopping myself from putting my fists together.

When twelve-thirty came around, I made the call to Jamie. She answered on the first ring, "Amy!" she squealed happily and called out, "Ella! Dani! It's Amy!"

The girls came running and I gasped, "what the heck, is everyone getting makeovers?" Ella was no longer a honey-blond but a chestnut-brunette. Her hair was still curled to perfection and cascaded over shoulders like a princess. Daniela chopped off her long locks, now her hair fell around her jaw in a smart, elegant style.

"You are one to talk," Daniela remarked, "you're growing out your hair."

"If you ask me."

Daniela rolled her eyes at Ella, "no one did."

She ignored her, "I think the pixie hair style fits her, not," she gestured to my head, "this."

"I think she looks cute," Jamie stated.

"Thank you," I proclaimed.

"I am only saying," said Ella.

Daniela changed the subject, "how are you? Last time we heard you were in Rome."

"I was, now I'm in Delhi."

"What's it like?"

"Crowded but friendly," I smiled, "the food's good, there are a lot of animals and people don't seem to care that I wear a sari."

"You wore your sari!" Jamie exclaimed, "Send me a picture."

I was prepared for this and had taken a few pictures before I had left for the meeting. Jamie opened my text and showed them to the others.

"You look so pretty," Daniela smiled.

"Let me see that," Ella yanked Jamie's phone away from her and analyzed the photos, the wheels in her head turning. "The colors. The patterns. The style . . . Yes, yes, yes, yes! I need my sketch pad," she jumped from her chair and ran out of the room.

"There she goes," Daniela sighed.

"I guess it will be awhile before I get my phone back," Jamie muttered.

"How's school?" I asked.

Jamie grinned, "It's amazing! Julliard is just awesome and oh my god Amy you would love my US history professor! I mean, it sucks that I have to take these classes, but he really knows his stuff and he's so interesting you know. Makes history come alive with stories and fun facts."
I nodded, "that's cool."

"Tell her about the dance program," said Daniela.

"Oh yeah, Amy, the dancers are epic. The dance department practice every form of dance and they hold a performance every semester for the students and I've been seeing some of their routines and it's just wow."

"Oh well let me show you guys what I just learn," I placed my phone on the night stand, stepped back and began to tap my feet and move my arms like the street dancers.

Jamie played a song from her computer, giving me a beat to follow as her and Daniela clapped along. A knock from the door jolted me from my dancing and I turned to find Akram poking his head in.

"Ms. America, what are you doing? It's nearly one in the morning."

"Sorry Akram," I whispered.

"Why did he call you Ms. America?" Daniela questioned.

Akram froze as Jamie's eyes widened and I exclaimed, "it's my nickname, because you know, I'm white, blond, blue eyed: practically what everyone around the world believes we Americans look like. It's a joke."

"Right, a joke," Akram smiled.

She raised a brow in suspicion, "okay."

"Are these your friends," Akram asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Yeah, Akram you met Jamie before and the girl beside her is Daniela," I proclaimed.

The girls said their 'hellos' as Akram bowed to them, "good evening ladies." Then he looked up to me and with a single gaze, he sends a silent message to end this quickly. "Well, I'm sorry I had interrupted you," he said to my friends. "Good night."

Once he was out of the room Daniela asked, "Who is that man? Is he friend of Sanjay's?"

"No, he's a friend of Arthur's and we're staying with him while we're visiting Delhi."

Daniela nodded, "I see . . . he's kinda cute."

"That's kinda random," said Jamie.

She shrugged, "I call it as I see it."

"Oh that reminds me," Jamie glared at me, "what the heck is going on with you and Lovino?"

"Oh god," I groaned. "Michel told you?"

"Yes he did, now talk. What's your deal with him?"

"It's complicated," I decided to use the very common phrase among the nations.

"This is not facebook. It's bullshit and you know it," Daniela proclaimed.
I sighed, "I'm taking it slow, trying to be friends with him-

"He doesn't want to be your friend he wants to fuck you," Ella remarked as she struts back to the computer to reveal her new drawings.

"Great, you told her too," I mumbled.

Jamie shrugged, "hey they were curious."

"Amy, don't beat around the bush, if you don't like him like that, then don't string him along," Daniela said.

"I'm not stringing him along. I told him about how I felt and he's the one not giving up."

"Then just have sex with him, he'll lose interest," Ella proclaimed calmly. "All men care for is the hunt."

"I'm not sleeping with him," I said sternly.

"Well then, get used to him cause he sounds like the kind of man that won't give up."

I rubbed my face and yawned.

Jamie gave me a worried expression, "Are you tired? We can get off-"

"Nah, nah, did you hear that Michel is seeing this guy Ethan?"

Daniela smirked, "you're late to the party."

"We met him," Ella confirmed, "not very exciting for my taste but cute for Michel."

"Guys," Jamie hissed and turned back to me. "Ethan is funny and very sweet, he and Michel are so precious together."

I smirked, "I see why Michel wants to get married."

The girls' jaws dropped.

"He was joking of course," I added quickly.

"Mon Dieu," Ella shook her head as Daniela sighed.

"Did he happen to mention where," Jamie asked, but by her tone she knew the answer.

"Alabama..."

Ella and Daniela gave a small groan as Jamie proclaimed, "Ethan is from Alabama."

"Oh god, how long has he known the guy?" I asked.

"Two-three months."

"Damn, oh boy has it bad."

"He's always been like this Amy, you know that. He doesn't test the waters, he drives right in."

"Like a fool," Ella stated.
"I can't believe you are French," Daniela mumbled. "Aren't you all supposed to be romantic?"

"That doesn't mean anything. Besides I don't want that boy to hurt him, that's all," she grumbled, hiding her face in her sketch pad.

I beamed, Ella may play cold and detached but deep down she cares. "Keep an eye on him you guys, make sure he doesn't go into the creeper stage."

"Will do," Jamie saluted.

We said our 'goodbyes', promising that we would talk again soon. The girls started making plans for the evening, hitting the town once again. Laughing and cracking their inside jokes with one another. Jamie giggled and glanced back to me, "You know this would be more fun with you here."

I gave a tiny smile, "thanks."

"Love you."

"Love you too," I waved as she signed off.

The next day Akram borrowed more clothes from his neighbor for the sari was still drying. The outfit was a beautiful shade of green. The blouse was short sleeve but it was covered in a light sheer, making the green shine against the light. The sleeves of that sheer stopped at my wrists and had gold thread sewed around the cuffs and collar of the blouse. The pants were loose but long, the bottom swept against my heels and swayed as if I was wearing a skirt.

Akram and I were a matching set; he wore a long dark green tunic with loose black pants. We sat together during the meeting and nothing new was discussed. It was filled with causal reports, economy updates and environmental changes. In other words, I was bored out of my mind.

"Is it over yet?" I mumbled.

Akram sighed, "Maybe if you had gone to bed earlier, you wouldn't be so tired."

"I'm not tired," I yawned despite myself.

He raised a brow and I whispered, "Okay, maybe a little."

"If no one has nothing else to add," Ludwig paused for a moment, "then the meeting is over."

The nations rose from their seats and began to socialize with one another. An Indian man in a suit walked into the room and came straight for Akram. He said something in his native tongue and Akram nodded. The man walked back into the hall as Akram glanced to me, "My prime minster wishes to speak with me. It will only be a moment."

"Yeah, no problem," I said as he followed the man.

I leaned against my chair and stretched. I had planned to wait for him but the soft echo of music pulled me away from Durbar Hall. I wondered the halls, following the beat of steady drums and the shake of bells. Before long a man started to sing and I stopped, I recognized the voice. I sprinted to the next corner into Ashoka Hall, well in all honestly it looked more like a ballroom than a hall.

Women in bright, colorful dresses were twirling and swaying their bodies to the melody of the band. The dancers swung long cloths around themselves, some even carried bells or small finger size cymbals that they choreographed with the music. The band was made up of men and boys, most
were on drums, each varying in different shapes and sizes. Some had string instruments, some I knew like the violin and the erhu.

The erhu was like a mandolin but with a bigger bass. The other string instruments had names I couldn't place. Most had long necks and fat bellies, some were flat and laid on the floor and a few were played with a bow. The singer was middle aged and had a powerful voice. The women's ages ranged from their early teens to late forties but that didn't render their performance. All were in precise sequence, each shake, step and hand gesture moved together as one.

When the music came to its end, the dancers ceased as one struts to the front to encourage the others and adjust a few flaws. The head clapped her hands and the women and musicians break for a short rest. A girl, the one that I had met the day before spotted me and came running to me.

"It's you," she greeted me with a smile. "Are you here with your husband?"

I blinked in surprise, "Husband?! When did I get married? And to who?"

Her brows furrowed in confusion, "Mr. Verma, my neighbor."

"No, no, no, no, no. He's not my husband."

"Oh, so you are one of his lovers."

"Noooooo. We're friends; just friends,"

"I'm sorry," she bowed her head.

"It's cool." I decided to move this conversation along, "I'm Amy," I shook her hand as she said, "I'm Esana."

"What brings you here Esana?"

"Mr. Verma has hired me and my family to perform for the party tomorrow."

I looked to the performers, "that's a big family. Do you all live next door?"

She giggled, "No, some of us live next door, and others live across the street."

"That's awesome, my family is kinda spread out there. I live in California, I got cousins in Texas and in Hawaii and my grandma has family in Oklahoma."

Her eyes widened, "that's a lot of distance."

"We still keep in touch. So are you and your family professional singers and dancers?"

"Yes, it is a long tradition among my family," she answered and then asked. "Do you come from the same background?"

"My grandparents were once dancers but now a days we do it for fun."

She narrowed her dark eyes, analyzing me. "That is what you say but the eyes say different. I saw how easy it was for you to follow me, you are dancer."

I blushed with pleasure, "thanks." I stuck my hands into my pockets, instantly I felt my iPod and wireless earbuds. "Hey, what kind of music do you like?"
"I don't think you would know any Indian singers but my favorite American singers are Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, oh and Nicki Minaj."

I nodded in acceptance, "I think I got something." I handed her an ear bud, scrolled through my playlist of songs and clicked onto 'Bang Bang.'

The melody blasted out with the bass as Jessie J started the lyrics. Together, we found our tempo and began to shuffle our bodies to the rhythm. It wasn't meant to be perfect, it was goofy and most times we were just showing off our most ridiculous moves. Before long we were just jumping and twirling to the song in our heads. Then when it came to Nicki's part Esana sang along; she wasn't a bad rapper.

"It's me, Jessie, and Ari"

"If they test me they sorry"

"Ride us up like a Harley"

"Then pull off in this Ferrari"

"If he hanging we banging"

"Phone ranging, he slanging"

"It ain't karaoke night but get the mic 'cause I'm singing."

"Damn girl that was awesome," I grinned.

She flushed, "thank you."

"Amy," Toris called from across the ballroom, "Mr. Verma is waiting for you."

"Yeah okay," I nodded.

"Esana!" An older woman exclaimed and gestured for her to gather with the dancers.

"I have to go," she handed me back the earbud.

"See you at the party," I grinned.

She nodded and walked back to the group as Toris came to stand by my side. "You make friends easily."

"Like Alfred?" I asked.

He smiled, "yes."

"Are you sure there wasn't more going on with you two?" I joked, "Cause all I hear is Alfred this and Alfred that. Be honest, you had a man crush on him didn't you?"

Toris chuckled, "if man crush is another way of saying that I respected him, then yes."

"Don't hide in the closet Toris. It's okay, there's nothing but love here."

He laughed harder, "I'm very open to the people I care about being female or male."

"Oh, I know. Gil went into some detail about the nations rolling both ways."
He sighed, "I could just imagine."

"He was wiggling his eyebrows and getting his voice all seductive and stuff. He thinks he's smooth but he ain't."

"You and I have that in common."

"You don't like Gilbert?" I asked.

"I'm not very fond of him," he proclaimed.

Before I could comment; the next song followed, it was one of my favorites: 'Lips Are Movin' by Megan Trainor. I shoved the other earbud to Toris, "put this on!"

He raised a brow but did what he was told, he took a moment to listen to the rhythm. I shook my shoulders as sang along with Megan, motioning for Toris to dance with me. He stepped back, shaking his head but I grabbed his hands and swayed his arms to the beat. He was stiff at first but he quickly loosen up, moving on the balls of his feet as we crossed stepped in sync.

I slid to his side, shuffling my feet in a quickstep. Toris smiled and followed my lead, shaking his legs with quick ball changes and loud stomps. We danced and lip synced to the melody, enjoying each other's silly antics and quirks. Then I held out my hand and without a single shred of hesitation, he pulled me close, spun me and then dipped me at the exact moment the song ended.

"You do realize there is no music playing."

We looked up to find Lovino staring daggers at us but I ignored his rude tone. "We have earbuds, we're not crazy."

Toris pulled me up as Lovino proclaimed, "Germany is about to pop a blood vessel if you continue ran off like this."

"I didn't go anywhere, I'm still here," I stated, annoyed.

"I can see that, but Germany needs to have sight of you. Is it just me or is he acting like a first time mother?"

"It isn't you. Ludwig would put a leash on me if he could."

"There are rumors about his affection for leashes," he smirked in joking tone.

"I do not need to know," I remarked as he gave me a dazzling smile but his eyes were still alert. They slid towards Toris, glaring at him with caution and suspicion.

I raised a brow in uncertainty as he turned me into the opposite direction, away from Toris. "I was thinking you and I should go out for dinner. I heard there's an amazing restaurant not too far from here."

"That sounds great Lovi but Akram and I are going dress shopping," I said apologetically.

"I can come with you, pick something that can show off those beautiful legs," he winked.

"You would like that wouldn't you?"

"Yes, very much," he grinned.
"Well," I unwrapped myself from his embrace, "that's what you say now but you never went shopping with me for formal dresses. You should've seen me in Vienna, I think we went to thirteen or fourteen different shops just to find one dress."

"And it was gorgeous," he grabbed my hand and kissed it. "I couldn't keep my eyes off you."

"Oh, I was wondering where that stare of obsession was coming from," I said in a humorous tone. Toris covered his mouth to hide his laughter, reminding us that he was still here. Lovino glared, "What are you laughing at Baltic."

He bit his lips together in a tight line, "Nothing; nothing at all."

I met Akram at the car; he was leaning against the hood, enjoying the breeze. He sensed my presence as I approached, his eyes sliding to me with a dull gaze. He looked tired, "hey you okay?"

"Hm? Yes I am. Why do you ask?"

"You look worn out," I whispered, but raised my voice again to say, "We don't have to go shopping. We can borrow something from the neighbors."

"No, I'm fine," he said cheerfully. "Besides we are only going to one shop."

We drove in silence, the ride wasn't long and the rain was only a drizzle. Akram entered into the heart of Delhi's downtown market. Again, traffic was jammed pack; he decided it was best to park a block away from our destination. We walked through the crowded streets, weaving around people as we got closer to a little shop. The windows displayed alluring and vibrant silks and cloths. Dresses of eastern and western style hanged along the walls while shoes, jewelry and bags were placed in glass display boxes.

"Mr. Brahman?" Akram called, "Are you here?"

A young woman stepped out from the back room, "Mr. Verma you're early."

"Is that a problem?"

"No," she smiled, "the dress has arrived and I am assuming that this is the young lady that the dress was ordered for?"

"Yes," Akram nodded as an elderly man walked out, "Mr. Verma you got here right on time." He lifted a black garment bag, "you're order's ready."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Go and try it on," Akram smiled.

"Abi, show her to the changing room," the old man asked.

His granddaughter gave a slight nod and gestured for me to follow her to a room with a curtain as a door. She handed me the garment bag, "come out when you're ready."

"Okay," I said as she closed the curtain.
The dress was long, sweeping around my ankles as a small portion trailed behind me. The gown was slimming but yet loose, flowing around my legs and giving me the freedom to move. It was sleeveless with thin straps, the neckline was a portrait aligning against my collar bone and scooping slightly at the back. The color was a light shade of sapphire; it faded subtly as it traveled to the floor, creating a graphic of the late evening sky. But that wasn't all, connecting to the straps of the dress was a sheer cape that draped around my shoulders and swayed freely behind me. In the center of the cape was a peacock outlined in sparkling green thread, feathers of that animal covered the garment causing it to shimmer every time the light touched it.

It was stunning.

I pulled back the curtain and skipped out, swinging my arms to reveal the cape. "This is amazing!"

"Do you like it?" Akram smiled, knowing full well that I did.

"Yes!" I exclaimed, "Akram thank you but you can't pay for this. It's too much-

"Nonsense," he said, "the price is fine."

"But-

He stepped forward, placing his hand on my cheek and craning my neck up to face his sternly set eyes. "You will wear the dress," his smile sent chills down my spine. "I will not take no for an answer."

He turned to the shop owner and said, "We'll take it."

The car ride was once again, silent. Akram said nothing as we drove back to the cottage, sometimes he would adjust the radio or tap on the wheel but other than that he was quiet. He said nothing to me, didn't make a single attempt to talk to me. It was unnerving, the tension was so thick that it could be sliced through with a knife.

I couldn't take the silence any longer. "Um, Akram did something happen with your prime minister?"

All I got in return was silence, so I continued, "if he said anything, you know you can talk to me. It's the least I could do-"

"I'm alright Ms. America," he interrupted. "You have nothing to be concerned about."

Once we arrived to the house, Hani was right at the gate to greet us like always. He jumped in excitement, wagging his tail and licking my face.

"Down Hani, don't get the dress," I lifted the garment bag away from his reach and scratched him behind his ear. He was a happy dog, very pleasant and super sweet. He was friendly towards people, never chased the chickens and barely barked. That's why I could never believe that what happened next was Hani's fault.

His dark eyes slid to his master and he froze. The fur on his back stood at attention as he lowered his head and bared his teeth.

"Hani," I whispered as Akram raised his brows slightly, "what's wrong boy?" He reached out to him slowly but Hani snapped at his hand. He growled harshly as he moved towards Akram, barking furiously at him.

I stepped closer, "Hani-"
"Wait Amy," Akram grabbed my arm and Hani leaped into action. The canine sank his fangs into Akram's forearm and jerked his arm away from mine.

"Hani!" I exclaimed.

Akram tried to pull him off by the fur of his neck but Hani would not let go. He bit harder, breaking skin as blood stained Akram's clothes.

"Hani! Stop!" I cried.

A neighbor, hearing the commotion came running with flat bat. He swung at Hani, smacking him right on the nose. He yelped, releasing Akram from his jaw. The neighbor continued to swing, backing the dog into a corner. More men came to his aid, gathering rope and a post. They surrounded Hani, holding him down as they tied the rope around his jaw and neck.

"Stop!" I shouted, "You're hurting him!"

A man held me back and it took all of my self-control not to sock him in the face. The men jerked Hani to the backyard where they tied him to the post. Two checked on Akram, they pulled back his sleeve reveling his bloody arm. The fangs had pierced the flesh, leaving deep puncture wounds.

Once Hani was secured, Akram reassured his neighbors that he didn't need a hospital and persuaded them to go home. I glanced to Hani, now tied and defeated. "What got into him? That wasn't like him."

"He was former stray," Akram stated calmly as he cleaned his wounds, which were disappearing by the minute. "He must still carry a wild streak."

"A wild streak?" I exclaimed harshly, "that dog wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Yet he harmed me," he remarked coldly. "It will be best to leave him out for the night, let his temper cool."

I bit back my tongue, at least taking comfort that he wouldn't call animal control. He tried to change the subject, asking what I would like for dinner.

"I'm not hungry," I said as I walked back into my room and collapsed into bed.

_This is so messed up._

It didn't make any sense; Hani was a good dog, being a former stray didn't change that. Hani held nothing but love for his owner, what would cause such a drastic change to his personality? Akram didn't look any different, tired for sure but nothing too severe. Yet that cold stare in the shop said otherwise.
I don't know when I fell asleep that night but it wasn't strong enough; my conscious mind still lingering in between reality and dreams.

"Amy . . ."

At first, I didn't hear this voice, but over time it got louder.

"Amy . . ."

It sounded like it was in pain and crying out for help.

"Amy . . ."

I groaned and sat up to find no one in my room, till I found a shadowy figure in the corner.

"Run . . ."

In a blink of an eye the figure vanished and reappeared from the corner to the foot of my bed. It lunged for me and I screamed.

"Ms. America!" Akram slammed my door open, sending out a burst of light from the hallway.

For a second I thought the dark figure had moved from my bed to the door frame, taking the place of Akram. But once I rubbed my eyes, I was relieved to see that I was wrong. The figure was gone.

"Are you alright?" Akram asked.

"Yeah, just . . . a dream," I reassured. "I'm okay, really."

He nodded, "very well, goodnight."

"Goodnight," I said as he closed the door.

I laid back, trying to calm my racing heart. I took deep breaths, silencing my thoughts with sheer willpower but it didn't work. Then I heard the sound of footsteps outside my door. I jumped, preparing for an intruder but this person walked on, heading out the front door.

Curiously overcame my fear and I opened the door. I scanned the hall, finding Akram's door open and his room empty. I stride to the front and followed Akram outside. He was heading towards the backyard where Hani was muzzled.

I leaned against the house, using the shadow of the wall to cover me. Akram walked closer to Hani as the animal tried to jerk himself free from the post. He looked absolutely terrified.

Akram stopped, watching as Hani tried desperately to get away but couldn't. In one swift move Akram grabbed Hani by the throat and slammed him against the ground. The dog squirmed under his hold. Hani kicked and scratched but Akram only pressed harder.

I was about to leap into action till the nation released him; allowing Hani to breath and cower under his gaze. When the light of moon hit Akram, I was finally able to see his face. His smile was big and it spread from ear to ear but there was no light in it. His eyes gleamed mean and cold and the only pleasure he was taking from this situation was the fact that Hani was whining and shaking in fear.
Hani never showed these emotions and if Akram was this hurtful all the time, Hani would have displayed them day one. No, this was new. Akram's sudden change in behavior and voice, his aggressiveness and chilling smile.

This man was not Akram.

I waited till the impostor was in his room and waited a little longer just to be sure that he was asleep. When my phone displayed two-thirty I scoured through the internet; searching through current news of India, CNN articles of world politics and for the last resort: tumblr. When nothing came up of the country in turmoil, the theory of Akram hearing voices and developing a split personality became less likely.

I decided it was time for me to try something even more delusional; exorcism. I scrolled through various websites, all containing ghost stories, shifter myths, vampirism, and dark magick. Along with this information were exorcists ready with a phone number to call. Wiccans and voodooists performing their rituals in step by step instruction on YouTube while charms and curses could be bought or sold.

What was real and what was just for show?

Who were the con artists and who were the professionals?

I rubbed my eyes, "this is impossible," I mumbled.

It was five in the morning, which means it would be four-thirty in afternoon in Summerland. I called Grandma but I was answered by Blair.

"Aunt Amy!" she exclaimed excitedly, "How are you? Mom and Dad said you were India, how is it? What's it like? Why don't you call more often? I mean I want to call but Mom says that you live on a different time zone than I do, so the only way I can call is if I figure out the math. But I hate math! And you live in the future! Every time I figure out the time in Delhi, Mom says it was too late to call and then I'm just so mad. I mean why couldn't you just say that first instead of me figuring it out through numbers, you know?"

"I know sweetie, math sucks but I'm sure your dad helps you out," I resisted my urge to yawn.

Blair huffed, no doubt she was pouting, "only sometimes, it's always Raiden this and Raiden that."

"Hey now, you love your baby brother."

"But he cries, a lot."

I chuckled, "yeah he's a wailer. Anyway, can you get G-Ma on the phone?"

"She's with Blake," she grumbled, "she's always with Blake, she likes him more than me."

"No, Blair, G-Ma loves you both-"

"But she always asks for him and they spend all afternoon together in her office, always asking me to watch the shop but I can see when she switches the sign from open to close. G-Ma only wants me out of her hair," her tone that was once so confident, now crumbled to a meek and wounded squeak.

I realized then that Blair was lonely; with the addition of Raiden and Grandma helping Blake sort out
his powers, no one really bothered to include Blair. She didn't see what her twin saw, she only experienced these moments through hushed tones and closed doors. I remembered what Arthur had told me about Blake always being the outsider because of his gift. I replied that he would never feel like that and I kept my promise, but his sister ended up in his place.

"Blair, it isn't you. G-Ma only wishes to help Blake-"

"Because he's special," she mumbled.

"Yes, but because he'll always be a target. No one will understand him, not the way you do," I proclaimed.

Blair was about to speak but I cut her off, "hang on sweetie let me finish. Remember when your parents sat you down in April? The day they were going to explain to you about Blake's power."

"Yeah," she said.

"And do you remember what you told them? You said that you already knew. Even though Blake was told at a very young age to keep his gift hidden and to wait for you to get a little older to keep secrets, you just knew. You knew what went on in Blake's head and connected the dots on your own. Blake realized this and confined in you, I'm sure he tells you things that no one else knows right?"

She was silent for a moment but eventually she said, "Yeah."

I smiled, "it's because you're his big sister and he will always come running to you when he needs help."

"But-" she froze for a moment and quickly whispered, "I gotta go; G-Ma's coming."

"Wait I need-" she hanged up, "to talk to her . . ."

Blair deleted the caller log in her great-grandmother's phone and slid it back to its place at the front desk. The elderly woman walked out of the back office and smiled at her, "thank you for watching the shop for me."

Blair nodded but said nothing.

"You two better get home, your mother's waiting," Aponi bends down to kiss her and her brother on their foreheads. "See you tomorrow my little warriors."

The twins rode their bikes in silence, both lost in their own worlds. Blair fell in behind Blake which was unusual for anyone that knew them, for Blair always preferred to take the lead. She didn't have the desire or will to pedal to the front. Her thoughts engrossing her into a daze. These thoughts contained her brother, her family and of her recent conversation with Amy.

She looked back to Blake, observing him with an aching heart and a wounded ego. It's been nearly three days since he spoke to her. He avoided her at every turn, locking himself away in his room, ignoring her when they crossed paths at school. It confused and hurt her, what had she done to deserve this treatment? Why has he stopped talking to her? Why has her own twin shut her out and for what reason?
Blair could no longer handle the silence. She stopped with a screech of her wheels and yelled, "I can't take this anymore! Why are you ignoring me!"

Blake braked and turned to face her, his face concealed in a calm expression. "I'm not-

"Yes you are!" she shouted, "you don't talk to me at school, you run to G-Ma when we're at the shop and you hide in your room every night. You're avoiding me. Why?"

He looked to the ground and whispered, "I'll tell you when we get home."

"No! I'm not moving from this spot till you talk to me!"

"Blair-

"You heard me!" she hissed but allowed her frustration to cool. She inhaled deeply, "was it something I did?" She gripped the handles of her bike, "did I do something to make you mad?" Tears spilled down her cheeks, "why won't you talk to me?"

Blake dropped his bike and pulled Blair in for a tight hug, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry Blair, please don't cry."

"I'm not crying," she lied as she wiped the tears from her eyes. "Why did you shut me out? Why did you stop talking to me?" she whimpered.

He pulled back, blinking away his own tears. "It was the only way I could keep my promise to G-Ma. I knew if I had told you what I've been doing, you would've begged me to show you but G-Ma said it was dangerous. I had to learn to master it before showing you."

"Master what?" she asked curiously.

He held out his hands, "give me your hands and close your eyes."

Blair didn't hesitantly, she grabbed his palms and closed her eyes. Blake squeezed her fingers in return and took a deep calming breath. After a minute passed, he said, "Okay, open your eyes."

What she saw she almost didn't believe. Blake was surrounded in bright purple light. This light cascaded over him from head to toe, bathing him in the color violet. When he saw her reaction, he beamed, his light glowing brighter along with the shades of pink and yellow merging with it. Blair remembered that pink was the color of love and friendship and yellow represented things like intelligence and indecisiveness but depending on the shade it could also mean happiness.

"You should see yourself, you're like a rainbow," he stated.

He was right. Blair was surrounded by colors: red, blue, orange, yellow, green, pink, the situation perfectly described her emotions. She was surprised and unnerved by the aura, how it not only surrounded her but poured out of her skin. She was also excited that she could see them that she had earned her brother's trust so deeply that he felt safe enough to share his gift.

She looked at Blake as the pink and yellow slowly faded away into the purple. "Why do the other colors fade while one stays?" she asked.

"It's because violet is my true aura, the one that reveals my true self while the others display only my emotions."

"What's my color?" she asked.
He shook his head, "you gotta figure that out on your own. Just focus, clear your mind of everything else and focus on what makes you, you."

Blair closed her eyes once again, racking her brain for proof of her essence. But in reality, who was she? Blair was still just a child, her parents always told her that discovering one's self took years and through trial and error. Just as Blake said, she was like a rainbow, experiencing these new sensations as they come and go.

What was her true color, she asked herself.

Was it still waiting for her or did she miss it?

"Don't over think it," said Blake.

Blair snapped her eyes open, "can you read minds?"

"No but your aura is all over the place," he gave a tiny smile. "Come one Blair, you know who you are, everyone does. The only reason we are told that finding our true self takes years is because we lose sight of them over time. Because we wish to fit in with the crowd or to become part of the group, we are willing to forsake our true nature and wear a mask to please others. It takes years for people to realize that hiding your true self only hurts you." He gazed to her with wisdom filled eyes, "don't let people take away what you are."

She nodded and relaxed her shoulders, clearing away the nagging thoughts and insecurities. When her mind was empty and all she felt was love and acceptance from her brother and herself, she opened her eyes. Blue radiated off her skin, completely engulfing her as if she was sinking into the deepest depths of the ocean.

"Blue represents creativity, loyalty, kindness and spiritual," Blake proclaimed. "It may not be at the same level as mine but its great way to start."

"Start? Start where?"

"G-Ma is teaching me magick and she wants you to learn too."

She blinked, "magick . . . magick's real!"

He nodded as Blair grinned like the Cheshire cat, "Sweetness."

"But don't treat it lightly Blair. We are learning it for self-defense."

"Why? What's happening?"

"G-Ma hasn't told me the whole story, but it has something to do with Amy."

I hardly got any sleep last night. I stood up to the late hours of the morning, searching for a clue to what was happening with Akram. I still had no solid evidence if the man I was sitting with was Akram having a mental breakdown or an impostor. He looked like Akram, he had the same skin color as him, the same eyes and hair and his voice carried the same honey like tone. It was completely terrifying that some guy could be exactly like Akram and it's also the major reason I still believed that this man was Akram but a different side of him.

But then of course I only end back to the same place where I began; deciding if Akram was real or
not and if this man was an impostor. Last night's incident was proof that something was wrong, but not proof enough if Akram was sick or replaced. It was a never-ending cycle.

"You've been locked in your room all day," he spoke, "you must be hungry."

I pushed my food around with my fork, trying to contain my composure. "I'm too excited to eat."

"For the dinner tonight?" he questioned, "Yes, I see. It must be pretty exciting for you meet the prime minister and attend a formal affair. Tell me have you gone to anything like this?"

My eyebrow twitched, he knew about the ball at Austria's, he knew I've done this before but was this forgetfulness or something more? "No. I never went to anything so formal, prom maybe but nothing like this."

"It's nothing too fancy, just a dinner, possibly a dance afterword."

"But you hired those dancers, the ones that live on this street."

His brow arched slightly and his jaw clenched. These minor movements were so tiny that anyone would have assumed that it was just a tick of the muscle. But I knew these were signs to the cracks of his facade.

"Oh yes, I nearly forgot. My mind has been other places."

"Well, Jasmine and her family will do a great job," I said, taking a chance.

"Yes, Jasmine is a very talented girl," he smiled.

I curled my hands into tight fists, having an urge to slam them into his fake ass face but I calmed myself. I released my hands and forced my lips to smile back, "yeah she is."

After I made an effort to eat, I excused myself to my room and locked the door. I sat back against my door, taking a moment for my heart to settle, but my adrenaline did not diminish. I knew for certain that this man was not Akram.

The only questions I had now were Akram's disappearance and the identity of that impostor.

My plan was simple: act like nothing was wrong and prepare for the dinner. Arrive at the Rashtrapati Bhavan with the fake Akram and mingle into the crowd. Once the dinner was over and the party was at full swing, I would sneak out and come back to the cottage for Hani.

The only way I had a chance of finding Akram was to use Hani's nose, for no matter how close in appearances the impostor had to Akram he couldn't produce the same scent. Hani saw through him the moment he laid eyes on him, a dog's instincts were not to be stifled with.

I skipped the bath and took that time arranging my hair, parting my hair to one side and designing a French braid on the stronger side. I braided it along the side of scalp till I came to the back, where I secured the braid with a rubber band and twisted the rest of my curls into a messy chignon. I then moved on to make-up, going in simple but fun with my eye shadow. Using light blue and gold I created a soft, somewhat natural look. I grinned at the mirror, I finally learned the perfect amount.

Jamie would be proud.

I slipped on my dress, slid on my sandals and stood straight in front of the mirror. I channeled Akram's words of advice: _walk as if you are goddess_. I grinned at my image and strutted out the
Lovino took longer than necessary to take a shower, but in all honesty, he couldn't stand the weather. It was humid, sticky and the mosquitoes were beyond troublesome. His showers were his only escape but tonight was not the night to take his time, especially when another rainfall was due.

The locals have told him that monsoon season would be over any day now, but that's what they've been saying for the last three days. Lovino sighed; rinsing the conditioner from his hair and stepping out of shower to find a note taped to the mirror.

Dear Lovi

You were taking too long, so we left without you.

Here's some money for a cab.

Love you

Feliciano

He folded the bills, crumpled the note and tossed it aside. He got dressed quickly, buttoning his shirt as he blow dried his hair and brushing his teeth as he jumped into his underwear and pants. Once he had his jacket on he ran out the door, calling out for someone to hold the elevator.

The silver doors were stopped by an arm and Lovino sprinted in. He was about to say thank you till he noticed that the person inside was Toris Laurinaitis, the nation of Lithuania.

Lovino cursed under his breath, of all the people he could be stuck in an elevator with . . . Well, if he was honest with himself there would be worse people.

"I see you are running late as well Mr. Romano," Lithuania proclaimed, no doubt trying to lessen the tension that he was creating.

"What's you're excuse?" Lovino countered with a venom filled tone, "Were you too busy doing your hair and makeup?"

Lithuania inhaled through his nose, "good one."

Once they hit the lobby, Lovino sprinted out to the front of the hotel. He lunged for the first cab he saw, opening the back door and crawling in with the money in hand.

"I'm in rush, take me to the Rashtrapati Bhavan."

The middle-aged man turned to him, "I'm sorry sir but I'm here to pick up someone else."

"Who?"

"Me," Lithuania opened the door and climbed in, "don't worry, he's with me."

"I'd rather walk," Lovino was about to step out till thunder roared across the gray sky.

"Are you sure about that?" the cab driver raised a brow.
He groaned, it was just his luck that the only cab that would be available to him was the one called in by Lithuania. He could walk but the rain would ruin his clothes and there was no time to wait for another cab. "Dammit! Fine!" he exclaimed, "let's go before I come to my senses."

The drive was meant to last ten minutes, nothing more but again Lovino was never favored by Lady Luck.

A cow was crossing the street, immediately every car and van came to a halt. The large, tan colored bull took his time, he leisurely strolled as the bells around his neck clanked together with every step.

Lovino rubbed the bridge of his nose, "sir we're in a bit of a hurry, can you honk at him to move faster?"

"No, I won't. He will get by, be patient," the driver stated.

Then, as if the universe wished to spite him. The cow stopped in front of his cab and laid down in front of them. The diver simply switched off the engine and pulled out his phone to check social media.

"What are you doing?" Lovino exclaimed.

"Waiting for the cow to move."

"I can see that," he hissed, "can't you drive around it?"

"No, we must wait for the cow to move."

Lovino moved for the door but Lithuania stopped him, "I know what you are about to do and I will tell you this now, it will not help."

Lovino shoved his hand off, "let go of me you bastard! You have no idea of what I am thinking."

"You are thinking of going out there to yell at the cow."

"Oh," he clapped sarcastically, "brilliant Sherlock, just brilliant."

"Wait," Lithuania pulled him back, "just give it a few minutes, the rain will come in and scare him off."

"You should listen to your friend," the driver added.

"Stay out of this," Lovino remarked and turned back to the Lithuanian, "We're late."

"Then five more minutes will not matter," he said.

Lovino brushed a hand through his hair in frustration, "Fine, fine. If you want to wait for the stupid cow, we'll wait for the stupid cow."

They waited in silence, looking to the sky or the cow for signs of change. The humidity was beginning the fog the windows and the unusually loud ticking of the driver's wristwatch was nearly causing Lovino to lose his patience. His irritation continued to grow whenever he heard the brunet shift in his seat or breathe. He was never this annoyed by the Baltic before. In truth, he didn't know the nation personal, he kept his distance from him to avoid Russia.

Later when Lithuania had severed his ties from Russia, Lovino never saw the need to befriend him. He could barely hold his patience for Poland; he didn't think he had the energy to deal with another
eastern European country. Lithuania was also friends with that meddling Latvia. The same Latvian that almost ruined his chances with Amy; but there was another reason, something deeper and more complex that he tried to ignore.

His mind would not let him; without his permission or knowledge, his subconscious brought him back to the first day of the meeting. When Amy and Lithuania were lounging in front of the restroom and Amy had asked the Lithuanian to be her date for best friend's wedding. Now, Lovino knew it was Amy’s impulsive nature that drove her to ask Lithuania and he was the only person around at the time. He also knew that this wedding wasn't even real but it was principle of the thought.

He flushed in embarrassment; he was being an idiot. He and Amy had chemistry, he knew it. For him to be jealous and over Lithuania was laughable. The man was dull and had the passion of a dead fish. Lovino made Amy blush and squirm under his gaze, she had shared her insecurities with him and she had kissed him.

Yet, his brain would remind him of Lithuania finding Amy first when she had wondered. Reenacting the scene of them dancing to the music in their heads. They looked ridiculous but didn't care; it was like everything and everyone faded away and all they could see was each other.

This was of course, all in his head but he couldn't deny the jealous ping his heart gave when he saw them. He needed to prove that he was special, that he was closer to Amy than Lithuania. He pulled out his phone and sent a quick text to the said American.

"Hey guess what, I'm only a block away but the driver won't go any further all because of a cow. The bastard actually laid down in front of us! Can you believe that?"

Satisfied with his message, he pressed send and waited for her reply. A minute passed, but to Lovino, it felt like an eternity.

"Lol, you should take some pics. Make sure to call Antonio, he's all worried about his little tomato."

He groaned, he didn't want to think about the Spaniard. He wanted Amy to say something he could use to make a point. He didn't want much, just a small token of affection.

"Aren't you worried ;)"

Her message was quick and to the point, "srry, dinner about to start-ttyl."

He glared at the message, having the sudden urge to throw it out the window. But he pushed that aside and plastered a fake smile over his face, pretending to chuckle.

Lithuania looked away from his window and turned to him, curiously, "what are you reading?"

He grinned smugly, "a text from Amy, she's wondering where I am."

The brunet nodded, not fazed by the news. "Oh, can you tell her I have her earbud. I'll give it to her at the party."

Lovino's blinked in surprise, "she left her earbud with you."

"Uh, yes, you pulled her away before I could give it back. I'm sure she must be worried, she loves her music and these buds are expensive. But they're definitely worth the money, I could still hear every song she has played. I even read that they are water proof," he smiled, "I'm thinking of getting a pair for myself."
Amy didn't simply love music, she was madly, deeply in love with it. She would never leave behind an earbud by accident. Did she trust the Baltic that much? Frustration burned at the back of his neck as his heart sank into his gut. He side glanced the Lithuanian, "can you even afford it? Your country is going through an economy crisis."

"It isn't that bad," he said.

"Sure, but Amy is pretty well off, maybe you can go work for her like you did for Alfred. I mean that's all you're good for anyway. Tell me Mr. Laurinaitis how did you ever get those coke stains out of Alfred's carpet?"

Lithuania was quiet for a moment, till he said, "Is it wrong to work for your earnings Mr. Romano? Or should I place all my faith and money on tourism as you do?"

"It works," he glared.

"Yes, it's the perfect job for you, you can lay about in your fancy house and not have care in the world."

Lovino laughed dryly, "yes, I have a fancy house, several actually. I have money to spend while you pinch your pennies as the Americans say. I have an idea, you can stay at Amy's house, earn some cash while I show her the world."

Lithuania raised an eyebrow in confusion, "you really believe that?" He shook his head, "I don't understand how Amy is involved but she would never go anywhere with you. You are immature, childish and hurtful, Amy prefers to be around people that are kind to others. Frankly I don't see how you two can be friends to begin with."

He curled his fist, digging his nails into his palms. "So what makes a better friend? A former slut of Russia's?"

Lithuania paled and Lovino didn't stop, "sorry my friend but Amy doesn't care for sloppy seconds."

The brunet clenched his jaw and gazed at Lovino with a fierce gleam in his eyes. "If I am sloppy seconds? Then what are you? Europe's Whore."

Lovino snapped, throwing the first punch. He made a clean hit at the Lithuania's cheek, sending him to collide against the glass window. Lithuania shook it off and lunged for Lovino.

"Hey! Hey!" the driver tried to break them apart but he was helpless against the nations' deadly focus on one another.

Lovino kicked him in the gut but Lithuania barely flinched, backhanding him so hard that Lovino's teeth rattled. They were so entangled by each other's fight that they didn't notice the driver opening the back door and hurling them out. When they hit the pavement, they broke apart looking to the driver.

He crossed his arms, "if you two are going to continue fighting about this young lady, she'll end up leaving both of you." After he said his piece, he climbed into his cab and locked the doors.

The cow rose and ran to a nearby porch as the drivers switched on their lights and started their engines. Thunder roared and droplets poured from the sky, drenching Lovino and Lithuania to the bone.
Dinner was surprisingly quick.

The food was amazing but I had a hard time learning which fork to use, luckily for me I was seated next to Erika, who was kind enough to show me. The nations were in their best attire, men wore suits as women chose between western gowns or saris. I couldn't help but question, did they know that Akram would host a dinner? Was it a tradition among host nations to hold a banquet or a ball of some kind? I wondered, would I be able to get a discount at Main Event. I mean these guys were will pass the age for a senior discount.

Narendra Mobi was a sweet man, almost a grandfatherly type. I had placed a sliver of hope that he would expose the man that was playing Akram but the prime minister didn't notice any changes. None of the nations seemed to notice that the man they believed was India wasn't.

I mentally groaned, I was on my own.

Once the Esana and the performers took center stage, I made my exit.

"Where do you think you're going?"

I winced and turned to face Peter and Raivis. Both were eyeing me suspiciously as Peter tapped his foot, waiting for me to explain myself.

"Just going out for some air," I brought out my most innocent smile.

"It's pouring out there," Raivis stated.

"It will pass, now if you excuse me-"

Peter ran around me to block my path, "I see that gleam in your eyes, you're up to something."

"I'm not," I countered.

"Yes, you are," he exclaimed, "and you are not taking another step further without telling us what you are doing."

"What if I don't want to?" I snapped.

"I'm pretty sure Germany would want to know what you're up to."

My jaw dropped, "you wouldn't."

"Try me," he smirked.

"Now, now, please don't fight," Raivis stepped between us and looked to me with a concerned gaze. "Amy you know we would never do that, we just want to know if you need backup."

I bit my lip nervously, thinking of way to avoid dragging them in. "Okay, but we need to talk somewhere more privately, come on, into the drawing room." I lead them to the room, gestured them inside and slammed the doors shut behind them.

"What the bloody-"

"Amy?!"
"Sorry guys," I ripped off my sheer cape and wrapped it around the door handles, locking them inside.

I had written down Akram's address and asked the cab driver to get me there as fast as he can. The rain was still coming in strong, cascading in waves as the wind howled and lightening lit the sky. The driver made it to the house in under twenty minutes and I asked him to wait as I grabbed Hani. I climbed out of the car, not caring that the rain was piercing my skin and destroying the gown.

I ran to the back, where poor Hani was curled into a ball trying to keep warm. I soothed him with kind words as I pulled out the knife from the strap of my sandal; complimentary of the Banquet Hall. I tore through the muzzle earning a small lick from Hani.

"That's a good boy, now come on. I need to get you to the Rashtrapati Bhavan, it's the last place I saw Akram."

I sprinted towards the car but Hani’s barking stopped me. He was scratching at the door, whimpering to get inside. "Hani, come on, we have to go."

He continued to scratch at the door as the driver said, "Miss, I can't wait here much longer."

I groaned and shoved him a wad of bills, "just go." I swept back to the front door, kicking it open with my foot. Once I was inside I paced in front of the living room; this was bad. I had no car, no money and my only ally was clawing at the floor.

I stopped and looked to Hani, whining and barking at the floor boards. Without even thinking I stabbed my knife into the crack of the boards, popping them out one by one. After I removed five boards I found a hand.

I jumped back as Hani whined and reached down to lick the hand. Then a voice whispered, the same voice I heard last night. "Hani . . .?"

"Akram?!" I exclaimed.

"Amy . . .?"

"Oh my god! Hold on!" I abandoned the knife and ripped open the floor boards with my bare hands. Not caring that my nails broke or my hands bled from splinters. He was weak, most likely dehydrated. His clothes were ripped and stained with dirt and his nails were broken off, proof that he had been trying to claw out.

I carefully and gently lifted him out and set him beside the kitchen table. "What happen to you?"

"I . . . I . . . was attacked . . . by that man . . ."

"The one at the meeting?"

"Yes . . . I let my guard down and he knocked me out," he shook his head, "next thing I knew I was buried here."

"I'm sorry Akram, I should've figured it out-"

"And you did, thank you," he gave a meek smile.
I smiled back and wrapped his arm around my shoulders, "up we go," I lifted him with ease as he winced. "We gotta get back to the party. Whoever that guy is, he won't get away with this."

"Are you sure about that?"

Akram and I flinched as we turned to the door frame. The imposter was leaning against the broken door, examining his nails, "I believe I still have the upper hand."

Hani stood in between me and the nation look alike, snarling viciously. The imposter rolled his eyes and with a wave of his hand, Hani was thrown back with an invisible force. Akram called out to his pet as my jaw dropped, what the hell were we dealing with?

Unfortunately, the impostor decided to answer that for me. His pupils became cat-like slits, glowing a dark shade of gold as his body morphed. His hands became claws as his feet grew ten times bigger, tearing through the soles of his shoes with black claw like toe nails. His face transformed from human to cat, taking on massive fangs and a pink snout. He towered over us; his muscles shredding his clothes as pointed cat ears perked at the top of head. His body hair grew thicker, completely covering him in orange fur with black stripes.

He was tiger human hybrid.

Akram paled, "He's a Rakshasa."

"A Raks-what?"

"A Rakshasa," the hybrid proclaimed, its voice was hoarse and cruel. "A shape shifter, a demon, it really does not matter. I only came for the girl."

I squeezed Akram close to me and sprinted down the hall, locking myself inside his room. "Now, now Amy, I do not have time for games." The tiger creature called out.

"Open the trunk there, quickly," Akram said as I sat him on his bed.

I did what I was told and found dozens of short blade swords. Each ranging in different widths, lengths and styles. Most of the swords were curved while some spiked out with hooks, they were nothing like the straight narrow style of the claymore.

"Take the Makhaira," Akram handed me a short-bladed sword that was curved slightly with a huge width.

I nodded and took the sword, cutting away at my dress to give me more leg room. I sighed, "See, this is why I can't have nice things. People are always trying to kill me when I wear pretty dresses."

The Rakshasa sunk his claws into the wood of the door ripping it apart with one swap. Akram and I jumped to our feet wielding our swords for battle. Akram charged in first sweeping two large curved blades around himself, spinning them at his sides and over his head. The Rakshasa stepped back and aimed a knee for Akram's ribs but the nation blocked the attack with one sword and slashed the other across the Rakshasa's chest.

He growled in annoyance as the wound healed instantly. Akram acted swiftly, aiming his blade to the side of his neck. The Rakshasa gripped the sword with ease, pinching it with the tips of his fingers. Akram didn't waste any second to thrust his spare blade into his gut. In one blink, the demon snapped Akram's wrist, kneed him under his chin and tossed him aside.

"You've grown so weak Mr. India? Tell me how long has it been since you wielded a sword? Fifty
years? Seventy? Almost close to a century, no?"

Akram placed his hand on the nightstand and slowly rose to his feet, using the furniture to keep him leveled. "If you had faced me at the beginning instead of burying me like a coward, you would see how strong I am."

He laughed, "You can barely stand. Can't you see? Gandhi and the modern world has made you weak." The shapeshifter raised his claw over Akram's head as I grabbed another sword and threw it. The hook styled blade stabbed the demon in the center of his spine.

He moaned in pain as I shouted, "Hey, Tony the Tiger! You're after me right? So come and get me!"

His fierce golden eyes blazed and I sprinted down the hall, hearing the loud stomping of his feet right behind me. *Great Amy, you got him to chase you, now what?* I jumped outside, the rain was just a drizzle now yet the sky was still concealed in gray clouds. I stood my ground and held the blade in front of my chest.

The Rakshasa snickered, "now we both know you have no idea how to use one of those. The only sword you mastered was a blue Nerf toy."

My eyes widened as he mentioned my childhood toy, "What the hell?! Have you been watching me?!!" I demanded.

He threw back his head and howled in laughter, "you really have no idea who I am, do you? Well I shouldn't be surprised. You didn't recognize me in my human form nor in my fairy." He giggled like a school girl, "You never seem to recognize your friends Amy."

"Friends?" *Wait, human? Fairy? It finally hits me, "Nina?!"*

He laughed once again, his hoarse voice rose in octaves, taking on a female tone. "You finally got it, congratulations."

"What the fucking hell?! Nina why are you doing this?"

"You ask? You ask why?" she laughed, "I've come to deliver you to Iya." She raised her hand summoning dark specters from the shadows. The vapors hissed and moaned, chatting among themselves in tongues.

"But you helped me," I exclaimed, "why would you side with Iya?"

"She asks why," the vapors chanted in sync, their voices were harsh and unisex.

"She asks why."

"She has no clue."

"She has no idea what she's done to you Nina," one vapor slithered around her head, whispering in her ear. "She doesn't know the pain she caused you. But yet she knew of the Abyss, she knew where you were but still did nothing."

"Nina don't listen to that thing," I shouted.

Nina growled, "Why? It speaks the truth does it not?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. They were right; Clovis had mention this to me the first time we met but I forgot. I would like to say that I merely set this problem aside for another
time, for I had another more pressing manner to look into first. But it was an excuse, a reasonable one but still an excuse. An escape for me as Nina drifted to the back of my mind.

"It does but you still can't listen to it. Nina those things are not your friends!"

"And you are?" she hissed, "You left me there to rot!"

She threw up her hands, whipping out the vapors to do her bidding. I slashed through them, keeping them back, but with every cut each vapor splits in two. Both coming alive to wrap themselves around my wrists. The turquoise bracelet blazed, burning the vapors. They screamed and released my left arm while the others snapped my right elbow back. The bone broke under the force, completely bending my arm in the opposite direction.

I cried out in agony as Nina took her chance to sink her claws under my jaw and dragged them slowly, drawing blood. It gushed out, staining her hands and my dress, "If you think this is painful," Nina smiled, revealing her long fangs as she tore the bracelet off my wrist and flung it across the yard. "Then you're in for a rude awakening."

I used the vapors to my advantage by picking both of my legs up and slamming the heels of my feet to her rib cage. She fell back as I tore the vapors away from my damaged arm. I collapsed to mud and tried to run but another shadow gripped my ankle and sent me flying into the side of the house. The back of my skull made a clean hit to the brick, causing my eyes to blur and my teeth to rattle.

I fell to the ground like a ragdoll, feeling as if my muscles had been liquefied; but still I forced myself onto my knees.

"You think this is torture?" Nina laughed, "You think this is the worst of it?"

I glared at her, grabbing my blade and rising to my feet. "You really don't know when to give up do you?" she hissed.

"Haven't you heard? I'm stubborn," I smirked.

Nina lunged for me but was stopped with an arrow to the side of her head. She collapsed to the ground and I turned to the doorway, finding Akram with a bow in hand. "Call me weak now, demon," he spat.

"Aw my hero," I remarked sarcastically as I fell back to my knees.

Akram kneeled beside me, gently carrying me away from Nina and sitting me by the door. He tore a piece of cloth from his shirt, "here, bite down."

I did what I was told as he caressed my twisted arm with soft hands, "this will hurt, bear with me. On the count of three, one-" he snapped it back into place.

"Fuck!" I cried, "You said on three?"

"I'm sorry, I had to set it when you were relaxed." He continued wrapping my arm with a make-shift brace that he also tore from his clothes. He folded my arm in front of my chest and tied the cloth around my arm and the back of my neck.

"There, all done-"

Slit.
My weapon that I had been dropped beside Nina's body was now pierced through Akram's chest. Akram clutched his torso as I reached for him but I had missed him by mere centimeters. Nina yanked him by the collar and threw him to the far wall in the backyard. Once he was out of the way she grabbed me by the throat and squeezed.

"Do you know what real torture is?" she hissed, her eyes flickering from gold to gray. The vapors were pouring into her, seeping into every pore. Slowly turning her bright orange fur into a washed out auburn. With the combined strength of her and the vapors she hurled me through the brick wall across from the house.

My back took most of the hit as the brick crumbled around me. Blood was streaming from my forehead into my eye as I felt three ribs crack under the pressure. My stomach no longer handling the turmoil of being flung through the air, threw up. I choked on my own vomit as I tried to get back onto my feet.

"Iya needs her alive," a vapor hissed

"Yes, but doesn't mean we can't play first," another laughed.

Nina smirked, "you think torture is all physical? Bloody knuckles, broken bones and stab wounds?" The vapors dragged me out and held me above her. Her face gleaming with twisted amusement, "That's not torture." Then the shadows slammed me down, my face flying smack into the mud. "Do you know what they do in the Abyss? It's not the hell everyone believes it is," the vapors raised me up. "It's much worse."

I was rammed into the ground once again.

"They play with you, show you versions till you can't even tell where you are." The vapors yanked me back up and she giggled, "I actually thought I had broken out once or twice, but I was wrong." I was smacked against the ground, "That's what they do, they play and they play, almost like spirits."

I spat out blood, vomit and dirt as I was jerked up once more.

"We play with humans, scare them, befriend them... Humph, people believe it's always the scary looking biker they should fear or a black man in a hoodie or a Muslim carrying a package. But people don't realize that we take on either the most monstrous of appearances," she gestured to her Rakshasa physic. "Or the most innocent," she shrunk, becoming smaller and rounder, taking on the form of a young five-year-old girl.

"The vapors don't hide, they know what they want. They are truer beings."

"Truer beings? Well someone went swimming in the Kool-Aid," I coughed.

I was rammed into the dirt for my comment and Nina laughed like an angel, which was even scarier than her hoarse Rakshasa voice. "Oh Amy, you just don't see it. The vapors only want the simple things in life. They only wish to devour, to conquer, to take-"

"How are those the simple things in life?" I spat as they yanked me up.

"They are simple because they want everything," she talked down to me as if I were the child. "Everyone may not say it or admit it, but they want everything the world has to offer. Being power, wealth, knowledge, love; they are all things that drive people to do mad things." She slapped her hands onto my cheeks and jerked me down to face her, "See Amy, the humans walk on a fine line between sanity and madness, order and chaos, love and hate. All on a thin line that can be so easily crossed." Her eyes continued to switch from gold to gray as her skin washed away to same ashy
Then vapors flung me to the far wall beside Akram, landing upside down on my neck. I whimpered as I forced myself onto my side. Every breath I took pained me, each muscle screamed for rest and my sides continued to snap under the abuse.

Nina only laughed harder, "Real torture is in the mind, screwing with someone till they finally break is the most fun! Watching as their hope is drained from their soul, realizing the world is neither kind nor gentle but cruel and unforgiving. That's the world we live in and whoever believes otherwise is just in denial. But when they open their eyes it is like child seeing the world for the first time; it's beautiful but ugly, it's sad yet truthful." She howled like a hyena, "People that believe that there is order in this world are crazy in their own right. It is just an illusion; all this is just an illusion. Could it be, I'm the sane one while everyone else is not?" She giggled, "Oh what am I saying? We're all mad here!"

I stared at her in disbelief, "What did they do to you?" I punched the ground in frustration, raking my brain for a plan. "The Nina I know would never talk like this!" For one second my eyes slid to the sword that was in Akram's back. "She was kind and funny, yeah maybe a little annoying but she was my friend." In one swift move I grabbed the sword and placed it inside my brace, "She was there when I was lonely or when I was in trouble. She was loving and would never hurt a defenseless animal!"

In a blink of an eye she stood in front of me, glaring down at me with dead gray eyes. Vapors circled around her, digging into her, eating away at her gold aura. "The Nina you knew is dead."

"I was afraid you would say that," I lunged for her, weapon in hand, plunging the blade into her heart.

She gasped, her mouth forming an 'o' with a silent scream. She tried to push me off but I wrapped my broken arm around her waist, twisting the blade in deeper. The vapors screeched like a deadly sonic, swirling around us like a dark tornado. Nina finally screamed as black liquid bled out of her mouth, nose, eyes and ears. Even her sweat was black ooze; it formed and dripped from each pore. The ooze traveled down her body, gliding off her skin like rain. The droplets pooled around us, evaporating into smoke as more continued gush out. The remaining vapors retreated into the shadows, screeching in confusion and agony.

The ooze finally stopped; evaporating into the air, leaving no trace of itself behind. Nina was as limp as a ragdoll, nothing supported her small child-like body but me. Her gray lifeless eyes staring up at the equally colored sky.

I brushed her hair away from her face, caressing the soft baby cheeks. "I'm sorry," my voice cracked, becoming rough and wobbly. "I should've . . . I should've tried," I inhaled through my teeth, "I should've tried to find you . . ." I embraced her, "I'm sorry," I whimpered, "I'm so sorry Nina." I closed my eyes tight, trying to stop the tears.

Once I had a grip on my emotions, I laid her down, crossing her arms over her stomach and closed her eyes. I sat myself beside her and tried not to bawl like a baby; for who I killed was once one of my best friends. Nina came to me when I was four, when I got lost in the forest behind my house. She was tiny, dressed in green and glowed in the same shade. Her butterfly wings were crystal clear and every time she fluttered her wings glittered. She was the most clichéd little fairy I had ever met, but she was my clichéd fairy.

Nina showed me the beauty of nature; she led me out on field trips, exploring the woods together as we sang rhymes. She kept me company when my friends were at school or when I was in stuck in
Over time she barely came around anymore and I forgot about her. *I forgot about her* . . . Those words again, how could I forget her? How could I push her aside? After what she did for me; no matter how big or small she was a part of my life and I killed her.

Well, that's what I thought.

I was going to check on Akram till Nina's eyelids snapped open, her eyes blazing with a brilliant golden light. She gasped for air as she rose to sit up.

I screamed and crawled back as she blinked and looked to the sword in her chest. She yanked it out without even hint of pain and tossed it aside. Her attention was turned to her shaking hands, she gazed at them as if she didn't know they were her's.

She clutched and unclenched them over and over, "I'm free . . ." she whimpered. "I'm free," tears streamed down her cheeks, "I'm free!" She was laughing and crying at the same time, holding her hands together as she repeated, "I'm free . . . I'm free . . ." Then she tackled me in a hug, "thank you . . . Thank you Amy, thank you."

I blinked, "Okay, I'm really confused."

She pulled back, taking on the form of a preteen girl that was dressed in a green sari. "It's me . . . It's me Amy, It's me . . . I'm back . . . I'm back," she sobbed, "I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry," her voice squeaked as she cried harder.

"Okay, okay," I soothed as I embraced her, "I know, I know." Her shoulders shook with each wounded sob. Her voice cracked once again as she screamed into my chest, grasping on to back of my dress for dear life.

I felt a pair of eyes on me and I turned to face Akram. He raised a brow at the girl and I mouthed, "I'll explain later."

"Let me see if I have this right," Akram paced as I bound Hani's sprain ankle. "You are a shape shifter spirit."

"Yes," Nina answered.

"You were controlled by dark spirits to take my form and attack Amy."

She nodded, "yes."

He crossed his arms, "do you wish to attack her now?"

"No," she exclaimed, "that was all Iya's doing."

"And Iya is?"

I gave Nina a look, hoping she would understand not to involve Akram into spirit business. She nodded slightly, "It's confusing. I barely remember what happen to me."

He raised a brow, not fully buying the story but left it be. "And you were purified when Amy stabbed you with the Makhaira."
"Yes."

"How?"

"When someone wields a weapon, it becomes a part of them," Nina gazed to him, "you understand that feeling don't you Mr. India."

He nodded, his eyes far away into a different place and time. He sighed, brushing his hair back, "and that has something to do with being a purified?"

"Yes, when a person is possessed by a vapor they need a powerful burst of aura to enter their system. There are three ways for a person's aura to enter another's. You can send out your aura, which is the most difficult. You can touch one of their chakra points, or you can stab them, which is the easiest method and anyone can do it."

"Oh, so you're saying that anyone could have purified you? That I'm not special," I said in good humor.

Nina smiled, "anyone could have purified me but I'm glad it was you. You care for me Amy, if anyone else had done it, it would've been agonizing."

"Are you saying I was gentle on you?"

"It certainly didn't look like it," Akram added.

"I'm not saying it wasn't painful, it just would've been worse if it had been done by another that didn't know who I was nor cared. Vapors are filled with," she closed her eyes, trying ease herself that her traumatic experience was over. "Ugliness and hatefulness... it can drive anyone to a mental breakdown. Love is the most powerful weapon against it."

Before anyone could make a comment, a car pulled up on the driveway. A door opened and slammed, "Amy!"

"Oh fuck that's Arthur!" I hissed.

Akram looked out the window, "it's not just him but Germany and France are with him."

"It's because I left the party, Peter must've ratted me out that ass." I looked to my torn dress, "they can't see me like this!"

"Go to the bathroom quickly, you," he pointed to Nina, "hide in my room, go!"

I ran into the room, opening the door with a crack to hear Arthur ask, "India? What happen to your door?"

"Oh that," Akram laughed, "Amy got frustrated with the door and kicked it open."

I heard each nation sigh, "Why would she do that?" Francis asked.

As Ludwig said, "I'm terribly sorry about that, I'll pay for your door."

"No, there's no need, the only reason she got frustrated was the fact that Hani here hurt himself and she was trying to get him out of the rain."

"Is this him?" Ludwig asked; he almost sounded affectionate.
"Oh you poor thing," Francis cooed as Arthur questioned, "What happened?"

"A neighbor called and said Hani got caught in a hole and twisted his ankle. That's why Ms. America and I left the party, she was so worried over Hani. She even bound his ankle and made a bed for him with some sheets. She's a very sweet girl."

"When she wants to be," Arthur proclaimed.

"And you're any better," I whispered to myself.

I imagined Francis rolling his eyes, "she is a sweet girl and I'm not surprise she would do this. She loves animals, just like me. Proving once more that America has stronger ties to France."

Arthur groaned, "Not this again."

Ludwig moved the conversation along, trying to avoid a pointless fight. "Well, make sure you tell someone before leaving," he said, "It took us over two hours to figure out that both of you were gone."

Wait, did that mean Peter didn't sell me out. I sent out a silent prayer: I'm so sorry for ever doubting you Peter.

"I'm so sorry for our rudeness," said Akram. "I just needed to check on Hani, he's become very important to me."

"I understand, a dog is a loyal companion. I would've done the same."

Aw, Ludwig, you big softie.

Francis chuckled, "Oh Germany, you're so cute."

I was pretty sure Ludwig was glaring at Francis for his comment.

"By the way, where is Amy?" Arthur asked.

"She is taking a bath, unfortunately when we arrived it was still raining and very muddy. She was wet and covered in dirt. I think we're calling it a night."

"Of course," I heard their feet tread towards the door, each of them saying their goodbyes.

"Wait Mr. Germany," Akram called out, asking him to stay behind.

"What is it Mr. India?"

"I only wish to say that you've taught Ms. America well," I imagined Akram smiling as he said this. "Continue what you are doing . . . She will be a great nation one day because of you."

I didn't hear a reply; all I did hear was the start of an engine and a car speeding away.

After my bath, I crawled into bed and curled myself in the sheets. I was about to go to sleep till a glowing fairy flew over my face. "Nina," I groaned, "it's been a long day, go away."

"But I have a gift," she sang.
"Fine," I sat up, "what is it?"

She held out my turquoise bracelet and I squealed in happiness, "My bracelet! Thank you! I would hug you but I'm worried I would crush you."

She giggled and sat herself on my pillow, giving me her most sincere look, "I'm so sorry for all the trouble I caused."

"What you call trouble, I call Tuesday," I gave her a carefree smile. "I'm fine Nina, nations are pretty durable."

We flopped back onto the mattress, staring up at the ceiling in peaceful silence. But one question would not leave me alone. "Nina . . . I know you don't want to talk about this but," I breathed in deeply, "in the Abyss . . . did you see Kai? Is he okay? Well, I know he's not okay, but he's alive right? We can break him out," she remained quiet, causing my anxiety to rise, "right?"

Nina's lip quivered, "He carried the Sight Amy. He would've seen through all their illusions and he had the power to fight back. He would've caused trouble," bright gold tears streamed down her face into her hair. "They ate him and I watched, happy to see that it wasn't me."

I sat up to face her but she was gone.
Chapter 27

Ludwig swung a kick and I took the hit. I wrapped my arm around his leg, grabbing the back of his knee and flipping him onto his side. He landed with a loud smack against the mat, but he wasn't done yet. He rose to his feet and threw a punch, aiming at my face. I dodged and roundhouse kicked him at the side of his temple.

He went flying across the mat, colliding against the far wall and sliding to the floor.

I eased my panting as I wiped the blood off my split lip. "Don't make a girl wait," I held my fists up, "Come on, come on," I shadowboxed.

He grabbed his jaw, checking to see if it was still functioning. He gazed at me for a moment and grinned. It was a smile filled with pride and respect, "There's no need, you won."

I dropped my arms and blinked a couple of times, "I won?"

He nodded, "yes."

"It's over?"

"Yes."

"I'm done?"

"With me, yes."

"Yes!" I threw up my hands in the air, "After four months of you kicking my ass, it's over! I won!" I turned to Gilbert, who was pressing a cold pack to his bruised cheek. "I won Gil! I won!"

"That's great, oh, and by the way," he said sarcastically and then showed me his left ear. "I'm still bleeding out of my earlobe."

I winced slightly, "sorry."

Ludwig rose to his feet, "we finished just in time. I'll make the arrangements, you leave to Copenhagen in the morning."

I watched as he walked up the stairs, "that's it?" I glanced to Gilbert, "he's just gonna ship me off to the next nation?"

"What were you expecting? A farewell party?"

"Kinda, yeah."

He placed an arm around my shoulders and squeezed, "I got beer."

"That works," I smiled.

We decided that we would celebrate after my bath. I undressed as the tub filled with hot water and bubbles. I slid in, twitching as the water touched my bruises and aching muscles. Once I was
comfortable, I switched the water off and sighed in content.

I leaned my head back, taking in the relaxing scent of lavender. I glanced out the window, it was early afternoon and the sun's rays was blazing through the branches of the tree outside. The birds were singing and I could hear the faint shouting of children playing.

It was peaceful.

But at these moments, I couldn't help but think of Nina and what she had said about Kai.

It had been a month since Delhi. Everyone brought Akram's story about Hani having an accident and us leaving the party early. No one questioned him and we were safe, for now at least.

_A month earlier_ . . .

"Nina?" I swiftly scanned my room, searching for the small green fairy. She was nowhere to be seen. She was gone. . . . Kai was gone.

I failed back at the manor. I wasn't strong enough to save him. I knew, somewhere deep in the back of my subconscious that Kai was dead. I just wanted to believe that he was captured, that just like Nina I could get him out. Grief and frustration burned inside my gut, my throat tightened as tears streaked down my cheeks.

The next morning my eyes were pink and puffy. I tried to hide them, soothe them with cold water but the swelling wouldn't go down. I was able to play them off as allergies to Akram, but he knew there was something more. He didn't say anything or tried to dig for answers that I was grateful for. We parted as friends at the airport but an unspoken promise lingered between us. I hugged him goodbye and felt the cold outline of the Makhaira.

My eyes widened, mostly concerned that security would tackle him to the ground but he reassured me with a bright smile and whispered, "I'll be ready next time."

The moment I arrived back at the manor, I locked myself inside my room with my Kindle in hand. I searched through countless websites but I all could find was that Iya was the chief of all dark spirits from Lakota mythology. He eats everything in his wake, from humans, animals and villages. He was considered to be the eye of the storm, so most likely, Iya was a reference the Native people used to explain tornados and hurricanes. Iya was said to have no face and was formless, like air. He also lived in the water and his brother was Iktomi, the Spider.

I shivered at the thought, "spiders." I hissed, "now those things are evil." I quickly grew annoyed with the internet and called Grandma. Luckily, I caught her around three in the afternoon.

"Amy," she said lovingly, "How was Delhi?"

"It was great," I figured it was best not to bring up my reunion with Nina. "Listen Grams what do you know of Iya? I've read some stories and most say he's a formless being made of darkness. I don't get it, the spirits keep referring to Iya as a girl so. . ."

Grandma was quiet till, "There's an older story, one that hasn't been written. Do you have sage?"

"No," I looked to the clock, it was midnight. "Can you just tell me the story?" I asked sweetly, "Please?"

"No," she said sternly. "I made a promise that I would tell this story when there is sage burning."
"Grandma, it's just a story."

She gave a little puff of air and was silent for a moment. I was pretty sure she was tilting her head and making her face. The one that said: 'I know more than you, so hush child.'

"Is it?" she didn't expect an answer.

"Alright you have a point, what else can I use?"

"Salt," she proclaimed.

I did as she instructed, I grabbed a can of salt from the kitchen and poured the gain into a circle. I sat myself in the center and lit a candle.

"Do you have your bracelet?" she asked.

"Yes," I said as I tightened the leather.

"Good," she inhaled through her nose, taking a moment to collect her thoughts. The story was told to her by Hayden Miller, a girl that worked in the shop after school sometimes. Grandma summed up the story swiftly, afraid that the longer she remained on the subject, the more dangerous the words would become.

The tale was of Iya seeking out war against his father Inyan. He was jealous over the love and worship his father received from the Lakota people and wished to take his place. Iya summoned an army of dark spirits from human hearts and turned them into soul-eaters. These soul-eaters would then take over humans and spirits and force them fight in his army.

That sounded all too familiar.

Grandma continued, saying that Iya was able to turn Maka, the Earth, against mankind; creating natural disasters all over the world. Inyan knew the only way to save the world he had created was to kill his own son. He gathered his army of spirits, humans and animals and after three nights of fighting they won. Inyan tore Iya apart and scattered his remains into the abyss as Maka locked him inside.

"Is that it?" I asked.

She sighed, "No. Hayden said that the pieces of Iya fused with the soul-eaters. Then she added that someone could rule the soul-eaters and use their power to obtain what they desire most."

Before I could ask anything else, Blair called for her in the background.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming," she turned her attention back to me, "I have to go, please Amy be careful."

"I will," I promised.

As the memory faded, I stepped out of the tub and dried myself quickly. I smeared on some lotion, shook out my wet wavy hair and dressed into a pair of high waisted jean shorts. The light blue was washed out and had a few holes and rips at the ends, but I could never part with them. They were my favorite. Then I added a white skin-tight tank and wore an ivory lace crop top over it.

I ran down the stairs, combing my fingers through my hair as I called out for Gilbert. "Gil, where are
you?" The kitchen was dark but something was moving in the shadows. I tensed and prepared myself as curled my fingers into fists. I walked forward slowly and switched on the light.

A person jumps up and I spun, colliding my heel to his face. He fell against the table, groaning as he held his cheek. "What the hell Amy?"

"Gilbert?" I blinked to adjust my eyes, "What were you doing?"

Ludwig laughed, "You're right brother; it was a good idea to surprise her."

He glared at him, "shut up."

I couldn't help but laugh along with Ludwig, "I'm sorry Gil."

"Its fine, you didn't hit me that hard anyway," he grumbled.

"Yet, you're bleeding," his younger brother remarked.

"I said shut it," he hissed.

I gazed to them with a raised eyebrow, "So what's the big surprise?"

"Well," Ludwig scratched the back of his head as Gilbert shoved him with his elbow.

"Come on West, don't be shy," he smirked as he wiped the blood from his lip.

The blond narrowed his eyes at Gilbert in a warning and then faced me. "This is your farewell dinner," he gestured to the table which was filled with food, beer and even a cake.

"Aw," I wrapped my arms around his neck and hugged him tight. "Luddy, you do care!"

He patted my back as his cheeks flushed in embarrassment, "ja, ja."

I kissed him on the cheek, "thank you."

He smiled in spite of his blush and nodded.

After we had our meal and beer, we moved on to the chocolate cake. "Mmmm," I moaned in pleasure, "I'm in heaven."

"Clearly she doesn't know what an orgasm feels like," Gilbert snickered at Ludwig.

I kicked him under the table and he hissed back a groan.

Ludwig smirked and pulled out a package wrapped in brown paper, "from us."

I grinned and tore it open to find a taser, a can of pepper spray and a whistle. "You got me a rape prevention kit." I chuckled, "I like it, especially the taser," I clicked it on and blue light sparked in response.

"Use it for emergencies," Ludwig stated.

"Or when Black Friday rolls around," I smirked.

He gave me a strict look and I sighed, "fine only for emergencies."
The next morning, I cleaned the room, packed my bags and took my time walking through the hall and stair case. I looked to the living room, kitchen, the office and the door that lead to the basement/gym. It was filling me with nostalgic and this feeling continued to grow as I stepped out in front of the manor. I smiled up at the old-fashioned house, "we had a lot of fun didn't we?"

"Amy!" Gilbert called out from the BMW, "we gotta go!"

I glanced to the manor one last time and strutted to the car. The ride to the airport and the registration for my luggage was swift and easy. I looked to the boarding line as Ludwig handed me my ticket.

"You have everything?" he asked.

"Yeah," I slid the strap of my carryon over my shoulder.

"You did put the taser in the luggage? They won't let you on if you have it on you."

"I know, don't worry, it's in the luggage."

"Chill West she's got this," Gilbert proclaimed as we embraced. "Take care Bärchen," he winked.

"You too Gil," I turned to Ludwig, "sorry for being a huge pain."

He nodded and I playfully narrowed my eyes at him, "hey this is the part when you say, 'nah, Amy you weren't that bad. We're cool.'"

He covered his mouth to conceal his chuckle, "you are a questionable soldier," I made a face as he continued. "But you have the potential to be something greater."

I gave a proper salute and he saluted back as a smile played on his lips. Before he could say anything else, I tackled him in a quick hug and then sprinted to the back of the line. Once I was passed security, I waved to them, "Gil! Gil!" I shouted from behind the guards.

"What is it?" he exclaimed from across the room.

"When you get home, go into my room and check under the floorboards. There's some mail for you."

"Mail?" he furrowed his brows in confusion till he looked at me with a wide-eyed expression. "Is this about my credit card?!"

"Maybe," I shrugged, "bye!" I ran in the opposite direction, laughing as Gilbert tried in a failed attempt to run pass security.

I grinned throughout my entire flight, giggling at the thought of Gilbert's face turning red and being escorted out by security. This was all revenge for his little stunt he pulled when I had arrived in Berlin. I leaned back, feeling proud of myself.

The ride to Copenhagen was short, about an hour. When I had arrived, the sky was gray and cloudy. The air was cold and it was beginning to rain. Even though I was inside with circling heat, I still felt the chill. It also didn't help that I was wearing shorts and a tank top.
I found Mikkel Densen waiting for me near the baggage conveyor belt, holding a sign that had my name on it.

"Amy!" he shouted, waving his hands in the air in excitement. "Over here!"

I nodded, keeping my arms close to my body to contain warmth.

"I got your bag," he gestured to my luggage and then took my carryon from my shoulder. "Come on, the cab's waiting."

I hesitated to follow him outside but I braved through cold. The chill sunk into my skin, causing me to shiver and clutch my jaw. I sprinted after Mikkel, running pass him to slide into the backseat of the car. I was surrounded by heat instantly as I settled into my seat and rubbed my palms together.

After Mikkel loaded my bags into the trunk, he climbed in and looked to me with a raised brow. "Are you cold?"

"Nah," my voice was laced with heavy sarcasm. "I'm doing the latest dance craze it's called the shiver." When he continued to look at me with a puzzled expression I snapped, "Yes, I'm cold!"

"How can you be cold?" he questioned with an amused grin, "It's only five Celsius."

"What?! Five degrees?!"

"No, five Celsius is about forty degrees."

"Oh," I mumbled but still held my arms close to my chest, "it feels colder than that."

"If you can't even handle this, how are you going to handle Stockholm?"

I stayed quiet, gazing out the window into the cold, gray world. I tried to picture the sun and the blue sky above and the golden sand and crystal-clear ocean below. The images of my family and friends came into focus; memories of us gathered at the beach, in town or in the backyard of my childhood home. My skin tingled at the thought of the warmth and light of home but the warmth completely evaporated when the car engine started, reminding me where I was.

I glanced outside again, sighed and pulled my knees up under my chin; trying to feel that warmth once again.

Mikkel shook his coat off and draped it over my shoulders, "I have something for you." I turned to him as he handed me a letter, "It's from your siblings."

I snatched the letter with a rushed 'thanks' and ripped it open:

Hey Amy, this is Johnny hitting you up with my pal Mikkel.

He told me you would be visiting his capital, then you would head out to Sweden. It's seriously FREEZING up there so Mel and I pulled some cash aside for you to get some winter clothes, because we know for damn certain you ain't got nothing to wear.

Buy yourself a big jacket, one that can resist water and keep you warm. Get sweaters, long sleeve shirts and thermals. And Mel says to buy these new fuzz-infused leggings, they can be worn by themselves (inside only) and under your jeans. Get snow boots, not winter boots but SNOW boots and yes, there's a difference.

~Johnny
Oh, by the way, Celine and I are expecting! I'm gonna be a dad, Ames!

I gasped, "oh my god!"

Mikkel jumped, "What is it?!!"

"Celine's pregnant! They're gonna have a baby!"

He grinned and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, "this calls for a drink! Driver get us to the nearest bar!"

"No," I interrupted, "we need to go shopping for winter clothes."

"You can just cuddle up with me for warmth," he smiled.

"Or I can shove you out of this moving vehicle," I smiled back.

"Driver, take us to Illum," he said.

"That's what I thought," I smirked as I crossed my arms.

The Illum was just like any other mall, it had four floors with plenty of stores and a large variety of clothing brands.

"Where do you want to start?" Mikkel asked.

"Clothes," I bundled his jacket around myself. "Definitely clothes."

We strolled through the floors, searching for a store with the cheapest prices. Luckily I found a small boutique that was having a sale. I was greeted by a pretty woman who was more than happy to assistance me.

"You are going to Stockholm," she looked me over, "those clothes won't do."

"Yeah, I know, please help," I placed my hands together in a mock prayer.

"That won't be a problem," she smiled, "you will need thermals about three to four pairs. Long sleeve shirts and wool sweaters, maybe some cardigans. Oh, and jeans, leggings."

"The ones with some kind of fuzz in them?"

"The very same."

Mikkel sighed, "we're gonna be here awhile ain't we?"

"Relax, I just need to try on the pants and we will be good to go," I proclaimed.

"Here let me measure you," she pulled out a measuring strip. Then she wrapped it around my hips and said, "You're a thirty-eight. A lot of girls are your size, let me go see if I got any thermals in the back. The jeans are behind you, browse through those and I'll be right back."

I nodded as she walked into the back room and I roamed through the thick threaded jeans.

"You're a thirty-eight? You look smaller than that," Mikkel caressed my waist as he smirked.
I grabbed his wrist and snapped his hand back, "Hands. Off." I warned.

He rubbed his wounded wrist as the sales woman came back with three pairs of thermals. "I'm afraid all I could find was gray."

"That's fine," I smiled, "they're all gonna be under my clothes anyway."

"Well that makes it easier to undress you in my head," Mikkel snickered.

I stomped on his foot and he hissed in pain. I ignored him and continued to chat with her, "Thanks, can I have a dressing room?"

"Of course," she led me to a room and pulled back the curtain, "if you need anything, just ask."

I nodded my thanks and closed the curtain. I undressed, moving quickly to slip on the thermals. They were a little short, but I didn't mind so much for the jeans and leggings covered my ankles. The thermal tops covered me completely and fitted nicely under the shirts and sweaters. Once I figured out my sizes, I grabbed four pairs of skinny jeans and three fuzz infused leggings. Four long sleeve flannel shirts, three long sleeve shirts, four baggy sweaters and two cardigans; all varying in the colors and styles. She also brought out thick coats, one was white with brown multicolored faux fur sewed inside. It was water resist, warm and the length came down to my knees. I even found a pair of snow boots; they came to mid-calf, were tan and espresso brown and had the same color faux fur as my coat. Then I added some color; pairing up my white coat with a teal knit cap infused with soft Shea-infused brown fur on the inside. Along with a teal scarf that had snowflake designs and a matching pair of gloves.

I decided to wear my new leggings, which were all designed with colorful winter themed stripes. I added a long sleeve purple shirt, a tan cardigan and my new snow boots. I paid with the gift card from my siblings and tried in a fail attempt to stuff my tank, shorts, and new clothes into my carryon and luggage.

"We need to find a post office," I stated as I sat on my luggage.

"There's one on the first floor," the sales woman proclaimed.

Once I got the zipper to close, I smiled to her, "thank you, you've been a big help."

"It was my pleasure, have a safe trip," she waved us off.

Mikkel and I almost missed the post office, it was crammed into a corner with a large second-hand book store on its right. We entered as I politely asked for a box and Mikkel opened my luggage. The zipper couldn't contain my clothes and as the zipper came half way, it burst open. Clothes popped out, scattering to the floor as I cursed and began to pick them up.

Mikkel held up a pair of plain underwear, "You know Amy, I was kinda hoping for something with a little more lace," he grinned.

"Give me those!" I flushed as I smacked him on the head and snatched my underwear back.

"He hissed back a groan but he continued to grin like a happy fool.

After I packed and shipped all of my summer clothes back to Summerland. Mikkel took me to a restaurant called Grams Laekkerier, it was a café in the heart of the city. It had about four tables inside with three outside; it was small but cozy. The wait staff was super friendly and welcomed us in with smiles and hellos.
They're sandwiches were amazing! I had their chicken and avocado, and my god I almost cried from one bite.

"Are you okay?" Mikkel asked.

"I haven't had avocado for like, ever!" I took another bite, "oh god, I'm in heaven!"

"I had planned for you to say that in bed," he shrugged his shoulders, "I guess this will do for now."

I rolled my eyes, "You are such a perv."

"You make it too easy," he winked.

I laughed in spite of myself.

We didn't have long to sight see. Our plane to Stockholm left in about an hour and we had to check in my luggage. The flight wasn't long, another hour or so but time flew as Mikkel and I played app games like Uno and Monopoly. The plane arrived in the late afternoon but with the sun waning down, I almost believed it was the evening.

"What time is it?" I asked as I slid on my coat and wrapped my scarf around my neck.

"It's three-twenty, the sun usually sets around four about this time of year," Mikkel proclaimed.

"Four?!" I exclaimed, "When does the sun rise?"

"Around seven."

I turned towards the window, the sky was gray and cloudy and the glass fogged when I breathed on it. "This is insane."

"Just wait till it snows," he grinned.

"Snows?!" I stared at him wide-eyed, "Like white puffiness falling from the sky snow?!"

He nodded, "yeah."

"It will snow here?" I asked excitedly.

"It is Sweden," he said.

"Wow," I looked to the sky, "I've never seen real live snow before."

"Really?" he cracked a smile, "I couldn't tell."

I shoved him playfully, "shut up."

Peter and Lukas Bondevik were waiting for us outside the airport. They were leaning against a dark blue van and were wearing wind breakers. Peter looked up from his phone and grinned when he saw us.

"Hey!" he waved.

"Peter!" I ran to give him a squeezing hug and then turned to the blond behind him. "Hey Lukas, it's
been awhile."

He gave a small smile, "it has; you look well."

"Thanks."

"Lukas!" Mikkel tackled him with a side hug, "did you miss me?"

He sighed, "How could I? You were only gone for a day." He looked to me with a slight pleading gaze, "you should've left this idiot in Copenhagen."

"I tried but he was persistent," I smirked.

"Guys, I'm right here," Mikkel exclaimed.

Peter's phone buzzed and he read a text message, "Come on its getting dark."

We climbed into the van, Lukas taking the wheel while Mikkel sat in the passenger seat. I claimed my seat behind them as Peter closed the door and moved to sit beside me. The city was filled with colorful buildings and was aligned on multiple rivers that crisscrossed through the land. As the sun faded, the city began to glow. Streetlights beamed, reflecting against the water while the windows of bars and hotels gleamed with soft light.

Lukas took the main highways, driving out of city and into the suburbs. Peter gave me a quick review about the buildings we passed. Such as the Stockholm University that was across the lake from the Karolinska University Hospital and further down was the Hagaparken, a park filled with trees of red and yellow colored leaves. Well, I took Peter's word for it. I couldn't really see much color through the dark hue of the night's atmosphere.

"So, what have you been up to?" I asked Peter in a whisper.

"Oh, you mean after you locked me and Raivis inside a room for two hours," he muttered.

"Hey, I said I was sorry," I stated.

"I'll accept your apology when you tell me why," he proclaimed.

"I did," I said, "Hani was in trouble and I didn't want to bother you."

"You did all that for a dog?" he questioned. "You tore off your shawl and wrapped it around the door handles to lock us inside a room . . . for a dog?"

"What can I say? I'm an animal lover," I grinned.

He sighed and looked away from me with his arms crossed, "fine, whatever."

"Pete," I reached for him but he shifted away from me. I pulled my hand back, feeling the coldness of his actions. He was mad but if he was anything like Arthur all I had to do was leave him be to cool down.

Lukas busted out a U-turn, taking an exit that led us to a back road and into small neighborhood. It was filled with massive houses and was surrounded by wildness. It was almost like we had broken away from civilization and was cloaked in a peaceful bubble. The sounds of the city had faded, allowing the birds to take center stage.

Lukas pulled up next to a huge house that stood in the outskirts of the neighborhood. It was two
stories tall and painted in a light shade of tan with black roof tops and white rimmed windows. We climbed out of the van as Berwald Oxenstierna, Tino Väinämöinen and Erik Steilsson walked out of the house. Tino was smiling and gesturing to us to come inside while Berwald and Erik stood behind him, waving and nodding their welcomes quietly. I made a grab for my bags but lost them to Tino and Mikkel.

"No, no, we got this. Come on in Ms. America," Tino smiled as he guided me inside. The first thing I noticed was a stair case right on the left side as a living room stood on the other. The room was painted in a shade of beige, filled with comfy furniture and was surrounded by windows. Further ahead was the kitchen, it had wooden floors with brown marble counter tops and white drawers. Under the stair case was a hallway that led to three doors.

Tino noticed my curiously and said, "That room straight ahead is the sauna, the door on the right is Berwald's and my room and the last room belongs to Lukas." He turned to Mikkel and handed him my luggage, "show Amy to her room."

Mikkel grinned, nodded and pulled me up stairs to the second level. "Across there is Erik's room, next to that is Peter's," he pointed to the two rooms on the right and gestured to the left, where three doors lied. "And this is your room."

My room was the last door; the walls were mint green with white furniture and gold framed pictures on the walls. The bed was queen sized with teal and white bed covers that were designed to look like quilts. It also had two big matching pillows and an ivory wired bed frame. It was sweet and cozy, warm and inviting.

Mikkel placed my bags beside the door, "the bathroom is next door and my room," he looked to me with a wink and sly grin. "Is just down the hall, if you get cold at night you know where to find me."

Lukas grabbed his ear and yanked; hard.

"Oooowww," he cried out as Lukas said calmly, "stop that, you're being disgusting."

"It's called flirting!" he stated.

"It's called being a creep," then the nation turned his sea blue eyes on me. "If this idiot tries anything call me."

I nodded, "thanks."

Lukas released Mikkel's ear and warned him, "I'm watching you."

He walked out of the room and Mikkel followed, exclaiming, "oh just admit it Lukas, you're jealous-"

Then a series of loud thumps echoed through the second floor as an object tumbled down the stairs. I ran out to find Mikkel stumbling to his feet at the bottom of the stair case as Lukas looked to him with a blank expression from the top.

"What happen?" I asked.

"He tripped," said Lukas.
Later, after Mikkel was picked up from the floor, everyone gathered in the kitchen for dinner. The food was amazing. Tino made Lohikeitto, a salmon soup with leek and potatoes. He paired it up with Kalakukko a bread stuffed with fish, usually called a fish pie and cabbage rolls that were stuffed with beef, onions and spices. It was served with lingonberry jam, which I will admit was unusual but I quickly got over it when I discovered how good it tasted. Tino called the dish Kaalikääryleet, and don't even ask me how to pronounce it. For dessert, he served gluten-free, blackberry pie with vanilla cream on top.

I took another bite and grinned happily, "Berwald I see why you married Tino."

His lip cured in a slight smile, "he is a good wife."

Peter sighed, "Papa, Dad's a man; you have to call him your husband."

"Finni doesn't mind, Sve's been calling him that since, what the fifteenth century?" Erik questioned.

"I think the fourteenth," Tino pondered.

"Wow," I said, "that's a lot of years."

"A lot history," Lukas said.

"Yeah," Mikkel grinned and proclaimed, "We should have a toast to all the years we spent together!"

"You just want an excuse to drink," Erik stated, annoyed.

"Fine we can drink to Johnny and Celine for they are with child!"

Tino gasped, "they are?!" he clapped his hands together excitedly, "I'm so happy for them."

"When is the due date?" Lukas asked.

"I don't know, I just found out today. He," I gestured to Mikkel, "just wants an excuse to drink. He even tried to get us to a bar when we were in Copenhagen."

"Either way," Berwald cuts in, "we should send a gift, maybe a toy? Clothes?"

"It's still pretty early," I proclaimed, "but they would like that."

"You know what," Tino rose from his seat, "this is a perfect time to drink." He walked to the fringe pulled out two bottles of vodka.

"Yes, he's bringing out the good stuff," he held up a shot glass, "Hit me!"

Tino poured him a cup full and did the same for everyone around the table. Once he was seated he held his glass up, "To Johnny and Celine!"

"To Johnny and Celine!" everyone echoed.

My training schedule was more lenient in Berwald's house than it was at Ludwig's. We ate breakfast together at eight and right after our meal both Mikkel and Berwald lectured me over handheld guns; mostly on the specifications of the weapon and historical backgrounds. These hand pistols were black and modern and were called Glocks. There were even different names for each model like the
Glock 17Pro that was custom made for Finland, with an extended barrel, night sights, and revised magazine release. The Glock 17DK, that followed Denmark's law of the eight-point-three length and the Pistol 88, which was just another name for the Glock 17, the standard hand gun.

Later, after Berwald would show me how to clean and maintain these guns we moved outside to a shooting range in the backyard. A small river swerved through the lawn and we had to cross it to get further into the woods. Tino and Lukas would be waiting for in a clearing, with M82 sniper rifles ready for my lesson. Tino was the main instructor, pointing out the gears and functions of the sniper and improving my stance to hold these weapons.

The first couple of days were difficult. The only things that I ever held even remotely close to a gun were water pistols or BB guns at the local carnivals. I knew this was coming but it just didn't seem real till I held the cold metal handle and felt the tickle of the trigger as my index finger touched it.

"Don't be afraid of it," Tino stated, "it's a weapon, a tool for you to use. You have control over it and you know exactly what it's capable of."

I quickly recalled the laser gun I wielded back in Paris and shivered at the thought of blasting off various aliens' flesh with each shot. I shook the memories off and aimed the Glock at a target.

"No, no," the Finnish man moved forward to straighten my back and spread my feet apart. "There are three stances for shooting a gun. Rely on your stronger leg, it will be your leverage. Don't lock the knees, keep them slightly bended. This is called the weaver stance." He then guided me to squat, but only slightly with both feet flat on the ground, "this is the isosceles stance. I suggest you don't use this one, it doesn't give you any freedom to move.

"The last stance is a more modified weaver stance, the stronger leg is little bit behind you," he moved my leg back. "It allows you move faster and comes in handy when shooting on the move. Still keep your legs bent, don't put so much space between your legs, try and keep them a shoulder length apart and keep yourself on the balls of your feet. Now show me how you would hold the gun."

I shot my arms out straight and held the gun with both hands.

Tino bended my elbows back an inch, "you don't want to do that. It will stain your arms and when your weapon recoils it would put major pressure on your shoulders. Your arms have to be bent, it gives you more flexibility and allows you to disengage faster." He followed with pushing my arms back into myself and instructing me to face the barrel of the gun to the side, towards the ground. "This is called lower ready, this is when you disengage but it also gives you a better react time to reengage your opponent."

He asked me to show the posture of my full body stance. I did as I was told as Tino nodded in approval, "you're a fast learner. Now to hold the gun, keep three fingers wrapped around the handle, right in the center of the palm. Put your other hand on top of the other, marry the thumbs and place your right index finger on the frame, so you're ready to fire."

Next, he showed me how to load a magazine and properly insert it into the gun. For twenty minutes all we did was load, unload and reload bullets. When I had those basics down he gestured to the target, "shoot."

I inhaled deeply through my nose and shifted into my stance. I slowly moved my finger over the trigger. My muscles twitched once my finger made contact and I had to take a moment to breathe and clear my thoughts. With both eyes open, I channeled my inner Peggy Carter, aimed the gun at the bull's eye and pulled the trigger. One bullet exploded out of the barrel, the force of this power shivered down my arms and pushed them back slightly.
"Lower ready," Tino commanded and I lowered my weapon as Mikkel checked the target. He smirked and held up the undamaged marker, "you missed, big time."

My shoulders slumped and Tino placed an encouraging hand on my shoulder, "you'll get it."

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Gun instruction pretty much lasted till lunch time, which would be around two; allowing my afternoons to be free.

Berwald sipped his tea, "you are a grown adult and you haven't given me a reason to watch you twenty-four-seven. I trust you to make your own decisions, you followed Mr. Germany's rules so I see no reason not to trust you."

"Uhh, did you not hear about me running off from a meeting or breaking his window or destroying Gilbert's car or using Gil's card to pay for food than hiding the bills from him?" I questioned.

Peter and the other Nordics looked to me with raised eyebrows but Berwald looked to me with a serious expression. "See you are an adult. A child would hide those facts from me to keep her freedom, a woman owns up to her mistakes and faces her consequences. For this I give you the freedoms of coming and going after your gun instructions but keep in mind you have to get up in the mornings and once you eat, the next five hours belong to us. After that you are free to do as you wish.

"I will not accept disrespect to anyone in this house, even if that person is Mikkel."

"Hey," the Danish man exclaimed.

Berwald continued, "Curfew is at eleven and I would like for one of us go out with you every time you leave the house but like I said you are an adult and you have every right to go out alone. But it puts me at ease knowing you have one us looking out for you but again, you're choice.

"Now if you bring someone home with you-"

"'Bring someone home'" I questioned.

"For sexual purposes," he said with a straight face.

"Papa." Peter hid his face in hand, his ears burning with an embarrassed blush.

I flushed, "That won't happen."

Mikkel added, "Yeah, cause I'm going to make sure I get that position," he grinned.

Lukas smacked him over his head, "idiot."

"Is that all?" I asked, "No running laps or combat training?"

Berwald shrugged his shoulders, "we have a weight set in the attic and you can run around the neighborhood if you like. We were only told to instruct you on gun safety and proper use of the Pistol 80 and the M82."

"But why for only five hours a day?"
"Five hours every weekday, the neighbors have complained about the noise and we've stroke a deal to only fire in the mornings," said Erik.

"And also, bullets are expensive," Berwald proclaimed.

"So, is there anything you wish to do here in Stockholm?" Tino asked.

The days passed in a steady pace; mornings were filled with gun training as afternoons and evenings belonged to sightseeing. First the Nordics took me out on the town, like the bus tours that I took in Rome, Berwald booked a boat tour. It was the perfect way to see the city's intricate island layout. The tour lasted two hours, crossing nearly fifteen of Stockholm's bridges and the locks that connected Lake Mälaren with the Baltic Sea.

Next we strolled through the streets of Gamla Stan or Old Town, it was filled with towering buildings. They were thin, tightly compacted against one another and were painted with bright colors. There were stores, bars, cafés and gifts shops. But everything was so expensive, the only thing I could buy were small, plain necklaces for the twins' birthday. We meandered through the streets, it was like a labyrinth of mysterious vaults and ancient walls that lurked behind striking facades.

Södermalm, sometimes called Söder was a hipster's paradise. Filled with trendy vintage clothing boutiques, cool independent galleries and intimate little bars. The district fell align with a river way, allowing boats to stop and go as they please. The buildings were just as vivid as they were in Old Town but some were crafted to look like Victorian churches with pointed arches and dark rooftops.

"This feels like I'm in medieval times," I proclaimed.

"Try living in them," Erik said sarcastically.

"Like you have any say," Mikkel cuts in, "you were just a sissy little girl-boy clinging to the cloak of Lukas when we had to fight tooth and nail for our lands."

Lukas elbowed him in the gut and he fell over clutching his stomach, "shut it Dane," he sneered.

I whispered to Peter, "is this how they show their affection?"

"Yeah, pretty much," he said coldly and walked further ahead.

We took tours through several museums and historical buildings; my excitement could not be contained. Note the sarcasm. The first stop was The Royal Palace, the official residence of the King of Sweden. The massive building lies on the water's edge on the periphery of Gamla Stan. The palace was also one of the largest in Europe boasting with six hundred rooms and had five museums. I was able to see Queen Kristina's silver throne, visit the Museum of Antiquities, and the Armory. Which was my favorite part because it reminded of the TV show Vikings. Then I toured around the Tre Kronor (Three Crowns) Museum and the Treasury. During the visit we were able to witness the daily changing of the guard.

Next came the Vasa Museum, the most visited museum in Sweden. Seriously, more than one million people come each year and I could see why. There was a gigantic boat, made out of aged wood and detailed with bronze statues; think Pirates of the Caribbean.

"The incredible Vasa battleship was intended to be the pride of the Swedish Imperial fleet, yet in a
forerunner of the Titanic disaster centuries later, sank on its maiden voyage in 1628. A salvage operation took place in 1961, and now visitors can marvel at this glorious time capsule, 95 percent of which is entirely original," said Erik.

I nodded, "cool, do you know a lot of Swedish history because of Berwald?"

"No, I just read that," he pointed to a gold painted plaque.

"Oh," I mumbled, feeling embarrassed.

Stockholm must have a great love for photography because there were three museums dedicated to the art. First was the Moderna Museet (the modern art museum) it had one of the world's greatest collections of twentieth and twenty-first century art and a photography dating back to 1840's. Second was the Fotografiska Museet (don't even ask me how to pronounce that, I wouldn't even know where to begin) a museum of contemporary photography; it also hosts an eclectic mix of exhibitions throughout the year. But that wasn't all, it had a restaurant, a book, and souvenir store and on the top floor, one of the most enviable views over the city. In recent years, the museum has gotten a huge increase of visitors and was now acknowledged as one of the world's premier photography venues. The Bistro on the top floor was claimed as one of the city's coolest restaurants (weekend brunches were particularly popular with locals) and the gallery hosts cutting-edge live and club music throughout the year.

Lastly was the Galleri Kontrast, it was a little gallery devoted to documentary photography. It was housed in a former bank with lofty glass ceilings and intimate underground vaults, it had stunning architecture. The kind where I knew Sam would spend all of his time taking pictures of.

The thought of Sam and his camera made me smile and miss him at the same time. I scrolled through my phone and tapped on his face. It ringed three times before I heard a tired, muffled voice say, "Who the hell is calling me at this ungodly hour?"

"Chill dude it's only seven over there," I smirked.

"In the morning," Sam grumbled.

I gave a soft laugh and said, "how you been Sammy?"

"Good, good," he yawned, "school is putting me through the ringer but I'm enjoying it."

"That's good."

"How's Europe? Just as stuck up as I remembered?"

"Eh, somewhat. Did you know that Europe is filled museums? Like seriously, everywhere you go there's a museum. Oh look another museum right next to that museum, oh look what a pretty cottage- nope that's also a museum." I paused as Sam laughed. "Even a villa and a movie theater can be constructed into a museum," I added.

"That's Europe for you filled with meaningless crap," he said darkly, "sometimes the world is just filled with meaningless crap."

My brows furrowed in worry, "Sam are you okay?"
He sighed, "I'm sure you know that Thanksgiving is only a few days away."

"It is?" I counted the days I've spent with the Nordics; damn, about three weeks.

"Time flies when you're having fun," he said sarcastically.

"Sure," I proclaimed with the same amount of sarcasm.

"Anyway, I have week off and everyone's gone-off being with their families and such."

"Why don't you go home? Back to London."

"I can't Amy, my . . . my parents disowned me."

"What?! When?" I asked.

"Back in July, when I was accepted to film school and I told them that wouldn't go to Oxford. When I told them that I refused to follow their path for me and that it was my life and I wish to do with it as I please. They didn't take it well." I could practically hear the fake smile, the one he always sported when he was out with his parents, Malcolm and Elizabeth Collins. They were part of the British Parliament and were highly respected among their peers. They were even on good relations with the royal family.

"They can't do that-"

"They can and they did."

"Well, you shouldn't spend Thanksgiving by yourself. Go to Summerland, spend it with my family," I suggested.

"I don't know, the holiday is meant for family."

"You are family," I proclaimed, "come on, you can stay with my parents, they wouldn't mind. Just think about it, you can have some turkey, pumpkin pie, my mom's incredible mushroom stuffing."

He moaned at the mention of food, "oh god that sounds amazing. I've been eating nothing but instant noodles from the hallway vending machine."

"Oh, you poor boy," I cooed, "You need some real food."

He laughed and it sounded genuine, "yes definitely." Then he asked, "are you sure they wouldn't mind?"

"Mom and Dad like you, and you're one of my closest friends. They won't just welcome you in, they'll drag you in."

He was quiet for moment and said, "Okay, I'm going. Will you be there?"

The happy high I was feeling came crashing down when I realized that I was halfway across the world. That over five thousand miles were separating me from the people I loved the most. "No . . . no . . . I won't be coming home for at least another year or so. Twenty months if you want to be specific."

"Oh . . ."

"Yeah . . ."
Silence grew between us, becoming awkward and uncomfortable. I looked back to the Galleri Kontrast and smiled, "hey put me on video chat, I got something to show you."

Once I saw his face, I flipped the camera, revealing the fabulous interior and unique photos that hanged on the walls.

"Oh god," he whispered under his breath.

"If you like this, I should show you the Fo-to-gra . . ." I gave up. "I'll text it to you."

He grinned, "It's a date."

It was the day after Thanksgiving, for me at least but for everyone back home it was Thursday. And I was being swamped with calls from family and friends.

"Look Ames," Jamie flipped the screen to reveal a huge brown turkey, "me and Dani worked all day to get this bird cooked."

"Awesome," I yawned. It was six in evening in New York that means that it was midnight in Stockholm.

She flipped the camera back to me, "you sound tired, do you want me to let you go?"

"Nah, I need to wake up... Sofia will be calling in an hour and then Mom will call at three, so I might as will be up."

"I got it!" Ella called as she slammed the door. "I got the stupid pumpkin pie, had to fight some guy for it but I got it."

Jamie turned the phone onto her, "Hey Ella, Amy's on the phone."

She waved to me and dropped the pie on the table, "I hate the holidays... everything's closing and everyone is so angry at each other. I thought this was a time to be merry and all that crap."

I gave a supportive smile, "it's not that bad."

"No? Did you have to take three trains to three different neighborhoods to get a pie?" she massaged her temple, "I need a drink."

Daniela walked in, placing bread rolls and cream spinach on the table. "Stop you're whining, Michel will be here any minute and then we can finally eat."

Then she looked to me and smiled, "Happy Thanksgiving Amy."

"Happy Thanksgiving," I greeted.

"Don't mind Ella, she's just mad cause she hasn't eaten all day."

"And whose fault is that?" she sneered.

I smirked, "so Michel is joining you guys?"

"Yeah," Jamie answered, "we decided that we would spend Thanksgiving together then take a plane
back to Summerland for Christmas."

"That's great," I said.

"He's even bringing Ethan," she gestured to the table, "so I figured we go all out. Ella just wanted us to go to some fancy restaurant in Manhattan-"

"A five star restaurant! One that would actually serve good food!"

Daniela sighed, "Hush! I didn't want to spend the holiday at some snotty restaurant, filled with stuck up people. This here is perfect."

"Oh yes, the overcooked turkey and crushed pie is just what you always dream of," she mumbled.

"You'll still eat and like it," Dani hissed.

Jamie took me away into the kitchen, "they fight like an old married couple."

"I picture more of a cat and dog sort of thing," I proclaimed.

"So, how's Stockholm?" she asked.

"Cold," I bundled three blankets around myself as I walked over to the white chimney and added another log.

"You have your own chimney?"

"Yeah all the rooms have one, it's pretty cool."

"Well I understand the cold thing, it's pretty chilly here and the weather man says that we'll get our first snowfall by tomorrow or the next day."

"Lucky!" I grumbled, "Mikkel said that it would snow in mid-November but it's nearly the end of the month and there's no snow! Damn you global warming!"

She laughed, "Be patient, it will happen."

The door buzzed and a familiar voice echoed through the apartment, "The king has arrived!"

Jamie and I rolled our eyes in sync but grinned none the less. She held her phone up, greeting Michel and Ethan with a bright hello. They exchanged tight hugs and sweet miss yous as Ethan gave Daniella a bottle of wine.

Ella snatched it from her and stared at the bottle, "this is a 1999 Domaine Leroy Musigny."

"And that means?" Michel questioned.

"This is one of the most exquisite wines from France," she said as if it was common knowledge. "My father has three bottles and each are worth over four thousand dollars."

Everyone turned to Ethan and he shrugged, "I had some extra cash."

"He's a keeper," I proclaimed.
In the next hour my assumption was proven true when I got a video call from Sofia.

"Happy Thanksgiving Amy," she grinned and then turned the camera on a large table. Everyone was there, Uncle Alex and Aunt Emily, Kupunakane and Kupunawahine, Mia, Josefina, and their husbands. Rafael was at the head at the table while the kids sat together at a smaller table.

Everyone gave a mighty, "Happy Thanksgiving Amy!"

"Happy Thanksgiving," I waved.

"Oh, Amy it's been so long!" Josefina exclaimed, "You need to call more."

"I'm sorry, but with all the traveling and the different time zones it's hard to keep track."

"How's Sweden?" her husband Aaron asked.

"Cold," I answered.

"Well at least it's constant," Sofia stated. "Texas is so damn unpredictable! One day it's hot, the next its cold and the next day after that it's hot again."

"That's why it's called a bi-polar state," Mia added.

Kupunawahine called for the phone, "let me see my little bonita!" Sofia handed it over and my Hispanic grandmother smiled to me with all the warmth in the world. "Oh look at my girl all bundled up in blankets, are you cold mija?"

"Don't worry Kupunawahine I got my own chimney," I grinned.

Kupunakane moved into the screen, "Hauʻoli La Hoʻomakikaʻi! How are you, kuʻuipo?"

"Wishing for anything to be on a beach right now."

"I know, me too," he sighed, "I don't understand why my grandchildren like living here in Garland, Texas. There is nothing here!"

"Our jobs," Mia proclaimed.

"Our community," Sofia stated.

"And it's cheaper," Josefina added.

I laughed as Kupunakane continued, "I have no idea what drove my son to raise his daughters here, at least Jessica had enough brains to move to California."

"Thanks Dad, I certainly fell the love," Alex exclaimed in good fun.

"Valencia, Gael, Lali don't you have something to say," Sofia turned the camera on the kids.

Valencia was the first to say, "thank you Aunt Amy for my camera!" She held up her instant film camera, showing off a massive grin.

Lali cuddled the Italian doll and whispered, "thank you."

"Aunt Amy! Aunt Amy!" Gael waved to me, using his hands to express his archery classes. "I'm really good and my teacher says I have a lot of potential! Oh, and I practice every day and."
"What do you say," Sofia repeated.

"Thank you . . . If you go to Japan can you send me ninja stars?" he asked.

I laughed as Sofia pulled me away and warned, "Don't you even dare."

"No more weapons as gifts, promise," I crossed my heart.

At three Mom called, "Happy Thanksgiving!"

"Happy Thanksgiving," I yawned.

She gave me a concerned look, "What time is it over there?"

"Three . . . in the morning."

"Oh sweetie, do you want me to call back later?"

"Nah, I'm good," I mustered a tiny smile, "where is everybody?"

"Let me show you," she flipped the camera towards the living room, where Dad, Melissa, Sanjay, Johnny, Celine, Grandma and the twins were seated at a long pull out table. The Chens and Russos had joined and even Mr. James had made it. I found Sam, sitting next to Johnny as Lady laid beside him.

I grinned, "Hey guys, Happy Thanksgiving!"

"Happy Thanksgiving!" they exclaimed.

Mom switched the camera back on her, "want to join us for grace?"

I nodded as she sat down and everyone held hands. She placed me in her left palm and Dad gripped the back of her hand so that both would cuddle the device. I was in the view of Sam and Johnny; my brother was teasing and ruffling Sam's dreads like he was a long-lost sibling. Sam cursed at him but he couldn't hide his crooked grin.

"Johnny, Sam," Mom said in a warning tone and the boys settled down.

I heard Dad chuckle and started his prayer. "I give thanks for this meal and thanks that I am surrounded by family. Being of blood or other," he gestured to Sam and the dirty blond flushed but only slightly. "Being of different race and culture," he raised his glass of wine to James, the Chens and the Russos.

Mom adjusted the angle so I could see them smile encouragingly at Dad. "We can still come together in good times. Of course, not every day is as memorable as others and sometimes just plain bad. . . But the important thing is that we can overcome the bad times so we can treasure the good.

"Even when we walk in different directions or when we're literally miles apart," he paused to gaze at me with nurturing fatherly love, "our paths will always cross, even if it only lasts a moment . . . treasure it."

I blinked back tears and said my goodbyes, making an excuse that I was tired. They let me go, wishing me good luck and happy holidays. I slapped my screen down, leaving me in the soft glow of
the fire. The flames were fading, dying away into the ashes. I was still cold but I didn't have the
strength to get out of bed. It was like I was being pulled by invisible force, dragging me down and
keeping me in place. As the blaze died, I curled myself into a ball watching as the light and warmth
slipped away; leaving me in complete, utter darkness.

Peter's phone beeped with a text from Tino, "could you bring us some coffee and tea for Lukas and
Berwald, please."

He typed a quick "sure," and headed to the kitchen to start the coffee machine and kettle pot. He
found Erik at the table, snacking on a bowel of chips.

"Hey," Peter stated.

"Hey," Erik said in a monotone as he ate a chip.

Peter looked out the window, trying to find Amy and his family through the trees. "How she doing?"

"Not good," Erik proclaimed, "she continues to jam her weapon, her form's sloppy and she's not
even hitting the target."

"Really?" Peter gazed to him then back to the window. He had kept track of Amy's progress since
she had arrived. Her skill had definitely improved. Her aim was precise and constant, she didn't quite
reach the bull's eye but Peter knew that it was only a matter of time.

He grabbed his coat and placed five cups and two beverage containers into a picnic basket. He
walked out into the backyard and crossed the river with one jump. He weaved through the trees,
following the sound of sniper shots.

"You need keep your arms firm, they're too loose," Tino instructed.

"Right, right, sorry," Amy inhaled deeply, pointed the sniper back at the target. She shot a round, the
bullets jumping all over the poster.

Mikkel whistled, "Damn Amy today is not your day."

She sighed and Tino patted her on the back, "we'll stop for today. Don't worry about it, everyone has
an off day now and then."

She nodded and handed him the gun as Peter severed hot beverages, "coffee or tea?" he asked.

"Coffee, please," she muttered, rubbing her forehead.

He handed her a cup and she blew at it before sipping the creamy brown liquid. She moved to sit
beside Mikkel on the bench and stared into her cup, her blue eyes glazing over.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She snapped her head up and blinked, clearing her vision. "Uh yeah, yeah," then she looked to Tino,
"I'm going to my room." She rose to her feet and spun, walking up the trail.

"Don't you want lunch?" Tino asked.

"No thanks, I'm really tired," she stated and headed straight for the house.
"She seems . . ." Berwald hesitated for a moment, "sad."

"Really? I don't see it," Mikkel said.

"Of course you don't," Lukas sighed.

Peter watched Amy as she disappeared through the trees and he was left behind with his nagging thoughts. He admits he had been sending Amy to the Coventry since the moment she arrived but, in all fairness, she was hiding something from him. At first, this petty reason was why he kept his distance from her, but as the days became weeks he began to miss the companionship of his friend. He didn't have many of those now a-days and here he was, pushing one of them away. He wanted to apologize but as the days passed he grew embarrassed by his earlier behavior and his courage slowly dwindled.

He brushed a frustrated hand through his hair, racking his brain for some sort explanation for Amy's behavior. His phone beeped with a notification from his tumblr account but once he saw the date on the screen he slapped his forehead. "Oh hell."

"What is it?" Tino asked.

"Yesterday was Thanksgiving," Peter stated, "that's why Amy's been acting so weird."

"Thanksgiving?" Mikkel raised a brow in puzzlement, "isn't that the holiday when Americans eat turkey?"

"It's not just that, it's a holiday where family and friends come together and give thanks for what they have."

Berwald nodded, "it must be painful to be away from the people you love."

Everyone was silent till Tino exclaimed, "we should make her a Thanksgiving dinner."

"Huh?" the Nordics said in sync as Peter's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"But Fin where the hell are we supposed to get a turkey?" Mikkel said.

"We can order one, and I'm sure it would be delivered here by tomorrow afternoon," Tino proclaimed.

"But we don't know how to make a turkey."

"There's this place called the internet," Lukas added saucy.

"And it should be a surprise," Tino smiled. "Berwald, you and Peter will take her out tomorrow. Get her out of the house, don't come back till six."

Berwald simply nodded and Peter couldn't help but think how they were going to pull this off.

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I was awoken by a knock at my door, "who is it?" I grumbled.

"It's the Queen of England," Peter said sarcastically.

"Ha-ha," I rolled my eyes, "I'm sleeping in today, go away."
"Yeah, that's not going to happen," he opened the door. "Come on, get dressed."

I groaned, *I forgot to lock the door.* I pulled the cover over my head, "I don't feel like doing anything today."

"But it's a beautiful day," he stated.

"It's cloudy. . ." 

"Meaning it's the perfect day to visit the Djurgården, not many tourists come around this time of year."

"What's the Dljur-garden?" I asked.

"It's a park, mixed with cafés, restaurants, snack-bars, museums-"

"Pass," I yanked a pillow over my face.

He pulled my blankets off, "get up!"

I turned away from him, "no!"

He grabbed my ankles and yanked me off the bed. I tumbled to the floor and glared at him, "you ass."

"I learned from the best. Now get dressed, Papa and I will be waiting for you downstairs."

I mumbled a curse under my breath and got dressed quickly. It was pretty cold today so I decided to wear my thermals and a pair of leggings under my jeans. I also wore a long sleeved shirt and a thick blue wool sweater.

"You sure are packing on the clothes," Peter commented as I stomped down the stairs.

"Shut it," I hissed.

We piled into the van and Berwald drove us to an island right in the middle of Stockholm. Djurgården which means The Animal Park in English, was known for its beautiful green spaces, many sights, events, parks, and tourist attractions. Stockholm was made of islands that were linked together by bridges; the island Djurgården was a cultural center and a lushly wooded park. During the summer the park would be filled with tourists but because of the colder weather, most people that were here today were locals.

Berwald brought Peter and me some Danish pastries for breakfast and we ate them as we strolled through the forest trails. It was peaceful; the towering trees, the soft green-yellow grass and the crystal-clear waterways. The leaves were absolutely beautiful; the yellow was so bright that it almost seemed like it was coloring the air. The red was deeply shaded that the fallen leaves had dyed the ground in a pink hue. The sky was cloudy and gray allowing the trees to pop and the air was cold and icy. It tickled my throat and lungs every time I inhaled.

I tightened my scarf around my neck and dipped my nose into the fabric, trying to conduct warmth. Peter fell into step beside me, side glancing to me as we walked behind Berwald.

"You should take a picture, it would last longer," I hissed.

He winced at my harsh tone but continued, "Amy, I need to apologize-"
"For what? Freezing me out or as you say, sending me to the Coventry."

"Maybe I wouldn't have sent you to the Coventry if you just told me what happen in Delhi," he exclaimed annoyed.

"Nothing happen," I snapped.

"If nothing happen, why won't you tell me."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because I'm worried about you," he shouted.

Berwald turned to face us, he spared a look to his son and then to me. "I'll go get us some hot chocolate," he speed-walked down the trail, heading straight for a vending cart.

I stood awkwardly, avoiding Peter's eyes as he kicked a stone and sat on small hill on the side. I grew tired of the silence between us and said, "Pete, you have nothing to worry about, I'm okay."

"No, you're not," he countered. "Amy, you didn't want to get out of bed this morning. That isn't you."

"How do you know what is and isn't me?"

He sighed, "I know that you're upset about not being with your family right now. I also know for damn certain that they called you last night, most likely video chatted. They must've showed you the dinner they we're having, filled with food like turkey and stuffing and pumpkin pie. I bet they were happy weren't they? Smiling and laughing and wishing you a 'happy thanksgiving' and of course you put on a brave face. You smiled and laughed with them, even gave a hardy 'happy thanksgiving' but once they hanged up you cried yourself to sleep."

I gritted my teeth, "I didn't cry last night." His words sunk deep inside my heart, allowing me to mentally relive the memory of my family seated at the table . . . without me. I tried to blink back the tears, but they still fell. The miles of separation hit me like a truck. They were so far away, physically for sure but what will I do when they go in their different directions. They will take paths that I can't follow and even if they cross, it won't be for long. Dad said to treasure the moment but will a moment be enough? I clutched my jaw and whimpered, "I miss them so much."

Peter froze, completely taken back by my shoulder shaking sobs. I tried to stop, tried to wipe the tears and snot away but I ended up crying harder. He rose to his feet and engulfed me into a comforting hug. I hid my face in his shoulder, drowning my cries into his coat.

"I hate this. . . I really hate this," I cried in frustration.

All Peter did was nod and patted my back, letting my tears flow.

It felt like I was crying for hours but in truth it only lasted a couple of minutes. We sat together on the hill as Peter handed me a packet of tissues from his pockets. I gave my thanks, rubbed my eyes and blew my nose.

"I'm sorry for making you cry," he said sincerely. "I know your family is risky topic and I took it way too far."

"Yeah, you did," I remarked, "but you were right. It kinda hurt to see them all happy and not being a part of it."
"But at least they called, they still thought of you."

I smiled in spite of myself, "yeah."

". . . . ."

". . . . . ."

"We cool?" he asked.

"We're cool," I grinned as we fist bumped.

"I'm glad you two made up, friends shouldn't fight," Berwald popped out of brush behind us and handed us our hot chocolates.

We both jumped in surprise, "Papa, you were listening?!"

He shrugged, "I didn't want to ruin the moment."

Peter sighed and slapped his forehead while I giggled and asked, "Hey can we go to that amusement park?" I pointed to Gröna Lund in the distance, "it looks like fun."

Berwald and Peter shared a quick glance. Berwald nodded and Peter said, "Yeah sure! It will be loads of wicked fun!"

"How are the steam vegetables coming along?" Tino asked as he chopped the mushrooms.

"They're fine," Erik stood at the stove, stirring a pot.

Tino glanced to Lukas at the kitchen table, "Lukas, how's the bread?"

"It's getting there," he sprinkled flour over the dough and began to break them off into small rolls.

Tino raised his head to the sound of the door opening and slamming shut. Mikkel walked in and sat beside Lukas.

"Where's the pumpkin pie?" Tino asked.

"Oh funny story, well not really funny cause I already knew what was gonna happen. There are no pumpkin pies in Sweden!" Mikkel exclaimed, "And don't even ask if there are pumpkins in Sweden, cause there's not."

"Okay," Tino decided it was best to leave Mikkel be for he was in a mood but Lukas didn't let it go.

"Didn't you call France or Germany, they have pumpkins right?"

"They're out of season," Mikkel grumbled as he pulled out two cans, butternut squash and yams. "But I can make a pie out this, they say it's like pumpkin pie."

"But it's made out of squash and yams," Erik remarked.

"Do you want a pie or not?"

Tino steps in, becoming the peace maker, "It's fine Mikkel, just start making it." The blond checked
his watch once again, it was a quarter till four. He sighed, "The turkey still hasn't made it and I paid for next day delivery."

"It'll get here Fin," Erik said calmly, "don't worry."

An hour passed before the door rang, announcing that the raw, slightly warm turkey had arrived. Tino unwrapped it and stared at the naked bird, pondering on how he was going to cook this stack of meat before six.

Giving up, he asked, "Any ideas?"

"Don't look at me," Erik proclaimed.

"I have no clue," Lukas added.

Mikkel narrowed his eyes at the bird, burning a hole into it. Then he shot up and snapped his fingers, "don't Americans deep fry this thing?"

The Nordics glanced to each other, smiling in realization. "Get a pot," Tino exclaimed.

Together, they set up the stockpot, placing it outside over a tarp. Following directions from a website Erik found on his smart phone.

"Okay, it says to fill it with peanut oil and heat it to 350 degrees," Erik stated.

Mikkel nodded, twisting the knob of the Bunsen burner, "done."

"It says to cook it for three minutes per pound," he turned to Tino, "how much does the bird weigh?"

"About five to six kilograms," Tino took a moment to do the math, "that would make it twelve pounds so about thirty-six minutes."

Lukas nodded, "but it will take about ten minutes for the oil to heat," he added.

Tino checked his watch again, it was ten minutes pass five. He smiled, "we have time." He glanced back to his friends; their clothes were covered in stains, mostly food spills or dried flour. Lukas and Mikkel had added flour in their hair because the two had an argument over the bread dough. Erik still had specks of spinach cream stuck to his shirt and Tino himself was covered in dried sweat and specks of food.

"We should probably clean ourselves up," he suggested.

"You don't have to tell me twice," Erik walked back into the house as Lukas followed.

"Would you like to take my shower Mikkel?" Tino asked.

"Nah," he waved him off, "You go first, and I'll cook this bird."

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Berwald, Peter and I pulled up into the driveway. The house was alive with activity, beaming with light. The thought instantly pulled me to the concept of food. "I'm hungry," I cuddled a massive brown teddy bear, pulling it closer for comfort. I had won this fluffy giant from a target shooting game at the amusement park, I was pretty sure Tino would be proud. "I hope this meal was worth starving me!"
"Don't be such a drama queen," Peter grinned, "trust me, it's worth it."

We walked through the front door to find Lukas and Erik running down the stairs. They stopped, glanced to each other and then back to us, "you're early," Lukas stated.

Their clothes were sticking to them and their hair was wet.

"Did you two just get out of the shower?" I asked.

Tino slid into the room, twisting his sweater on as he shook his hair out like a dog, "Sve, I told you to bring her back at six."

"I'm sorry but it was getting dark and Ms. America kept trying to sneak away for a vending cart."

Before I could defend myself, my nose caught the scent of something all too familiar. "No way," I whispered to myself and ran towards the kitchen. The table was filled with steamed vegetables, spinach cream, bread rolls, pumpkin pie and what looked like my mom's mushroom stuffing. "Is that my mom's stuffing?"

Tino stepped forward, "I called her yesterday, asking what your favorite thanksgiving foods were. She told me you loved her stuffing so she emailed me the recipe."

My jaw dropped, "She gave you the recipe! She said wouldn't give out that recipe till she was on her death bed."

"She made an exception," he smiled.

I turned back to the delicious home cooked meal, "you did all this for me?"

At that moment Mikkel walked in through the back door, "Oh Amy, you're back and just in time too. In a few minutes the turkey will be ready."

A soft glow illuminated from the back yard, drawing all of our attentions. Mikkel was the first to react, "oh shit!"

He sprinted out the door and we chased after him, stopping dead in our tracks when we saw a stockpot on fire.

Mikkel tried to fan it down with cardboard but his tool ended up catching fire.

"Stop it! You're making it worse!" Lukas pulled him away from the flames as Berwald grabbed a fire extinguisher from the kitchen and sprayed down the blaze.

Once the fire was out Erik turned on Mikkel, "what the hell did you do?!"

"Nothing! I followed what you said, cook the turkey for thirty-six minutes for 350 degrees Celsius." 

Everyone was quiet for a moment, allowing his words to sink in.

"You dumb-ass!" Erik shouted, "I was using an American website! They use Fahrenheit!"

Mikkel slapped his forehead and groaned, "why didn't you say that?!"

"We were using an American website, to cook a turkey for an American holiday. It should've been obvious that you needed to convert from Fahrenheit to Celsius!"
"Or maybe," Mikkel hissed, "if you just had said 350 degrees Fahrenheit, like a normal person this wouldn't have happen!"

"You're blaming me? You were the one that was too stupid to figure out that we were using an American website-tell me what Americans use to measure with?" he asked, condescending.

"Okay, okay, that's enough," Tino stepped between them, speaking calmly. "Calm down you two, there's no need to be so angry. The fire's out and nobody got hurt."

"Tino don't you realize what he did!" Erik exclaimed, "He destroyed the turkey, the one that you bought and paid extra for next day delivery. We slaved over a hot stove trying to make this dinner and here he goes, pissing it all away like he usually does!"

Mikkel made a grab for Erik but Tino held him back, "It was an honest mistake you little brat!"

"Guys the turkey doesn't matter," I shouted.

They stopped and fixed their gazes at me, "What do you mean the turkey does not matter." Erik narrowed his ice blue eyes at me, "isn't the whole point of your holiday."

"No," I exclaimed. "Thanksgiving is about being grateful for what you have, it's about spending time with each other and making memories together." I gestured to the burnt turkey, "Sure this one's pretty bad now, but I bet in five, ten years you all will look back on this day and laugh. It's not about having the perfect dinner, it's about being together as a family."

I stride forward to hold Tino's hand in mine, "This is one of the nicest things anyone's ever done for me. Thank you." I gave a quick peck on the cheek and he smiled.

"You're welcome, but . . ." he sighed, "I really wish that turkey survived, it looked really good."

"Next year?" I suggested.

"Hell no, this is too much work," Erik said.

Mikkel leaned against me, his angry was gone and he was back to his usual carefree self, "do I get a kiss?"

"You blew up the turkey," Lukas stated.

A blast of cold air rippled through, sending chills throughout my body. I was about to held back inside till a white speck landed on the back of my glove. I stared at this speck, narrowing my eyes to focus in on its cut-out design. More started to fall from the sky, dancing as they glided through the air.

"It's about time," Mikkel smirked.

"It was running late this year," said Berwald.

I ran out into the middle of the yard, cupping my hands together to try and catch them. Each speck stuck to my clothes, gathering more as they wedged together. "It's snow . . ." I turned back to the others, "It's snow!" I threw my arms up and began to jump around excitedly, "It's snowing! It's really snowing!" I twirled, "Oh my god, this amazing!"

Peter and the Nordics shared a laugh, "you haven't seen nothing yet," Peter proclaimed.
Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Hau'oli La Ho'omakika'i: Happy Thanksgiving

Ku`uipo: sweetheart
Chapter 28

Peter was right.

I hadn't seen anything yet.

The next morning, I looked out my window to find a winter wonderland. All I saw was white; the ground, the branches of trees and the rooftops were all covered in bright, fluffy powder. *Everything* was covered in a blanket of clean, white snow. I stared with my jaw hanging open and my eyes wide in astonishment.

"Oh. My. God!" I shrieked in excitement as I quickly dressed in layers and ran down the hall. I banged on Peter's door, "Peter! Peter, wake up! It snowed! It snowed!"

He opened the door as he rubbed his eyes, "great . . . can I go back to bed now?"

"No, we need to go out and play in it!" I jumped up and down like a kid on Christmas morning. I slid to Erik's door, "Erik wake up! It snowed!"

The platinum blond opened his door to hiss, "You're annoying."

Not even his bad mood could bring me down, "It snowed," I grinned and moved on to Mikkel's room.

Unlike the others, he was happy to see me. He wore a cocky grin as he propped himself against the door frame, "I was wondering when you would knock on my door." He wore a pair of pajama pants while the upper half of his body was bare. His chest was lean and defined with a tone stomach and flexed biceps.

Again, I was too excited to care. "Put on a shirt, we're going outside!" I dashed down the stairs, leaving Mikkel with his ego bruised.

Tino, Berwald and Lukas were already sitting at the kitchen table, "Guys! Guys, did you look outside?"

Berwald and Lukas nodded as Tino said, "Yes, we have, now sit down for breakfast."

But I was already at the door with my coat and boots on, "but-but snow."

He gently guided me away from the door and back to the kitchen, "breakfast now, snow later."

I sighed, "Okay."

I ate the meal as I tapped my foot impatiently and looked out the window. The others joined the table, sitting across from me as Lukas and Berwald sat at the ends and Tino sat beside me. The Sunday morning news was playing in the background on the counter behind us. I didn't understand a lick of what the news announcers were saying but the images that were shown had boys and girls dressed in white, full length gowns. The girls wore branches in their hair as the boys wore tall paper cones.

I looked to Berwald, "Hey, what are they talking about?"

He glanced to the screen and smiled, "those are the girls that have been chosen to be the finalists for Lucia."
"For who?" I asked.

"Saint Lucia; every year on December thirteenth Sweden celebrates a young Christian girl who was killed for her faith. She would bring food to the persecuted Christians in Rome, who lived in hiding in the catacombs under the city."

"She would wear candles in her hair so she could hold the food and light her way," Tino added. "Lucia also means light so it was an appropriate name. The day is celebrated by a girl dressing in a white dress with a red sash round her waist and a crown of candles on her head."

"Even on little kids," I turned back to the screen; girls as young as five were wearing candles.

"No, now-a-days the candles are battery powered," Mikkel stated. "Schools usually have their own Lucia and some towns and villages also choose a girl to play the role for caroling. Even a national Lucia is chosen, candidates are presented on TV and on the local news website a couple of weeks in advance."

"Lucia, the bearer of light," Lukas spoke, his voice deepening as if he was sharing an ancient tale. "We used to have a pagan festival of lights on the winter's Solstice during the time we followed the Julian calendar but the festival was changed to St. Lucia Day thanks to the influence of Christians."

"St. Lucia still follows the same concept: darkness and light, cold and warmth. Lucia is an ancient mythical figure with an abiding role as a bearer of light in dark winters. There are even songs about it and every St. Lucia day the radio stations play recordings of those songs, performed by school choirs."

"But the origins of this holiday are little hazy," he began.

"Oh, here he goes," Erik sighed.

Lukas continued without hesitation, "The Swedish Lucia tradition can be traced back to both St. Lucia of Syracuse, a martyr who died in 304 AD, and to the Swedish legend of Lucia as Adam's first wife. It is said that she consorted with the Devil and that her children were the race of demons in the underworld. Thus, the name may be associated with both lux, meaning light and Lucifer."

"Wasn't Lilith Adam's first wife?" I asked.

"Yes, in the Hebrew bible but the theory of Lucia being Adam's first wife is only legend. Some people even think that Lucia is just another name for Lilith but no one really knows for sure."

"Then there's the old almanac that states that Lucia Night was dangerous. Supernatural beings were stronger and all animals could speak. By morning, the livestock needed extra feed. People, too, needed extra nourishment and were urged to eat seven or nine hearty breakfasts. This kind of feasting presaged the Christmas fast, which began on Lucia Day."

"And before he gets on his rant of Lilith being a feminist powerhouse," Mikkel cuts in, "Can someone pass the jam?"

I raised a brow to Lukas, "you think Lilith is a feminist?"

"She is the first feminist," he proclaimed, "think about it, the main reason she left Adam was because he wouldn't treat her as his equal. Have you read Black Madonnas by Lucia Birnbaum?"

"No."
"One day you should, it's very interesting. Lucia described Adam's treatment of Lilith as 'the first violence done to women.' If one reads this as rape and it is, the Garden of Eden is no longer a paradise but a prison. Lilith chose to leave and live in 'loneliness over subservience.' But yet why do we have so many stories of her being child killing demon? Simple, men were afraid of a woman's power. Lilith represents independence, rightful rage in purist of justice and proud sexuality. Men began to fear a woman's inner power to bring men to their knees."

"And what's that?" I asked curiously.

"Their sexuality; women have a way of digging under a man's skin."

"In other words, we're slaves to our dicks," Mikkel commented. "Yet we blame them," he shook his head, "that never really made sense to me. It's not their fault if you couldn't control yourself it's yours."

I turned my attention back on Lukas as he proceeded. "That's why men did everything in their power to control women, taming their sexuality, for if it ran 'loose' it was destructive. They even demonized snakes as evil because they represented women's power and wisdom. In some Medieval Christian illustrations of the serpent, it's drawn with a woman's face; some believe it's another form of Lilith. The serpent and women were then painted as an evil temptress, causing men to stray from the straight and narrow."

I nodded, absorbing his words with a calm expression. The way he spoke of legends, myths and religions reminded me of Grandpa. "Wow Lukas, you're quite the scholar."

He smiled and rubbed the back of his neck, "thank you, it's been a while since someone had bothered to listen to me."

"We do listen," said Tino.

"But you repeat," Erik added, "often."

Peter set his gaze on me, "Uncle Lukas loves school; he goes back any chance he gets."

"Really?"

"You're never too old to learn," he stated.

"What degrees do you have?" I asked as Mikkel counted them off his fingers, "Well, he has one in folklore, history of magick and witchcraft, philosophy, art history, world religions . . ."

I blinked, "whoa, that's a lot."

"Thank you," Lukas cracked a satisfied grin as he sipped his coffee.

I glanced over his head towards the window and found little snowflakes falling outside. "It's snowing again!" I squealed excitedly and turned to Berwald, "please, can I go outside? Please!"

He nodded and I grabbed Peter, "come on!"

I dragged him to the front, tossing him his jacket and boots as I opened the door, allowing the cold air to burst inside. The chill cascaded down my spine and legs but I ignored it when I laid eyes on the dancing flakes and unmarked snow blanket. I found myself grinning with a wide and open smile as I drove in.
The porch steps were completely buried as small hills piled between the bars. Icicles dangled from the rooftops and bottoms of cars as snow fell into clusters, becoming little white dots. I walked backwards, taking moments to hear the soft crushing of flakes under my heels and to see the footprints I left behind. I was laughing and cheering, jumping and twirling; enjoying the new found sensation of snow.

"This is amazing! No. No, it's-it's incredible! Astounding! Just-just-" then I remembered a promise.

A promise I made to myself if I ever saw snow.

I dropped backwards, colliding into the fluffy whiteness with a tiny smack. I swung my arms and legs, grinning at the gray sky for the very first time. I rose carefully, making sure not damage my first snow angel. It was sloppy and unsymmetrical but it looked like an angel.

I turned to Peter and found that the Nordics had come out to join us and most likely saw me fulfil one of my promise to my childhood self.

I blushed, "how much did you see?"

Mikkel smirked, "I got the whole thing on camera. Who wants me to send this to all the nations?"

Everyone raised their hands and I was shouting, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no!" Without even thinking, I grabbed a ball of snow and threw it at Mikkel's head.

He stopped, looked to me and grinned mischievously, "Oh it's on." He swooped down and hurled a snowball at my shoulder.

I was hit and then hit again as Mikkel continued to pummel me with snowballs. I shirked and hid behind a tree but the spot didn't last. He came after me, throwing more balls my way. I ducked and dodged as much as I could, trying to lay down some hits of my own. It wasn't long before everyone else joined in; adding their own hits on me, Mikkel or anyone else they had in their sight.

It was an all-out battle; every man for himself. Snow came flying in every direction, most times I was overwhelmed by clusters of soft ice. On some occasions I was able to dodge and on rare moments I was able to hit one of them. Usually when I that happened, I would cheer and then be hit with another snowball.

By the end of the fight we were all panting and sitting together in a circle in front of the house. "That was so much fun," I grinned.

"Glad you enjoyed it," Erik mumbled sarcastically as he removed his cap and shook out the flakes from his hair.

Mikkel pulled out his phone from his pocket as a smile spread from ear to ear. "Hey I already got twenty messages about your first snow day."

"You still sent it!" I exclaimed and hurled another ball at him.

He blocked with his arm but continued to laugh and said, "If it makes you feel any better, most of the nations thought it was cute."

I sighed and turned to Peter, "there's one more thing I want to do."

He raised one thick eyebrow as I grinned, "I want to build a snowman!"
"Okay, but on one condition," he stated.

"What?"

"You can't sing that song."

"What song?" I asked innocently.

"You know what song," he proclaimed.

"Can I hum it?"

"Fine, but nothing else."

I beamed and started the base of the snowman. Tino and Mikkel aided in the task, packing in more snow as Berwald and Peter built the torso. Erik formed the head and Lukas gathered small pebbles for the buttons, eyes and mouth. I hummed the song that cannot be named as we put the snowman together.

Lukas and I pressed the black, smooth pebbles into place as Tino brought out a scarf and carrot from the house. Once the snowman was built we gathered around it to take a selfie.

"Say snowman," I said.

"Really?" Erik asked.

"Just do it."

"Snowman," everyone smiled as I snapped the picture.

After I had sent the photo to friends and family, Tino suggested for us to take a hot coco break. Berwald started a fire as we lounged in the living room. I wrapped a blanket around myself like a shawl and held the mug of coco close to my face. I drank the liquid after a few blows and instantly felt the pits of my stomach burn. I placed my empty cup on the table and curled up at the arm of the couch. Watching as everyone chatted amongst themselves and the blaze cackled in the distance.

The next day, after training I asked Peter to drive me into town.

"Sure, but why?" he asked.

"I want to take part in St. Lucia Day, after what Tino and the others did for me I kinda want to repay them."

Peter gave me genuine smile, "Alright, but we got a lot of work to do. At least you're a decent cook."

He took me to a fabrics store and brought three yards of white cloth and one strip of red. Then we headed straight for Östermalms Saluhall, a market that sells fresh fish, seafood, meat, fruit, vegetables and fancy cheeses. It also had cafés for a quick lunch or snack. It was built in 1885 and was one of Stockholm's landmarks; it had recently gone through renovations back in 2015 and it had lasted till 2017.

It was made with dark red brick and black rooftops. Dark tinted windows surrounded the second floor while large, clear arched windows placed on the ground level. The inside was designed almost
like train station, with the separation of meats, breads, and fish placed at different stands.

"So, what are we looking for?" I asked.

"We need to get the ingredients for Lussekatters," he answered and when I gave him a puzzled look, he then said. "They're buns made with saffron and raisins."

I nodded, "gotcha."

"I just have no idea how we'll be able to cook them without Papa and Dad waking up. They're both pretty light sleepers," he grumbled to himself as he grabbed a bag of raisins.

"What about Lukas?" I asked, remembering that his room was also near the kitchen.

"Nah, he sleeps like a log. Besides if he is up, he would most likely be reading. He says that late night and early morning are the only times the house is quiet enough for him to read."

Peter paid for the raisins and moved along to the bakery, "Dad says to get some crispbread for dinner."

I waited for him by the pasties, eying the exotic sweets. "Peter can you buy me a piece of cake?" I asked sweetly, pointing at a red sponge cake.

"Why don't you buy it?"

"I spent most of my money buying the twins birthday gifts last month." I looked back to the cake, "and looks so good. Can you buy me a piece? I have a craving for something sweet."

He shrugged his shoulders, "why not, it is princess cake." He asked for two slices and we sat down at a table across from the M. Seger.

The pastry had layers of yellow sponge cake lined with jam and vanilla custard and was finished off with a heavy topping of whipped cream. The piece was carefully sealed with a thin layer of sugary sweet red marzipan.

It was delicious.

I squealed in delight, "This is amazing, can we have one for Lucia Day?"

"Do I look like I'm made of money?"

"Kill joy."

He rolled his eyes and poked at his piece with a fork; he looked like he was deep in thought.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said.

I raised a brow, "it doesn't look like nothing."

"Are you and Romano together?" he asked.

I blinked, "that came out of nowhere but no, we're not together."

"Don't you like him?"
"Yeah sure, but I'm not ready for a relationship."

"Then why would you kiss him?"

"Things happened, I can't explain it they just do."

"How did he do it?"

My ears burned, "The kiss?" I reluctantly asked, afraid that he would want me to describe it to him. That would be embarrassing.

"No," he said, "how was he able to get that far with you?"

I sighed, relieved, "I don't know, he was just being himself."

"But is that enough?" he questioned softly.

That's when it hit me; this was about Victoria. "Yeah it is," I proclaimed, "Peter, you shouldn't feel like you need to change yourself for someone. That someone should like you for who you are."

He gave me a narrowed look, "you are beyond cheesy."

"This advice is coming from my mom, if you think its cheesy go tell her," I teased. "But I'm serious Pete, maybe you should tell her how you feel. Be honest."

"But-"

"No buts!" I said frustrated over the topic. "I'm tired of hitting this wall, next year you're going to tell her how you feel."

"But? No-"

"Yes! It's time to woman up and tell her your feelings! Raivis too, when I get my hands on him."

He nods, "okay . . ." he held out his hand and I took it to shake. "But on one condition," he added.

I raised a brow, "what?"

"I'll tell Victoria how I feel if you give Mikkel a kiss," he smirked.

My jaw hanged slightly as I pulled my hand away, "you sneaky little punk, this was planned wasn't it?"

He gave a mocking gasp, "Do you really believe I would complain about Victoria so you would get frustrated and force me to confess; allowing me a chance to get you tied to a contact to kiss Mikkel? Amy you give me too much credit."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose and asked, "Why Mikkel of all people?"

"He promised me a laptop."

"You sold me out for a laptop?!"

"It's not just a laptop, it's a tablet too with Windows 10, HD camera, built in pen-"

"You sold me out for a laptop!" I crossed my arms, "some friend you are."
"So . . . you gonna do it?"

"No!"

"But it's a Microsoft Surface Pro 5!"

"I don't care if it's the Holy Grail of computers, I ain't kissing him."

"You know a good friend would take one for the team."

"A better friend would punch you in the face."

Saint Lucia Day was next Friday, giving us eleven days for Peter to sew the dress and for me to weave a crown of lingonberry branches. We did our work in secret, sneaking away every day after gun instruction to the Stadsbiblioteket. It was Sweden's largest library with more than half a million books. It was huge, with plenty of floors for study and craft groups but the main hall was something to see. It was a circular room with three levels of wall to wall wrap around book shelves and work desks in the center. There was free Wi-Fi and had an annex filled with books from all over the world.

We sat together at a desk in the corner, hidden away by tall shelves. I worked on the lingonberry branches, tying them together with thin rope and copper twine. Peter worked on the dress with a silent, portable sewing machine. The only time he stopped was to measure my limbs, waist and chest.

"Do you like fashion?" I asked him. It was a slow day, for I had already finished my crown and Peter was really focused on the collar and cuffs of the gown.

"Costumes," he proclaimed, "I like to make disguises and I was really into dressing up when I was smaller." He smiled, "I even designed a pirate costume for Victoria."

"Aww, you somehow make the fact of calling her your living doll sound romantic," I smirked.

He threw a ball of lace at me as I giggled, "you're not funny," he said.

"Are you sure about that?"

Someone glared at us as they placed a finger over their mouth and hissed, "shhhhhhhhhhhhh."

Peter ducked as I whispered, "sorry."

We were quiet for a few minutes till I asked curiously, "why do you like her?"

He stopped and gave me long, analyzing gaze. Then he scratched the back of his head and said, "When I was younger . . . she was so confident, still is of course but she always stood for what she believed in and never took any shit from Britain. She's witty and funny and strong. People don't seem to realize that or give her enough credit for it but I see it. She inspired me to be strong and face my problems head on with confidence. . . . But I wonder, do I inspire her?"

"Wish you told me before the sleepover, I would've asked," I said.

He blushed, "I figured it was embarrassing."

"Your feelings are not an embarrassment," we exchanged caring smiles.
Peter woke me up super early on Saint Lucia Day.

It was close to five in the morning when we started cooking the Lussekatters; to make and prep the dough was a long process. Boiling milk, crumbling saffron into melted butter, adding sugar and salt and then three and half cups of flour. It took us about an hour to get the dough just right but yet it only took fifteen minutes for them to cook.

Ironic right.

"Go get dressed, I got this," Peter whispered.

I nodded and tip-toed up the stairs to my room. I pulled out the dress from under the bed and tore off my Captain America pajamas. The simple gown came to my ankles and was made with thin white material. The sleeves were loose as the collar was wrapped perfectly around my neck and decorated with embroidered tiny ivory flowers.

Peter was pretty talented; the stitch work and detail was amazing. *I should introduce him to Ella . . . no, on second thought they would just dress me up even more if they met.* I shivered at the thought.

A small squeak of a floorboard made me jump, snapping me out of my thoughts. I didn't have a lot of time before everyone woke up, so I grabbed my crown of Lingonberry branches; which was also under the bed and speed walked back to the kitchen.

Peter gestured for me to sit as he combed his fingers through my hair and sat the crown and candles on the top of my head. There were five candles, they were long and white and were placed around my head. He lit each one carefully as he turned off the timer on the oven.

"Shit, they would've heard that. Quick, stand up," he said.

I stopped myself from nodding and straighten my dress and tightened the red slash that was around my waist. Peter swiftly pulled the buns out of the oven, slid them onto a tray and handed them to me. We both tensed when we heard murmurs and footsteps from the bottom floor.

"I'm going to get Mikkel and Erik," he ran up the stairs as Tino, Berwald and Lukas walked into the kitchen. Each wore a confused expression till they laid eyes on me.

"Happy Saint Lucia Day," I said uncertainly, worried if it was the correct phrase or not.

Tino was the first to react; he beamed and gushed, "You look so pretty!"

I smiled, "thank you."

Peter came down the stairs with Mikkel and Erik right behind him. Once they saw me, Erik blinked as Mikkel grinned, "Amy, you look amazing."

"Thanks," I blushed slightly and held up the tray, "who wants Lussekatters?"

"I'll take one," Lukas grabbed a warm bun and took a bite. He chewed and nodded, "they're good."

"Peter made them," I said.

He turned to him and ruffled his hair, "you did good kid."

Peter ducked away only to be met with a hug from Tino, "So this is what you two have been up to."
He kissed him on the cheek, "this is wonderful, thank you Peter."

"Dad," he flushed but then whispered, "It was Amy's idea."

I shrugged, "you guys celebrated Thanksgiving, it was the least I could do."

"Awww," Mikkel walked over and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, "you are just too cute."

Erik rolled his eyes, "can we eat? I'm starving."

We sat together and ate the buns for breakfast. Training was canceled for the day and we spent the late morning and early afternoon outside with the neighbors as their children sang songs and handed out more baked goods. The rest of the holiday was spent in the city. The streets were alive with actively; venders were selling Lussekatters and Pepparkakors. They were ginger snap biscuits and they were delicious. There was also hot chocolate and Glogg, mulled wine that they served with buns or cookies. Families were out and about, their children (being both girls and boys) were dressed in white gowns. Others were dressed in Santa and gingerbread men costumes. School choirs were roaming the streets singing Christmas carols, most were made up with girls but there were a few boys added in the mix. They all wore long white tunics and carried candles while one girl in the group wore the candle crown. Boys were called Stjärngossars (star boys) while the girls that weren't playing Lucia were called tärnors.

I had decided to leave the Lucia Day attire in my room, preferring to dress in jeans and sweaters out into the cold night. We strolled through Old Town, taking in all the sights and choirs that were pretty much around every corner. The buildings were illumined with the soft glow of gas lamps while small fires were lit in parks to keep citizens warm and toasty.

"Here," Lukas handed me a cup of Glogg.

"Thanks," I took a sip; it burned with a slight tingle as the liquid slid down my throat.

I must've made a face for Lukas gave a small smile, "takes a while to get used to the taste. It's usually made with orange peels, cinnamon and cloves."

I swallowed, reliving the strange taste, "its . . . interesting."

Berwald took us to a church, allowing me to see firsthand of what Lucia Day was all about. The warm inviting lights of the candles, the friendly and accepting smiles of the priests and the peaceful atmosphere of the crowd and the voices of the young girls that sung like angels.

Afterwards, we continued our stroll to Södermalm, where I couldn't help but notice all the boutiques and stores selling beautiful jewelry and well-made clothes. I found myself saying that that dress would look perfect on Jamie or Michel would love that paint brush set. Those perfumes smelled amazing, Mom would want one and Mel too. Dad would like that antique mug, Johnny could have a small wooden statue of Odin's wolves and ravens and a bag of rune stones for Grandma.

But there was one major problem.

I barely had any money to spend on even one gift.

Luckily, I was able to find a candy shop and tea shop with reasonable prices and make a small Christmas care package for my family back home. It wasn't much but I knew they would enjoy it. I arranged this on the week of the twin's birthday in November; their rune necklaces and the care package practically drained me leaving me with about three hundred krona.
Now that might sound like a lot but if you do the math it was only thirty-six dollars.

The Nordics, Peter and I were at Östermalms Saluhall eating a quick dinner when Tino announced. "I invited Estonia to come over and spend Christmas with us. I've also invited Mr. Poland and Mr. Lithuania to come and Latvia is sure to be here too."

Peter gave me a grin and I smiled back, our little trio would once again be united.

Tino looked to me, "I've even asked your family to join us—oh I mean your nation family."

I figured; my family didn't have the money to spare on a trip to Stockholm, maybe for one or two but I wouldn't want separate them during the holidays. "That's cool, thanks Tino."

"Does that mean we're going to have to share rooms?" Erik asked, annoyed.

"Well I need one of you to give up your room; there are three beds in the attic, Mr. Poland, Mr. Lithuania and Estonia are taking them. Latvia would stay with Peter and there's still a spare room on the second floor but it would be too crowded for three people. So either you or Mikkel will have to room with Lukas or share one with each other."

Mikkel raised his hand, "I'll do it." He grinned and wrapped his arm around Lukas' shoulders, "it will be like two-week sleepover party."

"Kill me now," Lukas said in monotone.

I smiled at his dry comment but I quickly drew away from the table's conversation as I began to make a list of gifts for the Nordics, the Baltics, Feliks, Peter and my uncles; like that tea bag set for Arthur, that cologne from a few shops down for Francis and a nice pair of leather gloves for Matthew.

But once again I was reminded of the prices and I would only be able to afford one of those items.

I sighed in defeat and held my face in my hand as I propped my elbow on the table. My eyes roamed over the crowds, taking in the tourists and locals alike. Then I saw an elderly woman knitting near a café and that's when it hit me.

"Hey guys I'm going to get some stuff real quick," I rose from my chair before any them could say anything. "I'll be right back," I exclaimed as I ran out of the market and into the packed streets.

I hurried down the block, scanning the stores as I passed. "I know I saw it," I muttered to myself. Then, just around the corner was a yarn store filled with vivid colored stringed cloth. I hesitated before walking in; I didn't know how to knit and I was pretty sure that any project I tried to do would only turn out like crumpled ball.

I mentally shook away the discouraging thought. I wanted to give my uncles nice, wholesome gifts; even if they come out looking like shit it's the thought that counts, right?

Before I could talk myself out of it, I grabbed a pair of silver knitting needles and six stacks of yarn in the colors of green, blue, purple, red, white and gold. This purchase took all of my money leaving me with a bag of yarn and a determination to succeed at the task at hand.

I spent the next four days looking up YouTube videos on knitting and crocheting; learning the skills
of the art. How to blend the colors, make patterns in the yarn and form designs with different colors.

Let's just say it was way harder than it looked. The slip knot, the cast on and the knit stitch was the very basic of knitting, but it took me an entire day to figure it out. Mostly deciding which methods and hand movements were best for me. Crocheting started the same way as it did knitting but needed a completely different tool. I was able to find a hook needle from a yarn basket in the living room. It was reassuring to know that there was extra yarn in case I screwed up.

I started with a simple project, knitting scarves for Arthur, Francis and Matthew. I decided to use the colors of their eyes; green for Arthur and blue for Francis while Matthew carried a shade of deep blue that almost looked purple. Each gift took a day to make and Christmas was coming up fast.

I had seven days to make five pairs of gloves, four caps and another scarf.

I sighed as I stitched the Sweden flag into the corner of Berwald's scarf. I missed a loop while crocheting the gold and blue together, "oh crap," I groaned. I began to untangle the mistake when Peter knocked on my door.

"Coming," I scooped my knitting supplies in the shopping bag and hid it under my bed. I took two long strides and swung the door open, "What's up?"

"Raivis and Eduard are here and you have package," he stated.

"I hope its money."

He gave me a look and I came to my defense, "hey it's going towards your Christmas gifts."

"You're getting us Christmas presents?" he asked with a surprised tone.

"Of course," I smiled.

He smiled back at first but then grumbled, "Now I have to get you something."

"That would be nice, yes," I laughed.

We walked to the front entrance where Tino was greeting his guests. They were sharing hugs and smiles and chatting amongst themselves about Tino's Christmas plans.

"Raivis!" I ran passed them to tackle Raivis in a crushing hug.

"Amy, you're crushing me," he choked.

I stepped back, "sorry."

"Amy, there's a package for you by the door," Tino added as he led Eduard to his room.

I nodded and picked up the brown cardboard box. "Whose it from?" Peter asked.

"My cousins from Texas," I grinned as I stride to the kitchen and ripped the box open. It was filled with Bath & Body Works products.

"Does your family think you smell?" Raivis asked as Peter snickered.

"No, they're the Holiday Traditions and they are amazing." I held up my favorite scent, Winter Candy Apple, "Smell this."
The boys winkled their noses, "it smells like candy," Raivis proclaimed.

"Did you not read the name," Peter stated.

"They even sent Vanilla Bean Noel, Twisted Peppermint, Frosted Wonderland . . . oh and they sent me more Lavender!"

Peter groaned, "You are never getting out of the bathroom and why do you even use these things, they don't even smell that good."

"Oh please, I know you've been using my lavender," I gave him a narrowed glare.

"No I haven't," he said defensively.

"Then why is my last bottle of bubble bath almost empty."

"That was yours?" Mikkel said with an apologetic smile, "sorry, I like taking bubble baths."

Erik rolled his eyes, "and this guy used to be a Viking if you could believe it."

Later that evening Peter found Raivis inside Lukas' room, reading a book from the Norwegian's mighty collection. His room was the largest in the house with a balcony built over his bed and an iron spiral stair case that connected to it. The walls were covered with shelves. Every square inch was given to old, leather bound books; the subjects ranging from magick, mythology, art, history and so much more.

"What are you reading?" Peter asked as he sat down beside him. He was incredibly bored, with his parents chatting with Estonia, his uncles at the market and Amy locked inside her room. He was left with his best friend, who seemed to prefer books over him at the moment.

"I have no idea," he made a face at the yellowed pages, "the words are written in symbols of some kind."

"Let me see," Peter flipped through the pages, "they're runes, Lukas uses them sometimes. The symbols have been explained in Norwegian."

"Can you read it?" Raivis asked curiously.

"Some words," Peter stated, "but I'm pretty sure we can translate this on the internet."

"Can you tell what's it about?"

Peter stopped at a page as his eyes widened, it was a recipe on how to make a love potion. A wicked smile spread from ear to ear as a plan began to form. "This is one of Lukas' spell books."

"Spell books?! We should put that back-"

"We should try one," Peter interrupted.

He didn't wait for Raivis to object. He walked to Lukas' bed and reached for the nation's ancient wooden box filled with dried herbs, mystical vials and ritual daggers.

"How did you know that was there," Raivis said wide-eyed and nervous.
"I've done my share of snooping," he proclaimed.

"Have you ever heard that curiously killed the cat," Raivis warned.

"But satisfaction brings it back to life," Peter grinned, "come on Raivis, I'm bored."

"Then we should watch a movie or finish *Teen Wolf* not dabble in things we don't understand."

"I know what I'm doing, I've seen Britain, his siblings and Lukas do magick hundreds of times."

"But you don't have the talent for it, you said so yourself," Raivis snapped.

"Yeah, but there are spells that ordinary people could do-especially when the objects they use have been charmed," Peter stated.

His friend crossed his arms, "why do you even want to mess with this? What are you trying to do?"

"I want to make a love potion," he answered.

Raivis' jaw dropped, "are you going to use it on Victoria?!"

"No!" Peter gave him a wounded look, "I can't believe you would even think that." He turned away and began pulling out rune stones and herbs that he would need.

"Then why make a love potion?" Raivis asked, his tone more curious than anything else.

Peter grinned mischievously, "I'm going to use it on Britain." He placed the magickal objects on a work table and began examining the Norwegian rune stones that were in a black pouch.

Raivis furrowed his brows in confusion, "why?"

"So he could come face to face with his feelings for Francis and gush and fond over him," Peter smirked. "And I'll be there to take all the photos and video I want," he chuckled, "just think of the blackmail material I can have on him."

"Peter, you shouldn't do this," Raivis remarked.

"Oh, don't worry Raivis. Britain will finally be honest with his feelings, Francis gets to have Britain all to himself and everyone would be happy that they stopped playing this dragged out game of cat and mouse. Everyone wins," he shrugged.

The brunette sighed, massaged his temple and gave Peter a narrowed, warning look. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"Yes," he nodded.

His friend shook his head and mumbled something under his breath in his native tongue. Peter knew the phrase well, he used it often when Peter pulled him into his schemes. It means, 'I know I'm going to regret this.'

"Fine, let's get this over with," he said in defeat.

Peter beamed, "come on, you can help me with the runes."

"Which ones do we use?" Raivis asked as he gazed at the stones.
Peter didn't know much on Raivis' past, like any nation, they don't like to talk about their early days. They may give snips and pieces but they wouldn't give any details. But that never stopped Peter from researching on his own. Latvia's earliest people had been raided by Vikings, the brunette must've seen these runes hundreds of times when those fearsome foes had invaded.

"You know you don't have to touch them or anything."

"I'm fine," he shot back and picked up one of the gray washed stones, "we should use Sigel."

"Sigel?" Peter questioned and looked through Lukas' spell book, "oh you mean Sol."

"It represents the sun," Raivis stated, "a lot of these runes have different names and most times different meanings. When you call out the name of this rune, I suggest you use the name Sowelo. It means life force and poetic justice and is the primarily rune for love."

"Why not Sigel? They're the same thing aren't they?"

"Sigel does have the same symbol as Sowelo and both mean sun and life force but Sigel is more of a guiding light."

"Which pretty much means the same thing," Peter countered.

Raivis shrugged his shoulders, "Do you want a love potion or not."

"Okay, okay, it says the main runes we need to use are Sowelo and . . . Gebo?"

"It means generosity, what you receive, you must give back in equal exchange."

Peter laughed at the concept, "I can just imagine all the romantic gestures Francis would throw around and Britain trying to do the same. This is going to be so much fun."

Raivis smiled in spite of himself, "it would be entertaining."

"What other runes should we use?" Peter roamed through the pouch.

"Use Kaunaz," Raivis proclaimed, "it may mean knowledge but it's also connected to passion; a consuming love affair."

Peter grinned even wider, "Well let's get started."

After they sorted through each stone and their meanings, the spell called for something to channel the power of the runes into; some kind of powder or liquid would do. Peter decided to use apple juice as he burned catnip leaves beside the cup. The gray smoke swirled around them, tickling their noses and causing their eyes to water.

"Why are you burning that," Raivis covered his face.

"It's good for love magick," said Peter.

The Latvian wrinkled his nose, "it stinks."

"Yeah I know but it won't be for long," he continued to work, crushing the Echinacea together with the orris root powder. "Get a candle, a seashell and a jade stone" he instructed as he checked the compass for the direction of north.

Raivis did his task quickly, following Peter as he pointed to each corner of the table. The catnip was
moved to the east, the candle was at the south, the seashell was in the west and the small piece of jade stone represented the north.

"What are these for?"

"It says that each rune should stand beside a representation of an element and their direction," Peter held the bowl of orris root and Echinacea in his palm as he placed the apple juice in the center. "You ready?" he asked Raivis.

The brunette sighed, "Yes."

"Freya; Goddess of beauty and love," Peter read the only translated line from Lukas' book, the other lines were either in Norwegian or had faded away completely but he figured Raivis didn't need to know that. "I ask of you to bless this elixir-"

"Elixir?" Raivis rolled his eyes, "its apple juice."

"Shut it," Peter hissed as he continued, borrowing rites from other spells done by the Kirklands. "To invoke the powers of the five elements; air, fire," he lit the candle with a match, "water, earth and spirit.

"To awaken the runes of Wunjo," Peter moved the said rune beside the catnip. It was carved in with deep lines and looked like a sharply pointed 'P'. "For absolute love and fortune."

"Sowelo," Raivis chimed in, sliding the straight lined 'S' next to the vanilla scented candle. "For life and love."

"Laguz, for spiritual love and deep relations," this rune was a simple straight line with another line coming down diagonally from the top.

"Gebo, for generosity," Raivis tapped the 'X' drawn rune beside the jade stone.

"And Kaunaz, for knowledge and passion," Peter placed this arrow designed rune next to the cup of apple juice. These objects were in the center of the circle allowing spirit to channel energy of the other elements and runes to the liquid.

He grabbed a pinch of powder from the bowl and sprinkled it over the drink, "Orris root evoke your properties of love and sexual desire as Echinacea enhances your power and strength, fuse with the elixir and become one.

"Just as two souls will become one," he finished.

As Peter blew out the candle and smothered the catnip, Raivis examined the cup, "did it work?"

"Do you want to try it?" Peter joked.

"No," his eyes widened in horror.

In the distance they heard the doorbell ring as Tino's cheerful voice, mixed with other more tired voices through the hall.

Peter worked swiftly, clearing the area, placing the magickal supplies back into their box and sliding them under the bed. He snatched the cup from Raivis, "come on, that must be him," and dragged him out the door.

"He won't drink it," Raivis whispered.
"Yeah he will, especially if he's tired and doesn't care."

Peter walked into the entrance where his parents and Estonia were helping with Poland's bags. "How much stuff did you bring Poland," Estonia whined as he carried a large suitcase in each hand.

"Hey, don't complain, most of this stuff are your Christmas gifts," the green-eyed nation stated as he checked his nails. "Finnie where are we staying?"

"The attic," Tino smiled as Poland made a face. "Don't worry, it's warm and has a bathroom."

Poland shrugged and followed them up the stairs as he called out, "Liet! Hurry up!"

"Yes," the dark haired nation came in, stomping the snow off his shoes and adjusting the suitcases and duffle bag he was carrying.

"Hey Lithuania is Britain out there?" Peter asked.

"Oh, no, I didn't see him," he glanced outside and then turned back to face them, "sorry. Are you expecting him?"

"Yeah," Peter said as he mumbled a curse under his breath.

Lithuania looked down to the cup in his hand and smiled thankfully, "is that for me?"

"Huh?"

Peter wasn't quick enough to react for Lithuania was already drinking the elixir. His jaw dropped as Raivis held back a scream. The apple juice must've coaxed the orris root and Echinacea for Lithuania made no sound of distress as he swallowed.

He finished the drink and handed back to Peter, "thank you Sealand. I needed that." He was about to climb up the stairs but his breathing hitched in pain as he supported himself on the rail.

"Lithuania!" Raivis stepped forward but the nation held his hand up.

"I'm fine," he hissed, "just... just stomach aches..." He clutched his gut as he struggled to breathe. His knees buckled and Peter and Raivis moved to support him.

Together they carried him to the kitchen and sat him in a chair. Lithuania continued to pant and hiss back painful moans.

Raivis yanked Peter to the side, "what did you do?" he whispered.

"I may have improvised," Peter admitted.

"Improvised?!" the brunette hissed, "You don't improvise with this kind of stuff Peter."

A groan from Lithuania pulled them away from their fight. The older nation was bent over with his head between his legs and had one hand on the table, clawing his nails into the wood.

"Liet, you okay?" Raivis asked.

He looked up, his face was pale as a sheet and sweat was running down his cheeks but that wasn't what made Raivis jump back and Peter curse. Lithuania's blue-green eyes were glowing as the black pupils became tiny slits. It reminded Peter of a cat's eyes.
"What's happening to me?" Lithuania cried, his canines sharpening as he spoke. He fell against the wooden floors, curling into himself as he gasped for air. His muscles twitched and his bones cracked as he shrunk; withering away as he disappeared, leaving nothing but his clothes and shoes.

"Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god," Raivis repeated the phrase, his voice falling into a whimper. "We killed Lithuania!"

"We didn't kill him," Peter said, trying to calm him down but most of all trying to convince himself.

"We need to get your parents-Lukas-"

Peter stopped him, "no, if they find out I was using Lukas' spell book they would kill me."

"Yet you still used it!" Raivis snapped.

In the corner of his eye, Peter noticed Lithuania's clothes moving, "Raivis, look!"

A ball maneuvered under the fabric as a lean, multicolored cat popped out of the collar. Its fur was mixed with black and orange with white fur starting from bottom half of its jaw and ending at its chest. The tail was long and fluffy, the ears pointed and shaped like triangles and the eyes were a piercing shade of blue-green.

"We didn't," Peter swallowed, "did we?"

"Uh-uh-uh," Raivis stumbled for moment and then asked the feline. "L-L-Lithuania, is that you?"

The cat cocked his head but nodded in response. Then his eyes darted to his body, taking in the fur, paws and tail. His eyes grew wide as he held one paw in front of his face.

"Now Liet don't freak out," Peter said calmly as Lithuania trotted on all fours to the fringe, finally seeing all of himself in the reflection.

His jaw dropped; revealing his new fangs and rough tongue. His tail stood straight and the back of his fur began to prickle. With a shaky paw he touched the surface of the fringe and then to his face. Instead of a human scream, a wounded animal screech took its place.

Toris was scared, confuse and most of all furious.

"What did you do to me!" he wanted to shout at the younger boys but what came out were meows and hisses.

"Lithuania be quiet, please, we'll figure this out," Sealand pleaded.

"How are we going to figure this out?! This was supposed to be a love potion! Why did it turn him into a cat?!" exclaimed Raivis.

"Shush," Peter hissed, "keep your voice down."

Love potion?! Toris blinked, unable to process the thought of a love potion turning him into a cat. He glanced back to his reflection, again all he saw was fur, fangs and claws. He cried out and once again his voice was replaced with a feline whimper.

Did cats even cry?
He really didn't ponder much on the thought, for his breathing turned against him. His new lungs were smaller and thinner and taking in the massive amounts of air was making him sick. He mewed, begging for all this to be a bad dream.

"What the hell is going on?" a voice echoed from the stairs as the boys tensed.

Toris wasn't paying attention, still hissing and mewing as Peter gathered his clothes and duffle bag from the hall. He tossed them inside the coat closet as America entered the kitchen.

"What's dying?" she asked till she laid eyes on Toris.

He curled back, feeling mortified of his shape and form. Amy's eyes widened, growing in worry and concern.

"Hey there little guy, it's okay, it's okay," she moved slowly, crutching down as she crawled towards him. She made soft cooing noises with flicks of her tongue and held out her hand for him to smell.

His tail twitched and he flinched at the response, still trying to process the cold, hard truth that he was a feline. Amy took this chance to pet him at the base of his neck. He winced and pulled back but she wasn't upset, instead gave a sweet smile.

"You're okay, I'm not going to hurt you," she slipped fingers back into his fur and scratched him behind his ear.

Toris felt his shoulders slump as his breathing became regular. She gently pulled him closer, coddling him in her arms and lacing her fingers through his fur. He sighed in content, the soothing touch calming his beating heart.

Amy smiled, "see, you're fine." Then she turned to the younger boys, "what happen? Where did this cat come from?"

Raivis opened his mouth to speak but Peter beat him to it, "he just wondered in here, started freaking out when we found him."

Toris snapped his head to look at him, what?!

Raivis was about to object till Peter wrapped his arm around his shoulders and silenced him with a slap on the mouth. "We were just coming down to help Poland and that cat ran in, to get away from the cold no doubt, right Raivis."

Toris noticed their exchange as if they were speaking without words. Raivis swiftly darted his eyes to Amy, Toris and finally Peter, "yes, he just wondered in here."

Before Toris could even make a sound of protest, a familiar voice resounded from the hall. "Liet? Where are you?" Poland entered the kitchen with Finland, Sweden and Estonia right behind him.

Feliks! He looked up, waiting for his friend to notice him but as the blond glanced to him, he raised a brow, "did you guys get a new cat?"

Feliks! It's me! Toris!

He meowed and Amy kissed his head in response, "the guys said he wondered in here."

"He must belong to one of the neighbors," Tino stated.

"I'll call the police," said Berwald.
"No!" Peter, Raivis and Amy exclaimed in sync.

"Papa, these no need to bother them with this, we can make flyers and hang them around the neighborhood," Peter proclaimed as Raivis nodded.

"Yeah, and I could look after him," Amy added, clutching Toris with a small squeeze. "Please," she begged.

Berwald and Tino exchanged a look and they smiled at each other. "Okay, he can stay with us," Tino scratched Toris under his chin. "You certainly are a pretty kitty, your owners will come for you soon."

Toris whined, *I'm not a cat! I don't have any owners! Peter, Raivis, tell them! But like before his words were nothing but dragged out meows.

Feliks lost interest in him as he scanned the room, "guys did you see Toris?"

"He-uh," Raivis stuttered nervously but Peter was able to save face.

"He got called back to his country, saying that his boss needed him back straight away. You know his economy is going through a rough patch and all."

The green-eyed nation raised a brow, "but he said everything was fine, he had vacation time."

*Yes Feliks! I wouldn't just leave without saying goodbye! Call me! Call my phone!*

As if reading his thoughts, Feliks pulled out his phone, "he is not getting away that easy."

Toris noticed Peter and Raivis tense as Feliks tapped on his smart phone. Toris' muscles twitched in suspense, waiting for his phone to ring from the hall closet but nothing came.

Feliks furrowed his brow in annoyance, "Toris has his phone off; he always forgets to turn it on."

Toris fell against Amy in defeat.

"But how did he leave?" Estonia asked, "The taxi left."

"The taxi hadn't left yet," Raivis proclaimed, "he was cleaning the windows when Toris got the call and was able to get a ride back to the airport. That's why he didn't say goodbye, he had to catch the taxi."

Toris stared at him wide-eyed, *how could you lie so easily Raivis? How could you keep the fact that you turned me into an animal hidden?* He hissed at the boys and Amy soothed him with kind words.

Everyone nodded, agreeing with the boys. "Well it can't be helped," said Tino.

Feliks pouted, "Liet is such a space case sometimes, running off without saying goodbye, the nerve."

"Well," Amy dragged out the word as she petted Toris, "I'm going to call Mikkel, see if he could buy some cat food and a litter box for Berlioz."

Everyone looked to her with a questionable gaze, "Berlioz?"

Toris spun his head around to face her, she's even going to name him? Could he sink any lower?

She flushed in embarrassment, "it's the name of the black kitten that was from *The Aristocats*. It suits
him, don't you think?"

Eduard shrugged, "I guess."

"But you shouldn't grow too attached," Tino warned.

"I won't," she smiled and nuzzled her face into the back of his neck.

Toris couldn't lie, he liked the sensation of her smooth skin and warm breath on his fur.
Chapter 29

After I made the call to Mikkel, I brought Berlioz into my room, nearly ecstatic at the thought of having a cat even if it was only for a few hours. I placed him on the bed, watching as he patted his paws and glanced around the room. He seemed timid and frightened.

"Hey, it's okay," I scratched him behind his ear, "you're safe."

He was reluctant at first but before long he purred in pleasure. I grinned, "You know, Mrs. Garrison, the public librarian back home, always said I had an affinity for animals, especially cats. We would always joke that I would be Marked by the vampyres of the House of Night," my grin fell, "I wished that happened, instead I get to find out that I'm a nation.

"Being vampyre would've been so much cooler. I would have a cat as my familiar, learn fencing, ride my horse all night long and maybe have the power to control fire or air and be able to fly with it." I gasped at the realization, "I would be the first vampyre air bender! But turns out vampyres and air benders don't exist but personifications of nations?" I shrugged my shoulders and spoke sarcastically, "oh yeah, they're real."

Berlioz just stared at me, his look unreadable.

"You have no idea what I'm saying do you?" I curved my lip in a half smile. "Let me sum it up for you, all the nations all over the world have a personification of itself. They represent the people, the culture, the spirit of the country and I'm one of them.

"It's not so bad, a little difficult at times but there are some fun parts, I guess." I rolled my eyes and turned back to Berlioz, again he continued to stare.

I sighed, "I know, I know, most people think it's weird I talk to animals like they could talk back. But hey, I did meet one. He's a polar bear cub named Kumajirou, granted he's the only talking animal I've met but there could be others-maybe?

"It was habit that grew when I was sick and I had Joey looking out for me. He was an old, dark brown Labrador, big and husky and was the sweetest dog you would ever meet. He always lied at the foot of my bed and kept me company all day and night. I would talk to him for hours, discuss movies and TV shows and even read him books."

I gave a sad smile, "he died shortly after I got better. He was a really good dog. The habit certainly didn't stop with him. I still talk to Lady and Midnight all the time and now I'm doing it with you. I don't know, I just like to think animals understand us." I side glanced to him, "do you think that's weird?"

Berlioz shook his head.

"Did you just shake your head?"

He blinked, as if he was surprised by his actions but he did nod in response.

I laughed, "That's adorable! I wish I was recording that that would've been instant YouTube gold right there."
I pulled out my knitting supplies from under the bed, "I better finish Berwald's scarf. The design is almost done, I just need to add length." I displayed the piece of cloth to him, "It may not be perfect but it will keep him warm." I sighed, "I wish I could call Ella or Dani for help but they got finals this week, then they need to catch their planes back to Europe after. So it's pretty much me and Chandi from YouTube.

"Well, at least Toris won't be here, I'll have more time to work on the others. What he should do is send me my ear piece. I'll ask Feliks for his number-"

Instantly Berlioz leaped off the bed and began to pull at my pant leg that dangled beside the mattress.

"What's gotten into you?"

He stopped, ran to the door to scratch at the wood and then came back to yank on my jeans.

"You want to go out?" I questioned as I opened the door.

He bolted out but stopped to look at me. He meowed and swatted his tail back and forth.

"Do you want me to follow you?"

He nodded and sprinted down the stairs. I chased after him to find the multicolored feline clawing at the hall closet door.

I raised a brow, "do you want me to open it?" He nodded and I twisted the knob; there was nothing there but coats. "I don't get it, what am I supposed to see?"

Berlioz mewed as if annoyed. Seconds after Mikkel, Lukas and Erik entered the house; stomping their feet and carrying bags of food.

"Hey Amy," Mikkel greeted with a beaming smile, "is that the new addition to the family?" he asked, glancing to Berlioz.

"Yeah," I tried to pick him up but he wormed out of my grasp and ran up the stairs. "He's friendlier than he looks."

Toris stopped in front of Peter's door and began clawing at the corner, hissing out curses under his breath as he ripped into the wood.

Raivis cracked the door open and Toris took his chance to run in, searching for his duffle bag and clothes. Just as he assumed, the boys had taken his luggage and hid it under their beds. Toris grumbled, gripped the strap with his teeth and pulled. The bag was too heavy for his tiny frame but still he yanked.

"Liet, stop you'll hurt yourself," Peter reached for him and he lashed out. "Ow! He bit me?!"

"Well I think anyone would be angry enough to bite you if you turned them into a cat," said Raivis.

Peter sighed, "Lithuania I know you're upset-

Toris jumped on Peter's bed and hissed, upset? Upset?!! I am beyond upset! You turned me into animal! He continued to growl, hiss and mew his rant but the boys displayed no sign of understanding.
The boys exchanged a look, "you do realize we have no idea what you're saying right?"

With one final frustrated gruff he fell against the mattress and buried his face in the comforter.

"Here Liet this may help," the blond placed his computer beside him, opening a Word Document.

Toris nodded in thanks, allowing his anger to cool and typed, "What did you do to me?"

"That's the thing, we have no idea," Peter stated, "it was supposed to be a love potion."

"So, you wanted to put me under a love spell?!" Toris wrote.

"No," Raivis jumped in, "it wasn't even meant for you."

"Yeah, why would you drink something from someone else's hand?" Peter narrows his eyes disapprovingly.

He glared, "placing blame on the victim Peter? What are you an American frat boy?"

The Brit blushed as Raivis raised his brows, "wow Lithuania I never knew you could be so catty."

Peter gave a look, "really, you're making puns now?"

Toris growled and typed, "Enough! Turn me back now!"

They shared a worried look, "that's the other thing Liet, we don't know how," Peter proclaimed.

"Then how did you even turn me into a cat in the first place?!

"We used Lukas' spell book but-"

"Peter couldn't read most of it so he improvised," Raivis remarked.

Toris slammed his paws on the keys with all caps, "IMPROVISED! WHAT DID YOU DO?!!"

"We used the runes, Wunjo, Sowelo, Laguz, Gebo and Kaunaz all pretty much representing love and passion. I also used orris root for sexual desire and Echinacea to strengthen it. I burned catnip leaves because it works for love magick and I needed something to represent air," he explained.

"Did it ever occur to you that your last name was Kirkland for a reason?"

The blond gritted his teeth, "hey, I'm going to fix it okay! I gathered all of Lukas' spell books, we're going to the library first thing tomorrow and scan all the pages into my computer."

"Or we can just ask Mr. Norway for help!"

"No! He would kill me!"

"Yet you still used it?!!"

"Wouldn't he notice that his spell books are missing?" Raivis asked, worried.

"He checks them at the beginning of every month. That gives us about thirteen days to fix this without anyone finding out." Peter turned back to Toris and fell to his knees beside the bed, "Please Lithuania give us a few days, we promise to change you back before January." He held his hands together in a desperate plea, "for now please just try and act like a normal cat, please!"
He sighed and thought, how bad was his situation, really? Yes, he was a cat but he was safety tucked away in a warm house and no one seemed displeased by felines. He tapped on four keys, "fine."

"Berlioz? Where are you? Here, kitty-kitty," Amy called from the hallway.

Peter gazed at him with a cautious expression, "you ready?"

Toris nodded and allowed Peter to carry him into the hall, "found him."

She beamed, "thank you," she took Toris into her arms, "it's time for dinner and Mikkel brought you some tasty canned food and snacks."

He flinched at the thought and stared wide-eyed at Peter and Raivis, mentally screaming, *cat food?! I don't want to eat cat food! But his pleas went unheard as he was carried into the kitchen placed beside a silver dish filled with brown, mushy wet food. It was covered in brown grease like slime and smelled like underarm sweat and rotten fish.

He gagged at the thought of this mess coming anywhere close to his mouth. He pushed the dish away and looked up to meet Amy's concern filled eyes.

"Are you okay Berlioz? Are you sick?"

A part of Toris felt guilty for worrying her but a bigger, more rational side of him had to put his foot down; well *paw* down. *I may have done a lot of things I'm ashamed of but I will not add eating cat food to that list!*

"Maybe we should take him to the vet," Finland proclaimed.

Vet?! What would happen if he got sent to the vet? Would he examine his body? Take blood samples and watch as his blood turned into dirt? What would the vet do then? Take more tests? Call an expert? Cut off his tail and see if it grew back? Then write an article on a living, non-marine organism that has the ability to regrow limbs while the detached limb became mud.

The nations and their bosses would definitely notice that and even if they kept it contended, Feliks would spread this little piece of gossip around with the nations. As the popular saying went: the cat's out of the bag or will be in this case. Toris would have the fact that he was turned into a feline held over his head for the rest of his life. Several nations already believed that he's a nervous, pathetic push-over, did he want foolishness to be added?

Now, if he decided to stay quiet and eat this disgusting slop then only Peter and Raivis would know. They wouldn't speak of this ordeal for they would be punished by Norway.

Toris slid his gaze to them, Peter was persuading Tino to not send him to the vet and that Berlioz (aka him) was fine. Raivis' hands were trembling and his eyes were darting everywhere, a clear sign that he was about to say something he shouldn't.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he drove in.

Now it wasn't as bad as one would think; it was actually so much worse. For being wet-food it was horrifyingly crunchy; with what? Toris never wanted to know the answer.
After dinner I had to give Berlioz a bath, for some strange reason he wouldn't groom himself even though he had bits of wet food stuck to his jaw and chest. He was very laid back and he didn't squirm as I poured warm water over him. His owners must've gave him baths regularly.

But what seemed weird was that he kept turning away when I was undressing and taking my shower. Last I checked cats didn't really care about that sort of stuff. I brushed it aside, like Mrs. Garrison always said cats were complex creatures.

Once I was inside my room, I piled in two more logs into the fire and fell onto the mattress, taking deep whiffs of my arms and wrists. "Mmmmm, Vanilla Bean Noel," I said in pure bliss.

Berlioz curled himself at the farthest corner of the bed, keeping his tail close and his head low.

"What's wrong Berlioz? You don't like baths?" I laughed and pulled out Berwald's half-finished scarf. "Time to finish this bad boy," I grabbed my iPod and connected it to my speakers, the last song that was left on the shuffle was 'Downtown Girl' by Hot Chelle Rae. I started to sing along and nod my head to the beat as I knitted, stringing the yarn through my fingers with ease.

I glanced to Berlioz, "I hope you don't mind the noise, I find that it's easier to work with music. Well it's easier for me to do anything while listening to music." Before long my old habit of talking to animals came flooding back. I avoided doing the same thing with Hani back in Delhi. I didn't want Akram to think I was too weird, but here in the privacy of my room I was perfectly safe.

"People have said that my family could be the major reason why I love music so much. Both my mom and dad came from strong musical ties; being musicians, dancers or singers, they all kept music as a part of their everyday lives.

"Music is more of a hobby to my parents, cousins, and siblings but my extended family from Mexico and Hawaii make it their livelihoods. Kupunawahine, my grandmother on my mother side has family in a mariachi band. The band started with her grandfather and with his fabulous singing and guitar skills he was able to win the heart of a beautiful Spanish woman, my great-great grandmother."

I smiled to myself, "Kupunakane, my grandfather's family lived on tourism; performing songs and fire dances for them. His sister even opened a dance school in their hometown of Kapaa. Kupunakane was very talented, he sang, danced and played the ukulele and drums but he wanted to be a pro-surfer but it didn't mean he didn't use his musical talents to charm Kupunawahine.

"They met while Kupunawahine was teaching Spanish in his hometown," I chuckled, "it also helped that her students, which were Kupunakane's nephews and nieces, did everything they could to get them together. They would ask Miss Jessamine questions like, where did she like to go on the island and what actives she liked to do. Then they would drag Kupunakane around on the weekends, trying to find her."

I shrugged as I finished a roll, "it must've worked cause their together." I recalled my Christmas in Kapaa, the first actually Christmas I was able to take part in after the Recession. I had the chance to meet Kupunakane's brothers and sister, their sons and daughters and grandchildren, even a few great-grandchildren. Kapaa was a small town on the island of Kauai. The island mostly contained wilderness, filled with nature reserves and sleepy towns; but those towns would come alive when tourism hit. Christmas was just as busy, lights were on each house, building and palm tree. The resort was packed with families, giving Kupunakane and his family plenty of business.

My tutors had given me a two-week break, allowing me to enjoy the island and my distance cousins. My skin tingled at the thought of the blazing sun and warm golden sand, the salty scent of the clean ocean mixing with the topical essence of the wilderness. Stockholm may have its perks and snow was
fun but my heart will always belong to the beach.

I sighed and stopped knitting, setting the scarf aside to rub my tired face. Memories of past Christmases came flooding in; Mom, Melissa and me working together to make tamales and sopapillas while Dad, Grandpa and Johnny set up lights outside the house. Celine and Grandma would bake as Sanjay wrapped gifts in the guest room. Sanjay was literally the best wrapper in the entire family and he knew it, showing off with fancy bows, candy canes and accents of fake pine cones, mistletoes and cranberry branches.

He took his wrapping very seriously.

One year I asked how he attained these skills and he answered with a laugh, "I worked at Macy's while I was going to school. You wouldn't believe what most of the costumers wanted me to wrap."

Most people, when they remember their first Christmases it's usually filled with cookies and presents. I had those moments but they were usually blurred with being trapped inside four walls and trying to keep down my lunch, which was always soup.

I was told to stay in bed and to do nothing that would excite me, which meant running, singing or dancing. Even walking was too much of a strain. My family tried everything they could to make me happy and to not feel so alone but life had other plans. Poaching of the grizzly bear and mountain lion had Dad station at the park at all hours of the day and night. It would be days before he had the chance to come home. Mom was called in multiple times, taking on more hours at the hospital. Melissa and Johnny took turns staying with me, they gave up hanging with friends to be with me but they still had commitments to school clubs. Grandpa, Grandma and even my tutors took up the job when they couldn't.

When Christmas rolled around I had thought everyone would be home and they were but I still couldn't leave my bed. Again, they tried to make me feel part of the traditions. Melissa and Mom had moved their tamale station inside my room, allowing me to help. Dad would bring up cookie dough and a cutting sheet, so I would make cut out gingerbread men, Santa Clauses, snowflakes and any other festive figures. Johnny decorated my room as I slept, he placed a small tree in the corner and used ornaments that he and his friends made. He hanged bright, colorful lights in droops on each wall and taped paper snowflakes on the ceiling.

They were small acts but yet held the biggest impact on me and what the true strength of family was. Life unfortunately didn't lighten up on us; Grandma's shop was swamped with the holiday shoppers and everyone had to pitch in. Except Mom, who was on call at the emergency room and any time she did have off, she used it to rest. Hunters didn't take a holiday, especially when most would go out looking for deer during the season. Melissa and Johnny had holiday activities and Michel and Jamie had school plays. They never meant to leave me alone but work and school got in the way. At least I had Joey, he was such an old dog but he still pushed himself to climb up those stairs to get to me. He was there when no else was . . . even when . . .

I shook my head, turned back to my scarf and forced myself to work on it, trying to distract my brain with the task. I spun the thread faster and faster, grinding my teeth in frustration when I kept missing loops and had to slow down. My iPod seemed to mock me when it played 'America' by Imagine Dragons:

"America,

"America, don't you cry . . ."

"Oh, shut the fuck up," I hissed and pressed pause.
I looked back to my project and found Berlioz staring at me; his ears were perked and the tip of his tail was curled. I almost thought he was upset or scared but his big blue-green eyes were calm. He rose, walked across the mattress and sat beside me, laying his head on my lap.

I scratched the top of his head as he purred, "maybe it's time to call it a night, huh?"

He gave a soft whine of displeasure when I stopped scratching his head and moved to put away my knitting supplies. I stored them under the bed, turned off the lights and drove under the covers, engulfing myself in the soft, cotton sheets. Berlioz headed back to his corner and curled back into a ball. I turned on my side, facing away from the chimney and watched as the shadow of the flames danced around the room. The effect was relaxing, it was as if the blaze itself was soothing me to sleep.

My body was racked with shivers and my lungs were growing tighter and tighter. Every breath I took was painful and my eyes stung with tears. I called out for Mom and Dad, for Mel or Johnny but no one was there. Then I remembered, Johnny had band practice and said that I would be left alone for two hours, tops.

The pieces of him faded as my body rippled with throbbing muscle tremors. I tried to reach for my emergency button but it wasn't on my nightstand.

Did I lose it?

No, no, Mom will be so mad.

I fell out of bed along with my sheets that were tangled with my legs. My head had collided with the corner of the night stand, leaving a bleeding gash across my forehead. Joey jumped to his feet and started barking, alerting my family that I was hurt but no one was here.

My stomach couldn't handle the fall and I vomited; mushy yellow liquid stained the floor along with drops of crimson. I almost thought it was head wound but another round of hacking coughs told me otherwise. Blood leaked through my fingers and splattered over my hands, my clothes and the floor. Joey whined when he realized that no one was coming and slid in beside me, trying his best to comfort me.

Tears streaked down my cheeks, the pain and tremors were growing worse by the second. I dropped to my side, curling into ball as my vomit and blood laid above me. The sickening smell made my nostrils burn and my eyes sting. My mind was clouded with fear as I saw the smiling images of my parents.

Mommy. . .

Daddy. . .

Help me. . .

The last thing I saw was Joey as he laid beside me and whimpered. I reached for him but my hand dropped halfway when my heart stopped.
The sound of a girl screaming pulled me from my nightmare.

It wasn't till I realized that I was on the floor, tangled in my sheets that I had been one screaming. I took a moment to breathe in the burnt wood, trying to kill the scent of blood and vomit that was forever burned in my memory. It had been years since I had that nightmare, why was it resurfacing now?

*You have realized the truth . . . you are alone . . .*

I jumped at the sound but I continued to breathe, scanning the room, desperately reassuring myself that it was all in my head.

*Alone . . . such as every nation is . . .*

It was another voice and it was close, "who are you?"

*No matter how hard you all try, you are all destined to walk these paths alone . . .*

*No matter who joins you or what alliances you make, none are ever eternal . . .*

I quickly recalled Sweden and Finland's relationship, "You're wrong."

*They will fall . . .

They will break . . .

"Get the hell out!" I shouted.

*Empty vessels . . .

Empty threats . . .

False hope . . .

False love . . .

Then the fire burst to life, flying out of the chimney and stretching towards the ceiling. The heat scorched my skin as swirling colors took form in the flames, images being displayed in the blaze. I saw a room, painted in sky blue with posters of horses scattered over one side of the room while the other had old worn-out Backstreet Boys.

It was the room I had shared it with Mel when she was a teenager. It wasn't the only thing that was a blast from the past. On the floor was a small girl with wild blond curls and wearing a pink night gown. A large brown dog was beside her as she tried to pet him.

My gut twisted; it was me.

I watched; reliving that moment as my hand dropped and the light from my blue eyes faded. I swallowed, "it was just a nightmare. . ."

*It was no nightmare . . .

But a memory . . .

A memory of the very first time you died . . .*
I closed my eyes, squeezing them tight, refusing to see.

And it won't be the last.

A shadow whipped out from under the bed, wrapped itself around my leg and dragged me into the darkness.

Toris awoke to the sound of mumbling and whimpers. He blinked away the exhaustion and searched for the source. When he realized it was Amy he jumped to her side and begun to meow; raising his voice in high octaves, desperately pleading for her to wake up.

When she showed no sign of waking, Toris gave a silent apology as he bit down on Amy's hand.

She gasped, more out of surprise than pain and sat up; yanking her hand away from his jaw causing the bite to become a slash. Amy hissed back a curse and wiped away the small thin lines of blood.

Toris flinched at the sight, he only wished to wake her not hurt her but of course when did anything ever go as he planned? He closed his eyes and tensed his muscles, ready for Amy to release her temper on him; for her to scream at him and toss him into the hall. When nothing happened, he peeked through a thin opening of his lid to find her simply staring at her hand.

She watched as the cuts slowly fused together, taking longer than usual for an average cat bite to last. He was worried that she might have figured this and was growing suspicious but she displayed no emotion. Her face remained expressionless as the wound vanished and the dried blood between her thumb and finger slowly turned into crusting dirt.

"That explains why I woke up with all that mud on me," she muttered to herself but yet loud enough for him to hear.

He watched as she fell back and curled into herself, her body trembled and her eyes watered. She covered her face with her hands, breathing through clutched teeth as she tried in a failed attempt not to cry. An unsettling shiver swam down his spine when the tears slipped and she released a soft whimper.

He hesitated, not sure on how to comfort her. If he was in his human form he would reach out, place a hand on her shoulder or her back and hand her a tissue packet. That's what he had done whenever Irunya cried, but as a cat he had nothing; not even a voice.

Then he recalled their first encounter; Amy had said so little, using simple human contact and affection to guide her. He strides forward and ducked under her arm to slide into the crook of her neck. He nudged his forehead against her cheek and licked the tears away.

He released a strained sigh and removed her palms away from her eyes. They were bloodshot and beginning to swell, which only pushed Toris to be even bolder with his actions. He continued to rub his face against her's, adding brief licks and nose brushes. She reacted slowly, slipping her fingers into the nook of his neck and combing her fingers into his fur.

He purred without knowing and laid himself beside her; their foreheads touching. After a few minutes of peaceful silence, Toris believed she had gone back to sleep but then Amy said.

"I was six the first time I died."
His eyes shot open to meet a pair of blue pools that rippled with a faraway gaze.

"I was really sick," she continued, "because of the Recession. Mom said it was because I was too small to handle it. I couldn't walk most days or eat, and my body ached like I was buried in boulders." She sighed and closed her eyes, squeezing them tight. "But those aches were nothing compared to that day. It felt like I was burning from the inside out and my arms and legs felt like they were made of lead but yet my muscles ripped and tore like tissue paper. . ."

Toris pressed his paw on her cheek being extra careful not to use his claws.

When she opened her eyes, they were glazed over with fresh tears, "but that really wasn't the worse . . . being alone was. . . No one was there. . ." She hid her face in her pillow, "I . . . I-" her voice shank, becoming small, like a child's. "I was so scared. . ."

His heart squeezed and all he wanted in that moment was to wrap his arms around her. To comfort her and to reassure her with soothing words but he couldn't. All he could do was nudge his head even closer and mew softly as he licked her tears away.

All he could do was stay by her side as she cried herself to sleep.

The next morning, I woke up with swore eyes, an itchy throat and a massive headache. I groaned as I messaged my temples; *I'm so stupid to cry over a nightmare.*

Berlioz yawned and looked up at me.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" I petted his head and rose to get dressed. I packed on the layers like usual, with thermals, leggings, jeans, and a blue and mint green flannel shirt.

Once I was done changing, a knock came from my door. "Coming," I opened it to find Matthew with a hockey bag hanging off his shoulder and Kumajirou by his feet. My mood instantly brightened, "Mattie!" I tackled him, wrapping my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist.

He almost fell back but caught himself, dropping his bag and holding me up with both hands. "Well that's a welcome," he chuckled and gave me a squeeze.

"How you been? How was your flight?" I asked.

"I've been good, hockey has been amazing and the flight staff had to make a dozen calls before I could get Kumahiro on board."

"It's Kumajirou," I corrected him.

He flushed in embarrassment, "right, sorry."

"I really don't get it, you named him and yet you forget his name," I rolled my eyes, "well he forgets who you are so it makes sense."

"Oh Amy, why don't you hug me like that," Mikkel whined as he entered from the stairs.

I raised a brow in confusion till I realized I still had my limbs wrapped around Matthew. I jumped off, "these kind of hugs are reserved for family and friends."
He gasped dramatically, "and I'm not you're friend! I mean, I want to be your boyfriend but I'm not even your friend."

"Boyfriend?" Matthew grinned, amused, "what about Romano?"

I smacked his arm, "you're not helping."

"Romano?" Mikkel raised a brow, "is there something going on with you two?"

"Nothing-"

"They kissed," Matthew added.

"Mattie!"

"Oh so I have a rival then," Mikkel smirked.

"There are no rivals," I exclaimed.

"Oh so you do like me," he wiggled his brows.

I rolled my eyes, "Yes, I'm so madly in love with you," I said sarcastically as I walked to the stair case.

Mikkel chased after me and gently grabbed me by the shoulder. He quickly leaned forward and whispered in my ear, "Don't tease me now." His lips were so close that I could feel them grin against the shell of my ear.

I felt my ears burn as a shiver ran down my spine and my thoughts hazed as he brushed his fingers over the back of my neck. I blushed even harder, "L-Lukas! Mikkel's bothering me."

In a flash, Lukas snatched Mikkel's ear and pulled, "what did I tell you?"

"Ow, ow, Lukas, ow," the Dane hissed as he was yanked into the kitchen.

I sighed in relief and Matthew moved to stand beside me, "I saw that."

"Saw what?"

"The blush, you like him don't you," he smirked.

"No. I was just embarrassed," I stated.

He raised a brow, "Embarrassed eh?"

"Yes, embarrassed," I hissed.

"Can I give you some advice," he asked, his mood becoming serious.

I nodded and he said, "When you find someone make sure it's someone that you can spar with."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"When you enter a relationship with someone, you want that person to treat you like an equal. That wish for nothing but to support you and help you reach your goals not someone that believes that you are fragile and need to be protected twenty-four-seven. 
"So find someone that challenges you and won't hold back, for what they should want is for to you grow not hold you back."

I nodded, "is that why Arthur and Francis have been together so long?"

He snorted, "possibly, and I'm not saying their relationship is the healthiest but they're always there for each other and they push each other."

"What if you push them too far?"

"You'll know when it's too far."

I made a face, "I don't know Mattie, pushing someone to do something that they might not even want to do, sounds a little controlling to me."

"Really? What was it like staying with Germany?" he asked.

"He was a total pain in my ass," I stated, "but he pushed me to my limit, then shoved me even further because he knew what I thought was my limit, wasn't."

"Someone that helps you grow and you help them grow in return," he remarked, "that's a good relationship."

I instantly remembered what Gilbert said: "You know ever since you came around, he's gotten better. Granted we got off on a rocky start, but he's smiling more and you make him laugh."

My smile grew wider, "yeah... So, what you're saying is that my perfect partner is someone I will fight with and punch me in the face."

He rolled his eyes, "that's not what I meant." He yawned, "I'm exhausted; I'm going to bed."

"I'll wake you up for dinner," I said.

"Thank you," he waved me off as he entered the empty room across from mine while Berlioz stepped into the hall.

"Come on Berlioz," I scooped him up into my arms, "there's a can of food with your name on it."

I was on a break from my training, being that Tino and Berwald wished to entertain their guests. I didn't mind so much, I planned to use this time to relax with my favorite Christmas movies. It was a tradition that I had created for myself since I was six, luckily my Netflix account was connected to ABC Family. I was able to see all the Christmas classics like: *Jack Frost, Santa Claus is Comin' To Town, The Christmas Carol, Home Alone, Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer,* and *A Miracle on 34th Street."

They even showed DreamWorks and Disney films like *The Little Mermaid, Tangled, Mulan, The Princess and the Frog, How to Train Your Dragon* (one and two), *Big Hero Six, The Polar Express, Brave, The Rise of the Guardians* and of course *Frozen."

I would watch these movies with the twins but Christmas Day was when the entire family came together to watch these films. This year I wasn't entirely sure if the nations wanted to watch a bunch of kids' movies.
I caught them at the front door, "hey guys, do you want to watch some movies?"

They shared a look before Peter said, "I'm sorry Amy we gotta go." He grabbed the keys to the small four-door BMW. "We'll be home by dinner," he proclaimed as he and Raivis closed the door behind them.

"Kay," I sighed.

The boys were gone and I was left with Tino, Feliks and Eduard who were cooking fish roe, it was some kind of bread with fish eggs spread on it. They also made bread with wheat and dried fruit, and gingerbread cookies. I snatched one of the slices of the dark bread and took a bite, "this is good."

"It's Christmas loaf, made with rye flour, rye malt, buttermilk, dark molasses, raisins, dried apricots, prunes and spices like Seville orange peel, caraway, anise and ginger." Tino explained.

I took a bigger bite, "I love this, Tino you're an amazing cook."

He beamed, "thank you."

I tore off a piece and snuck one under the table for Berlioz, he snatched it without even sniffing and scuffed it down like he hasn't eaten in days.

"Don't spoil him now," Feliks joked.

"Why not?" I lifted him up and kissed his nose, "he's just so adorable!" I continued to give him little kisses.

"What some fish?" Tino handed Berlioz some caviar and he wolfed it down.

"You're gonna make that poor cat fat," said Feliks.

"You're just jealous because he's getting all the love and attention," I proclaimed.

Eduard laughed and Feliks narrowed his eyes at him, "hey, it's true."

After my snack I walked passed Lukas' room to find him and Mikkel pulling books from their shelves and piling them on the floor.

"Why did you put a book of fairy tales in the fiction pile?" Lukas lectured as he held up a dark blue book with silver writing on the cover.

"Because it's fiction . . .?" Mikkel said uncertainly.

"No, it belongs in the mythology pile next to the history pile," he stated.

Mikkel sighed and nodded as I asked, "Hey guys, what's going on?"

"Oh, just Lukas acting paranoid nothing much," Mikkel proclaimed.

"I'm not paranoid," Lukas snapped, scanning his room, "I don't know how to explain it but something isn't right here."

"Okay~" I stepped back, "I'll be in my room if you need me."
Mikkel grinned, "I'll join you."

He was about to raise but Lukas yanked him back to the floor, "no you won't. If you want to stay in my room, you help me organize my books."

"But I don't want to! Amy! Save me!" his voice carried as I ran up the stairs. Berlioz followed, sliding in through the crack as I closed the door.

I collapsed against the cushion of my bed, "I'm so bored," I muttered.

Berlioz jumped beside me and curled into a ball above my head. I craned up to meet his eyes, "I'm not saying that Christmas loaf is bad or anything, it's really good but I could kill for a tamale or a burrito, whatever comes first."

The feline yawned in response, "oh am I boring you?"

He shook his head and I laughed as I flipped onto my stomach, "you're too cute." I scratched him under his chin and he purred in pleasure. I subconsciously glanced to my night stand, where Grandpa's journal stood beside the lamp.

July 20, 1957

The next morning, we were awakened by a loud banging at the front door. This seems to be a common occurrence.

Alfred answered it with a tired "Morning. . ."

A man in suit handed him a pair of keys, "here you are Mr. Jones, I've brought the Thunderbird as you requested and also-"

"My baby!" Alfred's mood instantly brightened as he sprinted outside and embraced a light blue car.

The man sighed and turned to me, "here, the other set belong to his house in the French Quarter."

"Uh, thank you," I yawned.

"Also, your P.O. Box has been sent to your next residence," he stated and walked over to Alfred.

The blond stopped kissing the hood of his car and slammed his hand on the dark haired man's shoulder, "thanks Scottie." Then handed him the keys to the rental, "take care of yourself, all right."

"Yes sir-"

"Hey, the war's over I'm not your commander anymore," he grinned. "Get on home, I'm sure your wife's worried about you."

The man nodded and climbed into the rental car. I stomped over, realizing the Thunderbird was a small car with only one seat and an equally small trunk. "Alfred, what were you thinking? This thing is too small."

"Thing! This here beauty is a model Thunderbird, only two years old and still runs like a high breed Kentucky champion!"
I rolled eyes, “fine as long as it gets me to New Orleans.”

“Oh, my baby will get you there no problem,” he beamed.

We spent the rest of the morning packing up clothes, only one bag for each of us seeming that most of the room had gone to my family’s ashes. I had asked what would happen to this house and Alfred explained that Dwight would send someone for the books for that was all he needed. The house and furniture would be sold, "I won't be coming back anytime soon," he said.

Before we left, Mrs. Landry stopped by. I greeted her with a polite hello as we shook hands. She glanced to the model-T, "That's certainly a beauty."

"More like a deathtrap," I said.

She nodded, "so you two are really leaving huh?"

"Well like Alfred said, we follow the story."

"Yes . . . the story . . . but when we met, you said he worked for the government."

My eyes widened, realizing I was caught in my lie. "Uh well, you see we're reporters for the government."

She raised a brow and smiled, amused by my far-fetched response. "Listen, it's none of my business what you two do but next time get your stories straight." She gave me a quick hug, "by the way you look quite handsome in your new hat."

I tipped my tan colored straw hat to her, "thank you."

"Take care of yourself John," she patted my arm as I nodded and Alfred announced, "all right we better get going, if we leave now we can make it by dinner."

He said his goodbyes to Mrs. Landry and we were off, taking the shortest routes to the Louisiana. The ride itself was about five hours, Alfred passed the time by asking questions about my brother Clay and why he would want his ashes spread in New Orleans.

"It was one of his favorite cities to visit: the food, the people, the music, the history; Clay loved it all. We visited every summer and we had stayed there before . . . ” I closed my eyes, "before the accident."

Alfred said nothing else as we drove in silence.

His house was on Exchange PI in the French Quarter, it was walk-way for some homes and two diners. He parked the car around the corner, in a lot on the corner of Royal Street and Bienville Street. He killed the engine and climbed out of the car to stare off into the distance. He breathed in deeply, "feels good to be back," he smiled, "did you know? Storyville is only a few blocks from here," his grin grew wider, "good times, good times."

We grabbed our bags and stride into Exchange PI, stopping at a three story house with two balconies. It was painted ivory white with brown doors on the first floor while the second floor had the added accessory of green shutters. The first balcony was made of iron while the other above was stone. The balconies were also large, covering the entire levels.

"Is this cut up, like your loft in Chicago?" I asked.
"Nope, this is all one house," Alfred grinned and swung the two main doors open. The first floor was completely empty of furniture. It had tile floors with a wet bar at the corner, a chimney beside the bar and a closet and half bathroom on the left side of the entrance. "During the twenties I hid most of my liquor here. New Orleans is a port city so I was able to gather alcohol from all over Europe. Scotch from the British Isles, Irish whiskey from Ireland, wine from France, vodka from Russia and Scandinavia and one time I got a bottle of sake from Japan. Capone certainly got a kick from that one," he laughed.

"Wait, you knew Al Capone?" I asked.

"Not only knew, I ended up working for him."

"You were a gangster?!"

"Bootlegger," he corrected, "big difference. I only supplied him with booze, it's not like he wanted me to whack anybody."

"So how did you end up working for him?" I asked.

"It was all by chance and he was in a good mood. In 1921 I lived in Chicago and Matthew had sent me some Canadian whiskey. Being the huge sap I was I didn't think that I would get into trouble if I brought the bottle into a juice joint with a friend.

"It was one of the first speakeasies that Capone had charge of and he wasn't too happy that some sap brought in his own bottle. He was going to make an example out of me. He was still new to the game and had a lot to prove. He would have killed me and my friend if he hadn't taken a liking to the whiskey. I promised him I could get him more foreign liquor, the good stuff so he could charge more for it. Once I started supplying him, I started supplying other speakeasies in New York and New Orleans."

"Did you do this for your friend? I mean, I've seen you fight I don't think Capone would force you to do anything," I stated.

He nodded, "that was the main reason, to protect Claire but over time I ended up loving the thrill of it." He grinned, "And the money was good," then his smile faded, "then I lost most of it in the stocks. Thank God I had enough sense to keep a couple thousands away from the banks."

I smirked, "You were part of the Klan in the 1866, you worked on the railroads in the 1870's and you were a bootlegger in the twenties. Anything else I should know?"

"I was also a jazz musician, played piano and the trumpet in my free time," he gave his trademark carefree smile and gestured for me to follow him up the staircase that was next to the bath.

The second floor was just as spacious as the first level. It contained one full bathroom, a living room, a gourmet kitchen, a small dining table and three brown rimmed French doors that led to the balcony. Alfred took a moment to open these doors, allowing the late afternoon sun to enter. The breeze was warm and humid but it felt good.

The last floor was left for two bedrooms and one bathroom that connected the rooms in the middle.

"Your room is on the right," Alfred proclaimed as he took the one on the left.

The guestroom was simple; with white walls, a queen size bed with white sheets and wooden gray floors and furniture. Dressers replaced closets, leaving one door for the bath and another pair for the balcony. Well it wasn't much a balcony more like a rail, giving only a sliver of room to move. I
opened the doors to circulate the air and found Alfred waving from his room.

I gave a small wave and walked back to the second floor, where a pile of mail was waiting for me. Alfred offered to grab my family's ashes as I looked them over and I was grateful. The bills were paid for by my grandparents in California along with a letter asking about my whereabouts and if I would come visit. I put that letter in the reply pile while others, like condolence letters from my parent's friends were placed in a maybe pile. But there was a couple that caught my attention, a few letters were addressed to Clay from an Eveline Greene, right here in New Orleans.

It felt wrong to read mail addressed to my brother, but this girl had written him four times and by the post stamps the last one was sent out on July 15th. She deserved an answer; but what I found... I needed to write down.

~June 21st 1957

Dear Clay

I know you only just left this morning but I couldn't deny the ache I felt. I miss you terribly and wish for nothing more than your safe return.

Was it true what you said last night?

Will you take enrollment at Dillard instead of Hampton?

I know this to be a fool's dream that what we had might have been only a passing thought for you. You have told me differently and I wish to believe you and I want to believe you but I don't know if I can.

We did only spend ten days together, and for us to think that this is love might be our undoing.

With Love

~Eveline

My mind was racing; Clay had a girl in New Orleans? Why didn’t he say anything? And the fact that he would go to Dillard besides Hampton? It is true that he had sent an application to both schools but he never mention Dillard accepting him or not.

That's when it hit me: did my brother only say what Eveline wanted to hear? Was this as she feared, Clay only saw her as fling?

No.

Clay would never play with a girl's feelings, he was far too kind. He would have answered if he had lived.

The next letter was mailed out on the 27th, on the day of the accident. I thought it would be Eveline writing out her anger but it was much worse.

~June 26th 1957
Dear Clay

With no reply, I took it as a sign that I was nothing but a passing fancy but I needed to tell you this.

I'm late and I fear that I'm carrying your child.

~Eveline

I was stunned.

I reread the sentence over and over again, just to make sure it wasn't a trick of the eye. I hasty moved to the last two letters.

~July 1st 1957

Clay,

Please answer me.

I have gone to a trusted friend's doctor and he has confirmed what I've feared. I am carrying your child Clay Hawkfeather and I am beyond terrified.

Please. Please, answer me.

~Eveline

~July 14th 1957

Still no reply and here I am left behind.

I was such a fool, a complete, utter fool to have believed you.

Why would you lie to me? Why couldn't you give me the common courtesy to be honest with me? Do you realize what you have done to me?!

Do you realize what I must do now?!

What I have to do?!

Do not blame me, for whatever happens it will be your fault and yours alone.

My hands trembled as my eyes scanned the page over and over again. Eveline's words sinking into my very soul.

When Alfred returned with my family's urns, he set his gaze on me and asked, worriedly, "John, are you alright? You look pale."

I was quiet for moment, trying to gather my thoughts. "Clay had a girl here in New Orleans."
He sighed, "I guess we would have to tell her the bad news huh?"

"But there's more," I slid the letters to him, "read them."

He skimmed through them and his jaw dropped, "oh no."

"What does she mean by 'What I have to do'?" I questioned, my temper rising. "What is she saying?! What is she planning?!"

"John stay calm-"

"I won't calm down!" I leaped to my feet, "We need to find her! She lives in Bywater, she's close!"

Alfred blocked me from the stairs, "and what will you do? Knock on every door? Ask where she is? Do you really think the locals will tell you? A complete stranger?"

"Get out of my way Alfred!"

"No!" He pulled me aside and slammed me against the wall, "you need to have a cool head for this."

"But she's out there!" I cried, "She is out there carrying Clay's baby and . . . she might-"

Alfred took in a deep breath, "I know," he jerked me forward, wrapping me in a tight embrace. "I know."

He held me till my breathing slowed and my fists were unclenched. His very heartbeat soothed me, clearing my thoughts.

After a moment he pulled away, "I'll find her. You stay here, I'll be back soon."

"You are not leaving without me," I stated calmly.

His eyes soften, "yes I am. John, you may sound calm now but your eyes say differently." He squeezed my shoulder, "Don't worry, I'll find her," he proclaimed and ran down the stairs and out the front door.

July 21, 1957

Alfred didn't return till late morning, while I was sitting on the second balcony waiting for him.

"You won't believe what I found," he exclaimed.

He began to tell me all about Eveline Greene and my brother. They had met in the center of the Quarter where the fountain tellers did their work. She was actually one of them and Clay had decided to get his hand read.

"It was love at first sight," said Alfred.

Turned out they were a well-known gossip in the Quarter and Bywater. The son of an Indian chief of a self-made tribe and the daughter of a voodoo queen falling in love in the Crescent City.

"It's the kind of passion filled love story every girl wishes to have," he grinned.
"Yes, until you are left with a baby and scared out of your wits," I countered.

His smile fell and he nodded, "this is one of the times I'm pretty thankful I can't have kids."

That confused me, "You can't have children? But you have brother-two in fact; for that to be possible you need to have the same mother or father."

"We don't have parents," Alfred stated, "Artie once told me that we're not technically born, we just... appear. Now what we can be is a successor to an older nation and that older nation would be our patron."

"Then you and your brothers... are not related," I confirmed.

"Not by blood," he proclaimed, "none of the nations are related. We just... decided to make the relations instead. I mean, Arthur raised me and I was kinda raised with Matthew and I always saw them as my family. Francis is like an uncle but one day he will be my brother-in-law," he winked.

I smiled, "he and Arthur?"

"He and Arthur, they are perfect together, they just need a little push." He cocked a brow, "you are not bothered by homosexuals?"

"Oh no," I exclaimed, "members of my tribe are encourage to love whoever they wish to love being man or woman or two-spirited."

Alfred beamed, "if only everyone was more like you." He looked out into city, "the nations may not have blood relations but the bonds we choose to create with each other are just as powerful."

I decided to get back to our main topic, "what about Eveline? Any word where she is?"

"Oh, she's still in Bywater, getting ready for her wedding."

"What?! A wedding?! Who is she marrying?" I asked.

"A childhood friend, some guy named James Reed," he answered as his eyes slid back to me, "and she says she's carrying his baby."

"What?!" I shouted as I rose, scaring Berlioz in the process. "James Reed?! Mister James Reed! It can't be the same person... it literally can't. It's a common name... and so is Eveline Greene. It can't be... could it? Mister James and Miss Eveline were from..." the answer slapped me in the face. "New Orleans."

"Oh my god," I fell back onto bed, trying to process this new found information. "Oh my god. Does that mean that Tyler was Grandpa's nephew? Dad's cousin?"

Berlioz leaned over me, tilting his head to the side.

"Tyler Reed was Mister James' son," I explained, "but now if I do the math... he was born in ten years before Dad... The time of conceive was mid-June 1957 so he would be born in February 1958. James said he moved his family to California for work around the time Dad was born... Tyler and he shared a birthday."

"Grandpa, Miss Eveline and Mister James were always friends but they never went into detail how
they met.” I rubbed my face, moaning in frustration, "What the hell Grandpa! Just why? Why didn't you say anything? Why leave it all in a journal?!" I sighed and whispered, "Why?"

Berlioz laid beside me, wrapping himself against the top of my head. "It's not like we didn't try, we always asked on how they met but all they said was, 'I met John while he was traveling through the country' that's it. That's literally it. Dad doesn't even know. Why keep it from him? Tyler was like a brother to him, even with the age difference they were friends."

I closed my eyes, "you know the wolf charm he wears is for Tyler. He was seventeen when he died, Dad was seven. I wonder what he would think about all this."

He rubbed his face against mine and I inhaled a calming breath, "should we finish?"

The feline nodded and I continued.

"What!" I shouted in disbelief, "It's not enough to threaten the child's life but to erase Clay entirely and pull in some sorry fool to raise a kid that isn't his!"

Alfred didn't raise his voice, merely leaned over the rail and watched as locals walked through the street. "In this day and age a single mother can't get far," he pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his back pocket and shook out a single stick. He lights it and inhaled a deep whiff of tobacco, "she has to do what she can to survive."

My thoughts were racing; images of Clay overwhelmed me. His caring exterior, his charismatic storytelling, his loving smile. I was never going to see him again. The only thing, the last thing I would ever have of Clay or of my family was that child.

"I need to see her," I proclaimed.

"You think that's a good idea?" the nation cocked a brow as he released a puff of smoke, "what are you planning on doing?"

"I'm going to tell her that Clay would've never ignored her. If she said he loved her then I know for damn certain that he did. He wasn't being cruel, the only thing that was cruel was fate. If she knew-"

"Okay, what if you go and tell her? She'll believe you, cry for you, cry for Clay but he'll still be dead. A dead man can't pay no bills."

"I'll help her!" I cried, "I'll give her support, it's my brother's child, my blood-"

"And what can you offer?" he exclaimed. "You have no shelter and barely any money. This James Reed fellow on the other hand, must have a job, a house and a name he's willing to give to save her reputation. I'm sorry John, but those are the facts."

I glared at him, "I need to see her."

He inhaled and exhaled one last drag from his tobacco and smothered the cigarette on the rail. "Let's go before my stupidity wears off."

He forced me to walk to Bywater, hoping that I would come to my senses and turn back but I didn't. I needed to see Eveline, I needed to tell her what happen to Clay but what I truly needed was proof of Clay's baby. Alfred and I traveled in silence which didn't concern me. I was too focus on my task.
Once we were in Bywater, he guided me to a small mint green house.

"That's her house," Alfred said as he lit another cigarette, "keep in mind her momma's voodoo queen, so I would really like not to be cursed today."

I gave him a piercing gaze before I faced the door and knocked. Shortly after, the door was opened by a tall slim-boned woman. Her skin was a milky shade of brown with dark tight curls and eyes the color of dark tiger's eye.

I took a quick breath in to calm myself, "Hello, are you Eveline Greene?"

"Yes," she answered.

"My name's John Hawkfeather, Clay's younger brother," I unfolded her letters, "I've read your letters and I need to tell you-"

I didn't have a chance to finish for she slapped me in the face.

"Leave!" she hissed, "I have nothing to say to that bastard and if he comes anywhere near me, I have a shotgun ready and waiting."

She slammed the door and I was left there on the porch, holding my wounded cheek. The fine line that contained my angry snapped. I banged on her door, shouting, "He wasn't ignoring you! Clay never got your letters! Because . . . because . . . " I leaned forward, placing my forehead on the wood, "he died. He died Eveline! It wasn't his fault! It wasn't his fault! And that child, that child you're carrying-it's his and you know it!"

An older woman, most likely her mother came storming out, "Boy you better get off my porch!"

Alfred grabbed my shoulders, "and that's our cue to leave."

"No!" I shouted, "I-"

Alfred punched me in the face; knocking me out till I woke up in my room that evening. Anger boiled under my skin as I tore through the house, finding him at the ground floor having a drink.

"You punched me?!" I exclaimed.

"It was either that or be hexed so," he held up his glass of scotch, "you're welcome."

Without even thinking, I stride towards him and collided my fist to his face. He fell back, gripping the wet bar for support. He hauled himself up and wiped the blood from his lip, "are you better now?"

Before I could curse at him a knock came from the door. Alfred brushed pass me and opened it to reveal Eveline.

"Well this is a surprise," he gave a polite smile, "Hello Miss Eveline, what do we owe the pleasure?"

"How did you know where we live?" I asked, my tone not so polite.

"A white man and an Indian man staying in a house together, you're the talk of the Quarter," she remarked.

"Hear that Johnny we're famous," Alfred laughed.

I ignored him and glared at Eveline, "what do you want?"
She was quiet then, her eyes falling to the tile. Tears built at the corners and they fell as she blinked, "is-it true?" Her voice was frail and weak, "is Clay really dead?"

I closed my eyes, the anger finally dissolving, "yes, he died on June 27th along with the rest of my family."

Eveline blinked, absorbing the news. She turned to the side most likely trying to leave but she found the wall. Supporting herself with one hand, her shoulders shook as a slow earth-shattering cry broke through. She fell to her knees weeping for Clay, begging for his forgiveness, for doubting him and cursing his name and honor.

Alfred knelt beside her, soothing her with comforting words as he lifted her to her feet and guided her to the second floor. I followed; observing as he sat her on the couch and handed her a box of tissues. He then moved to the kitchen to fetch her a glass of water.

I sat across from her on a chair, pondering on what I was going to say to her. Once Alfred set the glass on the table he gave me a concerned gaze, more for her than for me and walked to the dining table.

After her sobs had stopped, she sighed and looked to me, "I need to apologize." Her voice came out in a whisper.

"You didn't know," I proclaimed.

"Still, I shouldn't have slapped you and I shouldn't have shouted at you."

I was silent, still not entirely sure on how to answer her. She took in another deep breath and continued, "Besides asking you about Clay, there is another thing I wanted to tell you." I cocked my brow slightly and she commanded, "Stay away from my fiancé and family, whatever claim you think you have on my child is misled."

I stared at her with shocked eyes, "That child is Clay's."

"That is what you believe-"

"I read your letters! Tell me, were you lying?"

She sighed, "No, but even with blood you still have no claim."

"No claim? No claim?! Both of my parents came from patrilinear lines, meaning that child belongs to his father's tribe."

"Your father was Miwok correct?" this was not a question. "Tell me, where is this tribe? Or the tribe that he had created? Why are you not with them?"

That caught me off guard, "I-I left-"

"Oh, you left? Weren't they your tribe? You're community?"

"I needed to put my family to rest," I remarked.

"And you couldn't travel with them?" she countered. "Even if we follow this outdated patrilinear ideals, you still have no claim for it is the father's elder sister that takes part in raising the child. Last I knew, you had brothers."

Alfred whistled, "You have to admit she knows her stuff."
I didn't have a chance to snap at him for Eveline said, "I'm sure that other Indians would agree with me. You have no family, no tribe, no community; you have nothing to offer. You. Have. Nothing."

It was like her words had pierced my heart and the blood flowed, leaving me drained. She was right. I had nothing to give to the baby. Nothing at all.

I was prepared to excuse myself but Alfred's next words stopped me.

"You're wrong," he placed a hand on my shoulder, "he has me." I blinked at him and he grinned, "If he'll have me. I can be his brother." He looked back to Eveline, "you're right on one thing Miss Eveline, blood don't mean a thing. But you are wrong about John having nothing to offer. He is kind, brave, strong and has so much love to give. That kid would be very lucky to have him in their life and you know it."

I didn't know what to say. I was beyond speechless and so was Eveline for a moment.

"I'm sure they would but it is my child and I decide who can and cannot be in his life." She glanced to me, her expression filled with genuine grief. "I have nothing against you John but . . . you look so much like Clay. What if the baby takes more from the father? And with you being around, James would be bound to notice. I can't take that chance."

She was about to walk down the stairs till I asked, "Is he a good man?"

She turned and said, "Yes, a very good man."

"Do you love him?"

She paused and then: "He's always been there for me, been a true a friend. He loves me so much more than I ever can. No matter how much I try . . . Clay will always be the man I love." She wiped away a single tear and held her chin up, "Please respect my wishes."

I simply nodded and she showed herself out.

Later when Alfred and I were having drinks, I found myself asking, "Did you mean it?"

He smiled, "every word."

I hid my face with one hand, blocking Alfred's view of my tears.

"Amy," Tino's voice echoed from downstairs, "come down for dinner."
"Kay," I sighed as I rubbed my eyes, "oh the feels," I moaned.

I gathered Berlioz in my arms and knocked at Matthew's door, "Mattie, dinner."

"I'll be right down," he yawned.

I headed for the stairs and nearly squealed in delight, "Francis!"

I quickly sat Berlioz down and leaped into the Frenchman's arms, "you're here!"

He laughed, "Of course, you think we wouldn't see you on Christmas."
I beamed, "where's Arthur?"

Francis nodded to the kitchen where the dirty blond was trying to lend a hand but Tino wouldn't allow it.

"No, Mr. Britain you're a guest here."

"Oh come now, I could make some biscuits," he offered.

"No," the Nordics exclaimed in sync.

I turned on Arthur and ambushed him with a hug from behind, "there's my favorite annoying Englishman, are you threatening everyone with your food?"

"There is nothing wrong with my food," he countered.

"I can give you a three page essay," Lukas proclaimed, "single space."

"Very funny, Mr. Norway," Arthur furrowed his eyebrows.

"Oh no," Feliks added, "I think those furry growths are trying to eat his eyes."

Everyone laughed and I heard him mumbled, "If I wanted to be ridiculed I would have spent the holiday with my siblings."

"Instead you chose me," I bumped him lightly with my elbow, "admit it, you love me."

He cocked a brow, "I have a fine regard for you."

Francis whispered in my ear, "that's the closet you'll get."

Soon after Matthew came down the front door was opened. Peter and Raivis came in, shaking off snow from their arms and legs.

"We're home," Peter announced.

"And just in time for dinner," Tino smiled.

The table had been stretched, enhancing the length. Extra chairs were added for our guests and hot streamed fish dishes were laid out in front of us.

"We would have been here sooner, but this idiot hand to drag me around Paris," Arthur glared at Francis.

"I needed to go shopping for gifts," he remarked.

"And you couldn't do that before?"

"Well at least you didn't spend the day rearranging books," Mikkel proclaimed.

Lukas sighed, "Like I've told you something isn't right."

"It's all in your head, you paranoid walnut," that earned Mikkel a stomp on the foot.

He cried out as Arthur gave Lukas a concerned expression, "what do you mean Norway?"

"I'm not sure but now that you're here you could help me," he stated.
"Of course, anything," the Brit nodded as he sipped his tea.

"I can't wait for your gift France," Feliks grinned, "you always choose the most fabulous gifts."

"Why of course I am quite tasteful and fashionable," Francis winked as Arthur rolled his eyes.

Matthew sighed, "yes but you tend to be flashy."

"What you call flashy, I call confidence," he sighed, "I sometimes wonder if you were ever my colony; destroying my beautiful language and wearing nothing but hoodies and jeans."

"They're comfortable," he said.

"Oh, leave the lad be," Arthur remarked, "don't force your choice of style on him. I did the same thing with Alfred and see where that led."

"Yet you still told me what to wear," said Matthew.

"And India," Francis chimed in.

"And Australia," Tino remarked.

"And New Zealand," Berwald stated.

"Egypt," Lukas added.

"South Africa," Mikkel joined in.

"Hong Kong," Erik was the last to speak before Arthur said:

"Okay, I admit I was bit controlling."

Peter gave him a look, "a bit."

"Besides, there was a lot more than clothes going on between you and your colonies," Feliks smirked.

"Did I ask you?" Arthur glared at them both.

"You didn't need to ask," the Polish man proclaimed, "I felt the shame and desperation from here."

I hid my giggle with my hand and took a moment to simply enjoy everyone laughing and jabbing at each other with playful banter. I recalled a quote from Alfred, "the nations may not have blood relations but the bonds we choose to create with each other are just as powerful."

I smiled, "hey, I have something to ask you guys."

After a brief second, the nations turned to face me. "Every year during the holiday break, I would make time to watch movies. Usually it would be me with my friends or with the twins but on Christmas Day my whole family gathers around to watch movies all day long." I inhaled through my nose to settle my nerves, "and I was wondering if any of you would like to join me? I mean, if you have something else plan that's cool, it was just a suggestion-"

"What are you talking about?" Mikkel exclaimed, "We don't do anything except for that one thing in the morning and the Christmas dinner-we got plenty of time to kill."
"We'll be more than happy to join you Amy," Tino gushed as Berwald nodded in agreement.

"What kind of movies do you watch?" Erik asked.

"Christmas movies mostly but I do watch Disney, DreamWorks, even some anime movies."

Arthur shook his head, "those silly cartoon movies?"

Francis and I gasped dramatically as Matthew said, "you poor, poor soul."

"I'm in," said Eduard, "I'm sure I can find a website with free movies."

"Count us in," Peter proclaimed as Raivis smiled.

"How does this work?" Lukas asked, "Do each of us pick one movie for the day?"

"Yeah; during the break, I would watch one or two every day or every other day on my own. Then on Christmas, everyone picked a movie." I explained. "We could watch one tonight if that's okay?"

Everyone either nodded or shrugged as Arthur sighed, "What do you want to watch?"

"I was thinking Feliks would choose," I said.

The blond cocked a brow, "why me?"

"You seemed kinda down since Toris left, so I just want to cheer you up," I grinned.

He gave a sly smile, "okay well seems that you love Disney so much and I absolutely love Meryl Streep. How about Into the Woods?"

"Yes!" Mikkel cheered, "We can even sing along with it too! Into the woods without delay but be careful not to lose the way!"

"Into the woods, what may be lurking on the journey?" Eduard sung along.

Feliks clapped, "Into the woods to get the thing that makes it worth the journeying."

Arthur groaned, "I hate this already."

Chapter End Notes

Voodoo is a religion first and fourth most. It is a religion that deals with power of the human mind and brings nothing but peace and love.

Yes, I am using (and will be using) a bit of Hollywood/tourist attractions like hexes and charms but that's only a slim part of Voodoo and most people that practice it don't use them for negative thoughts or for payback. Like Wiccans they believe in the power of the three law- except they say four, so whatever negative spell they do cast comes back to them four times stronger.

Chicken Man: a Voodoo King of New Orleans, has said if he ever used his power for evil, God would take it away. And yes, Voodooists believe in God, but under that God there are other lesser gods and deities (or Lwas and Orishas) spirits that they call upon
for help, to get them through tough times.

If any of you watched American Horror Story: Coven (which is my personal favorite) Papa Legba plays a role in the show and in Voodoo, but not as dark. He is the god of the crossroads and the symbol of the cross is associated with him and the cross is also symbolizes the intersection of material and spiritual worlds. He is also associated with the Catholic Saint: St. Peter, who holds the keys to the gate of heaven.

A lot of Voodoo Gods are associated with Catholic Saints, mostly because slave owners would force their religion onto their slaves. The slaves would then find common traits of these Saints to their Gods and picture them as they worship.

Nowadays Voodooists are Catholics because a lot of their altars at home would hold a cross, pictures of the Saints and burn candles. As a Catholic would ask help and/or guidance from a Saint, a Voodooist would do the same with one of their Gods, Goddesses or spirits.

Again, I only wish to interpret these practices into my story and add my own certain flare. I mean no disrespect and I know that this is a religion taken seriously by others. This religion is just like any other religion that teaches love and peace, there is nothing evil about it.
Chapter 30

July 22, 1957

The day was bright with a warm sun and humid winds. The sky was blue mixed with white clouds and passing birds. The locals were out, enjoying the musicians and artists that populated the Quarter. They were all smiling, laughing and dancing.

Is it possible to envy them and hate them at the same time?

Alfred leaned against the rail beside me, "Who you glaring at?" he asked jokingly.

My mood on the other hand wasn't so amusing, "They all seem so happy, a part of me wishes I could join them. Another wants me to scream at them."

"You're grieving. Being here, finally putting Clay to rest: it's getting to you."

"It's not just that," I admitted.

Alfred sighed through his nose, "the baby."

Imagine: to lose your entire family, then to find out that you have a nephew or niece—a piece of your sibling left behind. The world doesn't seem so dark anymore. You begin to feel hopeful and wish for nothing more than for this child to be healthy. To tell them all about their family and their father. But then fate comes along and snatches them away, leaving you to grieve once more.

"It is like I've lost another family member but it's so much worse." I took a long drag from my cigarette, "the child is alive and I know where they are, yet I can't be anywhere close to them."

He studied me as if debating with himself on what he should say. He gave up and squeezed my shoulder; saying nothing at all.

We waited till late afternoon for Clay's funeral.

Alfred suggested to spread half of his ashes at St. Louis Cemetery while the other half will be spread along the Mississippi River; both were walking distances from our house.

The sun was low causing the sky to bleed with red, pink and light blue. The shadows of large tombs and angels were casted across the stone walkways. The cemetery was designed as a maze filled with crisscross intersections, above ground graves and dark gray brick tombs. Alfred guided me to an old pale white tomb with 'X's written all over it.

"What is this?" I asked him.

"This is Marie Laveau's grave, well that's what people assume. Now she was the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans. The legend says if you mark an 'X' on her tomb three times, spin around three times and knock on her tomb three times—she'll grant your wish," he explained.

I furrowed my brow, "if she isn't even buried here, why should I make a wish at this tomb?"

He rolled his eyes, "it's a rumor but it's not the point. The point is to invoke her spirit. She had the power to sway the justice system and save two men from being hanged in public. Maybe she'll grant your wish."
I crossed my arms, allowing my silence to be my answer.

He said nothing else as he pulled out candles from a bag and lit them beside the grave. I leaned against a tomb across from Marie Laveau's, pondering on how a dead person could grant wishes.

A wish.

Did I look like a kid to him?

Magic, curses, hexes and charms; those things are used to entertain and terrify white people, nothing more. "Do you believe in that? The wish thing?"

Alfred regarded me with an analyzing gaze, "I've seen things John. Things that I can't explain other than to call them magical. I'm not saying you have to believe, but it might help to have a little faith in something other than yourself."

My lip curled into a half smile, "did you ever make a wish on Marie's tomb."

"Two," he stated.

"And what were they, if you don't mind me asking."

"The first one was for Claire, wishing for her to be happy."

"Was she happy?" I asked.

He nodded, "yeah, found a stiff with an honest job and had a couple of kids and grandkids," he grinned.

The way he said this, it almost sounded like he was envious but it seemed too personal to pry. Instead I asked about his second wish.

He sighed, "That one still needs some work." He patted the tomb, "I want to put my faith into Marie but I don't think her power can reach Toris."

"Who's Toris?"

"A good friend of mine that came to work for me in the twenties."

"Is he like you?"

"Yes, he's the nation of Lithuania," he confirmed.

"Nations can work for other nations?" I questioned.

"He needed the money and I was doing pretty well."

"For a bootlegger working for a gangster," I remarked.

He laughed, "He was a little shocked by that but he didn't really mind; ended up becoming my partner in the whole thing."

"He became a bootlegger!"

He grinned, "Toris may seem all sweet on the outside but he's got a spark. He's not someone you should underestimate." His smile fell as he raked a hand through his hair, "I really hope he's doing
okay."

"Why don't you visit him?"

"He's working for Russia now and . . . he and I haven't been on good terms not since the Revolution."

His eyes glazed over in a dark haze, like they always did when he reached a topic that was difficult. A part of me thought it was best to let this fade but my curiously would not stand down. "What happen?" I asked.

He sighed through his nose, "he lost some people that were precious to him and . . . it broke him." He turned back to his bag and dug out a bottle of whiskey and pack of cigarettes. He pulled a stick and placed it between his lips and offered me one.

I took it; realizing that he wished to drop the topic. I placed my attention to Clay's urn, caressing the silver painted vase and unscrewing the top to reveal gray ash. I never noticed till that moment how light it felt. It was difficult to grasp the concept of Clay, a giant in his own right to even fit into such a tiny container.

Alfred lit his cigarette and offered to light mine, each of us took long drags. The nicotine relaxed my muscles as I blew the smoke of the tobacco into the air. We placed the cigarettes beside Marie's tomb and Alfred twisted the top of the whiskey bottle. I scooped a hand full of ash and scattered them along the walkways as Alfred followed, spilling the liquor along with Clay's ashes. I spread most of his ashes next to Marie's grave, subconsciously asking her to keep my brother company.

Tears blurred my vision as I imagined a future Clay could've had. One where he and his family made it to Chicago and Tristen and Rose got married. He would have told us of Eveline and decided to change schools to be with her. Then when he read Eveline's letters, he would not hesitant to marry her. Mother would be over joyed to have her first grandchild and Father would have hinted to Tristen to catch up.

The image of Clay holding his child for the very first time made my heart both squeeze and ache at the same time. His big, meaty hands coddling a tiny human being with such gentleness and love. The thought seemed to morph, causing Clay to look up and smile. He beckoned me to come closer, "Come here John; meet your nephew."

I rubbed my eyes, trying to stop the tears from falling. I glanced to Marie's grave and the promise of a granted wish. Once again, I questioned my sanity for believing in wishes. Then I narrowed my eyes to the 200 hundred year old immortal nation.

I threw out my sanity long ago.

I grabbed a piece of brick and followed Alfred's instructions to the dot. When I had reached the third knock I realized: what was my wish? I looked to Clay's ashes, both that were left in the urn and the portions that were scattered with the soil and liquor. Then I turned to Alfred, who was giving me an encouraging smile and finally to Marie.

"I wish. . ." I whispered, "For Clay's baby to be healthy, happy and loved every single day."

We took the rest of his ashes to the Mississippi River in Woldenberg Park. We walked along the brick walkway, which was aligned to follow the river. Ferries drove by; their lights shined through their windows, reflecting against the rippling surface of the water. The light blue was fading as a dark indigo shade took its place and the stars began to beam into existence.
I held up the urn one last time, memorizing every detail of the vase with my fingers. Before I threw the ashes, a loud blast of sound echoed from behind. The sound quickly picked up in a tempo, adding more notes and beats; creating a song. I glanced back to find a man playing a trumpet. His song was smooth, slow paced and seemed, somewhat sad.

Alfred must've agreed for he said, "That cat surly knows how to play the blues."

As I listened, the song continued to rise and fall as if displaying a person's life with all its highs and lows. The beginning and ending of life.

I hadn’t realized I was crying till I found tear drops on Clay’s urn. The musician continued his beautiful yet sorrow filled song as I turned and unscrewed the urn one last time. My hands trembled as I whispered my final words to my older brother and scattered his remains along the Mississippi River. The trumpeter played out his last few beats and ended it with one long, fading note.

As we walked away from the river, Alfred slid a five into the trumpeter's case, "thanks for the tune."

"You’re welcome . . . and sorry for your lost," he proclaimed, nodding to the urn. He was young, maybe one or two years older than me. He had light black skin with chocolate colored eyes and wore a brown fedora hat.

I was hesitant to speak but I quickly swallowed that nerve down. "What was the song you were playing?"

"Ah nothing really, I was just messing with some notes," he said.

"It's good, you should name it."

He raised a brow in good humor, "any suggestions?"

"Life," I answered without thinking.

He nodded in approval, "I like it." He then packed up his instrument and handed us a card of a jazz club called the Forever Blues. "I'll be playing later tonight, maybe debut 'Life' for ya," he grinned as we parted ways.

Alfred said that the club would be the best way to honor Clay's memory, "didn't he like jazz?"

He didn't just like jazz, he loved it.

The club was small, squeezed between two massive buildings but that didn't stop people from coming. Both white and black crammed themselves in, settling in for a night of smoking, drinking and soulful jazz. Alfred and I took our seats at the bar, ordering us whiskey as the owner continued to introduce every musician that strolled on stage.

What he said next almost made me choke on my drink.

The owner presented James Reed, a trumpeter that grew up in Bywater.

The same man that I had only spoke to mere hours ago.

The last five days passed blissfully.
Mornings were usually used for simple, mindless errands mostly for groceries and late Christmas shopping. Arthur and Matthew decided it was a good idea to shop in Stockholm, till they saw the prices.

"This is ridiculous!" Arthur exclaimed as he held a beautifully crafted jewelry box, which I figured was for me.

"I know," Matthew sighed as Kumajirou grumbled about fish.

"I told you to shop in Paris but did you listen, no," Francis said in a condescending tone.

I covered my mouth to hide my laughter as Arthur glared at both of us.

Afternoons were reserved for sightseeing and fun; turns out there were even more museums like the Skansen Open-Air Museum, Arkitekturmuseet and the Moderna Museet.

The Arkitekturmuseet was the center of architecture and design dating back to the nineteenth century. It had blueprints, drawings, models and urban development projects. While the Moderna Museet was used for modern art; the collections varied from the twentieth century to current day, featuring works by artists including Picasso, Dali, Derkert and Matisse. The museum even offered a children's workshop, a gift shop, a library and a restaurant with a view of Djurgården and Strandvägen.

Unlike the others, I personally enjoyed the Skansen Museum. It was the oldest open-air museum in the world. Located on the island of Djurgården, it's a beautiful attraction for families, mostly for kids. That didn't bother me, I was a kid at heart and that counted. Feliks certainly used this fact to poke fun at me; asking if I would like to order off the kid's menu, to have a coloring book and a stuffed animal from the gift shop.

I will admit, I jumped on it, "Oh, oh there was this super cute elephant! Can I have it!"

The blond rolled his eyes but played along, "that depends . . . will you throw a tantrum?"

"Don't tempt me," I joked and we shared a laugh.

We did buy a coloring book filled with displays of Skansen; dark outlined drawings that varied from the zoo animals (yes there was zoo) and over a hundred and fifty buildings and houses that were collected from all around the country and reassembled at the museum. It was a way to give visitors an authentic taste of Sweden. There was even a distinct town that included manor houses, a bakery, a beautiful Seglora timber church, and a pottery.

Then we gathered at Kungsträdgården for ice skating and I learned that it was nothing like rollerblading. The skates were leveled higher, they pinched my feet and the laces were tied extremely tight, almost cutting off the circulation. That's the last time I asked Matthew to tie my shoes. I also had a hard time trying to find my balance, luckily for me I had the others to cling on to. Unluckily for them I usually crashed into them.

"Move! I can't stop!" I shrieked as I collided into Francis, who in turn grabbed on to Arthur and we all fell against the ice.

We groaned out curses as Matthew giggled above us and Feliks recorded us.

Mikkel gave me a hand, "that was better, you just need to work on the brakes."

"Or maybe ice skating is just not for her," Arthur muttered.
"I'm trying okay," I pouted.

After a few more efforts and each of them ending with me hurling into either Peter, Raivis, Erik or any other poor, innocent bystander. Mikkel suggested I should take a hot coca break with him and Lukas. We sat on a bench, watching as the others skate in the ring. There was a music festival taking place; melodies of folk songs resounded from a distance as food vendors sold hot coca and warm cinnamon buns. I untied my rental skates and slipped my snow boots back on, feeling the blood rush through my heels and toes. I quietly sighed in pleasure and took a big bite of my bun.

I was so content at that moment, I didn't notice Mikkel taking a picture till the flash went off. "Mikkel!" I hissed as I reached for his phone.

"But you looked so cute," he grinned.

"And you are such a creep," Lukas muttered as he sipped his drink.

"Agreed," I mumbled.

"Oh come on, you do look cute," he displayed the picture of me chewing with big fat cheeks.

"Yeah, I'm totes adorbs," I proclaimed sarcastically.

"See, I knew you would agree," he smiled.

I raised a brow, "I'm being sarcastic."

"He doesn't get sarcasm," Lukas remarked.

"And you couldn't tell me this sooner?"

"It wasn't in my job description," he stated.

I curled my lip in annoyance and reached over to flick his ear. He literally froze and turned slowly to meet face to face. His dark blue eyes narrowing, "did you just flick me?"

"Yes I did, whatcha gonna do about it?" I smirked playfully.

He cocked a brow as his lips flinched slightly. I guess I could've called that a smile but I didn't have much time to really think on it before Lukas hurled a snowball in my direction. I threw myself over the bench, using the wood as my fort. I scooped a ball and chucked it at him, making a direct hit at his shoulder.

"Ha! I've been practicing!" I exclaimed.

He took that chance to collide a snowball to my face, "not nearly enough," he said.

I glared, grabbed two snowballs and charged at him. He followed with another splash of powder as Mikkel cheered in the background.

Afternoons and evenings were for movies; everyone had a chance to choose a film. Mikkel really liked *How to Train Your Dragon* movies while Lukas and Erik preferred *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* movies. Berwald and Tino seem to enjoy the clay-like 3D animation like Rudolph, Jack Frost, and the Santa films; calling them cute and adorable. Arthur and Raivis favored the classics like *A Christmas Carol* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, but they did like current films, well I know Raivis did. Arthur didn't care much for the animation.
One night, Matthew had brought a CD copy of my lead performance in *The Nutcracker* from two years ago.

"Oh my god, where did you get that?" I exclaimed as a nostalgic string pulled at my heart.

"I asked your mom for it," Mattie proclaimed. "I've been saving it for the holidays."

"God, I remember how nervous I was," I hugged Berlioz closer, nudging my cheek against his. "I missed counted and fell off stage."

Mikkel snickered, "can we skip to that part."

I threw a pillow at his face, "shut up, it only happened during the dress rehearsal."

"It's in the bloopers section," Matthew grinned mischievously as he clicked on it.

"I hate you," I stated nonchalantly.

Francis and Peter both loved animation movies; Peter preferred the strange vibe of Tim Burton's films like the *Nightmare Before Christmas* and *Corpse Bride*. While Francis leaned more on Japanese films from Madhouse and Studio Ghibli.

Feliks really liked romance with the guilty pleasure of the supernatural; Peter, Raivis and I knew we had to make him watch *Teen Wolf*. The show ended up sparking an interest in all the nations but we still made time for Eduard; who was a fan of spy movies like James Bond, *Mission Impossible* and *Kingsman*.

Usually we spent every night watching two or three movies.

Late nights were all on me to finish my knitting. In the last few days I was able to finish all of the caps for Feliks, Tino, Mikkel and Lukas and two pairs of gloves for Peter and Raivis. It was night before the twenty-fourth, I had two gloves left and I was running out of yarn. I was tempted to just make headbands but I didn't think Erik and Eduard would be too happy about that. Gloves were agonizing to sew and I wasn't really keen on making another two.

I cast aside the deformed glove and glanced to Berlioz, who was swaying in and out of sleep. "Okay, it's time for a dangerous mission. I may not come back alive," I smirked.

I moved quietly through the halls, tiptoeing passed the doors and sneaked downstairs. I didn't notice that Berlioz followed me till he tipped over a cup from the coffee table. I flinched as I saw his darken figure passed by. I cursed and acted quickly, snatching two stacks of yarn, one blue and the other black. I scooped up Berlioz and sprinted back into my room.

"Damn, you scared me," I dropped him on the bed and ruffled the fur of my sweet little baby.

With more than enough yarn, I was able to make caps; blue for Erik and black for Eduard. I worked till the crack of dawn, keeping myself awake by talking with Berlioz. The topics varied from family and friends, Summerland and Kapaa to more current events; like the countries I visited and the nations I met.

"Rome was amazing," I yawned as I sewed halfway through the second cap. "Filled with art museums and monuments and the night life was fun-even though it ended with me cleaning up after Arthur. He's a, um . . . interesting drunk. He was all shouting and screaming one moment and kissing Francis the next. It was funny till he started crying . . . because of me."
I sighed, "I was ignoring him, being mean and all, and I shouldn't say that he started it because that doesn't change or help anything. He and I didn't have the greatest start or a middle and it's been better but I feel like if I make one wrong move, it just goes out the window. I care about Arthur and I just don't want to hurt him anymore or anyone for that matter." When I said this, the image of Lovino appeared in my head and I groaned as I scratched my head. "That wasn't the only thing that happen in Rome, I kissed Lovi."

Berlioz blinked and raised his head, "it was a rough night." Then I blushed, registering the words, "not like that! We were locked out of the house and we had to sleep on the patio furniture. I also got into a fight with him and pushed him into a fountain, if that's not a making of a rom-com than I don't know what is." I giggled at my own joke but my smile didn't last, "It may not be a very good one seeming that I asked for us to slow down."

I rubbed my face and eyes, "it's not like I don't like him but I shouldn't get involved with someone if I'm not going to be entirely honest with them. Jamie thinks I'm using this as an excuse and maybe she's right. Lovi wasn't the first, I've had one or two guys ask me out back home but it didn't feel right. I mean, I couldn't tell them who I was, not really-hell I'm still trying to understand who that is."

"I'm just scratching the surface really. What's even worse is that I haven't even told the people that I love and trust the most," I huffed, cursing under my breath as I brushed my hand through my hair. "I think Grandma suspects and I did tell Jamie and Michel once but not the recent stuff."

"Maybe the first step is talking about the things I don't want to talk about," I sucked in my teeth. "The question is with who." I turned back to Berlioz, "do you count?"

He meowed and I smiled through another yawn, putting aside the cap on the stand and flopped onto my side. My eyes closed, feeling the weight of exhaustion taking hold.

The world around me was filled with people and stone brick buildings. The structures were stunning, painted in the bright colors like red, blue, pink and white. Most had gorgeous balconies with vine ivory rails, wide spaced windows and tall French doors. The streets were crowded with people, artists and musicians, while horse drawn carriages and streetcars moved through the enter locks of city.

I craned my head up, searching for a sign or clue of where I was. The locals wore bell bottom jeans, velvet dress shirts, floral print dresses, graphic jean jackets and brown leather vests. Men varied in facial hair from simple stubble to thick mustaches and beards. Women kept their hair curled no matter the length but both genders weren't shy of growing out their locks.

"Is this the seventies?" I asked.

No one answered me for they didn't see or hear me. I was a ghost.

"Well this is new," I muttered as a familiar blond crossed my path; like everyone else, he didn't sense my presence nor acknowledged my existence.

Alfred wore a skin-tight shirt and bell bottom jeans with a thick brown leather belt and matching sandals. I let out a small giggle at the sight of his outdated attire, but I admitted he did look good. He strolled through the brick streets with a certain sureness of himself, a confidence that the nations had labeled as one of his main qualities.

I chased after his figure, slowing to walk beside him. I took this chance to get a better look at his
features and build; he was little taller than the average height, an inch or two more. His hair fell loose against his cheek bones and dark shaded, round rimmed sunglasses. His shoulders were broad and muscular with well-defined arms and waist.

I knew that he was handsome but it was different to actually see it as me. The dreams before were always set with me looking through Alfred’s eyes. Sometimes I knew that; other times I didn't, believing that I, personally was experiencing it.

This time I had no idea what he was feeling or why he was here. All I could do was follow him as he walked, wearing the carefree grin that Grandpa had described so many times. We came pass a series of stores and cafes, all with signs for food, clothes and even a voodoo shop. It finally came to me; Alfred was in New Orleans in the French Quarter during the nineteen-seventies. The question now was for what?

"Excuse me Monsieur," an elderly man called out to him, beckoning him with a deck of tarot cards, "wish to know your future?" This man may have been in his sixties or seventies; he had long black dreads and wore a brown cowboy hat.

Alfred laughed, shaking his head, "no thanks."

"Come on now," the dark-skinned man shuffled the deck, "there must be something you wish to know?"

The blond shrugged, "alright," he sat across from him, "lay it on me."

Was this really a good idea?

I mean, he was a nation of people; could some guy really separate the future for America and Alfred? Or was Elizabeta right? You can't separate the two.

Or was Alfred just humoring him?

The man laid out three cards, "the past," he gestured to the first card. "The present," he pointed to the second and moved to the last, "and the future."

Alfred nodded and the fortune teller flipped the first card to reveal a woman dressed in white and sitting between two pillars of white and black. "The High Priestess, she is the spiritual Bride and Mother, the daughter of the stars and the Higher Garden of Eden. She is, in fine, the Queen of the borrowed light, but this is the light of all. She represents wisdom, science and secrets." He curled his lip in a sly smile, "you must be a man filled with secrets and mystery; and the wisdom you've obtained through your years was through hard lessons and experiences."

My eyebrows rose and I turned to Alfred, his features were concealed in a poker face. He didn't say one word, most likely testing the man.

"You seem so young, it's hard to believe you've dealt with such trauma. Tell me Monsieur how old are you?" the man asked.

"Nineteen," Alfred politely smiled.

The fortune teller grinned knowingly, "How long have you been nineteen?"

Alfred’s brow flinched slightly and I squealed, "This guy's legit! This guy's legit!"

The nation didn't lose his cool, "a year, I'm turning twenty next month."
He nodded and added, "The High Priestess also foretells a future yet undecided. You must have been on the break of failure many times, could explain why you're so wise but of course I'm only scratching at the surface aren’t I?"

Alfred said nothing, allowing that to be his answer. The man moved along to the second card; it was a dark-skinned man sitting in front as a row of gold cups were placed behind him. The card was upside down. "The Nine of Cups usually means contentment but it's in reverse meaning truth, loyalty and liberty and it also follows my prediction. The Nine of Cups-reversed also means mistakes and imperfections.

"With this being your present, you must've made a big mistake recently. A lost love, perhaps?"

"Ooohhhhh, wait, wait! This is the seventies so that means the Vietnam War must be ending." I paused; remembering Kim at the drinking game and admitting that she had slept with Alfred. "Oh my god! You had a thing with Kim?!" I exclaimed, "And why am I shouting at you? It's not like you can hear me." I sighed, "But the Vietnam War was a war that you lost; so it might be a bruised ego . . ."

I leaned in closer; his sunglasses blocked the fortune teller from seeing his reaction but not me. Alfred's brows furrowed as his eyes narrowed in irritation, "or maybe both," I remarked.

The man turned the last card.

I was expecting it to be death, you know with the history and all; but instead it showed a dog and a wolf, howling at the moon, with two towers in the distance and a scorpion crawling out of a lake.

"Hm, now this is strange. If this card had been in reverse it would mean that you would fix your mistakes." The dark eyes of the fortune teller looked straight into Alfred's blue, even behind his shades. "Unfortunately, The Moon facing right side up means you will never fix them, no matter how hard you try."

The nation's chest rose and fell as his eyes stared at the cards, "I kinda figured . . . is that all?"

"No. This card is also a warning . . . a hidden enemy is after you. Someone dangerous and filled with deception and darkness. The path between the towers is the issue of the unknown while the dog and the wolf are the fears of the natural mind in the presence of that place of exit, and there's only a reflected light to guide them; the moon."

He tapped on the card, "the scorpion, that which comes up out of the depths, the nameless and hideous tendency which is lower than the savage beast. It strives to attain manifestation, symbolized by crawling from the abyss of water to the land."

In the corner of my eye, the card swelled and ripped as the black scorpion jerked and its tail itched for movement. The tail grew larger and wider, covering the entire card in complete blackness. I yelped and pointed to the card but Alfred and the fortune teller heard and saw nothing.

Then the massive tail snapped; flying out of the card and plunging itself through my mid-section.

I gasped, clutching my torso as I rose off the bed; ready and alert for an attack. Something mewed behind me and I jumped, not fully registering it was Berlioz till I saw him. His bright eyes blinked and his head tilted, as if asking if I was okay.
A sigh of relief took hold as the muscles of my shoulders dropped and I fell back against the cushion. The feline strides quickly to my side, nudging himself into the crook of neck while he rubbed his head against my cheek and licked my jawline.

I soothed myself with deep breaths as my fingers combed through his fur, "I'm okay . . . I'm okay."

I couldn't go back to sleep even when my eyes strung with exhaustion and my body was weighed by fatigue. My head throbbed painfully and my stomach was in knots. I decided to detox myself in the sauna, figuring that the heat and steam would be good for me. I undressed and slipped on a long robe that Tino had given me.

I walked downstairs, not realizing that that Berlioz had followed me. He slithered in and I scowled, "no, no, you can't be in here."

I gently scooped him up and placed him outside the door. I disrobed, grabbed a towel from the basket and wrapped it around my body. I stepped towards the radiator attached to the wall and cranked up the heat. The warm air circulated and I inhaled, releasing the tension from my shoulders and back. I was beginning to relax . . . till the door opened.

I immediately froze, curling my hands into the fists as I shifted my weight onto my supporting leg. I spun; swinging my other leg high enough to strike my attacker in the face. It was a direct hit. The loud smack of my heel and his cheek bounced off the walls and I was prepared for a brawl till I saw that the figure was Mikkel.

"Mikkel!" I whispered harshly, "What the hell are you doing?!"

"I thought you were Tino," he mumbled, "He sometimes uses the sauna in the mornings."

"Then why didn't you knock? Why didn't you say anything? Why did you sneak in all creepy like?"

"I was going to," he exclaimed, "till you hit me."

I looked him over, he had a towel tied around his waist and was rocking a sexy bed head. The poor guy just climbed out of bed, "I'm sorry," I muttered. "It's been a rough night."

He nodded as he massaged his wounded cheek, "yeah, same."

"Again, sorry," I said.

"It's not you," he sighed, "Lukas kept me up all night. He thinks something's off but he can't figure it out and it's driving him mad. So if you don't mind, can I share the sauna with you?"

"I don't mind but on one condition, you keep that towel on," I proclaimed.

He chuckled; no doubt remembering my embarrassed face when I had discovered that people were usually naked in saunas. "I'll keep it on."

I nodded my thanks and sat down, breathing through my nose and combing my fingers through my hair, massaging my scalp.

"So, what's your story? Why couldn't you sleep?" he asked, making small talk.

I bit my lip, contemplating if I should answer truthfully or not. I decided on a half-truth, "stress."

"Are you okay?" he asked, concerned.
"Yeah," another half-truth; I needed to change the subject. "So what's the deal with Lukas?"

He sighed, "Like I said, he thinks something is off. He's been digging through his books and spell books-"

"Spell books? Like for magick?"

"Yeah. Oh you don't know, Lukas can do magick," he wiggled his fingers.

"How many nations can do magick?" I asked curiously.

"Lukas, Britain and his siblings, Romania . . . some African countries and there's a rumor that Egypt practices the same magick his mother specialized in."

"And what is that?"

He rubbed his temple, "what was that word . . ." he mumbled and then snapped his fingers, "necromancy!"

"Summoning the dead?!" I exclaimed.

"Not exactly, more like speaking to the dead," he insisted.

"By summoning the spirit or the body," I stated.

He blinked in surprise and I grinned, "Hey, I've read my share of fantasy novels; but can Gupta really summon the dead?"

"It's a rumor," Mikkel proclaimed, "no one really knows for sure."

"Has anyone ever asked?"

"Do you want ghosts or zombies?"

"No."

"Then don't ask."

I gave a half smile and rubbed the back of my neck, "I still don't get it. Why can't all the nations do magick?"

"We think it's because the culture influence of our people, other than that we have no idea. And the nations that can do magick range in skill level. I'm not sure about the other countries but I know Lukas, Britain, Romania, Wales and Ireland are pretty powerful. Sometimes I'm thankful that Christianity came into existence because if it didn't, we would be dealing with magickal war fare.

"It's also a good thing that the nations that can do magick are responsible. I mean can you imagine a fool like me with magick, I would mess up so bad and if I got it when I was younger," he laughed, "I would've screwed the world over."

"That's a pleasant thought," I muttered to myself. "So . . . what are they like? Wales and Ireland?"

He cocked a brow, "Haven't you met them?"

"Nope, but I've always wondered."
"Well, the Kirklands are pub hoppers, game lovers and big drinkers. In other words, my kind of people," he beamed.

"Peter said that they hated Arthur," I said.

"I wouldn't say hate, it was more like . . . questionable affection."

"And you know this…"

"I've been over plenty of times," he smirked, "Fiona and I were close."

"Oh," I matched his grin. I figured that Fiona was Ireland, seeming she was the only girl in Arthur's family. "So what happen there?"

His smile tilted slightly, "We decided it was best to stay as friends."

"She dumped you didn't she," I proclaimed casually.

"Sheesh, you don't have to be so blunt about it," he said defensively.

"It's the truth isn't it," I grinned. "But I'm pretty sure you're not that devastated. There were other women to share your bed."

"And men," he said.

"Of course," I rolled my eyes.

He chuckled, "are you jealous?"

"No, I just don't want to be another number to you people," I didn't mean for that to come out snarky. Okay, maybe I did, but cut a girl a break. I was tired from lack of sleep and stressed over random nightmares, that didn't seem to connect; or maybe they did and I'm too stupid to figure it out.

Either way, I was being rude and I should apologize. Before I could though, Mikkel's features became sober, "Amy, it's not like that. Granted, the boyfriend thing was a stretch but I'm a flirt, can't help it. But it doesn't change the fact that I want to be your friend."

I narrowed my eyes, "why?"

"What's with the suspicious look?"

"How do I know that you're not just tricking me?"

"How scarred is your trust that you can't even accept me wanting to be your friend? Who hurt you?"

He was joking, I knew that but something in me snapped. "You want a list," I remarked harshly. "My family and friends knew I was nation before I did and my grandfather was the fucking master mind behind it. Arthur, Francis and Matthew didn't see the need to inform me about Ivan and we all know how that turned out. And they had the nerve to tell me that it would be best for me to leave my family; 'make a clean break' they said. Even after they saw how much my family means to me. Then finally, when it was all over and everything was settled they come strutting back in to say," I dropped my voice into a bad British accent, imitating Arthur.

"Ello Amy, long time no see, by the way-pack your bags and kiss your family goodbye. You're going on a trip around the world for two years. Now, now love, no tears. Come along, kiss, kiss, cheerio and all that."
I panted after my rant, crossing my arms as Mikkel slid his gaze away from mine. "Do you really hate it here that much?" he asked.

His hurtful expression caused guilt to plunge itself through my heart. "No," I said this at first to soothe him but I soon realized that I was being honest. "No, like I said I'm stressed. It's the holidays and I'm away from my family and . . . it's getting to me. But . . . I do like it here. I like being here . . ." I curled myself into a ball, tucking my legs in as I looked straight ahead, avoiding eye contact. "I like Tino and Berwald and Lukas and Erik… And Peter and you and after staying with Ludwig and Gilbert, I just feel more at ease here. It's warm, the food's good and if I close my eyes it kinda feels like home."

He remained silent till he said, "you like me?" I could practically hear his smile.

"Not like that," I stated.

"Hey it's a start I'll take it," he said cheerfully. "Do you still want to know why I like you?"

I turned to face him, resting my head against my thighs, "sure."

He grinned from ear to ear, like he was hiding a guarded secret. "You're funny, out-going, and you have a confidence that's so close to Alfred's. It's remarkable to see. That day at your school, you were just as stubborn as he was and you didn't back down when you came toe to toe with Germany and China. He would be proud of you for standing up for yourself and your family, I know I was."

I blinked, surprised at this new information, "you were? Why?"

"Cause I think Alfred was right to leave you with them, and most nations didn't like the fact that he was right. But they had to swallow their pride and realize that the Hawkfeathers were good for you," he smiled, "they still are."

Unlike some nations that say their piece on how the Hawkfeathers were only a milestone. That they had done their job and it was time to move on. Mikkel implied that it was better for them to stay in my life, to be a part of it in the long run.

I needed to hear that, "thanks Mikkel that means a lot."

His eyes shined as his smile transformed into a triumphant grin.

Peter skimmed through the spell books that were scanned into his computer. Dozens of windows cluttered his desktop, using several different websites to help him decipher the foreign text. He pulled at his hair in frustration when he found another text written within a hidden message or metaphor.

"Bloody hell!" he cursed, "it's like Lukas wrote in security locks into his journals."

"Hm, maybe he was worried of some kid thinking it would be fun to fool around with magick and look, he was right," Raivis said nonchalantly as he browsed through a tablet.

The blond glared at his best friend; he hated being called a kid, "shut it."

Raivis met his glare with the same intensity, "We've been at this for six days and what do we have to show for it? Massive headaches, tired eyes and copied spell books that neither of us can understand."

"Hey I can read it-"
"Some of it! And if you could why haven't you found a spell to turn Toris back huh?!

"Maybe if you didn't complain so much and actually helped-

"I have been helping Peter!" Raivis exclaimed, "I've done what you've asked; I kept your secret from the others. I've stolen Norway's spell books for you, and I've been here trying to read these books to help you!

"I know! Okay, I know," Peter massaged the bridge of his nose, "I'm frustrated. None of this is making any sense and I don't know what to do.

They sighed in sync and sat on their twin beds, facing each other with exhausted expressions. Peter rubbed his eyes, mentally taking a step back from the project and tried to look at it from a different angle. His research wasn't all in vain, they did find two spells that had the concept of changing a person. The main problem was if these spells changed them back to normal or not and he didn't want to take the chance of being wrong and making this situation even worse.

A round of whining meows came from behind his bedroom door, crawling at the wood with long scratches. Peter sighed once again and opened the door, "If you're here to ask if we made any progress, we hadn't."

The feline ignored him, trotting after a brown speck that was darting away from his reach. Peter focused and found that the speck was a spider. Toris swatted at the insect, playing with it between his paws.

Peter raised a brow and glanced to Raivis, who gave his own look of confusion. "Liet? What are you doing?"

He didn't answer; continuing his game with the spider, toying with the creature till he slammed his paw on the bug and ate it. Peter's jaw dropped in disgust and Raivis blinked in complete shock.

"Did he just eat a spider," Raivis asked, not expecting to be answered.

Peter shook his head, "Liet, I know the canned food isn't that great but there's no need to eat spiders."

Toris paid them no mind as he leaped on to Peter's bed and crawled at the cushion. He stretched in satisfaction, collapsed against mattress and yawned, preparing for a cat nap.

"Toris," Peter called out to him but he got no reaction. "Toris!" the cat gave him a blank expression, blinked and yawned once again. "Toris?" Peter gazed into his eyes, finding that his pupils were irregularly large. The blackness nearly absorbing all of his green-blue irises.

"Toris . . ." Raivis moved closer to the feline, his eyes widening in worry, "Toris answer us."

Peter snapped open his laptop, clicked on notepad and slammed the device beside him. "Type! Come on, say something!" Toris did nothing as Peter grabbed him and shook him, "Toris! Toris!"

Toris' eyes fluttered, as if waking from a dream. Then he scanned the room, looking as if he had no idea how he got there. Peter was relieved to see that his eyes were back to normal. He sat him back and gestured to the computer, "Toris, do you know how you got here?"

He turned to the screen and typed, "No."

Peter shared a worried glance with Raivis before turning back to Toris, "What's the last thing you
remember?"

He paused in deep thought, "I was with Amy, she wasn't getting enough sleep and I was worried... Then everything went blank."

"But you were active at breakfast and . . . you ate a spider," Raivis remarked as Toris gagged and stuck his tongue out in disgust.

"I did WHAT?!"

"Let's get back on the subject," Peter said, "do you really not remember any of that?"

He shook his head and Peter groaned, "this is bad, this so bad. His eyes were beyond dilated, the color was nearly gone."

"What does that mean?" Raivis asked.

"Remember Brave? Toris is becoming a real cat, before long he won't even remember who he is."

Raivis' jaw dropped as Toris gasped in pants, mewing as he did. Raivis tried to soothe him but he hissed at the brunette and shot out of room.

"We got those two spells," Peter grabbed his coat, "come on, we need some supplies."

Raivis followed, "But you're not even certain if they'll work."

"We don't have time," Peter proclaimed but muttered to himself, "Toris doesn't have time."

Toris paced; mewing as his mind became a whirlwind of realization and fear. This wasn't the first time he dealt with time gaps. At first, they were small incidents; waking with Amy in the mornings and joining her for breakfast but then he would find himself on the window seal bathing in the late afternoon sun. On another occasion, Amy would be brushing his fur on an early afternoon day and then he would wake by her side as she watched a film in the evening.

Toris figured that he had taken a custom to nap around the house, like a cat did.

That thought hit him like a cold splash of water; like a cat did, he mentally repeated. He was becoming a feline on the inside just as Peter said. The cat was taking over as he slept, and he realized with great terror that the blackouts were happening frequently.

Then the bell rang at the front door, shaking him from his thoughts. Tino answered the door with a polite smile as the delivery man handed him a package. Without questioning his better judgement, Toris moved closer to the door . . . his natural instinct to explore and claim territory became steadfast.

He blinked, shaking his head. What am I thinking?! Explore? Territory? That wasn't him; he needed to stay inside the house where it's safe.

Yet, he couldn't keep his eyes away from the open door. Toris fought, but he couldn't deny his inner desire for freedom and adventure. These raw instincts silenced his fears and anxieties, allowing him to let go and thrive.

He sneaked past Tino and the delivery man with ease and sprinted across the yard. The snow dug under his paws, clinging against the ends of his fur and tail. The burning sensation of the powdered
ice sent exciting shivers up his spine. He ran further and faster; the air chilled him but he didn't feel
the cold only the blood that circulated through his body, giving him warmth.

He disappeared into the wildness, weaving through the trees and brushes. He took twists and turns
along the trails, enjoying the splashes of powder he kicked up into the air. He climbed trees and
leaped from branch to branch. He baited fish from the river and tumbled into snow, the powder so
soft that it felt like a pillow. He was carefree, blithe even; it was a feeling he rarely experienced. He
had no idea why he would ever burden himself with these responsibilities and anxieties. It tired him
and he never wanted to go back.

He spotted a pair of rabbits and instantly felt the raw need to stalk the furry white creatures. He
moved with stealth, inching towards the rabbits slowly. Once he was close enough he pounced,
tackling one to the ground as the other ran away. He would never hurt them; merely chase them,
scare them, nothing more. All he wanted, all cared for was the hunt.

He quickly grew bored with the rabbits, craving a more changeling prey. He craned his head up and
noticed a black and white bird. It was fluffy with a yellow and red beck, beady brown eyes and wore
a red bow tie. He scaled the tree after it, placing all of his focus on capturing the bird. He was too
impatient and frightened the creature, it shrieked out a round of curses as it flew away.

He didn't give up though, for this was what he wanted. He followed the bird keeping its scent
embedded in his nostrils and his keen eyes locked on the bird. He dashed through the woods,
continuing to follow the bird as it entered the neighborhood. The bird soared low as if taunting him.
He took the bait, not realizing it was a trap.

A net seemed to come out of nowhere, scooping him as a hand sealed him in. He meowed and
crawled at the rope but these men moved swiftly; shoving him inside a crate and placing him in the
back seat of a police car. His cage was tied down by the seatbelts and he could smell another cat
beside him, most likely caged just as he.

"Where can we take them the shelters are full," a man said as he typed at his portable laptop.

"We might be able to squeeze them in at Svenska," his partner proclaimed as he started the car and
drove out of the neighborhood.
Chapter 31

I spent my morning out with Mikkel and Berwald, searching for the perfect Christmas tree to bring home. It was my first time going out to buy an actual pine tree. Dad was Eco-friendly preferring to have a fake tree while Mom liked it because it saved them money. I never really cared about having a real or fake tree but it was fun picking one out. It reminded me of an old *modern family* episode where Phil suggested they have an Express Christmas. Of course, everything goes wrong; Manny accidentally tased Phil causing him to crush the vintage baseball card he was going to give to Jay. Gloria running over the tree that Mitchell and Alex had brought and then tossing out the Angel from the car because of a spider.

*I don't blame her, I would've done the same thing.*

The episode ends with Jay surprising the family with a snow machine and giving Cam a hug. It was one of my favorites and it still made me smile every time I thought about it.

We arrived with the tree just as Lukas, Erik, and Arthur did some last minute shopping for the Christmas dinner tomorrow. Everyone else stayed behind to bring out the ornaments but it was Feliks and Tino (well, mostly Feliks) who chose the colors and theme. Decorating the tree with blue, silver, and gold ornaments while he twirled sheer blue ribbon around it. He did this twice, with both strands going in the opposite directions causing the ribbons to crisscross. Then proceeded by placing fake blue flowers (that looked a lot like poinsettias) in any empty space he found. It may have sounded tacky but Feliks made it work; spacing the ribbons, flowers and ornaments with precision and skill.

Once he finished telling us what to do, we all took a step back as Mikkel shuts off the lights and Berwald lit the tree. The lights shined with great intensity, creating a twinkling display of soft luminosity and warmth.

While we admired the tree Peter and Raivis came in, carrying multiple shopping bags.

"Last minute shopping?" Tino asked as he lend a hand.

"Uh, yeah," Peter scanned the room, "where's Berlioz? I have, uh, treats."

That piqued my interest, "I don't know, I haven't seen him."

The boys and I began the search; we checked under beds, behind the fringe, and every nook and corner. He was nowhere to be found. I subconsciously glanced outside, fearing the worst. Raivis and Peter seemed to read my mind, walking out the door and calling Berlioz's name. I followed their lead, crying out for my missing friend.

Everyone joined in on the search, breaking up into teams as they roamed the neighborhood. Mikkel, Erik and I took to the woods; checking the branches of the trees and under bushes but still nothing. I chewed at my lip as my gut twisted and tugged with nerves. The thought of something happening to Berlioz caused tears to build at the corners of my eyes. I wiped my face and shouted even louder for him, almost begging for him to come back.

Mikkel placed a comforting hand on my shoulder, squeezing it slightly. I took a deep breath but it didn't ease my stomach. I gave him a tiny smile and walked on, rising my voice higher in hope that Berlioz would hear. Then at the corner of my eye a bush rustled and I charged, yanking apart the leaves and snapping the branches under the force of my fists. A black figure flew out and I jumped back as this bird soared and landed on Erik's shoulder.
"Mr. Puffin," Erik smiled, "I was wondering when you were going to get here."

"Had a bit of a detour," the bird chuckled, "but I won in the end, haha." But his laugh didn't last when the bird took notice of me, "oh shit-squawk! Squawk! Squawk!"

"Relax," Mikkel proclaimed, "she's one of us. Amy, Mr. Puffin-Mr. Puffin, Amy."

Oh great, another talking animal and this one seems to be on the more annoying side of the spectrum. "Hi," I greeted with a monotone.

"Oh, so this is the new America," I never thought a bird could smirk before but Mr. Puffin did. "You were right, she is cute," he elbowed Erik.

The boy blushed, "shut up, I did not say that."

"Yes you did! You mentioned it after she threw a podium at Prussia; I believe your exact words were, 'she's fearless, strong and really cute,'" he winked.

Erik flushed and Mikkel joined in to tease him, "aw, you have a crush on Amy. That's so adorable."

"Lay off Dane," he muttered.

"Erik and Amy sitting in a tree," Mr. Puffin sang, "K-I-S-S-I-N-G!"

"First comes love!" Mikkel added.

"Then comes marriage!"

Mikkel hesitated, "but we can't have kids."

"Then they'll make it up with tons sex!" Mr. Puffin laughed as he sung one word, "SEX! SEX! SEX! SEX!"

Erik slammed his beak shut, "Shut up!"

I massaged my temple, feeling like Ludwig at that moment; I'm surrounded by morons.

Peter was very close to losing his patience. He had a half of mind to scream Toris' name but he couldn't take the chance of the others hearing him. Instead, he hissed his frustration, praying for the nation turned cat to show himself.

"I swear to God Toris if you don't come out I will strangle you," he said through gritted teeth.

"Yes, he will definitely show himself now," Raivis mumbled.

He didn't bother to acknowledge Raivis' comment, again putting his attention to his surroundings. The neighborhood? The woods? Where could he have gone? What possessed him to even leave the house?

He had the urge to smack himself; Toris wasn't himself. The cat was taking over, the problem was that this cat might not be domestic. He cursed under his breath, raking both of his hands through his face and hair. He craned his head up to meet with the sky; the air had chilled and the sun was inching closer to the horizon with each passing minute. The thought of Toris freezing in the snowy climate,
frightened, cold and alone took hold in his mind. What came next almost made him sick; becoming a tasty snack for a wolf.

Of course, once he thought that, his logic reassured him; wolves were in the central part of Sweden nowhere near the south but . . . their population was growing.

"Toris!" he cried out, "Toris! Come on, snap out of it! We have a spell that can turn you back! Well two and they're maybes but it's better than nothing, right?" He paused, waiting but his patience was wearing thin, "Dammit, Toris!"

"Why are you calling the cat Toris," a voice spoke from behind, flat and hollow.

Peter spun to Feliks, who was fixing a confused yet irritated glare at him. "Why are you calling the cat Toris?" he asked but his voice was anything but calm.

"Uh-" the excuse died on his lips, he was tired of lying. "I turned Toris into a cat. The cat; Berlioz," he specified.

Feliks' green eyes widened in shock and drifted to Raivis, who nodded in confirmation. Feliks turned back to Peter his shock quickly replaced with anger, "you turned Toris into a cat!" With two long strides, he shortened the distance between them and curled his fists into Peter's coat. "How?! Why?!" he shook him with each word, "What were you thinking?!" he begged.

He was about to apologize but Feliks grabbed his arm and jerked him back to the house. "I don't know how you did this, but you will fix it."

"We've been trying," Raivis followed, "Peter has been trying-"

"Clearly not hard enough," Feliks hissed as he pulled out his phone and sent a group text to everyone to gather at the house.

I hated being called out of the forest; leaving Berlioz out there wasn't going to happen.

"So, what's the problem?" I asked, annoyed.

Feliks didn't answer me, instead turned to glare at Peter, "tell them."

I cocked a brow and Peter sighed, "Berlioz is not really a cat."

I rolled my eyes, "If he's not a cat then I'm Beyoncé. We don't have time for stupid jokes."

"It isn't a joke," he exclaimed, "Berlioz isn't a cat; he's Toris."

The room went silent as everyone either blinked or furrowed their brows in confusion. I gave Peter narrowed look, "what the hell do you mean?"

"I accidentally turned Toris into a cat," he admitted.

"But how?" Arthur questioned, "You don't have any magick."

Mikkel snapped his fingers as his eyes lit up, "Unless he used Lukas' spell books and supplies."

Tino faced his son, "did you?"
He stared at his shoes, "yes," he whispered.

"It's not all his fault," Raivis spoke up, "I helped-

"That doesn't matter, it was still my idea," Peter exclaimed.

"What were you trying to do?" Tino asked.

"I was trying to make a love potion for Britain."

Arthur arched a thick eyebrow, "I'm afraid to ask but why?"

"It was for you to admit your feelings for France."

"What?!" Arthur snapped as Francis raised his brows in surprise and slight amusement.

"We all know about the sexual tension between those two," I spat in irritation. "What I want to know is, why did Toris turn into a cat if it was supposed to be a love potion?!" I felt like my body had gone completely numb. My mind filled with images of Berlioz; feeding him, bathing him, brushing his fur, sleeping with him and calling him my baby. Kissing him on his head, cheeks, nose and even his mouth. My ears burned in embarrassment as everything I said to him in private came rushing back. My family, my friends . . . my nightmares. Then I instantly froze as if ice had coursed through my veins. Oh, god he even saw me naked!

"I don't know," Peter drew me back from my thoughts, "I really don't know."

"It's because the spell you used wasn't a love spell, it was a transformation spell," Lukas proclaimed. Peter looked up, his eyes widened in realization, "you knew?"

"That you used my spell books and materials?" he asked with a condescending tone, "yes, I did."

"Then why didn't you say anything?!" Feliks and I shouted in sync.

"And, why did you keep me up all night?!" Mikkel exclaimed.

Lukas ignored them and gave Peter a narrowed look, "It's not my job to clean up after your messes and magick is not a toy. I was waiting for you to apologize and ask for help, to grow up and take responsibility for your actions, but it's clear to me now you are still a child."

My angry vanished when I saw Peter clutch his jaw and shift his gaze to the floor, afraid to look at anyone in the eye. I breathed in deeply, calming myself to think rationally.

"Okay, he gets it, he messed up. But what's important now is to find Berlioz-I mean Toris," I corrected. "He's somewhere out there and we need to find him before he gets hurt."

"But something is bothering me," said Eduard, "why did he leave? Why didn't he stay inside the house where it was safe?"

Peter was about to answer but Raivis took over, taking some of the responsibility off his shoulders. "The cat's taking over, he's losing himself to the animal," he stated.

"Well he has been a cat for a week," Lukas remarked.

"Can I say something?" Mr. Puffin raised a wring.
"No," Erik and I snapped in sync.

"Well fine, I guess you don't want to hear about a certain cat being taken by the police," he proclaimed.

Berwald's gaze slid to the bird, "what did it look like?"

"Hmm, I seem to have forgotten."

Berwald strides forward to stare the bird down with the darkest look I had ever seen, "what did the cat look like," he ordered.

Mr. Puffin gulped, sinking back, "it-it was multicolored with orange, black and white fur-"

"That's Berlioz!" I exclaimed but then corrected myself as I flushed; mortified. "I mean, Toris."

"He was taken by the police, meaning he would be sent to an animal shelter," Tino stated.

"That isn't so bad," Matthew said, "we can find him."

"If they don't put him down first," Berwald said, stoned faced.

My jaw dropped in disgust, "You have kill shelters!"

"Only if a cat is feral," he said.

"Toris isn't feral," Feliks added.

"But what about the cat," Francis questioned, "if it forced Lithuania to go out then would it be feral?"

I swallowed the lump that was slowly forming in my throat. "Enough talk. We need to find him now. Berwald how many animal shelters are in Stockholm?"

He pondered for a moment, "ten to fourteen the last I checked."

Eduard opened Google Maps on his phone, displaying tiny red dots. "There all over Stockholm; Djurgården, Östermalm, Söder-"

"Any of them open now?" I asked.

"A few," he said, "but most will be closing early for Christmas."

"Then there's no time to waste," I spun to face the nations, taking control of the situation. "Berwald, Tino, Erik, you three head to the city; take Francis, Matthew, Eduard and Feliks with you. Spread yourselves out into teams of two or three and check the shelters around the city. Mikkel and I will check the ones outside. Lukas and Arthur will stay here and make a potion to turn Toris back; Peter and Raivis will stay behind to help.

"I'm sending you all pictures of Toris now," I swiftly sent a group text. "Send a text when you find him. Understood." I was met with raised brows and surprised gazes but they ended up nodding in agreement. "Good. Grab your coats! Hit the books! Let's move people!"

I slid on my coat and wrapped my scarf around my neck, gesturing for Mikkel to follow. He did as did the others; snatching their coats off the hooks as I sprinted to the BMW.
"We're not taking the car," Mikkel proclaimed.

"Then what are we taking?" I was not in the mood for games.

He grinned and ran to the garage, revealing a sleek black motorcycle. It was curved with a flat seat and had one square shaped front light. The body was lifted high on shiny silver chromes that connected to thin wheels.

"Is that a dirt bike?" I asked.

"Close, it's a Suzuki dual sport," he pulled two helmets off the shelf and threw one my way.

I caught it with ease as I rounded to the backseat, strapping the helmet over my head. "Let's go, the minivan already left."

"Kay, kay," he kicked off the stand as the engine roared to life.

I wrapped my arms around his torso, squeezing him tightly as my thighs hugged the seat. My thoughts continued to torture me with all of my humiliating moments I had shared with Berlioz/Toris. Singing along with my favorite Disney movies like a little kid, doing some major booty shaking to 'Uptown Funk' when I felt the need to dance and of course the nakedness.

I pressed my face into Mikkel's shoulder and groaned.

"What's up?" he asked, concerned.

"Oh nothing, just realizing that Toris saw me naked," I admitted.

He muttered loud enough for me to hear, "lucky bastard," and sped out of the neighborhood.

Toris was anything but lucky.

He finally came to his senses when the policemen entered the back roads of a national park. Trees towered along the paved road, their shadows cascading over them as they drove into a clearing. It was twilight when they arrived; the sun was along the horizon, disappearing behind the luscious forest hills. The shelter was surprisingly red, which reminded Toris of a barn that he had saw back when he worked for Alfred. His heightened senses were able to catch the faint scent of animals and people.

The policemen parked the car in front and gently pulled his cage out of the back seat. The interior was filled with bright florescent lights, tiled floors and white walls. The main hall was covered in Christmas decorations. Ivory vines were scattered along the walls while festooned wreaths hanged off doors. Glitter painted snowflakes were taped on the windows and stapled to the ceiling. A simple tree stood at the corner with vibrant wrapped presents at the bottom while another, smaller tree was placed at the front counter.

A woman greeted them; she was lively, filled with optimistic holiday joy that could put a smile on anyone's face.

"Hello there cutie," she cooed at Toris as he was sat beside her. "You sure are pretty one."

He meowed for help but he knew it was in vain. He was sore, his head was pounding and his body was racked with anxiety. He tried to remember what Sweden's policy was for cats. He knew that...
feral cats were a mayor problem in this country and whenever they were encountered, shelters tried to capture and rehabilitate them. But if they were too far gone, they would be euthanized.

At least *he* wasn't feral but what of the animal taking over? He tried to swallow through the tightness of his throat but couldn't.

It happened so quickly; the men signed a few documents as the woman handed the crates to two volunteers. They brought him into a hall filled with felines and stuffed him inside a square kennel. There was thin blanket at one corner while a litter box stood at the other and the water and food bowls were in front; beside the checkered iron door.

He lied against the cold, itchy blanket as the shadows of the cage cast over him. He mewed in irritation for being too careless, for not being strong enough to fight for control. He was imprisoned inside a chrome box and there was nothing he could do about it. He was a small, helpless animal but even before this, he knew he was weak.

There was a time when he was strong, stable; able to handle any obstacle that was thrown at him. He led countless men into battle, wielding his sword high towards the sky for the charge. He rode on horseback through perilous terrain, clashed blades with the fiercest warriors and defended his people with devoted loyalty. He wasn't cocky like Prussia; he was cautious yet cunning and even confident at times.

That confidence though was fragile, only coming to light when he had his claymore in his hand or fought in hand to hand combat. Material arts were one of his great interests and he was never shy to learn any form or skill. Time moved on and those skills were replaced with automatic weapons. It was difficult but not impossible to adapt but bigger, stronger countries had better weapons and larger armies. The thought of Russia made his stomach churn. He was taken, imprisoned just as he was now. *Not only in this cage but in this ridiculous body!*

The woman at the front desk came into focus; her smile may have been bright but her eyes carried pity. He growled, *I don't want to be pitied.*

Then Amy took shape, cuddling him in her arms both in feline and human form. But as a nation, she gazed to him as someone to protect. *I don't want to be protected. I am not fragile! I am not broken!*

Or was he . . .

Romano's words echoed, "*Russia's slut.*"

"*Sorry my friend but Amy doesn't care for sloppy seconds.*"

"Toris hissed at the memory, *what have I done to Romano? We barely spoke to each other! Why did he feel the need to rub salt into old wounds?! Why were we even fighting in the first place?!*

It wasn't like him, to start a brawl in the backseat of a cab. Romano did throw the first punch and granted Toris did call him Europe's Whore but, dammit he still had some pride. Russia may have bruised it, chipped at it little by little but it was still there.

*I am not weak,* he thought, changing his tune from before. *I don't want to be weak.*

Then a hand tapped at the door, pulling Toris away from his inner monologues. The hand belonged to a beautiful woman with long raven curls, glowing smooth skin and sparkling brown eyes. She wore a loose-fitting blouse, skin tight jeans and stiletto boots all in the color of black. The only color she had was a lone silver necklace attached to an aged gold amulet.
She gave a stunning smile as her eyes suddenly beamed red, "well, don't I have a deal for you Mr. Lithuania."

His eyes widened in shock as the cats that surrounded him hissed and growled at the mysterious woman. She giggled; paying no mind to the felines as she bent down to yank out a young hyena pup from her bag. Toris blinked in disbelief and confusion, where would she get such a dangerous animal?

The pup trembled and whined as he squirmed in her grasp, trying to break free but couldn't. She reached down to her boot, where a silver decorative knife lay hidden. It was curved like a crescent moon and gleamed with a dark hue.

In on slick move, she slit the animal's throat and held it upside down, allowing the blood to collect inside a wooden bowl. Toris gasped and the felines became enraged; growling and crying as they paced around in circles, searching for an escape. While others remained silent as they sunk deeper into their corners, trying to make themselves as small as possible.

Using the pup's blood, she drew a large circle and within that circle were four interlocking oval shapes. Then above this strange knot cross, she drew an upside down triangle while adding other symbols that hadn't been used since Toris was young. These runes were combined and he wasn't entirely sure what they meant but he knew it wasn't good.

Once she was done she ripped open his cage and forced him out. She tossed him into the circle with a hard thud. Toris shook it off, using this chance to escape between her legs but found an invisible force blocking his path. He tried running to the back, to the sides but he was sealed in.

"Try all you want, but there is no escape." the raven haired woman grinned cruelly as she cut her own palm, bathing the curved blade with her blood. She closed her eyes and whispered a Latin verse, her voice growing hoarse and scratchy as the lights flickered and the cats mewed in terror.

Dogs howled in the distance but their brave and frightened cries quickly fell silent as the ripping of flesh resounded in Toris' ears. The cats grew restless, clawing at their doors till their nails snapped and bled, but they were trapped; they were all trapped.

Her shadow rippled as face-less snake like beasts slithered around her feet. The door behind her shook and Toris almost believed that help was coming but he was wrong; very wrong. More of these sleek tentacles of darkness slipped in through the cracks, carrying with them gushes of blood. The shadows began to fuse with the plasma; creating a monstrous beast of flowing red. It was massive with huge paws, a narrowed rib cage, a long snout and sharp fangs. Toris flinched at the realization; it resembled the structure of a wolf. But this creature had no fur, muscles or bones it was made purely out of blood. The veins circulated, twisted and interlocked with each other as the beast moved, leaving gory prints behind.

Toris fell back as the strange and terrifying creature jerked forward with unnatural movement. It wheezed with croaked and strangled breaths as if the air could not sustain it; like nature was against its very existence.

He was so disturbed and repulsed by the creature he hadn't noticed that the shadows around the woman's ankles were gone. It wasn't till the felines began screaming in shrill, horrified octaves that Toris looked away from the atrocious canine. The tentacles had divided into thin strips, tapping on each iron door as their heads peeked through checkered squares. Cats screeched and clawed for their lives; fighting off the face-less snakes till their struggles were silenced with sickening rips and tears of flesh.
Blood dripped from the cages, forming multiple pools of dark maroon to splatter against the white tile. The specters slithered out of the kennels and the blood followed. They blended together as did the first creature. This beast was just as large and menacing but it had a round face, a stretched body, a long tail and massive fangs. The form reminded Toris of a tiger but the blood wasn't settled; continuing to shift and morph with liquid manes or painted spots.

During all this, the woman still chanted; the incantation only just beginning. The blood made creatures spared a final glance to their master and lunged for Toris. Their bodies lost shape as they became liquid once again. Before Toris could even act, the blood and specters surrounded him. They spiked and harden, slicing through his fur and skin and he screamed. Not only feeling his pain but of all the animals that were killed.

He was shoved to the floor, his body felt like lead and he couldn't move. The specters moved swiftly, sealing Toris inside a whirlpool of blood and darkness. They slid into his wounds, merging with his muscles and imprinting on his very bones. It was like liquid fire coursed through his veins, burning him from the inside out. His skin stretched, his muscles tore and his bones snapped, healed and snapped again. It was a continuous cycle as his body tried to find shape and stability; it was excruciating.

As the beasts within fought for control; Toris was hit with a cyclone of emotions. Fear and pain took over his senses, causing him to scream and thrash. The shelter animals were still embedded in the blood; screeching together in terror and agony. Their shrill cries filled his ears as tremors racked through his limbs and torso. Tears of blood streaked down his cheeks as the beasts and specters tore him apart. He reached out, noticing for the first time that he had a hand but it was covered in thick brown fur and the nails were yellowed with long and pointed spikes.

He tried to speak but all that came out was a strangled moan as he finally lost consciousness.

When he awoke he was met with a pair of scarlet eyes.

"Good, you're awake," she smiled, her voice soothing but cold. "Come on now, get up."

His muscles trembled as he lifted himself to his knees. He was humanoid but his hands and feet were clawed and beast like. His body was covered in thick dark brown fur and a tail had grown from behind. A nest of messy hair sat at the top of his head and fell against his shoulders. Within that mane was a pair of enormous feline ears that perked up with every faint step and whisper. He ran a tongue over his teeth to find his canines were long and jagged.

The pain and fear had faded, leaving only anger and power. He lunged for the witch, aiming for her throat. He was an inch from contact before his gut heaved, yanking him back from making the final blow. He roared in absolute fury, wanting nothing more but to rip her vocal cords out.

"It's no use," she giggled and slipped a hand to his cheek. "You belong to me now. Don't worry I'll give you an outlet."

A shrill scream bounced off the walls, pulling the witch's gaze away from her monster.

He drifted his glance to the door to find a young girl. She seemed to be a volunteer, a student on holiday. She was frozen in place as her eyes roamed the kennels.

He followed her gaze; blood had splattered everywhere. The fresh corpses of felines were twisted, broken and reeked with the stench of death.

"See my pet," the witch grinned, "there is a building full of people that you can take your anger out
His rage returned as his eyes focused on the volunteer. Toris shook it away, the girl had done nothing to him. All he wanted was the witch, but the beasts and specters within him roared in protest. They were furious and hungered for blood; they desired nothing more but to rip and tear into that girl's flesh, to inflict the same amount of terror, angst and pain as was done to them.

Toris fought, speaking reason; the witch was what they wanted not some innocent girl.

"We were innocent!" they cried, "where was our mercy?!"

But the witch is to blame! Not this girl!

"Where was she when we cried?! When we begged?! She nor did the others came to our rescue! They stood by and let this happen! They are at fault just as the witch!"

His body began to move towards the petrified girl and he screamed in a beseeching tone: stop!

"No!" their combined fury and power crashed into Toris, slamming him aside. Allowing them full control of his body and their rage. They leaped for the girl, tackling her to the ground as their nails sunk into her chest and their teeth found her throat. They shredded her; ripping her apart as flesh and bone splattered against the kennels. Her lung was punctured and her intestines were spilled to the floor. Her cries were choked back as blood pooled in her mouth.

Toris yelled for them to stop again, and again but he was silenced. The beasts completely consumed him, engulfing him in their darkness.

"I still don't understand," Peter rubbed his temples as he skimmed through a spell book. "How could the spell have been a transformation spell? I swore it was for love."

Lukas turned a page in one book while he cracked open another; the piercing twist of his gut was getting worse. How far had his perceptive skills fallen? He should've realized that something was wrong the moment the boys stumbled upon his spell books. He keeps a protective glamour on his magickal items at all times, who or what broke them?

"My best guess is that it was an illusion, someone wanted you to see something that wasn't there," Arthur proclaimed.

"But we only focused on love," Raivis stated, "how could it have turned Toris into a feline?"

"What were the runes you used?" Lukas asked.

"Uh, Wunjo, Laguz, Gebo, Kaunaz and Sowelo," the brunette answered.

"All quite harmless," said Arthur.

"Yes . . ." he nodded, thinking, "What else?"

"We invoked the five elements, used a jade stone, a seashell, a vanilla candle and-" Peter suddenly slapped his forehead. "Catnip! Was that it?!"

"No, your spell had no effect on him," Lukas remarked.
"What?! But he was turned into a cat!"

"Because you two were merely tools," he said, "someone channeled through you and to cast their own spell. Even the runes and materials you used would have aided them. When used together Wunjo and Gebo can be used for commitment; to seal a deal. Laguz is a rune closely associated with water. Water in nature changes and becomes anything it wishes. Sowelo may mean life and love but it's also fueled by the sun. It gives power and strength to a spell, being for good or evil. Kaunaz is wisdom and passion but someone could focus more on Kaun, which symbolizes waste. For the flame of knowledge to continue, kindling must be used and eventually be consumed."

"So are you saying that all these good runes that are used for love and fortune can be twisted into something evil?" said Raivis.

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions," Arthur added.

Peter smirked, "isn't that from a Madonna song?"

"No you twit," he snapped. "It was a quote by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux in the eleventh century and later was adapted by John Ray in the 1670, and then again by Samuel Johnson in 1775. Most people believe it was Samuel Johnson that came up with the famous quote but in all honesty all he said was 'the road to'."

Peter rolled his eyes, "I didn't ask for a history lesson."

"Enough," Lukas exclaimed, his gut churned at the thought of someone slipping through his wards with such ease. "Clearly we are dealing with a powerful magickal user and fighting amongst ourselves won't help."

Arthur and Peter both huffed in agreement as Raivis asked more to himself than the others. "But why would they do this?"

Lukas blinked in realization, "Peter you said this spell was intended for Arthur."

"Yeah," he nodded as Arthur crossed his arms, "bloody little wanker."

"And how did you come by the spell?" Lukas continued.

"Raivis found your book and I skimmed through it," he answered.

"But why disguise a transformation spell as a love spell, what would be the point . . ." it finally hit him, "to trick Peter into doing it. Arthur you were the target all this time."

"Huh?" he arched a brow as the boys shared a confused glance.

"Whoever this person is, knew of Peter's distaste for you and knew if they laid out a chance for him to inflict some humiliation onto you, he would take it."

"But why turn me into a cat?" he questioned.

"Well let's think, do you have any enemies?" Lukas smirked.

"Not that amusing old chap," Arthur gave him a narrowed look. Then leaned back in his seat, pondering for moment. "My siblings would've done something like this but they wouldn't erase my consciousness at least I hope not. Yet that is what's happening to Toris," His eyes widened, "they're luring him out."
Lukas' jaw dropped, knowing exactly what he meant. "You don't think-"

"Definitely."

"Can someone let us into the loop here please?" Peter exclaimed.

"They're making Toris into a power source," Arthur remarked as he grabbed a map of Stockholm and a scrying crystal.

"A power source?" the teenagers questioned in sync.

"There are several different types of magick along with different users. Witches, shamans, necromancers, alchemists; any magick user is born with a power source within them," Lukas explained.

"But most range on different levels," Arthur added, "some are powerful while others are weaker."

"There are ways of enhancing your magick; training, amulets and any other sacred items but everyone has their limit," Lukas cleared the desk for Arthur.

"Unless you're ambitious and cruel enough to make a user an added source of power," said Arthur.

"But," Raivis' lips trembled, "Toris doesn't have magick."

"But he is a nation, an immortal with hundreds of years of experience," Lukas proclaimed. "He may not have magick but his years and healing abilities more than make up for it."

Arthur held up the crystal and Lukas took his hand; together they twirled the crystal clockwise.

"What are you doing now?" Peter asked.

"Scrying for large amounts of dark magick," said Lukas.

"Why not search for Toris?"

"We could but it only works when he's conscious but if the cat takes over, we'll lose him."

"But these kinds of spells take massive amounts of dark magick and we can be able to locate magick," Arthur stated.

The crystal landed and a bolt shot up Lukas' spine. A vision took hold as the wailing of animals throbbed in his head. He withdrew from the sound and was thrown into chaos.

_Men and women were screaming as they bagged on the building's main entrance. An arm laid by his feet; it was meaty and hairy, most likely a man's arm. Beside that was a woman's foot and above that was an ear with multiple piercings._

_Blood was everywhere; splattered over walls and floors, staining them with the crimson color. The people screamed and Lukas spun as another man was shoved to the floor. The figure loomed over his victim and plunged his fingers into the man's eyes, blinding him. The man cried out and figure dived for the kill, ripping his throat out with his teeth._

_Lukas knew this was vision, it would not hurt him. Yet he recoiled, stepping back from the creature that took pleasure from shredding people. It was shaped like a human with hands, feet and a long face but everything else was beastly. The figure was covered in brown fur with pointed, yellowed nails on both fingers and toes. A tail jerked and swayed behind him and his canines were razor-
The beast looked up and Lukas gasped and whispered, "Lithuania?"

The beast answered with an earth-shattering roar as a woman laughed in the distance. Lukas turned to face this mysterious woman. She sat on the counter with her legs crossed and her dark curls draped over one shoulder. Her honeyed giggles would've been appealing if he didn't already know her warped reason behind it.

She continued to laugh as Lithuania tore apart every man and woman; their fresh and limbs scattered around the main hall. Their blood rained against the glass doors, the paper snowflakes, the ivory vines and wreaths and the Christmas tree. During all this, the dark haired woman howled in menacing glee.

Lukas shook himself awake to find Peter kneeling beside him. His young sweet eyes were wide, staring down at him with concern. "Uncle Lukas, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, it was just a vision," he gave Peter a quick pat on the back to reassure him.

"So you saw it too," Arthur sat across from him, raking a hand through his hair. "It's her," he hissed.

Lukas wasn't one to shout but sometimes his voice would slip, "You know her?"

He nodded, "that little witch scarred Alfred and nearly burnt Salem to the ground."

"Who?" Peter asked with a shaky breath.

Arthur glared to no one in particular but Lukas knew that fierce, threatening gaze was meant for her.

"Abigail Williams," he said through gritted teeth.

Lukas' brow wrinkled in confusion, "but it can't be, that was over three hundred years ago."

"I'm not mistaken, it's her," he hissed.

"Um, wasn't Svenska one of the animal shelters that Mr. Denmark and Amy would check," Raivis gestured to the crystal. It was on its side, pointing at the Svenska Hundskyddsföreningen.

Arthur needed only one glance as he spun for the door but Lukas quickly snatched his arm to hold him back.

"Don't try and stop me, Norway," he words were laced with a hidden rage.

"I'm not stopping you, I'm coming with you, but first we need weapons." Lukas gestured him to follow as they stride to Mikkel's room.

Lukas began hitting his palms against the walls, searching for Mikkel's hidden armory. Before the others could question him, the hidden compartment was revealed. It was filled with swords, axes, daggers, arrows and a cross bow. Arthur didn't hesitant, grabbing the cross bow and arrows while Lukas chose a short sword for himself and ax for Mikkel.

"Why don't we take the guns?" Peter asked.

"Guns are useless against magickal users," Lukas stated.

"But arrows are?"
"If they have iron tips," Arthur smirked.

Peter and Raivis moved to choose their weapons but Lukas pulled them back. "What do you think you two are doing?"

"What does it look like? We're coming with you," Peter proclaimed.

"No, you're not," he said firmly. "It's too dangerous."

"But-"

Lukas slammed his hands on Peter's shoulders, leaning forward to meet at eye level. "I am doing this to protect you Peter. Your parents would kill me if anything happen to you but more than that you're part of my family and I'm not going let anything happen to you."

Peter was stunned, "Uncle-"

He didn't have time for heart filled moments, turning to Raivis with silver dagger in hand. "This is one of my most powerful weapons against dark magick, it's infused with protective charms." He shoved the handle into the brunt's hands and squeezed them, "look out for each other."

With those final words, he and Arthur slammed the door behind them.

Raivis watched from the window as Mr. Norway and Mr. Britain climbed into the BMW and sped down the street, their tires screeching against the pavement. He glanced to the dagger in his hand; the handle was wrapped with aged leather as the pointed blade gleamed in the moon light.

"How did it come to this?" he muttered, "Oh right, I listened Peter."

"That's the only way you would have any fun," Peter voice caused Raivis jump.

"Are you trying to scare me to death," he said in a loud whisper.

"No," Peter sighed, taking his place beside the window. He stared out into the night, gazing after the car. His thick eyebrows wrinkled forward as a pout formed on his face but that pout was soon replaced with a determined grin.

Raivis knew that look all too well, "Oh no."

"Oh, yes," he beamed.

"No," Raivis had to put his foot down. Peter had already dragged him, Toris and all of their fellow nations into a pit and it was time to start climbing not dig further. "No, no, no, no. No!"

"Come on Raivis-"

"No, Peter! No! We already caused too much trouble," he sighed, "just do as Mr. Norway said and stay put."

"But Raivis I . . . I need to fix this," the blond proclaimed.

"How?" Raivis knew he sounded harsh but Peter needed to listen to reason. "We tried but we couldn't turn him back."
Peter slumped and Raivis squeezed his shoulder, "it's okay; like they said we were tricked. The runes may have been good by nature but people tend to break what's ever good."

"That's the thing Raivis, we used Gebo, Wunjo and Sowelo those runes are closet ones to love. It may sound stupid but I don't think love can be twisted or broken."

Raivis sighed even deeper. "yes, love can be twisted and it can break you."

Peter grabbed his free hand and gripped his fingers, "do you believe that?"

He looked away, avoiding eye contact but that didn't stop Peter.

"I have an idea to turn Toris back-

Raivis snapped, his frustration rising, "Peter we tried-

"Just listen," he pleaded and Raivis reluctantly nodded. "We'll do the spell again."

He blinked, "the one that turned him into a cat in the first place?"

"But that wasn't us that was Abigail. She twisted the runes but it doesn't mean we can't twist them back into place. Love is Gebo and Wunjo's truest and purest form and Sowelo is the primary rune for love, you told me that."

He huffed but a tiny smile did form as he nodded.

Peter continued, "If we learned anything from fairy tales is that true love breaks any spell or curse."

"Those are fairy tales," Raivis proclaimed, "they're not real."

Peter arched a brow, "where have you been? In the past week Toris turned into cat and we just watched as Lukas and Arthur scryed with a crystal and became the Grimm Brothers to go hunt down a witch that has lived for over three hundred years."

Raivis had to admit he was stupid for saying that but still, it was a useless effort. "Okay, but Peter we don't have any magick."

"We got the dagger," he gestured to the blade.

"We don't have a vehicle."

Peter grinned, "Yes we do."

He yanked Raivis forward, hauling him to the garage in the far-off corner. He dug through paint cans and boxes to reveal a brand-new dirt bike. It still had the bright red bow and name tag on the handle.

"Oh no," Raivis groaned. "Do you even know how to ride this thing?"

"Uncle Mikkel taught me," he started the engine, "come on, get on."

"No!" How did it always come to this? Peter dangling an adventure where they most likely will get into trouble or die in this situation. While he protested, spoke reason, only to end up along for the ride but not this time. The pale, sweat streaked faces of Mr. Norway and Mr. Britain were still vivid in his mind. They looked like they had seen a ghost, well one of them had. But for a split second he had seen a flicker of fear in their eyes.
"It's dangerous Peter! You have no battle experience, no skills-Amy knocked you out with one punch!" he was hitting below the belt but he wasn't trying to hurt him but save him.

Peter narrowed his eyes, "then I'll go without you, try catching a bus on Christmas Eve."

He was about to drive off but Raivis wasn't going to let him go. He blocked his path, causing Peter to curse and screech to a halt. Peter at first was shocked but when he took notice of Raivis' furrowed brow and narrowed eyes he shot his own glare.

"Move Raivis," Peter said through clutched teeth.

"No."

Peter cranked the handle, causing the engine to roar but it was scare tactic and Raivis wasn't falling for it. He kept his grounded and met with Peter in dead lock glare; stubborn blue faced off with unwavering violet.

Raivis was the first to speak, "get back in the house."

"Make me," Peter jeered.

In a blink of an eye, Raivis threw out his hand, pressing the dagger to Peter's throat. "Get off the bike or I'll slit your throat."

The blond's eyes widened, darting from the dagger to his best friend.

It took all of Raivis will power not to look away but he couldn't stop his mind from screaming; what are you doing?! Protecting him, he reassured himself. Peter hasn't been in war, he had grown up in a time and place were boys his age never saw battle. He was loved, cared for and even spoiled. He even had a family. Raivis always envied that about him. Yes, he had Eduard and Toris but they never saw him as their brother but they were definitely the closest thing he had to one. And yes, he would love the idea of saving Toris but he had to be the rational one here. They would get in the way; Peter would get in the way and he would never forgive himself if he got hurt.

"Do it."

Peter snapped Raivis out of his processing thoughts, "Huh?"

"You heard me, do it; at least you know I won't go anywhere."

Raivis' bottom lip quivered but he still held the blade to his neck.

Peter's eyes relaxed and leaned into the dagger. Raivis flinched, stepping back and the blond gave a sad smile, "you won't do it, will you."

He gritted his teeth, squeezing the handle even tighter.

"You got two choices," Peter said casually, "you can move and give me the dagger or you can come with me."

Raivis' spare hand curled into a fist, willing himself to remain strong but he caved. He dropped his arm and raked a hand over his face and hair, "I hate you so much right now."

He beamed, "I know, get on."
Mikkel weaved through the cars; he leaned right and then left and I moved along with him. If I wasn't worried about Toris right now I would be enjoying the freedom and excitement of the ride. The slick slide of the wheels, the warm hum of the motor it all reminded me of an action movie. The heroes cruising down the highway, merging through the lanes and ducking under eighteen wheeler.

"Can we go faster?!" I asked, mostly to get to Svenska. Iform was a dud; Toris wasn't there and the others were having no luck. I knew I shouldn't have placed so much faith into one place but I did.

Mikkel nodded, pushing the accelerator to the max.

There were actually two shelters in the area, Hundstallet was a home for stray dogs while Svenska was for the cats at least I hoped. We passed Hundstallet but I didn't hear any dogs. Well, it was freezing and the building must be sound proof, at least that's what I told myself.

Mikkel pulled in front of the shelter and I hopped off the bike, tossing my helmet behind. He caught it with ease as I sprinted to the doors. I should've realized that something was wrong when there were no lights or when the doors were unlocked but yet blocked.

Mikkel knew and tried to stop me, "Amy! Wait!"

But it was too late, I forced the doors open as the lights flickered on revealing the gruesome scene. Red.

That was literally all I saw but I still remembered. The blood splattered, no painted everywhere. Bodies were scattered through the hall; all ranging in race, age and gender. Torsos were ripped open as their insides were either slashed to pieces or thrown across the room, sticking to the Christmas decorations. The organs peeled off the walls, pools of crimson had bled into the snow and the air was overwhelmed with the toxic scent of iron. Limbs were torn off, necks were bent in unnatural angles and some didn't even have heads. It was like I had walked on a set of The Walking Dead, but this was real.

Gruesome.

Bloody.

Real.

A scream was caught in my throat as Mikkel jerked me back, covering my face into his chest.

"How-how," I stuttered, lost for words or function. "How d-did you know . . ."

He closed his eyes for a moment before facing the room, "I smelled the blood."

I bit my bottom lip as tears fell on to his jacket. I curled into his arms, refusing to look back, trying with all my might to erase those horrible images. Then Toris came back into focus and I shouted, "He's in there! Toris is in there!"

"Well, you're not wrong."

Mikkel and I looked to our right, to find a woman in black but she didn't wear a jacket.

"Who are you?" Mikkel asked, furrowing his brow as he pulled me closer.
"A tourist," she reassured.

"Don't fuck with me!" he cursed, "Who are you?! What happen to those people?!"

She tsked her finger, "such language spoken to a lady."

"I have a feeling your no lady," he lunged for her but she vanished, leaving him to grab air.

"You may not know who I am," I followed her voice to the roof. "But maybe Amy does."

I flinched, "how do you know my name?"

"Oh, I know everything about America," she smiled.

*That wicked smile. I've seen it before, but where?*

She sighed, "come on Amy did they not teach you anything at that fancy school of yours? Well, I certainly don't have the patience to wait another century. Here's a hint; I'm from Salem."

Then it hits me; the dream back in Rome. The tall narrow trees, the high cliffs, the crashing tides, the vapors... Sarah... Abigail. My jaw dropped as I stared at the abnormal resemblance. She was the girl in my dream but this woman had her dark hair and eyes, soft cheekbones, high forehead, and full lips. I shook my head, "you can't be... you must be her descendant that-that's the only logical explanation!"

"Is that your final answer?" she remarked nonchalantly.

"Yes! Abigail Williams died over three hundred years ago!"

"Really?" Then a blaze engulfed her, spinning around her in a fiery tornado till they separated. Parting for her to take center stage as her eyes glowed red, "Because I feel quite lively."

Those flames, those eyes, there was no mistaking it. "H-how?"

"It's quite simple, darling. I'm a vampire," she grinned.

I shared a worried glance with Mikkel, "are vampires real?!" I hissed in a low whisper.

"No. Europe may have had panic or two-"

"They killed hundreds of people were any of them vampires?!"

"No, they were just sick."

"And yet you didn't notice why some nurses or certain family members were immune while entire families died off?" Abigail chimed in, "the public was scared and they needed the scapegoats and their victims were already dying," she shrugged. "Doesn't take a genius to put two and two together. You believed them so easily; the pale skin, the hollowed eyes and the fear of sunlight," she laughed, revealing her perfectly tanned skin. "Now tell me am I not simply glowing."

"You did this," Mikkel pointed to the closed doors of the shelter. "You ate those people!"

"If you're asking if I ripped them apart, you're wrong. I mean, do these nails look like they do manual labor," she waved her French manicure at us. "Here's a little advice, every book, movie and TV show you have ever seen is wrong. True, we need live off the souls of others to keep our youth but we don't need to drink their blood."
"Hmm, maybe I'm using the wrong term here . . . Oh," she snapped her fingers, "I'm a psychic vampire! There I'm sure that clears up everything for you."

"This bitch really likes to hear herself talk," Mikkel muttered.

I narrowed my eyes in a profound glare, "I still think a good beheading would work."

In a flash, Abigail appeared behind us. "Now, now there's no need to be so testy." Then with a swing of both arms she sent us flying; Mikkel into a street light while I collided into a parked car.

I slumped to the ground, groaning as I popped my shoulder into place. But I didn't have long to recover. Abigail moved quickly, wringing a hand around my neck and lifting me up in mid-air.

"Now I can give vampire writers' one thing, we are pretty fast," she squeezed and I gasped. "And strong too," she smiled. "And it also helps to have a balanced meal."

My eyes popped open at the realization, "But you said you didn't do anything?" I wheezed.

"I released my pet for some exercise, he's just excited. It's his first time," she giggled, "but it was certainly entertaining."

"You watched?!"

"Of course, it's better than cable, but the really fun part was the hunt."

"What?"

"Oh, well, you see when people die in a traumatic way their souls tend to wonder the place that they had died at." Her face twisted into a predatory grin, "I was able to hunt them down one by one; even in death they had no peace."

I slammed the heel of my boot into her jaw, shattering it as I yanked her hand off. Her nails had dug, leaving angry red lines but it was worth it to breathe.

I looked back and found to my astonishment and horror that she had slid her jaw back into place with ease. "That was a good one," she said, "Germany taught you well or should I call him Ludwig? I'm always confused on how to address nations."

I gritted my teeth, "How do you know that?!"

She gave a sly smile, "sweetie I've been watching you. I know everything about your life, and your dreams. Tell me do you enjoy them? Because I certainly get a kick out of them. I simply love the parts where you die and wake up covered in sweat and tears. It's so pathetic, adorable but pathetic none the less."

I charged; throwing a punch but she stepped away gracefully. I found my footing but she floated out of reach.

"Baby girl wants to play?" she lit her hands on fire, "let's play."

Mikkel sat up, groaning as he rubbed the back of his head. "That bitch-" a figure loomed over him, rising a claw high over its head. Mikkel acted swiftly, using a fallen branch to block the attack and allowing him to have a better look at his opponent. He was expecting a buff witchy body guard,
maybe even an undead slave but he sure wasn't expecting a fluffy cat demon now that was new.

It hissed, displaying bloody teeth and sharp fangs.

"Well, aren't you a charmer," Mikkel flipped it aside as he jumped to his feet. He held the branch out in a defense and the demon lunged; lashing out with a series of slashes and punches.

He knocked each one back as he thrusts the brunt of the stick into its foot, going on the offense with a kick to the chest. The beast fell back into a flip and landed on all fours. It charged; sending a flying knee towards Mikkel's face. He fell back just in time but was met with the heel of the beast's foot to the gut.

The demon didn't miss a beat, aiming an all-out assault of fast chain punches. Mikkel took the hits, falling back with a bruised rib cage and heaving chest. He clutched his jaw and whipped out a backhanded punch. Then collided a kick into its mid-section and slapped the branch over its face, sending it to the ground with a hard thud.

"Not so tough are ya," he cracked a half smile.

But his smirk disappeared when he found its face slashed open. Now, it wasn't because he was squeamish, far from it but what really forced him to stop and stare was Lithuania's face. It was only a slash but Mikkel saw it; hidden away within those worm-like-parasites that laced and fused together to cover him in the mask of the beast.

"Okay this is definitely the weirdest thing I ever seen."

Lithuania spun into a back kick and Mikkel dodged, barely. "Lithuania!" He blocked another kick, "Snap out of it!"

Then the possessed nation was slammed against the shelter with an invisible force.

Mikkel grinned, "Lukas! My hero!"

Lukas waved his comment off and asked. "Are you okay?"

"Now that you're here," the Dane winked.

Lukas rolled his eyes and shoved an ax into his sore chest. Mikkel winced, "thanks bro," he hissed.

"Where's Amy?" Arthur shouted.

Mikkel cursed, "That bitch must've gone after her."

A fireball shot into the air, stabbing a tree and setting it ablaze.

Lukas pointed, "I think they're that way."

"No need to be smart," Arthur said abruptly.

The blond nodded, "go, we'll handle Lithuania." He turned to face the said country, wielding a short blade.

The British man gave a single nod in thanks and sprinted towards the forest.

Mikkel weighed the ax in his hand, "thanks for the weapon."
"Better than a stick," he remarked.

"Hey, that stick kept me alive."

Toris roared, no doubt feeling neglected Mikkel thought. He gestured for him to attack, "well come on then." A wide grin spread from ear to ear, "we don't have all night."

I ducked behind a tree as another fireball swerved into my line of sight. I weaved through the forest, trying to shake Abigail off my tail but the bitch flew. Soaring high above the branches to track me down. She hurled fireballs in every direction, causing me to jump, duck, weave and dive for safety. But those moments never last for long, especially when she rains down another swarm of fire. Then it's back to jumping, ducking, weaving and diving once again. It seems my middle school gym teacher was right, dodge ball would save my ass someday. Never thought that someday would contain a flying witch and fireballs.

"Amy," Abigail sang, "where are you?"

*Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!* I rounded the base for my tree, nearly missing her as she flew left and I stayed right.

I breathed a sigh of relief till she popped out of nowhere shouting, "Boo!"

I fell back, breaking for a run but she tackled me to the ground. We rolled around in the snow, both of us struggling for the upper hand. She may have fireballs but I had brute strength. I gripped her wrists and snapped them back. She howled and I kicked free, sprinting further into the forest.

Once I believed I was safe, I leaned against a tree trying to catch my breath.

"Oh Amy when are you going to learn?"

I jumped, searching for her figure but found a black pool soaking into my boots. I screamed, crawling back for leverage but I wasn't being dragged in. Instead Abigail used this as a portal, rising out of the pool like a dark water nymph.

"You're not safe anywhere," she beamed a Cheshire cat's grin.

Till an arrow soared, plunging into the side of her skull. She collapsed into the snow as Arthur rushed to my side.

"Are you alright? Did she hurt you?" he patted me down, checking for wounds.

I reassured him that I was fine and asked, "How did you find me?"

"Abigail isn't one to be subtle," he gestured to the trail of snapped branches and burning trees.

I laughed, "No kidding." Then I drifted my gaze back to Abigail's body, "did you really kill her?"

"I truly don't know, this is my first time dealing with a human immortal but she's still a witch and a witch's weakness is iron."

"Just to be safe," I pointed ahead, "there's a lake a nearby. How are you at ice magick?"

He smiled, "I think I can handle thawing and freezing water."
After Arthur put out the flames, we dragged Abigail to the center of the frozen lake. Adding two more safety measures, Arthur stabbed the rest of his iron tipped arrows into her head, making a killer crown-pun intended. I tied my scarf around her feet and attached her to a massive rock. It may have been a little over kill but hey, you can't be too safe.

Once we were at shore, Arthur chanted in an ancient language that I didn't bother to understand or place. Instead I watched as the ice thawed and Abigail fell in, sinking into the depths of the lake. When she was under, Arthur recited another spell and the lake froze once again.

"It's Christmas Eve and here we are, in the middle of nowhere, committing a murder together. If that's not family bonding I don't know what is," I proclaimed.

Arthur chuckled, his face splitting into wide grin.

Then a memory rocked me back to my senses, "Oh shit! Her pet!"

"Her what?"

"Her pet! She said it was responsible for the attack at the shelter!"

He arched a brow till he blinked, "oh god, she meant Lithuania."

"What?" The image of the massacre appeared in my mind and I shivered. I shook the thought away, "Toris . . . wouldn't do that."

"Not by his own will," he proclaimed.

Mikkel charged; colliding a mighty punch into Toris' gut and tossed him over his back. Toris landed with ease and shot out with a roundhouse kick. Mikkel crashed into the snow but recovered quickly as he jumped up and slammed the flat side of his ax against Toris' ear.

The armor of fur and blood tore, fused and rippled back into place. Toris swung an elbow and Mikkel ducked and tripped him with smooth swift of his foot. Toris maneuvered; catching himself and flipping to stand once again.

Mikkel panted, "Was Lithuania ever this much of a badass or is the parasite armor giving him skills?"

"Give him some credit," Lukas sat on the hood of the car, searching through a spell book. "He is a nation, and besides you should know, you two were allies once."

He blinked, "we were?"

He was left open, allowing Toris to make a clean hit to his cheek bone. He dropped to the ground, the attack leaving him dazed. He shook it off just in time to find a claw descending into his line of sight. He weaved, the nails nicked his ear. Mikkel kicked Toris off, jumped up and swung his ax, ripping into the beast's organic breastplate.

Toris recoiled and the armor wove back into place. Then he backhanded Mikkel and slammed him to the ground, diving for his throat. Mikkel held him back, "Lukas, I don't want to bother you but, did you find a way to turn him back yet?!"

"I'm still looking," his eyes narrowed at Mikkel like he was a child annoying him with meaningless questions.
"Oh okay, take your time then. It's not like he's trying to eat my face!"

Toris leaned in, snapping his jaws then someone leaped on to his back, wrapping their arms around his neck.

"Toris! Stop!"

Mikkel knew that voice, "Peter?!"

The boy enveloped his legs around Toris' waist, refusing to be thrown off. "Toris! It's Peter! Listen, I know of a way to turn you back but please you have to fight it!"

The beast retaliated with a sinking bite into his forearm. Peter cried out and Mikkel and Raivis sprang into action. Raivis slit a dagger into Toris' shoulder and Mikkel buried the ax into his thigh. He howled, releasing Peter as Mikkel caught him and carried him to Lukas to check his wound.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Peter squirmed.

"Oh well, seeming that you're alright," Lukas smacked him over his head. "I told you stay home but clearly you've been spending too much time with this idiot."

"You know words hurt," Mikkel exclaimed.

He ignored him and turned on Raivis, "you were supposed to keep him home."

Raivis looked away and Lukas faced Toris, who had successfully yanked out the ax but couldn't pull out the dagger from his shoulder. Every time he tried, the metal burned him as bloody worms dangled, rotting into a black moldy shade and breaking into dust. The rest of the armor was retreating from the blade forming a perfect circle, displaying Toris' real skin.

"The dagger weakens it," Mikkel observed.

"Uncle Lukas, I have a plan-"

He stopped Peter right there, "no, you've done enough."

"Please, you have to trust me!" he begged.

"I can't even trust you to stay home," he argued.

Toris leaped for them and Mikkel blocked him, tackling him to the ground. The blade sunk in and Toris and the armor screamed in sync.

"Maybe you should listen to him," Mikkel shouted as they struggled.

"You stay out of this. You have no idea how to raise children."

"Maybe he's not a child anymore!" Toris gained the upper hand, pinning Mikkel beneath him but the Dane was prepared. "Give him a chance to prove it!" Mikkel gripped the handle and slashed the dagger over the beast's back.

A shrill roar resounded as pieces of the armor splattered and crumpled into dust. Toris withdrew, crawling backwards as he hissed and growled.

Lukas drifted his gaze back to Peter and sighed, "What do you need us to do?"
"We need to keep Toris in one place."

"On it," Mikkel chimed as he dove the dagger into Toris' thighs and calves, tearing into the muscles. He cried out and Mikkel smirked, "oh, don't be such a baby."

I ran through the burned trail, not caring that my lungs were on fire or that my feet felt like lead. Arthur called after me, pleading for me to wait for him; that Toris wasn't himself, but I didn't care. I had to see this for myself.

Once I entered the clearing; Lukas, Peter, Raivis and Mikkel snapped their heads up to look at me. I didn't meet their eyes, instead I focused on the brown furry creature that was beneath Mikkel. Blood rushed through my ears, muffling everyone's voices as I walked closer. The creature had a structure of a person but with a tail, claw like feet and hands and his fur moved. Like a million tiny brown and dark red worms were sticking to his skin while they combined and divided over and over again.

Mikkel was on top of him; seizing his hands behind his back with one hand as the spare pressed a dagger to his neck, "make one move and the head comes off."

I knelt beside him; his face was covered in these worms, slithering over his skin and forming cat ears at the side of his head. The only thing that belonged to him was his eyes, but they were crazed and vicious.

"Toris . . . you in there?"

He growled and Mikkel slapped the handle against the worms. These parasites screamed as they were burned away while others retreated. Toris cried out too, his voice breaking through.

"Toris!" I exclaimed, "Talk to us!"

He hissed, saying nothing.

I turned to Lukas, "please tell me you know how to turn him back."

"I don't but Peter has a plan," he gestured to the blond beside him.

I took a moment to analyze him; his hair was a mess, his eyes were red, cheeks were flushed and his arm was bleeding from a bite wound. "What happen to you?"

"Rode a bike a here without a helmet and got a parting gift from our dear friend Toris," he said casually.

"At least you weren't chased by a flying witch that threw fireballs," I remarked.

He smiled and I continued, "How are we going to turn him back?"

"Right, we're going to redo the spell that we thought turned him into a cat."

"Huh?"

"Abigail hijacked their circle, allowing her to cast her own spell through them," Lukas explained.

"But, if we recite the spell again but invoke the runes of love we could break this curse." Peter
carried a determined look in his eye, the kind that made you believe in his crazy schemes.

"Well if I learned anything from *Once*, is that love conquers all and breaks any spell."

He grinned, "I knew I could count on you." He clapped a stone into my palm, "you're going to be in the center of the circle. When it's your turn call on Sowelo, it's the primarily rune of love, represents poetic justice, hope, life, the sun-get the idea?"

"Uh, I think so . . ."

"Amy seriously you're the main key in this circle, get it together."

"Why me?"

"Cause you spent the most time with Toris as a cat, you might be the only one to break through to him." He paused, "and possibly if anything else doesn't work; kiss him."

I flushed in embarrassment, "what! But-but he's got worms all over his face!"

"Uh-ah! True love conquers all, get with the program," he walked off to hand everyone a rune stone.

"You heard the man," Mikkel grinned, "need some gum?"

"Fuck off," I hissed as I fell back to Toris' side.

He growled, bearing his teeth.

My embarrassment from before was gone, replaced with concern for Toris' well-being. I reached for him and his face twisted into a snarl. I flinched but I swallowed back my fear and caressed his cheek. The worms slithered under my palm causing a repulsed shiver to wash down my back. I shook it off and gazed into Toris' eyes, searching for him in this chaos of blood and fur.

"Don't worry," I whispered in a soothing voice. "We're gonna get you back, okay."

"Everyone ready," Arthur called out as he stood in front of me.

The others took their place around the circle; Lukas was behind me, Raivis was on my left and Peter stood to my right. They nodded, each one clutching a stone.

Mikkel stayed within the circle, keeping Toris secured.

Arthur began, his voice commanding and sure. "Wunjo, I call upon your promise of happy endings, of absolute love and partnership. I ask of you to break your former contact and to create a new."

The stone glowed in a bright golden light as a gust of wind swirled around us, kicking up powdered snow and whipping our hair against our faces.

"Well this didn't happen the first time," Peter said, almost worried that he would screw this up.

"As long as you have us," Arthur gestured to himself and Lukas, "it will work."

Peter gave a thin smile and shouted over the gusting winds, "Raivis, you're next!"

The brunette took a deep breath and held his rune between his palms in prayer. "Gebo, this partnership is unbalanced and toxic. It does nothing but inflict pain and suffering," light streamed out of his fingers. "With the warmth and aid of fire, I ask of you to burn their bridge."
The chilling winds became hot and humid as if we were in a sauna. The snow beneath us began to melt, slushing against our feet.

Lukas joined in, "Laguz, you are the rune of water, of ocean and tide. Such as water, you change and morph, becoming anything you desire. You are forever intertwined with not only the sea of this world but also of the ones that dwell in people's hearts. I ask of you to guide our friend out of this darkness, to lead him back to us."

Water twirled around his ankles and shot forward, aiming for Toris. Mikkel jumped away as Toris was cloaked in water. He cried out in pain as the armor swelled and winced at the touch. He tried to break through but ice formed, keeping him inside no matter how much he struggled.

"Algiz," Peter followed suite, holding out his rune as it shimmered. "Aid Laguz in healing our friend. Let me right my wrongs and heal the innocents that were caught in the cross fire."

It was simple but effective. The light of the rune soared, piercing through the ice and blending with the water.

"Amy, it's your turn!" he proclaimed.

"Uh," I froze. I had no idea what to say or do. *I know I should call out its name but what were the other things?! Oh dammit Amy! This is not the time for you to forget! Toris is convulsing in a water bubble! Do something!*

Mikkel must've sensed my frustration and fear of failure for he jerked me forward to face him. "Hey, hey look at me, hey," he held my chin with one hand. "Don't over think it, just say... just say what's in the heart."

My gaze darted back to Toris, who was trembling and moaning in agony. He crawled at the ice, not caring that his nails were bleeding. That pissed me off, we were supposed to be helping him. Why was it hurting him?!

*He has suffered enough.*

I glared at the rune in my hand and my eyes fell on to the dagger in Mikkel's hand. I grabbed his wrist and gripped my fingers around his, pressing the rune against the handle. "Sowelo, if you really are the rune of love and poetic justice," I raised the dagger high and Mikkel followed my led. "Then end his suffering!"

Mikkel and I plunged the blade through the ice and pierced the armor's heart. The armor exploded into black liquid, polluting the water and dragging us in. The last thing I heard was Arthur crying out my name.

We were entombed in an orb of black, murky water. I couldn't see anything but I still felt Mikkel's hand and the dagger. I switched hands; clutching the rune with my ring and pinky fingers as I used the other two to feel my way through the blackness. The bubble was small, I knew that but yet it felt like I was sinking.

I ignored the urge to swim up, refusing to leave Toris. Mikkel squeezed my hand, as if he was agreeing with me. I smiled with tight lips, conserving my air as I pushed on. Searching for another figure but found nothing.

Air bubbles escaped from my nose and I cursed internally: *dammit!*

I tightened my hold on the stone: *come on you stupid rune, glow! Shine! Release the light! Do*
Mikkel's grip tightened as I heard him gasp. I spun; feeling for his face. I held his cheek with a pleading hand, giving him a gentle shake. Please hang on! Please!

But I wouldn't blame him if he wanted to break for the surface, where ever that was. The thought of air caused my lungs to burn. I groaned in a scared and whimpering tone, fearing for Toris and Mikkel's lives.

I cursed once more: Fuck! Fuck! Someone . . . anyone, please help.

My eyes shot open, recognizing the voice; Alfred!

His voice was faint but I heard it. I jerked Mikkel further, following Alfred's voice. I pushed my free hand out, seeking for Toris as Alfred's voice grew stronger. Then, when I finally felt skin, I almost didn't believe it.

I shoved aside my doubt and lunged for him; curling my arm around his shoulders and cuddled his head against my chest. Mikkel wrapped us into a tight embrace and shot up, swimming for the surface. But like I said before, the surface was nowhere to be seen.

Yet, Mikkel thought if he just swam up he would find the exit. I wanted to believe in that too but doubt was beginning to weigh on me. I couldn't hold my breath any longer and neither could Mikkel. His movement slowed, his stamina was weakened and his strength was drained.

He gasped and fell against us, sinking us. I tried to move but my muscles were locked, refusing to listen. The fire in my lungs coursed and my eyes felt like they were about to burst.

I squeezed the rune stone: Sowelo . . . rune of love, life and hope . . . please give us strength.

My eyes drupe to a close as my hand tingled with a scorching heat. Light glistened and shimmered from my hand, bleeding out through my fingers. Then this glow burst; sending streams of light through the bubble shattering it to pieces.

The cold air burned as I drank it in; panting and coughing out water. Mikkel was in the same boat, choking as he spat out black liquid. We were soaked and freezing but at least we were moving.

Toris was limp in my arms, his skin was cold and his lips were turning blue. Mikkel yanked him out of my grasp and spread him out on the ground. He titled his head up and puffed air into his mouth. He continued to give Toris CPR, pressing his palms against his rib cage and going back to give him air.

After the third try, Toris gasped and coughed; spitting out water from his lungs as Mikkel turned him on his side, patting his back.

Through chattering teeth, I laughed and pulled his head into my lap, brushing his wet hair out of his face. "You're okay . . . you're okay," I whispered, mostly for myself than for him.

His eyes fluttered open and he smiled. It was weak and his lips were still blue but I'll take it. I hunched over, the chill finally slipping into my bones.
Mikkel huddled above us and cursed, "Fuck."

Lukas and Arthur sprinted towards us, tugging at our clothes as Lukas shouted. "Peter start the car!"

Arthur carried me to the car while Lukas and Raivis dragged Mikkel and Toris. They tucked Toris in first as Arthur and Lukas worked quickly to get our clothes off.

"What are you doing?" I asked through trembling lips.

"Trying to save your life," Arthur removed my layers and then stripped off his jacket and sweater.

Raivis climbed over us, to get to Toris. It took me a minute to register that the upper half of his body was bear. He embraced Toris, holding him close to his body heat. Mikkel was stripped to his boxers as Lukas covered his naked chest with his own.

Peter slammed the trunk, circling back to us to hand us blankets. Arthur draped it around our shoulders, engulfing me in his warmth. He and Lukas squeezed us together to shut the doors but it wasn't enough. Arthur pulled me into his lap while Lukas sat on top of Mikkel, trying to compact the six of us into the backseat of a four door BMW.

When Peter didn't enter the car Raivis searched for him and when he spotted him, his violet eyes widened. "Peter!" he shouted as he banged his hand against the rear-view window, trying to grab his attention.

Mikkel looked up and wheezed in a weak voice, "No, get away from there!"

I craned up to see Peter opening the doors of the shelter, "no," I choked.

All any of us could make out was Peter's figure as it froze. None of us could see his face but I was certain that he felt the same gut twisting nausea as I did. I continued to watch as he stepped back, tripping over his own feet and collapsing to the ground. He shook, hiding his face in his hands as the faint sound of his cries reached our ears.

Lukas turned away, "he needs to learn what his actions can cause."

"He didn't need to see that Nor," Mikkel said in a heavy tone.

"And it wasn't his fault," I chimed, "Abigail did that."

"No," Toris whispered in a rough voice, "I did."

Raivis and I were about to protest till he fell back asleep. Frankly we were all tired and worn out, not really in the mood to boost up our morale.

I looked back to my clutched hand and found the Sowelo rune broken into tiny shards. "My rune broke," I held up my shaking hand to Arthur.

"Yes, all of ours did as well," he said.

"Is that bad?"

"No," Lukas announced, "it just means that the runes had to use every bit of their strength and power. They can be written again; become stronger than before but," he slid his gaze to Arthur, "Please tell me you killed Abigail."

The nation smiled darkly, "I made her crown of arrows and sunk her to the bottom of a frozen lake."
The Judarskogen Nature Preserve, Stockholm's first nature reserve. The park varied in different landscapes; from wide spaced meadows, to hilly woodlands and a lake that sat in the center. Lake Judarn, the final resting place of the Salem Witch, Abigail Williams . . . or so they thought.

A hand exploded out of the ice; it steamed with an inner fire as it dug its nails in and heaved itself up. Abigail broke through the surface, gasping for air as she channeled the winds to lift her out of the water. She breathed in, guiding her inner blaze to spread through her torso and limbs as she wrenched the last arrow from her skull.

"Iron tipped arrows," she almost laughed. "Oh Arthur, you gotta learn some new tricks." She tossed it aside as her wounds healed instantly. A vapor formed against her cheek, nudging for attention. She caressed her beloved pet, "Mistress isn't just here to play but win."
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

I believe we can all agree this fic is just a parallel universe.
Also ya'll realized that I love music...

Twelve people died yesterday.

It was hard to believe that the police could identify them, the way they were torn apart almost seemed impossible. Investigators determined it was a wild animal attack, either done by a pack of wolves or a lynx. The security cameras were no help; they all had been mysteriously shut off. Abigail's doing no doubt. All they had to go on, were the bodies. We didn't stick around to give statements, Lukas said that it would only complicate things.

Complicate.

I'm really starting hate that word.

My life used to be so simple, now it's just one lie after the other. I see why the nations were so intertwined with each other. The things we saw and experienced last night can't be explained to normal people. Now just imagine dealing with that kind chaos on a regular basis; who could you talk to about this? Who could you confine in?

And if you were anything like me, there were secrets that you couldn't tell anyone about.

I sat in the kitchen, watching as the stove clock switched from 2:59 a.m. to 3:00 a.m. It was Christmas morning and I was glued to my phone.

Twelve people died yesterday.

Twelve families have to spend their holiday in mourning, planning their loved one's funeral. Partners had become widows, parents had lost children and children were forced to grow up on Christmas.

I ground my teeth together and muttered, "Merry Fucking Christmas."

I couldn't sleep, my stomach kept doing somersaults as images of Svenska and the victims resurfaced in the back of my mind. Every time I closed my eyes I saw bodies ripped apart like ribbons, Abigail's face twisted into menacing laughter and Toris cloaked in that disgusting armor made of crawling, unnatural worms.

There were so many times I wanted to throw up, to somehow purge myself of those events but my stomach was empty.

I glanced to the cabinets; I should probably eat something. My gut twisted at the thought of food, warning me if I did eat something, my wish would be granted. In the end I decided I wasn't hungry. Instead I focused my attention on my phone's screen, watching as news announcers retold the breaking report of Svenska's animal attack and the victims of this tragic event. The further they dug, the more questions came unanswered; like how were the cats and dogs killed even though their cages were never opened or how could a pack of wolves get inside a building without anyone letting them
in? And if the attack was done by a lone wolf or a lynx, why didn't Colin Jönsson, the police man on duty that night shoot the animal?

Bullets were found at the scene and he used every single one; but it was like he was shooting at a steel plated wall. He was on the force for thirty years, I highly doubt he was a bad shot. He was just up against something that no one would ever be prepared for. Colin was fifty-three years old, married with two daughters. He was a grandpa; his oldest daughter just had a boy a year ago.

He was only two years older than Dad.

Tears threatened at the corner of my eyes; the thought of my dad ending up like him was too close to home. I inhaled deeply, rubbing my eyes and willing the tears away.

I turned back to the screen, scrolling through an article about the victims. Along with Colin; five veterinarians, two veterinarian students and four volunteers were killed. The youngest was a sixteen-year-old girl.

I shook my head and pushed my phone aside, raking a hand through my face and hair. This was all too much; the veterinarians were people with big hearts, only trying to help animals that were mistreated. The volunteers were all in their late teens, just students on break. The vet students were in their twenties, trying to learn the trade. One was even engaged; the clip of Emil Lindberg breaking down in front of the station appeared in my mind. His boyfriend, Aron Magnusson had just been confirmed to be among the dead.

I sighed; plugging in my one (and only) wireless ear bud and pressed play on my iPod. The smooth jazz of Hoagy Carmichael's 'Stardust' thrummed through my left earlobe. I always had mixed feelings about this song. When I was younger I thought it was romantic till I actually listened to the lyrics. It was about a man's lost love and that love returning to him in his dreams. The nightingale and its sweet melody painted their love as new but he knew it wasn't real. I almost thought it was tragic till I listened to the lyrics again.

It's bittersweet; even though the couple went their separate ways the man would always remember his love with fondness. His relationship to him was a cluster of stars filled with the good and the bad. Either way, he would never forget his love. The song, to me at least, symbolizes that life was filled with ups and downs and you had to take in the good along with the bad.

But this attack was too new, too fresh. Instead of soothing me, the song brought tears to my eyes. I wrapped my arms around my head as I slouched against the table and tried to take comfort in knowing that the person behind all this was dead.

Toris laid in bed; tucking and untucking himself from his sheets, feeling hot and then cold in a continuous cycle. His gaze flickered from the ceiling to the clock on the wall.

*Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock . . .*

He rubbed his temples; the sound was giving him a migraine. Then an alert vibrated from Eduard's tablet, drawing Toris away from his bed. He was the only one to hear it for Feliks and Eduard were still asleep. He envied their slumber, wishing that he could steal an hour or two from them. Another alert beeped and Toris arched a brow, his curiously taking hold.

He tapped on the device and the screen appeared with bright red notifications popped beside the news applications. He pressed on one and a video took center stage, it was a broadcast of an animal
attack at Svenska. His eyes widened as the announcers spoke of the brutal attack that led to the death of twelve people.

"Tw-tw-twelve," he heaved softly and clutched his gut with one hand as he gripped the device with the other.

He didn't dare look away from the video. After all, he was the one behind it all. The news casters went into a vague detail of the attack for they had no other evidence besides the bodies. The security cameras had been disabled and there were no witnesses. They moved along to the victims, stating that most were young; in their twenties and late teens all with bright, remarkable futures ahead of them. Families were called away from holiday feasts and late-night parties while children were pulled out of bed to find themselves at a police station. Being told that their son or daughter, wife or husband, mother or father were killed by a wild animal. Being advised that if they had a weak stomach to not look at the bodies.

Toris dug his nails into his lower abdomen, the guilt plunging into him like a knife.

This was all his fault.

If only he didn't drink that elixir from Peter's hand.

If only he wasn't so prideful for the others to see him as a cat.

If only he stayed in the house.

If only. . .

*If only.* . .

He shook his head, it was too late for second chances or wishing that he had done something different. The path of destruction was already made; twelve lives were taken, families were scarred and Toris was the one to blame.

The clip cuts to a series of pictures of the victims; one immediately sparked at his memory. The woman at the front desk, the one with kind eyes. Her name was Novalie Blom, she was forty-seven years old, married and was a mother of two boys.

Toris shuts his eyes, praying that her death was quick. He had no memory of his actions but he could piece together the scenario by the claw marks on Denmark and Peter's cries when he had opened the doors of the shelter. But he didn't know the scale of the damage till he overhead Denmark describing the scene outside his door while everyone thought he was asleep.

Bodies reduced to broken, battered dolls with twisted necks, snapped elbows and knees and missing heads. Limbs were ripped from torsos and thrown around the room as blood splattered the walls and soaked the floors.

He had stopped listening after that, his stomach threatening to heave.

A part of him wanted to remember, to bear witness to what he had done. To punish himself with the memory of their deaths, but they wouldn't come. While the beast's cloak took shape onto his skin, he had been blocked from his senses. Trapped inside his own mind as the anger and blood lust took hold.

The final picture displayed and Toris' jaw dropped.
It was the girl that had walked into the cat kennels after he became a puppet to that witch. Her name was Emma Arvidsson, she was the youngest victim of the Svenska Attack. She was a student at a local high school, part of a scholar program to enter university early and had a love for science, biology and animals.

"She wanted to be a veterinarian," her sister had whimpered to the reporter as she held her sobbing mother.

The knife of guilt twisted as his self-loathing wish came true.

He did remember one death and it was Emma's.

He lunged at her, clawing into her shoulders and throat. Her cries muffled as she drowned in her own blood.

Toris rose to his feet; tossing aside the tablet onto the mattress as he brushed both hands through his hair, yanking at the roots. His breath came out in pants, trying to take in air but it was stiff and suffocating. His heart thrummed in his chest, ramming itself against his ribcage.

He needed to leave, he needed to get away.

Without thinking; he laced up his boots, threw on a sweater and sprinted to the front door. He didn't know if he was loud, his ears were buzzing, muffled with the sound of blood rushing through them. The air had grown thicker, leaving him gasping as he grabbed his coat, a pair of keys and thrusts opened the door. The cold air hits him, filling his burning lungs but it wasn't enough. He still needed to leave, to find a place to breathe, to think.

He unlocked the BMW, cranked the engine to life and sped out of the driveway.

"He's gone!"

I winced, shaking myself awake as I rose off the table. Everyone had gathered downstairs, their tired voices carried from the living room. Tino and Feliks were at the front door, too preoccupied to take notice that I was at the kitchen table behind them. I rubbed my eyes, yawned and turned my attention back to Feliks. He carried an unhappy scowl as his gaze flashed to the key rack and then to the window.

"Are you sure he's not on the roof?" Tino suggested, "it's a tradition of ours to climb the roof on Christmas morning and-"

"This is the first Christmas that Lithuania spent with us, I don't think he knows about our honey and feathers tradition," proclaimed Erik.

"Honey and feathers?" Arthur vocalized from the couch, "sounds like something France would do in the bedroom."

"Is that a hint, mon ami?" I could practically hear the sly smile on Francis' face.

Before Arthur could make a snappy comeback, Feliks resumed his rant. "He's not on the roof! He took the car and left! That idiot!" he tapped on his phone, do doubt calling him.

"What's going on?" I asked to no one in particular.
"He left."

I winced at how close the sound was and turned to the stove, where Mikkel was pouring hot water into a cup. "Don't scare me like that," I hissed.

"Well someone woke up on the wrong side of the table," he snickered but his smile didn't last. He sat the cup in front of me, dropped a tea bag into the hot liquid and took his seat across from me.

I narrowed my eyes but I gave up on my glare when I noticed that my ear bud had stopped working. I checked my iPod, it was still playing. Weird.

I curled my fingers around the cup, warming my palms with it. "I didn't mean to sleep here, I thought I was hungry so I came down but," I shrugged my shoulders, "I lost my appetite."

"You need to eat something," he said, his voice laced with concern, "you haven't eaten anything in the last twelve hours."

"Neither have you," I stated.

He grinned sadly, "true."

We were silent for a moment, till I asked curiously, "When did he leave?"

"Early," Mikkel proclaimed, "we all must've been too exhausted to hear him."

I nodded, "I was down here and I didn't even hear him." Then I asked, "Why would he leave?"

His face sobered, "Estonia found his iPad on Lithuania's bed. It was open to a newscast video about the Svenska Attack."

I blinked, realizing the subtext within his words. "He thinks it's his fault... but it wasn't, it isn't! He was being controlled, he was literally a tool used by Abigail. She's the murderer not him."

"You know that, I know that but it doesn't stop him from blaming himself," he sighed, scratching the back his neck. "He may have been controlled but to him he was the one that killed them."

"But he wasn't!" I said through gritted teeth, "he would never have done that if he wasn't turned into a monster."

Mikkel remained calm, "I know, but that doesn't stop him from feeling guilty."

I looked away, tugging my fingers through the tangles of my loose curls. I didn't know what to think. Toris wasn't to blame, why didn't he see that? He was controlled, manipulated into being Abigail's puppet. It wasn't his fault.

I slid my gaze back to Mikkel, "is there way to find him?"

"Estonia's tracking the car as we speak but as Poland said he never turns his phone on." He twirled his finger in a circle against the wood of the table, "but maybe it's best to leave him be. He needs some time to himself."

"But what if he does something? What if he tells someone? Tries to confess?"

"What would he say? 'I was turned into a murderous beast by a three-hundred-year-old witch.' They'll think he's insane." His eyes widened and he slapped a hand over his face as he groaned, "That's what he wants."
"What do you mean?"

"He'll walk into the nearest police station and say whatever he needed to, to be classified as a mental patient. They would then call up his 'father' and he'll be sent back to his country."

I blinked, "Father?"

"We all look very young and sometimes we need someone to pose as our father or mother, usually it's a government official. They're the ones that people contact when we have problems."

"What kind of problems?"

"The kind of problems that get you sent to an asylum." My eyebrows rose and he continued, "We've lived a long time Amy, you really think we haven't had a mental breakdown or two? Sometimes it's caused by high stress of the people, trauma of battle-"

"PTSD," I interrupted.

"Yeah that but it can also be caused by major catastrophes or if a civil war breaks out." He sighed, "Sometimes we need to be contained."

"For how long?"

"Depending; the longest a nation has been imprisoned, and when I say imprisoned I mean total solitude, was about fifty years."

"Fifty years?!"

He waved off my shock, "it happened more often back when I was younger but now-a-days it usually lasts for about six months, a year if needed."

Then I remembered what Alfred had told Grandpa, of being locked away during the Civil War for trying to kill Lincoln. "Or for four years," I mumbled to myself.

"What?" Mikkel didn't catch what I had said.

"Nothing." I crossed my arms, chewing on my inner cheek. "We need to find him-"

He raised his hand, gesturing me to slow down, "Or we should let him go."

"And punish himself for something he had no control over?"

"He needs a break, everyone does now and again."

"But in a mental institution?"

"He won't go to an actually institution. He's not a harm to anyone else so they'll just put him under watch. They'll have some government agents live with him, send a counselor, think of it as a home arrest."

"But," I sighed in frustration, "but it's not his fault."

Mikkel placed a hand on mine, giving it a comforting squeeze, "I know."

We joined everyone in the living room as Eduard typed on his tablet, "the car is on the Island of Lidingö, but it hasn't moved in seven hours. He could be anywhere by now."
"That idiot," Feliks sighed, "but he's out there, if he told anyone about yesterday someone would've called me."

"Should we go and try to find him," Matthew suggested.

Berwald shook his head, "he needs some time to himself."

"Besides a blizzard warning has been put in effect," Eduard proclaimed as he pressed on a video clip of a weather man with a map of Stockholm behind him. He continued, "A huge Baltic storm is heading our way. Transportation is scheduled to close; buses, trains-all are being shut down as we speak. They have advised for people to stay home and off the roads."

"Is he safe on the island?" I asked.

"Yes, it's mostly a suburban area; filled with houses, some stores, good for families," Berwald explained as Eduard switched back to the map of the tracked BMW.

I leaned in to see the name, "Will the storm hit Li-din-go," I tried to pounce the name.

"It's Lidingö," he corrected, it almost sounded like he said Li-din-ya.

I massaged my temples, "Swedish is giving me headache."

"Try learning Finnish," Erik smirked.

"The storm is coming from the north, it's going to hit the entire city of Stockholm. It's even big enough to hit the south of Finland," Eduard answered my question.

"So, we're going to be snowed in," Mikkel slid to my side and nudged his shoulder into mine, "you and me want to be snuggle buddies?"

In a flash, Francis wrapped an arm around Mikkel's shoulders and drew him close. "What did you say Monsieur Denmark, I didn't quite catch that." He was smiling but there was no light in his eyes.

"Yes, would you mind repeating," Arthur cuts in between me and Mikkel, sending a piercing gaze at the Dane. I quickly noticed that Matthew had arched an eyebrow; he was amused by this but he did add a not-so-innocent crack of his knuckles.

I tried not to laugh, "guys, there's no need to scare Mikkel."

"Who said we were scaring him?" Francis blinked in mock surprise.

"Yes, I believe we were just asking him to do a simple task," Arthur remarked.

"Guys, let's focus," I looked to Feliks, "are you sure he's out there? Is he somewhere safe?"

He threw up his hands, "he won't answer my calls or texts and no one else has called in to inform me if he 'checked' himself in."

My mind was made up, "we need to find him. How long do we have before the storm hits?"

"An hour, two if we're lucky," Eduard stated.

"Oh no," Arthur tsked his finger, "it's too dangerous."

"So was last night but I handled it."
"Oh really," he smirked, "because last I checked, I was the one saving you."

"Yeah okay, but-"

He held up a hand, "Lithuania is over seven hundred years old, he can take care of him."

"But-"

"No buts. We're all going to stay here, where it's safe."

"But Toris-"

"Will. Be. Fine." he insisted.

I groaned, "You are so infuriating!"

"And you are being ridiculous," he snapped. "Have you ever been in a blizzard?"

"No," I admitted, "but is it anything like *The Day After Tomorrow*?"

He knitted his brows in puzzlement, "no."

"Then I think we'll be okay," I head for the door but he snatched my wrist, jerking me back.

His eyes blazed, "You are not going out there and that's final."

I wrenched my wrist away, "you can't tell me what to do."

"He may not but I can," Berwald stepped in, "you were put under my care, it is my responsibility to make sure you're safe."

"What about Toris?" I exclaimed, "Who's looking out for him?"

He placed a hand on my shoulder, giving a reassuring squeeze to calm me. "He can take care of himself, trust me."

I exhaled through my nose and bit my lips together, keeping my choice words to myself. He gave a half smile as if knowing that I wanted to say more and appreciated that I wouldn't.

"Come on," he gently guided me to the front door, "you can help me chop wood. Mikkel, Lukas get the axes and meet us outside."

Lucas nodded and head to the second floor as Mikkel squirmed out of Francis' hold, grateful for the excuse to get away from the Frenchman.

I laced up my boots and zipped my coat as Lukas joined us at the bottom of the stairs with an ax in each hand. Then Berwald led us into the forest where a tree had fallen in the middle of a clearing.

"Alright, we don't have a lot of time," Berwald tossed an object towards Mikkel.

The blond caught it with ease and found that they were a pair of keys. "Hey, these are the keys to my bike, how?"

"When you were warm enough, Peter and I drove them back. We couldn't just leave them there for the police to find," Lukas proclaimed.

"Aw, Nor," he was going in for a hug but Lukas held a hand out to stop him, "don't."
I grinned, realizing what they were trying to do, "you're letting us go look for Toris."

Berwald matched my grin, "I told you to trust me. Now go, you got an hour."

"Thank you! Thank you!" I exclaimed cheerfully as I hauled Mikkel back down the trail. "Come on, come on!"

"I'm coming, you don't have to pull."

The sun was completely consumed by thundering gray skies, leaving the world in an ashen hue. Snowflakes scattered and hurled to the earth, falling faster and faster with each passing minute. The winds roared as the waves churned and crashed along the river that flowed between Stockholm and the Island of Lidingö. The city's skyline was nothing more than a blurred outline in a whiteout sketch.

There was no light and the only warmth Toris felt was from each swallow that he took from the vodka bottle in his hand.

He craned his neck up to meet the gaze of a disgruntled angel. The sculpture was carved out of green stone and stood on top of a column. The angel held its face as its feet edged off the pillar. Its wings were folded in and its cold stone eyes almost seemed frightened.

It mimicked a fall.

Other statues were designed the same way, their figures balancing on top of a slim column. There were two angels playing trumpet horns, a woman with her arms extended to the sky and a small man standing on the thumb of a massive hand. Weather and age had taken its toll, giving all the statues a gray after tone.

Toris twirled the bottle in his hand watching as the clear liquid swirled in the glass. He tipped his head back, the alcohol burned as it slithered down his throat. The sensation escalated into a heat that cours ed through his veins and dazed his thoughts.

He didn't want to remember.

He wanted to sleep and what better place to sleep than under a flock of angels.

The wind came and went but it was a gust of power each time, slamming itself against the tree branches. They swayed and bounced as if at any moment they could snap from their trunks. The snow, once a peaceful sprinkle was now a cascading downpour.

"You know if this becomes a regular occurrence, I'm going to ask for a snowmobile next year," Mikkel shouted through his helmet and over the roar of the motor.

"Don't look at me," I exclaimed, "I had to make all my gifts this year."

I could picture the grin that was definitely on his face, "Is it a paper heart filled with your undying love to me?"

I snorted, "You wish."
Mikkel passed a bridge, entering the Island of Li-din-ya, I will admit I added some sarcasm to the word. "How big is this island?"

"Pretty big," he exclaimed, "there are homes, buildings, schools, a golf course."

"A golf course? In Sweden?"

"I know," he paused, "hang on!" Then he switched to second gear and zigzagged through the street, weaving through parked cars. He slowed to a stop and kicked out the stand. We were in an intersection filled with apartment hotels and drug stores. On any other day this place would be filled with people and activity but with the storm rolling in the tourists had enough sense to remain in their rooms.

I popped open my helmet's screen, "Please tell me Eduard told us where the car was parked on the island."

He lifted his screen up and sighed, "We didn't get that far."

"Fuck!" I dismounted and whipped the helmet off, instantly regretting it when I felt the chill. "Where could he be?" I muttered.

"Well, if I was guy that was turned into a monster and killed a bunch of people. Where would I go?"

I gave him a narrowed look, "that's not funny."

"I'm not trying to be," he remarked soberly, "I'm trying to get into his mind set. He's racked with guilt and feels like he should be punished but a part of him wants to be forgiven."

I nodded in understanding, "so he'll be in a church. Is there one nearby?"

"There's one ahead," he snapped the stand back and cranked the engine into roar. "Come on, it's not far."

We arrived at a small white building called Kyrkallén which translated to Church Allen. The structure had red tile rooftops and was built with a mix of brick and ragged, scrapped rocks. In front: there was one brown wooden door, a circle window above and above that, a tiny tower with a cross on the very top. The chapel was in the center of a graveyard and scattered trees with slim pathways crisscrossing through the grounds.

"It's so empty," I said as I hopped off the bike.

"I bet the service was canceled because of the storm," then Mikkel pointed to the car beside us. "But someone's here."

I followed him to the entrance and a red headed, middle aged priest cracked it open; guarding himself against the weather. "I'm sorry, the service has been canceled today. We will make it up tomorrow morning."

His Irish accent threw me off for a second but I dismissed it quickly. "Have you seen our friend? He's white, about this tall," I waved my hand an inch or two above my head. "On the lanky side, with shaggy brown hair and blue-greenish eyes."

He frowned, sympathetic to our ordeal, "I'm sorry, I haven't seen anyone like you have described." He widened the gap, "My name is Father O'Connor, the head priest of this church. Have you called your friend?"
"His phone is still off," Mikkel remarked.

"Are there any other churches on the island?" I added.

"No, Church Allen is the only one," he proclaimed.

"Fuck," I flinched when I realized that I just cursed in front of a priest, "sorry Father."

He nodded accepting my apology, "come in, it's freezing."

The interior of the church was very simple with stone walls and dark brown pews that split in the center for the aisle. A shrine to the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus stood in at the front with small red candles below them. Four windows were on the right wall as wooden stalls were built next to them, for confessions no doubt. Then there was a door on the left, most likely leading to the small structure that was attached to the building's side. He led us to that door where a narrowed hall was waiting for us. Another door stood ahead at the end of the corridor, while two more doors stood on each wall.

He guided us to the first door on our right, revealing a spacious dining area with a quaint kitchen in the corner. "There are cookies," he smiled, "I'll get you both some tea."

I sighed, feeling the weight of failure on my shoulders, "where could he be?" I mumbled to myself as I sat at a table closest to the makeshift kitchen.

Mikkel sat beside me, "maybe we should cut our losses, get back home. Like the others say he's," he spared a swift glance to the priest, who was arranging a plate of cookies. "Resourceful."

I threw up my hands, "I know," I snapped. "I know," my voice fell to a whisper and I crossed my arms, digging my nails into my skin. "But... no one should be alone on Christmas."

His blue eyes soften as he covered his palm over my knuckles. I spared a thin-lipped smile and squeezed his fingers.

"So, this friend of yours," Father O'Connor set a tray in front us, handing us each a cup of tea. "Why do you think he would come to a church?"

"He's... been having problems," I admitted.

He nodded, "I see, I'm sorry I can't be much help."

I chewed on my inner cheek and slipped a hand into my coat pocket, caressing my iPod's screen in thought. It was a habit I developed in middle school; when teachers lectured I would circle the buttons, waiting for the bell to ring, waiting for the moment to press play. My finger found the wireless ear piece and I gasped, "My music!"

Mikkel and the priest jumped, "what about your music?" Mikkel asked, concerned by my outburst.

"Why didn't I see this before? Ugh, I'm so stupid," I groaned. I shook off my annoyance for myself and explained, "This is a wireless headphone, the pair can be Bluetooth to my iPod but the pair can only work when they're in a five-mile radius of each other. When Feliks and the others arrived a few days ago, I connected the iPod to the speaker and the ear bud started working.

"But the headphone hasn't worked since India where I gave Toris the other piece. And last night, it was playing perfectly but when I woke up, my iPod was still playing but my headphone wasn't. Toris left with the other piece."
Mikkel arched a brow, "Are you saying that you could track him with your music?"

"Possibly, if he's within the five miles. Uh, how much is that in kilometers?"

"Eight kilometers," Father O'Connor answered.

I blinked and he beamed, "I'm good with numbers."

I nodded, impressed and pulled the devices from my pocket. I plugged my ear bud in, prayed for this to work and pressed play. 'Stardust' hummed through and I squealed, "I can hear it! It's faint but I can hear it!"

Mikkel grinned, just as excited as me, "I'll start the bike!"

I chugged my tea, the warm liquid instantly heated in the pit of my gut and spread throughout my body. "Thanks Father."

"Anytime," he said uncertainly, "good luck."

I ran outside, yanked on the helmet and hopped on behind Mikkel.

"How will this work?" he asked.

I shut off the repeat icon and shoved the iPod deep inside my pocket. "The sound will get louder as we get closer to the other ear bud."

"So which way?"

I tilted my head to right, then left, but there wasn't much of a difference, "Go straight for now."

He drove the bike forward and when we reached downhill, the tune vibrated. I grinned, but the music instantly faded when Mikkel turned left. "Turn back! Turn back! You have to go right!" I tugged at his arm jacket as he made an illegal U turn.

Toris' eyes fluttered open, the words reaching him through a haze. A soft hum echoed along with the words, creating a rhythm. He massaged his temples; the noise was too loud for his over sensitive ears. He inhaled; the cold air immediately chilled his lungs and his stomach stirred.

He groaned as his head throbbed and his eyes burned with each blink. The noise didn't cease, it only grew louder. Toris didn't pay much mind to it, believing it was all in his head, till his pocket began to whistle.

He fished inside, his hand grasping a tiny ear piece. The one that he had meant to return to Amy but got distracted. The word was laced with a harsh venom that he didn't even know he could possess.

The young girl must be listening to her music. Like always, he thought. Ignoring the stinging pulsation of his brain, he pushed the bud into his ear.

The melody was familiar but he couldn't place it. After a few assumptions and educated guesses, he gave up, allowing the song to mesmerize him.

'Though I dream in vain
'In my heart it will remain
'My stardust melody
'The memory of love's refrain'

The song faded as soft keys of a piano and a steady beat of a drum followed. This one was modern, composed in the last few years but again he could not name the song or the artist. He was sure Amy would know, she knew enough trivia about music to rival Natalia.

'Guess it's true, I'm not good at a one-night stand
'But I still need love 'cause I'm just a man
'These nights never seem to go to plan
'I don't want you to leave, will you hold my hand?
'Oh, won't you stay with me?
'Cause you're all I need
'This ain't love, it's clear to see
'But darling, stay with me'

This song was about loneliness, he knew plenty about this emotion to recognize it in others. Sure, the melody was heartfelt and beautiful but the artist couldn't hide his despair.

In all honesty, Toris thought, who can?

'Why am I so emotional?
'No, it's not a good look, gain some self-control
'And deep down I know this never works
'But you can lay with me so it doesn't hurt
'Oh, won't you stay with me?
'Cause you're all I need
'This ain't love, it's clear to see
'But darling, stay with me'

As the harmony thrummed, the memories he tried so hard to keep buried came flooding back. Abigail's vile smile, her malevolence ritual and the animals howling in fear and rage. His bones breaking and his skin stretching to abnormal lengths. His body being invaded by her murderous demons, bending and twisting him into her pet.

He bared his teeth at her image, of her laughing as he tore Emma apart. The girl's terrified eyes flashed through his mind and instantly, his heart plummeted. His hands trembled, recalling the sensation of warm blood and tender flesh.

He gripped his hands, willing them to stop but they couldn't. They couldn't lie and he couldn't deny
the damage he caused.

His eyes began to water as a hand found his shoulder and he tensed.

"Found you," the voice panted, gripping him tighter.

He turned and found Amy gasping for breath but grinning none the less.

Though her smile didn't last; no doubt watching the tears streak down his cheeks.

Immediately, he wanted to hide, to cover his vulnerability but he had nowhere to go. He was exposed to her and it terrified him.

'Oh, won't you stay with me?'

Amy cupped his face, wiping his cheek as she pulled him close and buried his face into the crook of her neck.

'Cause you're all I need'

He hesitated at first but his need for contact, for human warmth won in the end. He wrapped his arms around her, one hand gripping her shoulder as the other squeezed her waist.

'This ain't love, it's clear to see'

His shoulders shook as quiet sobs filled the space between them.

'But darling, stay with me'

"Why couldn't I stop her?" his voice cracked with each word. "Why? . . . Why? If only I was . . . If only . . ." he paused. "What happened to me? . . . What happened to me?"

'Oh, won't you stay with me?'

Amy said nothing, merely listened as she embraced him and combed her fingers through his hair.

'Cause you're all I need'

"I'm sorry," he cried, "I'm so sorry Emma . . ."

'This ain't love, it's clear to see'

Toris felt her flinch and she held him tighter. Her hand formed a fist into the cloth of his jacket as her jaw clenched.

'But darling, stay with me'

The snow came down even faster as the wind crashed into my body, causing the chill to sink into my bones. I hauled Toris to the car, leaving the bike behind as Mikkel started the engine. I gently pushed Toris into the backseat and climbed into the passenger.

"Can we make it back?" I asked.

"You want me to drive on bridge through a blizzard," he gave me an are-you-crazy look.
"Okay stupid question, but where else are we going to go?"

"The church, it's not far and I'm sure the priest will give us sanctuary."

The distance wasn't long but the storm did make it difficult. The roads were icy and the snowflakes were obstructing Mikkel's line of vision but we made it. We pulled into the church's parking lot and piled out of the car.

Mikkel ran ahead to bang on the door while I held Toris by the wrist.

"I'm not going anywhere," he muttered.

"I'm not taking any chances," I remarked.

Father O'Connor rushed us inside and when he took a chance to see Toris' face, his eyes misted with compassion. "How long have you been out there?"

"Long enough to drink entire bottle of vodka and fall asleep in the snow," I gave a disapproved glare. His hair was damp, face pale and his lips were cracked with tiny tint of blue. He could've freeze to death.

"There's a bath you could use," the priest proclaimed.

"Perfect," I said, "where?"

"Second door on the right."

I dragged Toris forward, my iron grip still intact as we entered the bathroom. I turned to the tub, twisting the faucet on and hot water came bursting through.

"Get undress, I'll see if there are any dry clothes you can wear," I walked out without sparing a single glance in his direction.

I found Mikkel in the dining area, at the same table we were at before. "Where's the Father?"

"He went to look for some clothes for Lithuania," he said.

I nodded as tore off my coat and released another yawn.

He arched a brow, "tired?"

"Yeah, I think my lack of sleep is catching up to me," then unexpectedly, my stomach growled. Mikkel grinned and I flushed, "and my hunger."

"You want some cookies?" he slid the plate forward.

"Yes," I mumbled and took one.

"You also want some milk with your cookies?"

"I'm gonna slap you," I bit into the sweet.

"Here we are," Father O'Connor came trotting in with a crisp, clean shirt and a pair of dark slacks. "I'm sure these would fit your friend."

"Thanks," I grabbed the clothes and headed for the bathroom. Steam was leaking through the bottom
crack of the door. "Toris I'm coming in," I warned but he didn't hear me.

I twisted the knob, pushed forward and was met with a rush of hot, humid air. The tile room was cloaked in thick steam, covering every inch of the room but it didn't hide Toris' figure. His back was to me. His bare back. I had technically, already seen him naked but I was too focused on his face, too focused on checking for any sign of life to see anything else.

But now, all of my attention was drawn to his back.

Angry scars crisscrossed over the skin; starting from his shoulders and ending below the ribcage with a few slashes reaching his waist and hips. Some were fine lines: simple, tiny and delicate in their own way. Others were deep gashes: ripping into the flesh, leaving behind broken skin and fading ridges.

It all happened in a blink of an eye. Me opening the door, the view of his back, his stunned eyes and pale cheeks as he spun around to face me. He stepped back, crossing his arms in hopes of covering himself; hiding the wounds from my gaze but it was too late. The image was forever imprinted in my mind.

I blinked a couple of times, gathering my wits. "I'm sorry," I said awkwardly, "here, some clothes."

I placed them on the counter, spun and practically ran out of the room.

"Ooh, la, la," I jumped and turned on Mikkel, who was smirking like the Cheshire cat. "Did we see some skin down south?"

I gave a warning look, "not now," I hissed.

I maneuvered around him, about to enter the dining room till he said, "You saw his back, didn't you?"

I froze and turned back, "have you?" I asked uncertainly.

"I've heard rumors but I never saw them till last night," he said calmly. "You had the front view while I got the back."

I nervously tangled my fingers into the hem of my over-sized sweater. I wanted to ask how he got those scars, who had given them and why; but I couldn't. It was too personal.

Mikkel sighed, "We're very old Amy. We all have scars, most heal better than others." He came forward, pulling up the sleeve of his turtle neck and displaying his firm forearm.

I raised a brow in confusion and he smiled, sadly, "look closer."

At first glance, Mikkel seemed unmarked but with a close observation I found minor but visible scars. They were scattered over his flesh; horizontal scratches, vertical cuts, and diagonally burns were spread all over his forearm. The marks were slender, subtle and had faded nicely into his skin tone. I reached out, wanting to touch them but hesitated.

"It's okay," he leaned in and whispered in my ear. "You can touch them."

I nodded, accepting his permission and glided the tips of my fingers over his past wounds. They were smooth, not as deep like the ones Toris had. His muscle shivered as I traced each one; following the thin, faded lines over the inside of his arm. Each mark leaving an impression, a story to be told.
"You're only seeing a small part of me," Mikkel's tone was soft and breathy. "I'm nearly covered in scars," I felt his lips smile against the shell of my ear, his voice adopting a flirty undertone. "You wanna see?"

My ears instantly burned, I was pretty sure that they were bright red. "No," I hissed, embarrassed. "I'll take your word for it."

He chuckled, "you're absolutely adorable when you're flustered."

Before I could smack him, Father O'Connor poked his head out, "hey, are either of you hungry-" His brows raised when he found us in the hallway.

I flushed, realizing how close we were. I shot away and speed walked into the dining room, "y-yes, please." I sat at our table, avoiding their eyes as I curled my fingers into my baggy sleeves.

"I'll warm up the ham," I heard Father O'Connor proclaim as Mikkel placed himself next to me.

He whispered, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"Well, you did," I muttered, digging my fingers further into my sleeves.

His gaze fell to my unsteady fingers, "what are you doing?" he asked with genuine curiously.

I finally looked up, meeting with his concern filled eyes. "I'm checking to see if I have any. I mean, I have never been in battle-"

"It doesn't matter if you were there or not," he stated. "Every war and battle your army has and will ever been in, will leave a mark on you. Every natural disaster and national travesty will leave a scar. Every change, every ripple, every rebellion will forever be imprinted on you."

My hand subconsciously touched a cut beside my brow. Mom said I bumped my head when I was crawling, when I was a baby. *The year was 2001*, I connected the dots, *the planes, the towers, and the Invasion of Afghanistan*. Then I remembered a photo of when I was a toddler, there was a welt that had ran from my shoulder to my chest. Plenty of scratches, bruises, scrapes and burns emerged over my limbs, ribs and back but I was an active kid. Climbing trees, jumping off swings, playing soccer, falling off my bike; everyone played off my wounds as being a kid but then I got sick.

I was bedridden but I still ended with unexplained bruises on my body.

My mind raced; tracing back through my childhood and adolescence, recalling every mysterious scratch, cut and scar that had appeared on my body. A gash that had torn along my ribcage when The Quake hit California. A deep cut that ripped under my thigh when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. Mom noting that I had new scratches down my back when seventeen tornados roared through Texas in 2012.

Melissa asked me to be more careful while skateboarding, pointing to the scrapes and bruises that were scattered over my legs . . . after The Boston Bombing. A scar sliced through the inside of my left forearm when Sandy Hook Elementary was attacked. When Michael Brown was shot and Ferguson became a battlefield, I received multiple slits over my right arm and shoulder. When Eric Garner was murdered, I found a bruise around my throat. Mom said, it looked like I was strangled. Then, when Freddie Gray died and Baltimore's peaceful protests became a movement; Jamie had pointed out a scar that loped from behind my ear to the bottom of my jaw.

My hand fell from my face to my neck and I rubbed it self-consciously. I moved my fingers over my shoulders and arms, digging under my clothes to feel for these forgotten scars. When it proved futile;
I shoved myself away from the table and ran into the room across from the dining area. It was a preparation room for brides; it had a vintage styled couch, cream colored walls, an elegant vanity mirror and a full body mirror in the corner.

I discard my clothes till I was only in my underwear. (I haven't worn a bra bunch these days thanks to all the layers and baggy sweaters I wear. And it wasn't like I needed it.) I turned to my reflection, revealing unmarked white skin. I stepped closer, analyzing every inch of my body; the cut near my left eyebrow and the scar across the front of my right shoulder to my collarbone. I craned my neck, narrowing my eyes to find the faint, thin line that started behind the right ear and ran under the jaw.

I looked to my arms; small cuts roamed over my right shoulder to the inside of my upper arm and down to the crook of my elbow. While another scar traveled diagonally to my elbow on the inside of my left forearm. I focused on my legs next, noting each tiny scratch and burn that scattered over my calves and knees.

I spun slowly, finding a wide but light tinted scar on my left ribcage. I held my hair up to examine my backside and stared into the mirror till spots blurred my vision, but my back seemed untouched. *I bet if I asked someone, they would find the scars.* My eyes fell to the back of my left thigh, finding the last scar, cut horizontally over the bent of my knee.

All of these scars had blended into my skin's natural tone. A person would really have to study every part of my body to find each and every one of these marks.

A knock at the door tore me away of my reflection, "Amy?" it was Mikkel. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I exclaimed, "I . . . just had to check something."

I dressed quickly, tugging my sweater over my rear when I opened the door. Mikkel was sitting beside the door frame, waiting for me. A hand was massaging the back of his head and neck and his face was shadowed in worry.

Then, when his eyes met mine, he gave me a knowing glance, "you examined yourself."

I fell against the wall and slid down next to him, "yeah," I whispered.

He was silent for a moment till he asked, "do you remember any stories behind them?"

"Natural disasters, shootings, the war in Iraq," I sighed, "black people being killed by policemen." I shook my head, "the evidence was all there, showing me that I wasn't human but I overlooked it." I curled my legs in, hiding my face in my thighs, "I was either oblivious or in complete denial."

"Well you are Alfred's kid, I would put my money on oblivious," he joked.

I released a small huff of a laugh, "thanks, that makes me feel so much better."

"Glad I could be of service," he smirked.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek when the image of Toris' back came into full view. "But mine were like yours, faded."

"That's a good thing," he said, "shows that you and your people have been healing. Isabella Garcia has been really good for you."

I blinked in confusion and he arched a brow, "you have no idea what she did to your law enforcement do you."
I groaned, annoyed with myself, "No. Tell me, please."

"Well first off, she asked Sweden, Finland and me for assistance to help reform the police departments around the country. Asking our top-ranking officers to go to major cities and reevaluate the American officers with heavily intense therapy and multiple psych exams. Most officers fought back, argued that it was unconstitutional but with the major outcry by citizens; Garcia wasn't going to let this go.

"Failure to show up for therapy and failed psych exams, caused nearly a third of officers to be let go. Past police reports of 'good shootings' were reopened and gone through in great detail, revealing another quarter that would serve time. Background checks ran deeper, digging through family records. Some were even followed and monitored, checking for any sign of hate groups they could have been part of. The remaining force were trained to use plastic bullets, gender and racial stereotyping were tossed out and sensitivity training was taken more seriously. This went on for three years but she couldn't fix a system that been damaged for so many decades.

"The only way it did change was when the younger generation stepped up to the plate. Garcia continued with Obama's promise for free community college classes for two years but if students joined the force and took it seriously. They would get extra credits for university and still make good money along the way. The academies were overrun by young people, but they were ready; prepared to truly honor the saying of protect and serve."

I absorbed his words, recalling Johnny mentioning about his classmates joining the force for college classes. My mind was elsewhere at the time, rehearsing a dance moves in my head. I groaned again, "I'm the worst nation ever. All this was going on and I was in my own little world. It's not like I didn't care, it was just . . . what could I do? I was just a kid," I raked a hand through my hair, pulling at the roots in frustration. "A stupid, stupid kid. I wasn't special, and things did get better.

"They didn't need me . . . I don't even think they need me now. America is fine without me." I blinked back tears. "Now that I think about it, it's a good thing the public doesn't know who or what I am. I can see it now, if they ever found out; news networks would be banging on my door asking for interviews. YouTubers and comedians would make tons of rants and jokes about my appearance. 'This is the representation of America, of course she's white. Of course she's skinny. Of course she's straight.' The only thing I have going for me is that I'm a girl. And with my background, the media and the internet would have fucking field day with me."

I paused, taking a moment to breathe, "god, at the thought of all this. I just want to hide under a rock and never come out."

Mikkel wrapped an arm around my shoulders, drawing me into the crook of his neck as he caressed his fingers up and down my arm. He didn't say anything, merely held me till I calmed down.

"Are you two alright?" Father O'Connor stepped out into the hall, gazing at us with worried eyes.

"Yeah, yeah," I wiped my eyes and pulled away from Mikkel's grasp as I rose to my feet. "We never introduced ourselves did we?" I asked, changing the subject, "I'm Amy, this is Mikkel and the guy in the bathroom is Toris."

As if on cue, Toris walked out of the bathroom, "and speak of the devil," I gestured to him.

He flinched in surprise and his gaze darted from me to the Father. When his eyes fell on the white collar he gulped, "hello Father."

Father O'Connor's smile was filled with understanding and compassion, "come on, let's get you
something to eat."

Toris blinked but nodded, allowing the priest to lead him into the dining room. I watched them go, my eyes never leaving Toris' back, "are all his scars from battle?"

"Some," Mikkel answered, "being in a battle or not, a scar still shows. But don't get me wrong, an inflicted wound will still leave a mark, depending on the emotional trauma the nation had suffered because of it."

"But . . . there were a few that looked fresh. How?"

"Like I said, some heal faster than others." He sighed, "Others don't even heal at all."

I sighed, massaging my eyes with the palms of my hands. Once I thought I understood everything about being a nation; another wave comes crashing in, dragging me even further into its massive depths.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Being in a church alone, listening to depressing music has a way of making you talk to yourself. Haha.

The storm knocked out the Wi-Fi and cellular towers, leaving our cellphones completely useless. The only thing that worked was a small radio that Father O'Connor had stored in the attic. News casters warned the public to find shelter and to stay off the roads. Communications were down, houses and businesses had lost power in some areas, and the storm was only getting worse.

Father O'Connor shuts off the radio and sighed, "we're gonna be here for a while." Then he gazed to the ceiling, smiling to the fluorescent lights. "At least we have power."

I nodded and picked at my food, my appetite had completely vanished. I slid my plate to Mikkel, gesturing for him to have my share. He raised a brow but I smiled, encouraging him to have it and to not ask questions.

He frowned and pushed my plate back, "eat."

"I'm not hungry," I stated.

He stabbed his fork into a piece of ham and swayed it towards my mouth, "here comes the train, choo-choo!"

I snorted, "Don't even-no!"

He moved closer, "come on, say 'ahh.'"

"No, Mikkel," I exclaimed playfully, "stop."

"You must eat," his voice dropped, his accent becoming thick, "so you can become big and strong like me."

I grinned, "you're not that much bigger than me."

"It's because you haven't seen all of me," he smirked.

I rolled my eyes, "Do you have to make everything a sex reference?"

He wiggled his eyebrows, "you know you like it."

I laughed, my smile spreading from ear to ear. Then my eyes clashed with Toris' green-blue orbs and instantly, we turned away, avoiding each other's gazes. "Okay, okay, I'll eat," I snatched the fork from Mikkel's hand and inhaled my piece of ham and stream vegetables.

"That was my fork," Mikkel informed.

"Here," I tossed him mine as he shifted his gaze from me to Toris, "o-kay."
After a minute of awkward silence, Mikkel broke it, "so Father O'Connor, what brought you to Sweden?"

The priest snapped his head up, his eyes rounded slightly almost like he was nervous and hesitant to answer. "Oh uh, the Vatican has this Priest Exchange Program."

"Priest Exchange Program?" I questioned.

"Yes, we get to visit churches all over the world. Spend some years there and spread the word as they say."

Mikkel nodded, "have you ever been to Denmark?"

"Once, I wasn't able to stay long."

"Have you ever been to Lithuania?" I asked without thinking.

I immediately felt Toris' eyes on me but I ignored it; focusing my attention on Father O'Connor. I didn't know where the question came from but I was curious to know more.

The priest nodded, "yes I have, its lovely country."

I should've stopped there, but I was being extremely nosy, "what about the sights? The history?"

"I don't know much about the history but I did visit one sight, the Hill of Crosses."

"What's that?"

"The name truly speaks for itself but, the Hill of Crosses has about 100,000 crosses. The first crosses were placed there by the next-of-kin of the rebels that fell in the 1831 rebellion."

"A rebellion, what about?"

"Independence," Toris proclaimed, his tone remarkably calm. "Around that time Russia had control over the country but the people would not submit. The 1831 rebellion was neither the first nor the last, several revolts took place, many at the capital of Vilnius."

Before I could ask any more questions, Father O'Connor guessed, "Are you Lithuanian?"

"Yes, Father I am," his voice was steady but his eyes darted from one corner of the room to the next. Avoiding eye contact with me. I realized now that Father O'Connor's interruption was a blessing in disguise.

*Great, now I've made him uncomfortable.*

I wolfed down the rest of my food and asked Father O'Connor if I could borrow the radio. Once he gave permission, I grabbed the black device and dashed out of the room. If I had remained in Toris' presence I would have been tempted to ask about the scars on his back. What was the story behind them? Was it a battle? A natural disaster? And if it was a battle, what was it about? Who did he fight? Who gave him those scars? But it was all too personal. Yet the image of his back kept resurfacing; taunting me to ponder the possibilities.

I mentally shook the image and questions away as I stride into the service hall, closing the door behind me. *I can't ask him.* He purposely diverted his gaze from me; he was embarrassed, and maybe a little upset and asking those questions didn't help either. I found an outlet beside the statue of the Virgin Mary and plugged in my iPod onto the dock, hoping that the music would distract me.
Continuing the shuffle was an old Alicia Keys song called 'If I Ain't Got You'. I smiled, it was one of Mel's favorites. She absolutely loved the artist and could play every melody on the piano like her idol. I had the faintest memory of teenaged Melissa singing as the keys vibrated through the floorboards and paper-thin walls. Her palms were enormous; completely covering mine as she guided me through the notes. Her long fingers were smooth and elegant while mine were stubble and short. I couldn't keep up most of the time and I didn't really care; all I wanted to do was listen to her. Melissa had a voice that could rival against Alicia and Adele; Grandpa had even compared her Billie Holiday.

I started to lip sync with the lyrics; believing, just for a second I was back in our old, cramped house. Sitting in Mel's lap as she poured her heart into the keys and song, nodding for me to join her. I never liked to sing, but for her I would. Still didn't change the fact that I sounded like a dying cat compared to her.

The song faded and so did my memory. I sighed, laying myself out on my back as five more artists followed; Taylor Swift, Lorde, Lana Del Rey, MisterWives and Fall Out Boy bounced off the stone walls and I lip synced with each tune. Then when Michael Jackson's ‘Man in the Mirror’ hummed through the tiny speakers I found myself grinning.

I was instantly transported to my eleven-year-old self in my mom's old beat up minivan. Mom was tapping her fingers on the wheel as she drove us home from work and school. Her radio station was blasting the greatest hits of the 80's and when Michael Jackson came on, she always turned up the volume.

"This is classic music-everyone loves my music. My parents, my kids and even your father," she laughed. "Did you know that Michael Jackson was the only artist we had in common when we first met?"

I nodded, knowing the story all too well. Mom was a Jackson Girl, loved every song he produced. She grew up with him, along with Whitney Houston, Phil Collins and Bon Jovi. While Dad was a hardcore rock and roll fan; preferring the bands Guns N Roses and Joan Jett and the Blackhearts.

"I'm starting with the man in the mirror~ I'm asking him to change his ways," she sung.

I joined, "no message could've been any clearer~"

Before long we were harmonizing with the King of Pop. "If you want to make the world a better place~ take a look to yourself and make that CHANGE!"

I laughed out loud as I visualized Mom's dramatic in-car dance moves. She would rock her head side to side as she sang and shimmied to the beat. Now, don't let her silly shakes and overdone singing fool you; she had rhythm. Hey, Johnny had to learn the moon walk from someone before he could pass the move down to me.

Thinking of Johnny, he was always the one to explore all types of genre. Metal, rock, jazz, blues, alternative, indie, rap, R&B, soul, techno, pop and everything in between. He was the one to introduce me to new bands, up and coming artists and underrated musicians like, Caro Emerald and Hugo.

As if reading my mind, Hugo's version of '99 Problems' flooded the speakers. I was ten when Johnny played this song and even after eight years, it was still in my top twenty-five playlist.

"Hey Ames, I got you something," Johnny was in his late teens, going to school in LA as a double major in music and business.
"What is it?" I uncurled myself from my reading position and rose off the couch.

He dangled a flash drive, "New music."

I beamed; music was just as precious to me as rubies and emeralds were to . . . well, everyone else. In two long strides he was in front of our Dad's stereo, plugging the drive into the port.

"I found this guy, Hugo. You're gonna love him," he double tapped the play button. "Hell, I think I'm already half in love with this guy."

The artist's voice was breathy and slightly high but it was made out of pure, smooth velvet. Hugo thrummed through the house, shaking the floor with his deep bass lines and firm drum strokes. A banjo streamed the harmony as a guitar resounded in the background and a tambourine trapped the audience in a hypnotic daze. It was like the artist had placed an enchantment on me. It was all-consuming, completely spellbinding and I was utterly hooked.

I swayed to the tempo, drawing myself in an imaginary circle as I hummed the lyrics. I threw out my arms to my sides and twirled, gliding with a grace I didn't even knew I had. My awkwardly long legs had finally seemed to listen to me, moving with ease and elegance. I followed a two-step dance that Grandpa had showed me when I was younger but I had added my own flare. Crisscrossing my ankles, rocking my hips from side to side and spinning on the balls of my feet into perfect pirouettes. I kicked off my boots and rose to my feet, the wooden floors were cold but I ignored the chill. I closed my eyes and tapped my feet, swaying my arms and hips as I spun in slow circles. The rhythm took hold, hurling me back into the past. Johnny and I rocking out to his flash drive. He going off to purchase a banjo and mastering all the scales and five songs in a matter of weeks. He and I performing the same song in the shop. He worked the instrument as he sung, while I held tempo with the tambourine.

The next song was an old favorite from Lana; 'Driving In Cars With Boys' was the perfect fusion of old school hippie rock and new indie techno. It was also one of the best cruising songs. Jamie and I would have this blasting as Michel drove us in his used Honda civic. As Jamie sung along with the lyrics and Michel drummed the wheel, I stuck my head out the window. The twilight breeze was warm and humid but fresh. The salt of the sea engulfed my nostrils as the setting sun blazed along the horizon, causing the sky to bleed.

As the song fades so does the memory and when I opened my eyes reality slapped me in the face. I was in a church on some island that I couldn't even pronounce the name of in Sweden. A nation of harsh winters and nearly eleven hours of darkness. I groaned and dropped back to the cold floor, rubbing my face with my palms and combing my fingers through my hair. I laid out eagle-spread as I stared at the ceiling. Rihanna's song 'Four Five Seconds' vibrated from the speaker and I hummed along.

I shut my eyes and I was back in Grandma's shop, sitting at the front desk one or two summers ago. I usually had the radio on, preferring to have music when I worked. Grandma always complained that I became distracted when I listened to music; not focusing on my work at all.

"You always go off into your own little world, and lose track of this one," she stated, time and time again.

Grandpa didn't mind so much, "leave the girl be," he grinned at me and whispered softly. "She's a lot like her father."

At the time, I thought he meant his son but now I realized he was talking about Alfred. I recalled the
journal entries of the blond nation singing along to Elvis and dancing to Big Joe Turner. My lips curled into a small smile at the image of Alfred showing a younger version of Grandpa, how to dance. I imagined the nation teaching him the Charleston, the foxtrot, swing and maybe even the jitterbug.

The shuffle proceed with the song 'Heaven Knows' by Five For Fighting and almost laughed. I had introduced Grandpa to the band years ago and they instantly became a favorite of his when he heard this song.

"Play that one again," Grandpa asked as he slowed to a stop at a red light.

I pressed the repeat button, "you like it Gramps? It's by Five For Fighting but that his stage name, his real name is Vladimir-something or other. His last name is hard to remember."

"Did Johnny tell you about him?" he asked.

"No, Michel did. He really likes him," I looked out the passenger side window, towards the sky. "He says that the lyrics are what really got to him, he thinks a lot when he listens to him."

Grandpa nodded, "I see." He was silent till he asked, "What do you think about when you hear this song?"

I shrugged, "I don't know . . . it's sad. I think he's talking to someone he loves and asking to go back to a simpler time, maybe?"

"You're still young Amy-bear, you haven't been touched by the grief of lost." He spared me a sad glance, "and I hope it will be a long time till you do."

I knitted my brows, slightly curious on what he meant, "What are you thinking about when you hear this song?"

He sighed slowly, inhaling deeply through his nose and exhaled through his mouth. "A different time, a time where I was . . . broken."

"Broken?" I blinked, "How?"

"I was angry, confused . . . lost," his voice grew quiet just as it always did when he spoke of something that troubled him. His dark eyes glazed over and someone behind us honked, breaking his trance.

A young driver sped around us but not before cursing, "its fucking green you old man!"

I yelled after his receding figure, "Come back and say that to my face, you asshole!"

"Amy, sit down," Grandpa placed a calming hand on my shoulder and settled me back in my seat.

I crossed my arms and glared at the green SUV, "I could take him."

"You're only twelve," he remarked and pressed on the gas.

I made a face and he continued, "I'm flattered that you would fight for my honor, really but you don't need to start a fight over insults and names."

My neck warmed at my outburst and retreated into myself, tucking my legs under my chin. After what felt like forever, I had to ask, "Who helped you?"
He smiled, "a friend."

The song ends and the memory slips from my fingers. I sat up, massaging my neck and shoulders as I stretched. When my gaze found the statue of the Virgin Mother and Baby Jesus, my iPod played 'Take Me to Church' by Hozier.

I raised a brow to my device, "seriously? Do you have to be that clichéd?"

I was met with the artist's honeyed voice as he sung the first verse.

"My lover's got humor
"She's the giggle at a funeral
"Knows everybody's disapproval
"I should've worshiped her sooner
"If the heavens ever did speak
"She's the last true mouthpiece
"Every Sunday's getting more bleak
"A fresh poison each week
""We were born sick," you heard them say it."

I pulled my knees to my chest and stared at the face of Mary. It was frozen in an expression of love and understanding while the chubby roundness of Jesus was a display of innocence.

"God, I would like to make a direct call to a John Hawkfeather please," I snickered at my own joke. Why am I only funny when no one's around?

I sighed, brushing a hand across my forehead and into my hair, "Gramps are you there?"

I was met with Hozier once again:

"Take me to church
"I'll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies
"I'll tell you my sins and you can sharpen your knife
"Offer me that deathless death
"Good God, let me give you my life."

"Are you mad," my voice cracked, "about Kai?"

He didn't answer neither did Mary or Jesus. I fidgeted with my fingers, "I'm sorry; I'm really, really sorry. I should've done more." I paused, raking my hands over my head and neck, "I miss you . . . Do you miss me?"

Silence.

"I guess not," I tried to laugh but it came out as a huff, my throat constricting. "Still wish you were
here though... I could really use your guidance right about now. I said something I shouldn't have... story of my life, right?"

Silence.

I wiped away the tears, "things are just as confusing as the day you died... nations and spirits and aliens and now, soul-sucking immortal witches. What's next werewolves?" Once again, I failed to laugh, "I better not say that, I might jinx it."

Silence.

"But what I really miss most is home. Where it's warm and sunny and... you're there because our family's there." I swallowed the lump that formed in my throat, "they miss you... we all miss you."

As Hozier fades, 'Heaven Knows' filled the hall. I snapped my head to the direction of the radio, my eyes widening in disbelief. I stepped closer, pressing on the screen of the iPod to show that it back tracked to Grandpa's favorite song.

I released a soft chuckle as I shook my head, "dammit Gramps, you scared the living shit out of me. I mean... it was you right?"

My shoulder squeezed like a hand was gripping it gently. I turned around and no one was there, I was alone. I grinned, sitting beside the radio as the last verse thrummed and I sing along.

"Tell me where the good men go
"Before I wash away
"Walk me down the old brick road
"So I can die where I met you
"Hold me like we're going home
"Turn your tears to rain
"Bury me beautiful
"Heaven knows how I loved you"

Outside the winds howled, cascading waves of snow and ice, burying everything in a thick white haze. Sitting alone on a worn down grave stone, mere feet away from the church was the Salem Witch: Abigail Williams. She wore a tight, emerald green mini dress with thigh length black boots that had crisscrossed laces from ankle to thigh. She was completely covered in a black cloak festooned with glittering silver runes.

She blew hot air into her hands, fire nearly sparking, "did it work?"

A vapor materialized beside her, coiling around her upper arm and shoulder. "Yes," its gravelly hiss whispered in her ear.

Abigail smirked, "she's absolutely adorable," she hackled. "In that gullible, pathetic way."
I lounged in the front pew as the shuffle continued. The genres ranged from jazz to alternative rock, from pop to smooth R&B with added soft-core metal. Artists like Ellie Goulding, Louis Armstrong, Linkin Park, Coldplay and Maroon 5 echoed off the walls. I whispered along with each one, humming the melody as I tapped the sole of my foot to the tempo. A part of me wondered what the guys were up to but I was enjoying my downtime.

Then the spellbinding lyrics of Florence and the Machine's 'Blinding' shook from the speakers. As the drums kicked in, I sat up, swaying to the rhythm. I shimmied out of jeans, allowing easy movement in my soft fuzz infused leggings. I fell to the floor, extending my legs with some stretching exercises. Once my hamstrings and calves were burning, I jumped to my feet and began bending my toes back and forth. The turnout and demi pointe exercises caused my toes to crack and pop, releasing the tension between them.

After the alignments, I leaped into quick glissades, bouncing side to side as my ankles crossed and uncrossed in a hasty two-step count. Standing on the very tips of my toes, I attempted to execute my bourrée but I had been out of practice for nearly six months. I stumbled for the first half of the song but I pushed not accepting the poor performance. I could just imagine my ballet mistress: Madam Nicole Adler glaring at me in the corner.

I shivered; she still haunted my ballet dreams but with the recent nightmares I've been having, I would take Madam Adler any day.

Recalling my harsh but fair ballet mistress, brought forth memories of my classes and dance mates. All of us starting at the tender age of five but I had missed the cynical years and when I had returned at ten; most believed it was too late. Being incredibly stubborn, I refused to listen to them and continued my dancing. Putting in extra hours at the rec-center; after school, on weekends and holidays, rain or shine I was there. I even started to skip school to practice but it wasn't long till my parents were called in about my 'playing hooky'.

I was failing the fifth grade; I mean what do you expect from a girl that became a ridicule on the first day? I didn't want to be there, the kids didn't want me there and the teachers saw me as nothing more than a troublemaker, so I left. Mom was not happy; she lectured me on the importance of school and I agreed, begging for my tutors back and to be home schooled again. Grandpa preferred them and backed me up on the notation but it was Dad who said I could do both. Continue with public school but have Neill, Christopher and Laura as my after-school tutors. It was the best choice out of the situation and I took it, but I threw a huge tantrum when they said I couldn't go back to any of my dance classes (which included ballet, ballroom and hip hop) till I got my grades up.

Thank god I had Laura; she found a loophole in my punishment and said I could practice my foreign languages as I danced, being that most of the ballet terms were in French. It was our secret of course.

I stood tall on a relevé, bending my knees up and crisscrossing my legs as I brought them down. All of my moves were in perfect harmony with Florence as I turned into a bourrée, pas de which was like a slower version of the bourrée. Instead of hasty tip toe taps repeatedly done one after the other, a relevé stood between the steps of sweeping my right leg behind me and bending into a small plié. Then I soared into a petit allegro, jumping into the air with ease and grace as my legs bends and stretched with each leap. I hopped from side to side, bouncing on the balls of my feet and flew when my heels overlapped in midair. The frustration vanished, replaced with confidence and pure joy. The music washed over every sensation, allowing me to lose myself in its blissful resonance.

Mikkel was dreadfully, exceedingly bored.
Trapped in a room with an Irish priest and an anxious Lithuanian, sounded like the beginning of a bad joke, he remarked mentally to himself. They had passed the time with poker, he suggested to use the chocolate chip cookies as currency, to make the game somewhat more exciting. But that didn't stop his foot from constantly tapping the floor. The priest was a complete blank, revealing nothing as he glanced to his cards, then to Toris, then to Mikkel and finally back to his cards.

Toris on the other hand was physically here but mentally clocked out. He never cared to play but they needed at least three players and when Mikkel had suggested that he would retrieve Amy, the brunet swiftly reconsidered. For some strange reason, one Mikkel couldn't comprehend, was that Toris was keeping his distance from the young girl.

For what? He wondered, her questions towards the nation's rebellion may have been personal but the blonde was simply curious. He was even a little jealous of the Lithuanian, if Amy ever bothered to ask about his history he would more than happy to tell her. Of course, he would omit some details, ones he wasn't proud of and even it's considered lying to some he would argue that it wasn't, not entirely.

Mikkel spared another glance to Toris, noticing that his eyes were glazed over and he was down to one cookie, again. He gave a pointed look to Father O'Connor and he nodded, both folded their hands, calling it quits for this round.

The brunet didn't response and Mikkel rolled his eyes and snapped his fingers in front of his face. "Toris," he exclaimed.

He blinked, breaking from his trance, "yes."

"You won," he gestured to the pile of cookies.

"Oh," he raised a brow to his cards, not a very good hand but he didn't question it. This wasn't the first time Mikkel and Father had to forfeit a hand to keep him in the game.

Mikkel continued to grow restless; he needed to move, to do something other than stare at his cards and his opponents' expressions. He rose to his feet and rummaged through the kitchen, begging to the Lord Himself to bless him with beer.

Instead he found the communion wine.

He grinned, better than nothing. "Thank God," he kissed the bottle and turned to his make-shift poker group. "Father, do you mind?"

"No, no. Dear God please pour me a drink," he proclaimed as he rose to his feet to grab three unflattering mugs.

Mikkel beamed, serving the priest a half-filled mug and offered Toris, "want some?"

The brunet nodded, "Thank you Mr. Denson."

He smirked, stepping away from the priest to lean in with a low tone, "You and I look like were the same age, call me Mikkel."

Lithuania gave a half smile but it didn't last, "the last time I called you by a name, you went by Matthias and before then, Magnus."

Mikkel's eyes widened in surprise, taking a moment to recall of a time when he was referred to by those names. Most nations, like Lithuania grew attached to their first names, keeping them through
the centuries no matter how much they argued with their government officials. Believing it would be smart to change their names from time to time. Names were special to them, something private and filled with affection. Others, like Mikkel didn't mind changing their name. Mostly experimenting on how the name felt but for Mikkel it was more of a cleansing. Through the course of his life he had been Magnus, Matthias, Abel and Anderson; he always stripped himself of an old name, believing he was stripping away apart of himself that he didn't care for or didn't wish to remember.

Matthias was a part of himself he could understand, granted he was still egotistic and war driven but not as bad as Magnus. Now Magnus was someone he wished to keep buried.

He squared his jaw and continued in a hiss, "Well now it's Mikkel. Please refer to me as that."

Toris huffed, "You still believe changing your name changes what you've done?" His eyes became saucers as he slowly covered his mouth with his hand.

He was just as surprised by his outburst as Mikkel was. "Damn Lithuania, who knew you had such a back bone." He tried to give a lighthearted laugh but it came out forced as he slapped Toris' back. It was meant to be a soft tap but it made a louder smack than he intended.

The brunet gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes. Mikkel met his glare with one of his own before he snatched his mug and stated, "I'm gonna go see how Amy's doing."

He walked out the door before anyone could make a comment. Once he entered the narrowed hall, he immediately sighed in relief. The rush of fresh air cooled his head and eased the tension in his shoulders. A faint echo of singing and rhythm tugged at his attention, drawing him closer to the door of the service hall. Where he stumbled upon Amy standing on the very ends of her toes as she glided across the floor. The steps were hasty but yet graceful as she swayed from one corner to the next. It was a move he had seen ballet performers use countless of times. Lukas had once told him the terms but he never really bothered to listen, preferring to watch the dancers.

He knew Amy was a fantastic dancer, he had seen the home videos, the Nutcracker performance and the very blonde in action but it was a different scenario when the dancer believes she was alone. She was free from prying eyes, free to express herself without judgment and safe to make a few mistakes. She flowed with her music; some pop song Mikkel couldn't place but he knew the artist's voice, he was the lead singer of the band Maroon 5.

Adam Levine's appealing vocals thrummed and Mikkel bobbed his head to the beat, relishing the catchy lyrics and quick tempo. He watched through the crack of the door as Amy twirled into fast pace spins, holding one leg up to keep her balance. She continued by shuffling her feet, quickly adapting a mixture of ballet and hip hop. Then as the song slowed so did she, turning on the balls of her feet and rocking her hips to the smooth, disappearing rhythm.

The next song began with a polished guitar stream and slowly escalated with a steady drum beat as the chorus sung:

"Take me down"

"To the paradise city"

"Where the grass is green"

"And the girls are pretty"

"Take me home."
The song sparked to life as the bass line fell and the electric guitar strummed. The drums followed, increasing the speed. Mikkel noticed the coy smile on Amy's lips as she thrashed her head to the beat, whipping her hair back and forth. He snickered; she reminded him of a heavy metal fan.

Then as the first verse followed, Amy began to sing along, well if he had to be honest it was more like shouting. She completely lost herself to the hard rock, shaking every inch of her body as her voice rose higher and higher. Mikkel pulled out his phone and pressed record, trying in vain to contain his laughter.

"What are you doing?"

Mikkel turned to face Toris and Father O'Connor, most likely drawn out by the music. Mikkel's former annoyance for the brunet was gone as he gestured to the door. "Amy's singing and dancing to Guns N' Roses."

Father O'Connor nodded in approval, "they're a good band."

"I don't think she would appreciate you recording her," Toris remarked.

"Don't be such a killjoy." He rolled his eyes.

He turned back to the door as Amy proceed by jumping on the front pew and jamming out on air guitar. While she was distracted, Mikkel tugged them inside; remaining by the door as the blonde shook to the rhythm. He carried on with his recording, wearing his signature goofy grin as Father O'Connor tapped his foot and Toris looked everywhere but Amy. Possibly experiencing second hand embarrassment for the girl, Mikkel wondered.

The song was near its end as the chorus was repeated through the last three minutes. Amy didn't grow tired of it, instead she sang with even more enthusiasm and energy. And as the final minute came, the blonde exclaimed:

"Take me down

"To the paradise city

"Where the grass is green

"And the girls are pretty

"Oh won't you please-

Mikkel quickly joined in, how could he not? This verse was in a continuous loop inside his head. "Take me home."

Amy instantly froze and slowly, turned to face them, her eyes wide. "How long have you three been there?"

"Long enough," he smirked.

Amy's embarrassment quickly vanished, replaced with anger, "you didn't."

"Oh, I did," he grinned.

"Give it to me!" she shouted.

"Nope," he dodged, circling her.
"Mikkel!" she lunged for him but he fell back, dangling the device above her head.

"Maybe for a kiss?" he suggested.

"Yeah, a kiss with a fist!" she swung a punch and Mikkel ducked but wasn't prepared for Amy to tackle him to the floor.

They wrestled for the phone as Amy hissed, "you creepy, stalker weirdo!"

"Aw, you're already giving me pet names," he laughed.

His laughter didn't last for the American hooked him in a choke hold.

"Should we do something?" Mikkel heard Father O'Connor ask Toris.

The said brunet shrugged, "I say let her kill him," he muttered.

Once I erased the video, I released Mikkel with a triumphant warrior cry, "are you not entertained?!"

I received an applause from Toris and Father O'Connor and I took a bow.

"You two make an adorable couple," the priest smiled.

"We're not a couple," I remarked.

"Yet," Mikkel added.

I smacked him over his head and he hissed, "Ow."

"Now that ya'll are done spying on me, you can go," I gave Mikkel a narrowed look.

"And leave you with your dance party," Mikkel propped himself on his elbow and grinned smugly. "I think not."

I groaned and he whined, "Don't leave me with them. I'm dying of boredom."

"That's not very nice," Father O'Connor stated.

"But it's the truth," he jumped to his feet, "come on Amy, let us join. We have wine."

I raised a brow, not interested and he added, "and cookies."

I nodded, "you're in."

He grinned, "Let's get this party started," he sang the last word.

I slid my gaze to the priest and Toris; both were sitting on the front pew but as Father O'Connor seemed relaxed Toris looked uneasy. This is train wreck waiting to happen.

I didn't drink so much, feeling guilty with having a priest in the same room and all but Mikkel didn't seem to mind neither did Father O'Connor. Both took turns serving each other mug filled glasses. Once the wine bottle was empty, Father O'Connor left for another.

"You two sure are friendly," I remarked.

"He and I have a deep spiritual connection," he beamed, "for alcohol."
I rolled my eyes, "he is Irish," I joked, nudging Toris with my shoulder hoping to loosen him up. All I got was an awkward lip curl and a timid nod. I huffed; scratching the back of my neck, *yup, some party.*

Then Mikkel turned up the volume and started to dance along to a song by Fall Out Boy. He quickly moved to stand in front of us, rocking his entire body to the beat.

I giggled, "woo-go Mikkel! Shake what you're Mama gave ya!"

He snatched my hand and pulled me to my feet, "dance with me."

I didn't fight him as he whirled me closer to the radio. We swayed together, singing the lyrics as we clapped our hands, shuffled our feet and shimmied our hips. We then I had the bright idea of twirling each other in circles. Both of us laughing like fools when it came for my turn to twirl him.

In the corner of my eye I caught sight of Toris, simply observing us from his seat. Without thinking I sprinted towards him and yanked him to his feet. "Don't just sit there," I said cheerfully, "come dance with us."

He stuttered, "No, no, I-I'm okay-"

"Come on," I tugged at his sleeve, "I know you can dance, Raivis told me about the ballet classes."

"You're a ballet dancer?" Mikkel asked, mostly out of curiosity than shock.

But Toris must've found the comment offensive and looked away; embarrassed.

I elbowed him in the gut, "that sounded a little rude."

"No, it's just," he paused for a moment and leered at Toris, not really hiding the fact that he was staring at his crotch.

Toris crossed his arms and glared, "What are you staring at!"

"I'm just wondering, aren't male ballet dancers supposed to pack a lot of... *meat* around this area." He gestured to his thighs and hips, "hmm, I really should've checked you out when I had the chance."

My jaw dropped as Toris flushed to his roots, "do you not have a filter?" I chided.

"What? It's not like you weren't thinking the same thing and you had two chances."

"You are something else," I remarked.

"Oh, come on, it must've crossed your mind at least once or twice," he countered as he circled the brunet. "I mean, he does have a nice ass."

I smacked him with a thick book, "Ow!" he rubbed the back of his head. "Did you just hit me with the Bible?"

"Yes, and I'll hit you again if you keep harassing him," I exclaimed. "Hopefully the holy spirit will save your soul."

He smirked mischievously, "it's already too late for that."

I snorted, "of course."
"Sounds like you need some heavenly salvation," Father O'Connor chuckled as he entered with the second bottle.

"More like an exorcism," I muttered and I caught Toris smiling at my comment.

Then as Fall Out Boy faded, a high beat, instrumental song took its place. Everyone fell silent, allowing the music to settle in.

Mikkel was the first to question, "Is this the Charleston?"

"Yeah," I stated causally as Father O'Connor raised a brow in puzzlement, "you listen to Guns N' Roses and big band music from the twenties? You have quite a range."

I shrugged my shoulders, "My music teacher always said, 'you need to appreciate the old to experience the new.'" I smiled at the thought of Mister James, "and that always stuck with me."

The priest nodded, "your teacher sounds like a wise man."

"Do you even know how to dance the Charleston?" Mikkel added.

"No, but," I turned my attention onto Toris, "I'm pretty sure he does."

He stepped back, "no, not really."

I grabbed his hand and tugged him back to the altar, "you were in the States during the twenties; you must know the dance." I whispered.

"It's been a long time, Amy," he said in a low tone.

"Not that long," I recalled, "besides, you either teach me the dance or I'll tell Mikkel about the tutus." His eyes widened and I continued, "And that there are pictures."

"How did you know about the pictures?" he asked, horrified.

I smirked, "Raivis' can't lie and also, you just confirmed it."

Toris blinked, processing my words, "you tricked me," he furrowed his brow.

I grinned, "Yeah, I did. Now teach me," I bounced on the balls of my feet, pulling him to stand in the middle of me and Father O'Connor.

He sighed, brushing a hand through his locks, "Alright well, um, the basic move is to go back two steps and then go forward two steps." He stuttered at first but as he continued to break down the steps, his voice grew in confidence. "You have to swing your leg out as you move back and forth."

He demonstrated the sequence by swinging his right leg back and tapping the floor briefly as his other foot follows after. "Make sure to remain on the balls of your feet as you move," he proceed to tap forward, adding a higher kick to his swing by slightly, shifting his knee inward. "Moving the knee inside adds a more dramatic feel to the move," he carried a thoughtful smile. "That's how I was taught anyway."

"Like this?" I asked as I crisscrossed my limbs to the beat.

He nodded, "yes, but swing your leg more."

"Oh, bloody hell," Father O'Connor cursed, struggling with the move.
Toris and I each gave him a wide-eyed expression and he apologized, "I have two left feet."

The brunet stepped closer to his side, instructing him even further while I practiced. After I strutted back and forth a couple of times, I began to sway my hands from side to side following the sequence of my legs. I was so distracted by the dance that I didn't notice Mikkel till I bumped right into him.

"You already know the dance don't you," he smiled slyly.

I batted my eyes innocently, "whatever do you mean?"

He shook his head and glanced to Toris as he continued to show each step to our willing Father. "If it was meant to get him involved, it worked," he proclaimed.

I grinned like the Cheshire cat and held his arms up, drawing him into the dance. We gripped each other's shoulder and held our spare hands together as our feet shuffled back and forth. Once we were in sync we let go of one another and fell back to our sides, kicking up our legs with a bit more flair and speed.

Father O'Connor stopped to watch us, "wow you two are amazing."

Toris raised a brow skeptically, "yes, very."

The song was coming to an end and I hastily ran back to my iPod to repeat the song. "Come on Toris, dance with us," I gestured for him to stand beside me.

He tried to decline but Father O'Connor pushed him forward. Mikkel and I trapped him between us and began the Charleston. Anytime he tried to sneak away either me or Mikkel would snatch his arm and jerk him back into place. He gave up after his third attempt; shaking his head as he took a moment to analyze our steps. Before long he jumped right in, kicking his feet and crossing his knees along with ours.

Abigail observed from above, sitting on a joist in the middle of the aisle. A smug grin emerged on her lips as her former pet was whirled around the room by the energetic blonds. The priest, which she despised the most out of the quartet, had joined in the dancing once the music had become more current. They laughed, clapped and swayed with the music, like a bunch of incompetent simpletons. She raised a brow to the two, seemingly young men; it was still, incredibly difficult to believe that they were once kingdoms and commonwealths.

"Wait," she turned to her vapor, "is the blond still a kingdom?"

"Yes," it answered.

Abigail glanced to the said blond, who was performing the can-can with the ginger haired priest, "really?"

It nodded, "he was also a Viking."

She snorted, "Terrifying," she jeered sarcastically.

The storm raged on, completely covering any view of the outside world. The music blared; muffling the howling winds and the splattering ice upon the windows but more importantly, it aided in her disguise. She was not only cloaked in an invisibility spell, she was also engulfed in darkness. Her
entire presence was unknown to her victims as she lounged above like a sly, mischievous cat.

"I wonder, what do nations fear the most?" she grinned from ear to ear as scratched her vapor under its chin. "Let's find out, shall we?"

Hours passed blissfully with dancing, eating and drinking . . . well till my iPod died.

"No," I moaned, "it died . . . my baby died," I mourned as I caressed the device. "Does anyone have a charger?"

They others shook their heads and I sighed, "And it had to die on Caro Emerald . . . I love Caro Emerald."

Toris patted my back, "it's okay Amy, besides it's late we should probably get some sleep."

I arched a brow, "what time is it?"

Father O'Connor checked his watch, "it's about to be ten. Wow, your music player has a long battery life."

"It did have a long battery life," I muttered.

"Where are we supposed to sleep?" Mikkel asked, changing the subject.

"Oh, there are two air mattresses in the closet," Father stated.

He grinned and hooked an arm around my shoulders, "me and Amy will take one."

I snapped his arm back, "You're sleeping on the floor."

We inflated the mattresses in the dining room, using blankets and pillows from a trunk in the bride's room. We stacked the chairs and slid the tables aside, giving us plenty of space. Being that I was the only girl, I got the twin bed all to myself while the boys shared the queen.

"Amy, you sure you don't want any company?" Mikkel asked, hopefully.

"Nope. Goodnight," I snuggled into the thick, soft sheets, sighing in content.

Toris stirred from sleep, rolling off the mattress onto the carpeted floor. His head throbbed and his muscles twitched with an ache that he couldn't quite place.

Was it from the dancing?

He raked a hand over his face and through his hair, realizing at that moment that his fingers were shaking. He knitted his brows in question till his foot snapped. He cried out and turned back to find the limb stretching, becoming paw-like.

"No," he whispered.

"Oh yes," an all too familiar voice giggled.
His eyes widened, "Abigail."

"In the flesh," she smirked, "what? You really believe I was dead? Come on now, you don't live to be my age without learning a few tricks."

Before he could warn the others, his hands, feet and legs shuddered; muscles were torn and bones grew, quickly becoming too big for his skin. He howled in pain as his skin was stretched tight over his newly structured body. With a struggled twitch, he looked to his allies; they were all in a deep, undisturbed slumber.

"They're not going to hear you. Not until your transformation is complete," the dark-haired witch stated nonchalantly. Then her voice grew with honeyed delight, "and of course that is when you will rip them to ribbons. Won't that be fun?"

He watched in horror as fur reclaimed his arms, "No," he choked, "no."

"You actually believed that they're little circle worked? That their power of love cured you?" She laughed and snatched his chin in an iron grip, "oh my poor, naïve little Lithuania. I am a master of blood magick. I am forever imprinted on your bones. You belong to me."

He shoved her away; finding new strength as he rose to his feet, slammed open the door and sprinted into the main hall. His small burst of energy didn't last, for he tripped over his animalistic paws in front of the altar of Mary and Jesus. He looked to the statue with a pleading gaze; his lips parted but no words came.

"Are you a religious man?"

He spun and found Abigail lounging on the front pew, "Either way, I'm afraid Jesus can't save you now."

He felt the fur spread as his nail became long and jagged.

"You know what, I should let one of them see you, but the question is, who?" she twirled a finger through her hair. "I despise the priest. It's nothing personal, it's just I can't stand a man of the cloth. They always believe that their so righteous, it's annoying really."

Toris tried to crawl, to somehow get away but his body was in too much pain to move.

"I mean it would be fitting. You being religious and then killing a man of the Lord right here in front of Mary and Baby Jesus," she hackled. "It would be poetic, beautiful actually."

He hissed at her and she smiled, "or maybe the blond, what was his name? Mikkel? Oh yes, he would be fun. He's just so happy, he needs to be taken down a peg or two if you ask me."

He glared and she sighed, "But you don't seem to like him very much. Not that I don't blame you. He attacked Poland's port right after you aided him in the Northern Seven Years War. He may have said it was because of Poland raiding ships, but if you ask me; I think he just wanted to show off how strong his navy was. I mean, isn't that what you thought?"

Toris sneered, "That was a long time ago."

"Yet, it still bothers you," she stated. "And even with that navy defeat, you still became his ally for the Second Northern War and then in the Great Northern War-"

She sighed and commented, "Clearly, you all didn't have that much originality." She continued,
"You were his ally and then his enemy and then his ally once again. I believe my girl Taylor can sum it up like this," she snapped her fingers.

Amy's music player sparked to life as a pop song resounded through the speakers:

"I remember when we broke up the first time

"Saying, "This is it, I've had enough," 'cause like

"We hadn't seen each other in a month

"When you said you needed space. (What?)

"Then you come around again and say

"'Baby, I miss you and I swear I'm gonna change, trust me."

"Remember how that lasted for a day?"

"I say, "I hate you," we break up, you call me, "I love you."

"Toris blinked, his eyes narrowing at Abigail as she laughed, "Don't give me that look. This is practically playing in the background of that entire ordeal."

He tried to rise but his spine snapped, sending him crashing to the floor.

She snapped her fingers again and silence filled the room, "So killing him wouldn't be as fun, I think you would even enjoy it and I prefer you to suffer." She traced a finger along his jaw, "that only leaves Amy."

"No!" his voice cracked and she smirked devilishly.

"Oh, did I hit a nerve?" she giggled and then asked. "Why are you so infatuated with her? Is that promise really that important? I mean, Alfred doesn't even know you made it."

His eyes widened and she grinned, "I've been inside your head Toris. I've seen every memory; seen your ups and downs. I know every little secret."

He glared with pure hatred and she countered, "What I don't understand is, why would you make a promise to the man that stole the love of your life? Was he really a better choice for her? He was so young-younger than both of you, but he certainly grew into himself. That golden blond hair, sky blue eyes, big strong arms and broad shoulders; it's hard to believe he was such a scrawny little boy."

Toris furrowed his brow and she continued with a chuckle, "Oh, you didn't know? He was there when I set Salem ablaze. Didn't you always wonder why he was so terrified of the occult?" Her brilliantly evil smile answered her own question.

He bared his teeth, now pointed and sharp.

"You care for him... well cared," she corrected.

He lunged for her but his gut twisted, dragging him back. He hissed at the pain and frustration as she turned her back to him, laughing at his misfortune.

"Could it be you think of Amy as their love child?" she chuckled. "Is that cute or sad?" she mockingly took a moment to think and answered, "sad."
He wheezed through his teeth, making a growl with the back of his throat.

"Or could it be," she giggled, "that you have passed the affection you had for her on to Amy?" Her giggle became a gut aching hackle, "that's even sadder."

Toris tried to shout, to scream a string of curses her way but his human vocals were gone replaced with a roar.

Abigail didn't even flinch, "let's put it to the test, shall we?" She waves a hand and a small voice echoed from the hall.

"Toris?" Amy called out and he flinched.

Adrenaline coursed through his veins, aiding him as he crawled to the confession boxes. He curled into the corner, using the shadow to hide himself.

Abigail towered over him, "look at you... so pathetic. What are you so afraid of?" The door opened and she smirked, "I guess we'll see."

She disappeared; leaving Toris alone with Amy. He faced the crook of the confession box and wall, trying to make himself as small as possible.

"Toris? Are you in here?" Amy stepped in, her curls were disheveled and her voice was groggy from sleep.

His failed attempts to warn her were caught in his throat. He could no longer speak, just hiss and groan... like a beast. He bit his bottom lip till it bled, the pain allowed him to keep his consciousness aware and the beast contained. She eventually stumbled upon his figure in the corner.

"Toris? Is that you?" She bent down, curiously, "Toris?"

Go away... go away!

He was slipping, he could feel it.

"Toris?" she reached out, finding his shoulder.

Go away!

He lashed out; trying to push her back, trying to keep her safe but he forgot about his claws. His hand had found the nook of her shoulder. His thumb digging into her neck as he shoved her. Blood warmed the tips of his fingers as it gushed from Amy's anterior vein. He froze, watching with horrified eyes as she collapsed to the floor and her blood soaked the wood frames.

No!

Before he could reach her, Abigail appeared and knocked him to the wall holding him there with an invisible force. Toris struggled against this force, but it kept him perfectly pinned like a dead butterfly in a display case.

"Good boy," the Salem Witch grinned, hungrily, "you brought me a snack."

Don't touch her!

"What will you do? Cry? Besides," she kneeled down and lifted the half dead girl towards her lips. "I never had a nation before."
She opened Amy's mouth and leaned forward. Their lips were only centimeters from colliding as a ray of golden light was pulled from Amy's body.

Toris thrashed from side to side, using every ounce of his strength to break free of Abigail's spell. He kicked, clawed and heaved but nothing could be done; he was powerless.

Abigail ate greedily, draining Amy of her life's essence as her colors faded. Her body taking on the shade of burnt brown as it dried and harden into place.

Her limbs were the first to break and crumble into pieces.

Stop . . .

Then her hips. . .

Stop.

Then her waist . . .

Stop!

Then her chest . . .

Finally, when Abigail had finished and Amy's head crashed to floor in a heap of dirt; Toris released a heart-wrenching roar.

Toris jolted out of bed with a gasp. His entire body shaking as he shifted his gaze around the room, in search of his own personal boogie man. He felt his arms and torso, discovering with a sigh of relief that he was hairless and clawed free. He turned to his sleeping companions, both undisturbed from their sleep.

Finally, he glanced to Amy who was only a lump under three thick blankets. He crept slowly, peering down at her sleeping form. Her hair was brushed off her face and her mouth was slightly opened, breathing softly. He took another, deeper sigh. It was only a dream, he consoled, a horrible, terrible dream.

The smell of brimstone overwhelmed Mikkel's nostrils, jerking him awake in the middle of battle. Men carried long swords, pointed spears, crafted axes and wooden shields as they lunged and attacked one another. Women and children were running in scattered directions, trying to escape from their invaders. Fire consumed homes, spreading from one to the next as clouds of smoke and ash engulfed the sky.

He blinked, realizing that this was a raid. But was he being invaded or the invader? He tried to think, to remember but time was not on his side. A man came charging at him, wielding his ax over his head and screaming like a banshee. Mikkel being quick to act, grabbed a fallen shield and blocked the blow. Using the shield, he smacked him across the face. His opponent fell to the ground with a thud and he bashed the end of his shield into the man's wrist. Disarming him with a crushing
blow, allowing him to take his ax; Mikkel's preferred fighting tool.

Then, with a wicked grin Mikkel raised the blade of the ax to his opponent's throat and sliced his Adam's apple. Blood splattered, staining his pants as the rest soaked the earth. Not yet satisfied, he moved on to his next opponent, instantly falling back into his old rhythm of fighting. Cutting down each man that dared to cross his path.

To his disappointment, the battle ended swiftly leaving him and his men the victors. He soon realized that his earlier question had been answered: he was the invader and it was time to take in the spoils. Jewels, gold, land, abled men and women were his for the taking.

At the thought of a woman, he subconsciously scanned the burning village, in search for a nightly companion. He grinned when he spotted a young blonde ducking behind a wooden cart. They make eye contact and she instantaneously bolted from the scene, heading towards woods.

He enjoyed a good chase.

He dropped his weapons and sprinted after her, quickly gaining on her tail. She made the mistake of looking back, allowing fear to take hold and causing her to panic. She tried to swerve, to confuse him but it only led him in for the kill.

He tackled her to the ground, grasping her arms as she kicked and screamed. Her strikes had no effect and admittedly he thought it alluring. His need grew and he flipped her over, tearing away her skirts as he unsheathed himself.

She cried, begging him to stop but he proceed, holding her wrists behind her back with one hand as the other gripped her hips. He wasted no time, positioning himself along her entrance and thrusting inside.

She released another dreadful cry but he paid no mind; experiencing his own pleasure instead. With each thrust he slammed deeper, harder as his body quivered at her tightness.

"May, may, it really is that easy."

He snapped his head up to meet the red eyes of a dark-haired beauty, "the old you fits like glove, Mr. Denmark."

Mikkel blinked several times as if he was waking from daze. He looked down, finding himself inside a sobbing, half-naked girl. His eyes widened in revulsion as he immediately let her go, shoving himself away from her.

"It didn't happen like this!" he exclaimed, "This didn't happen!"

The red-eyed witch gripped his face and forced him to look at her, "is that what you really going to tell yourself? This is who you are Mr. Denmark, a rapist, a murder and a traitor."

He attempted to punch her but she snatched his wrist, squeezing tightly.

"Family, friends and allies alike, you betrayed them all for your own selfish gain," she grinned from ear to ear. "And eventually, you're betray her."

She jerked his face back to broken girl; her hair was shorter than before, curled in loose waves and her eyes were no longer dull brown but brilliant blue.

"No," he whispered.
Amy hid her face in her hands, wiping away at tears that continued to fall, "why . . . Mikkel?" She gasped, finding it hard to breathe through her constricted throat and heated tears, "why?"

Mikkel gritted his teeth and glared at Abigail, "this isn't real! This is a damn nightmare you made up to screw with me!"

"Nightmare?" she questioned, "Or desire?"

Mikkel sat up; panting for air as his fists clutched; his nails digging into his skin. Warm blood broke through, staining his tips, assuring him that he was awake. That this was real. He forced his eyes to adjust to the darkness, immediately searching for Amy. She was still tucked away in her blankets, breathing steadily.

He released a shaky breath he didn't realize he was holding and raked a hand through his hair. He glanced to his bed mates . . . or should he say bed mate. Father O'Connor was laying on his side, snoring with an open mouth. Toris on the other hand was missing.

Mikkel arched a brow as he rose to his feet, yawning and rubbing his eyes as he stepped into the hall. Flickering light fluttered from the edge of the door of main service hall, drawing his attention. He found the brunet sitting in the front with his hands locked in prayer. Candles were lit in front of the Virgin Mary, causing the lights and shadows to dance upon her caring appearance.

He moved forward, taking his seat beside Toris. The brunet didn't acknowledge him, remaining silent as he leaned against his hands.

Hating the silence, Mikkel spoke, "so . . . what brings you here?"

Toris slid an annoyed glance his way, "prayer."

"You still pray?" the blond asked.

"Don't you?"

Mikkel sighed, "Not really."

Toris rose off his hands, hesitant to ask his question at first, "Why is that?"

The blond shrugged, "there's not much of a point. He doesn't listen, and even He does, He doesn't care."

The Lithuanian nodded reluctantly, "it is hard to believe in Him or anything, given the life we live."

Mikkel flinched; flashes of his nightmare flickered behind his lids. Men fighting, women and children screaming as fire consumed everything. But the image of Amy with her clothes ripped off and tears streaming down her face left a stronger imprint.

Abigail's menacing laughter echoed, "This is who you are Mr. Denmark, a rapist, a murder and a traitor."

He cringed at her words, "I'm not like that," he pleaded softly to himself.

Toris blinked, rising a brow in question, "You're not like what?"
Mikkel didn't realize that he said that out loud, "I'm not like I was . . . back then."

"Back when? When you were a Viking? An egotistic war driven maniac?" Toris asked bluntly.

"Damn Lithuania." Mikkel sighed bitterly, "You certainly know how to kick a guy when he's down."

Toris' brow twitched slightly as he raked a hand over his mouth and slid it behind his neck. "I'm sorry, I . . . I don't know why I'm saying all these things."

"Hey, it's not like your wrong." Mikkel paused for a moment, thinking. "But I have changed . . . didn't I?"

Toris nodded, "at least you changed for the better. I seemed to have only grown weaker."

"Weaker? No, I remember the wars we fought, you're still just as strong as you were back then." He smiled sadly, "I remember, when my navy attacked the Baltic Sea Ports. You held quite a grudge but it was never really about you but more about Poland. You protected him and the Baltics with such urgency. You become guard dog when it comes down to them. . . I always admired that about you."

"Admired," Toris snorted, "you admired me?"

Mikkel grinned, "Still do."

He shook his head slowly, "How? Just yesterday I-"

"Lithuania it wasn't your fault."

"I could have stopped it-"

"No, you couldn't-"

"Yes, I could," Toris realized he was shouting and forced himself to breath. "I would . . ." He rose to his feet and walked to stand before Mary. "I should have tried harder . . . I should have fought harder. What happen to me? I used to be a knight, a warrior-"

"You still are," Mikkel stood beside him. "More than you know."

The brunet wrinkled his brow in question and the blond grinned, "Raivis told us, what you did back when you all lived in Russia's house." Toris' eyes widened and Mikkel continued, "You took on Russia's abuse so they wouldn't have to. Anytime they messed up, you always diverted Russia's attention onto yourself."

Toris looked to the floor and Mikkel gripped his shoulder with a reassuring squeeze, "I know that you fought Abigail the entire way."

The Lithuanian shook his head once more, "and how would you know that?"

The Dane gave a crooked grin, "Because, that's the Lithuania I know."
away. I stretched; rising my arms above my head as my toes bent forward. I realized at that moment I wasn’t wearing any shoes.

I looked down and found myself in a pair of shorts and a loose tank top. The lack of clothing allowed the sun to kiss my shoulders and collar bone, heating my chest as well as my heart. The grass was soft and vibrantly green while the sky was blue and covered in big, white fluffy clouds.

I will admit, snow was fun but they could never beat a warm summer day.

A wave of hot breath blew along my forehead as the scent of musk and leather engulfed my senses. I snapped my eyes open to find a solid black snout breathing above me.

I gasped, "Midnight!" I sat a hand on his cheek, trying my best to rise without scaring him.

Once I was on my feet, I slid my hand over his head and through his long mane. "Oh, my big boy," I cooed and leaned my face against his. "I missed you so much." I kissed his forehead. "I'm so sorry I didn't say goodbye. So much was happening so fast, I didn't get a chance. I'm sorry."

He nudged me with his nose, reassuring me with a caress. I smiled and moved even closer, ducking under his head to wrap my arms around his long neck and giant chest. "I love you too."

A minute passed before he began to nudge his snout into my shoulder, our signal for ride. I grinned and heaved myself onto his back, gripping his mane between my fingers. With one quick kick Midnight broke into a run. He trotted in short strides, his mighty hooves stomping through the field. I could feel every movement, every muscle as they interlocked with his joints.

Percherons weren't bred for speed but for power. But that never stopped Midnight. My big boy was a competitive fella, always showing off to Daisy as he ran and tried to get Jack to race him.

He pushed himself to go faster, cutting through the field with crashing steps and short jumps. I tightened my legs around his body, bending my head low to aid him in his speed. Then, at the corner of my eye I spotted a forest filled with bright green grass and towering trees. I urged Midnight toward the woods, taking the worn-out path.

The dirt paved trail sparked a tingle of familiarity within me. I knew the trees, the brushes, and the shrieks of the birds above. I knew every patch of grass, every bundle of wild flowers and the clicking of the insects below. I grinned excitedly and pressed my heels into Midnight's stomach, pushing him to go faster.

When we finally cleared the path, I spotted a house . . .

My house . . .

Home.

I urged Midnight forward, slowing him to a stop when I got to the back door. I swung open the door, calling out for Mom and Dad.

I found Mom sitting in the living room with an old book in her lap. I surprised her with a crushing hug, burying my face in her chest. "Mom! I missed you," I gripped the back of her shirt as I blinked back tears, "I missed you so much."

"Oh Amy," she slid a hand through my hair, "How touching . . . even through the last we met, you tied me to a rock and pushed me into a frozen lake."
I tensed; jerking away from her touch, "w-what?"

Mom's lips curved into a harsh smile, "you don't recognize me?" Then slowly, her features shifted, becoming more delicate as her tan skin faded into a milky ivory. Her lips became fuller and wrinkles stretched, leaving smooth, unmarked skin behind. Her hair remained dark but it grew rapidly, curling around her hips in glamorous beach waves.

Her dark eyes flickered to red, "how about now?"

"Abigail!" I jumped back, scanning the room as I did. "Where are they?!

"Where is who?"

"Cut the bullshit! You know who I mean!"

She smirked and pointed to their room. I gave a final glare her way before I ran inside. Mom and Dad were in bed, tangled in their sheets as if they had struggled to get loose.


I grabbed her shoulder, flinching when I found her cold and stiff. "Mom . . ." I whispered in a trembling tone as I brushed her hair off her fear-stricken face. "No . . ." My jaw clutched as my throat squeezed, "Mom . . . Mommy, please . . . please . . ."

I dived for Dad, pulling him forward, "Dad. Dad, wake up . . . Dad?" He laid limp beside Mom, his once beautiful dark eyes were now glazed over in a ghostly haze.

Tears blurred my vision and my voice dropped, becoming small and scared. "Daddy . . . no, no," I whimpered.

"Are you done yet?" Abigail leaned against the door frame, her voice dripping with cruelty.

"Why? Why them? They did nothing to you?!” I cried.

"Yes," she remarked, "but they mean everything to you."

Rage boiled under my skin as I grabbed the lamp from the nightstand and hurled it at her face. She dodged gracefully, ducking back into the living room. I chased after her, screaming, "I'll kill you! I'll fucking kill you!"

"Is that all you can say?"

I spun a roundhouse kick and she jumped, gliding back with grace. Then with a wave of a hand, she sent me flying into the rail of the stair case. The wood clattered around me, scraping my arms and
legs as I tried to rise to my feet. I was still in a daze when Abigail grabbed my jaw and slammed me against the wall.

"Is that all?" she jeered, "is that all the fight you can give?"

I threw another kick but I never made contact for a vapor had wrapped itself around my ankle. It yanked my leg back, breaking my ankle along the way. I ground my teeth, refusing her the pleasure of watching me in pain.

"Oh, look at you," she cooed coldly, "trying to be tough."

I bared my teeth and she laughed. The scene morphed behind her, shifting and swirling as the house faded and left us in the center of downtown Summerland.

My jaw dropped and Abigail grinned, "Do you like it? I did some renovations."

The coffee shop known as The Dragonfly . . .

Carlo and Gemma’s restaurant down the street . . .

Grandma's shop just along the broad walk . . .

Were on fire.

Everything was on fire.

"No!" I choked out, pushing Abigail away as I fell back on my twisted ankle. Ignoring the burning sting of my broken bone, I crawled to my feet, placing all of my weight on my good foot. I swung my head left and right, watching in shock as every shop, restaurant, and office building was set ablaze. Bodies littered the street; most severely burned while others were completely untouched by the flames. But their eyes revealed their death. Their ghostly gazes always seemed to find me, as if blaming me for their demise.

My knees buckled, sending me to the ground as every ounce of strength left my body. My fingers dug into the concrete, leaving behind blood and broken nails. My shoulders shook as tears streaked down my cheeks and an earth-shattering wail escaped my lips.

While I was having a mental breakdown, Abigail found it as the perfect moment to summon a stylish lounging chair. She placed it in front the broad walk, making sure to have the perfect view of the ocean while everything else burned.

"Amy," a voice called out to me, shaking my shoulder, "Amy, wake up!"

I bolted; hugging my knees as I gasped for air. Even though my skin was cold and clammy, sweat ran down my spine like bullets.

Mikkel rubbed my back, soothing me with comforting words as Toris observed with a worried expression.

Once my breathing settled, I pulled away from Mikkel's grasp. "I'm okay," I reassured, "I'm okay, it was just a dream. It's nothing."

Mikkel narrowed his gaze, not really believing me while Toris knew that these dreams didn't mean
nothing. He placed his hand on mine, "you," he paused, taking a moment to build his courage. "You know, you could always talk to me about them."

I yanked my hand away, "I'm fine."

"It . . . seemed to make you feel better-"

"I said I'm fine," I hissed.

Toris blinked; shifting his eyes to the floor before turning back to me with a new-found confidence. "You had always told Berlioz, what makes this any different?"

My ears burned, "it-it makes a total difference," I exclaimed in a harsh whisper. "If I had known it was you, I wouldn't have said anything." I snatched my blankets and quickly covering myself in my own personal cocoon. Checking myself out of this conversation, "do you realize how embarrassing that is?" I muttered, not really caring if they heard me or not.

"Which part?" he remarked casually, "when you would kiss me on the mouth or call me your baby?"

I hid myself even further once Mikkel had started giggling, "oh right, she kept calling you her little Berlioz and spoke to you like you were a small child. It was adorable."

"Shut up," I muttered.

"Oh, that reminds me, Toris you have been holding out on me," Mikkel proclaimed.

"What do you mean?" the brunet questioned.

"Oh, you know," I could practically hear the smirk on his lips, "you got to spend all that time with Amy. Hell, she even took a shower in front of you and she even said you saw her naked. Come on Liet, don't leave a nation hanging; what did you see?"

Instantly, a mental image of Toris blushing appeared in my mind's eye, "I-I didn't . . . I-"

I gripped him by the collar, "answer that question and I'll beat you to a bloody pulp."

"Would you really do that to your precious baby," Mikkel cooed beside me and I flushed.

I tsked and released Toris, retreating back into my fort of blankets. "Oh my god! Just go away, both of you."

They were silent but they didn't move, leaving me sandwiched between them. I mumbled a string of curses as I curled into ball, counting to ten before I made the decision to throw both their asses into the snow.

Then, in one swift move, Mikkel pulled my blankets off allowing both him and Toris to join me under the covers.

"What the hell! Stop!" I tried to kick them out but Mikkel held me in an iron grip, spooning me from behind. "Mikkel, let me go," I hissed through gritted teeth.

"Not until you talk about your feelings," he said cheerfully.

"I rather gorge out my own eyeballs," I emphasized.

"No, you don't," he countered, "They're a pain to grow back, take it from me."
I tried to turn around to give him a glare but that only encouraged him to hold me tighter. "I hate you both," I declared.

Mikkel moved in close, burying his face into the back of my neck, "no you don't." I could feel his lips as they curved into a playful smirk.

I ignored the shiver that tickled at my skin and decided to set my glare on Toris. "What do you think this will accomplish?"

He avoided eye contact as if he had second thoughts on what he was doing. I continued to glare, narrowing my eyes till I visualized burning a hole in between his eyes. After a solid minute of silence, he finally returned his focus on to me, "Must you look at me like that?"

"Yes, yes I must. For I am squeezed in a twin size bed with two grown men who act like a bunch of girls," I sneered.

"You think you can shame me with sexist insults," Mikkel chuckled, "they hold no power over me."

"I'll call on Father," I remarked.

Mikkel tsked, "The man could sleep through anything."

I took a moment to hear Father O'Connor's snores and I sighed. I shook out my hair, allowing the strands to hide my face; hoping, if I play dead they would go away. Neither of them said anything till Toris combed his fingers through my curls, brushing them aside.

"Was it a memory?" he asked, his questions leaning towards my dreams, "was something attacking you?"

"It wasn't like that," I hissed, pulling away from his touch, "just . . . leave me alone."

"I am certain, if the roles were reversed, you wouldn't listen to me," he proclaimed.

"I would-"

"No, you wouldn't. I believe you proved my point this morning."

I closed my eyes, forcing my frustrated tears to disappear, "that was different. This is some stupid dream, it's not that big of a deal."

"I believe it is," he whispered, cupping my cheek with a gentle hand.

My jaw clutched as a lump formed in the back of my throat. I tried to face the pillow, feeling the threat of my tears spilling. His spare hand blocked the move, pulling me back to face him.

"Look at me," I shook my head to his request, "please," he added.

Reluctantly, I looked up, hating how tears blurred my vision and were no doubt, falling onto my pillow with each blink. Toris' eyes softened as his thumbs caressed my cheeks, wiping away the salty fluids. This one act caused my breath to hitch and my tears to flow even faster. I gulped, trying to swallow the lump but it only led to me hiccupping a sob.

Toris leaned forward; our foreheads touching as he soothed me with comforting words in his native tongue. The form and pronunciation of his words were strange but yet peaceful and appeasing to the ear.
I looked to him with hooded eyes, relaxing into his touch and voice. He grew closer, kissing my forehead, eyes, nose and hesitantly my mouth. The sensation of his lips on mine caused my toes to curl and the hair on the back of my neck to stand.

I jerked back, "s-stop, M-Mikkel is right here."

At the sound of his name, Mikkel grinned, "I don't mind watching, or could it be?" His hands slid to the hem of my sweater, his fingers tucking under the folds, "you would like me to join?"

I flushed, "n-n-no. N-not here, not now, not ever-"

Mikkel gripped my chin and pulled me into an open kiss, instantly sending a wave of pleasure down my spine. His tongue roamed the caverns of my mouth, flicking the tip along my lips as he drew back. "Are you sure about that?" he beamed.

Before I could answer, Toris began to leave a trail of kisses along my neck and jawline. I shuddered, dipping my head back to allow him more access as he made his way back to my lips. He was gentler than Mikkel but just as sensual, with slow tantalizing licks and soft lip brushes I was left wanting more. I wrapped my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss as I raked my hands through his hair.

I gave tiny tugs at his locks, causing him to groan and me to grin.

Mikkel's hands continued to explore, digging under my layers to reach skin. Once his hand made contact, I shivered; enjoying his heat as it traveled up my torso and cupped a breast.

"No bra?" he questioned as his lips broke into, yet another sexy grin. "Such a naughty girl you are Amy."

"I-it's not like tha-ah," I wasn't able to get the words out before he squeezed; flicking the nipple between his fingers with ease.

"You make the cutest sounds," he nipped my ear, "I want to hear more." He made quick work of my sweater and undershirts, yanking them off one by one. "Why do you wear so much clothes?" he asked, slightly annoyed.

"I-I don't like the cold," I confessed.

"We'll take care of that," Toris whispered, taking his chance to steal another heart throbbing kiss.

Then he drew back, fixing himself in the crook of my neck as he pecked and nibbled along my shoulders and collar bone. He continued to my left breast, giving soft nips as his tongue twirled around the nipple. Mikkel gave my breast another squeeze as his spare hand found and lingered on the inside of my thigh.

I released a quiet moan and tilted my head up to kiss Mikkel but a surging wave of pain caused me to scream instead. Mikkel slapped a hand over my mouth, stopping my cry from ever escaping from my throat.

My gaze darted to Toris; his lips were strained red as he chewed something soft and pink. I shift my eyes to my stomach, finding to my horror a gaping sore that had the markings of a bite. I cried out through Mikkel's hand, kicking for dear life but the blond hastily hooked his leg around mine. Stopping my panicked blows but not my muffled screaming.

"Dammit Lithuania," he sneered as his skin, hair and eyes lost their color, replaced with a gray hue. "You couldn't wait?!"
"I couldn't help it," he licked his lips; his coloring also fading into a washed out ashy tint. "She just tastes so good," he dipped his tongue inside the wound, moaning at the taste.

Mikkel rolled his eyes, "I was hoping to play with her a little longer." He glanced down, smiling a cruel, sadistic grin, "well, it can't be helped now." He stretched my head back, exposing my throat as he drove, ripping into the tender flesh with his teeth.

An ear-piercing scream erupted from the hall, jerking Toris away from Mikkel's grasp. "That's Amy!" he exclaimed, running into the dining hall with Mikkel on his heels.

They found the girl on her bed with her blankets scattered around her and her hair whipped in a series of disheveled curls. She trembled like a small bird as she panted and hugged herself in an iron grip. Father O'Connor was slowly moving towards her, speaking to her in calming words but once she spotted the nations those words meant nothing.

Her eyes widened, filled with fear and survival as she crawled backwards. "No," she whimpered, shaking her head.

"Amy, it's alright," Toris assured, taking a step forward, "it was just a-

"No!" she shrieked, throwing a nearby chair at his head.

Toris ducked as Mikkel dodged, moving closer, "Amy calm down-

"Get away from me!" she sprinted to the kitchen, pulling out a large kitchen knife from a drawer. She waved it around, slashing through the air when either of them made a step in her direction. "Stay back! Stay back!"

"Amy-

"Get back! I said get back!"

Even though she was the one swinging the knife, she was falling back. Seeping into a corner as she shrieked for him and Mikkel to leave her be. Toris took a deep breath and approached her calmly, "It's okay; it's just us." He slowly reached for her and she jumped, slicing the blade across his palm. "Don't touch me!" she exclaimed, her words cutting more deeply than her knife.

Father O'Connor patted Toris on his shoulder, reassuring him to stand aside. "Amy, you're among friends," she shifted her eyes skeptically around the room, mostly glaring at the nations. "We're not going to hurt you," he said soothingly, "You're safe here, I promise."

She looked to the nations and back the priest as her hand tightened around the handle, trying to ease her trembling fingers.

"Give me the knife," Father O'Connor held out his open palm, "you don't need it."

With one last scared glance towards Toris and Mikkel, she handed the knife over. The priest smiled and placed it back inside its drawer. Then he wrapped his arms around the young girl, hugging her close as her knees buckled and she wept into his shoulder.

Abigail howled in laughter, her breath not coming to her easily. "How marvelous, simply
marvelous!" She wiped a tear of joy from the corner of her eye and continued to watch through the eyes of her vapor. "Do you see their faces? How she screamed at them?"

She hackled, "Toris looked like she had slapped him and Mikkel was pale as a ghost! And Amy, dear sweet Amy had such a craze look in her eyes!"

She sighed, resting her gut and lungs as she fell back on the joist, "All that fear and hatred. . . I believe it as strewed for long enough."

"Time for dinner," she grinned vindictively.
Abigail continued to observe, suppressing her giggles as Amy's cries softened.

Once the young blonde had stopped shaking, she whispered in the priest's ear and he gave a quick nod. Together they gathered her bedding, maneuvered around the male nations and headed straight for the bride's room.

Where she had locked herself inside.

Abigail grinned and glided to the door, dancing on the balls of her feet. Her smile only widened when Father O'Connor scratched the back of his neck and nervously advised.

"Best to leave her be."

Mikkel glanced to the floor, raking hand through his hair, "yeah."

Toris was silent, simply gazing into his slit palm.

Abigail laughed.

With Amy safely secured in the bride's room, or so they thought. The twin bed was now free for Father O'Connor to use. Neither Mikkel nor Toris cared that they had to remain in the same bed for both where lost in their own thoughts.

She took her chance to evaporate into air and slithered after Amy. Once inside, the dark swirling vortex morphed into flesh and bone. She stepped closer, her eyes gleaming red as the young nation curled herself into a ball on the couch. She clutched her blankets, bending her head low to hide herself. Her body trembled as her eyes darted around the room, ready and alert but exhaustion had won out in the end.

"Aw," Abigail cooed, "she looks like a frightened child, so adorable."

The roar of drums and trumpets thrummed from the streets, causing the ground to vibrate. Lights hanged from balconies, illumining the roads as jazz bands played and people danced in the streets.

Mikkel watched from one of these balconies, slipping his beer with a carefree grin. He didn't seem to notice Louis Armstrong singing below or the fact that men were dressed in slick suits and wore fedora hats while women kept their hair short in chopped waves. The one thing he did notice was a confused brunet, struggling to get through the crowds.

"Hey, Toris!" he shouted over the music.

Toris snapped his head up, his face becoming even more baffled than before. Mikkel didn't pay any mind, gesturing for the brunet to come and join him. Toris sprinted inside the bar, taking the stairs two at the time to reach him on the second balcony.

"Isn't this amazing," Mikkel greeted.
Toris raised a brow, "I don't believe those are the exact words I would use."

A woman's voice below rose as a trumpet harmonized with her with every verse.

"Stars shining bright above you

"Night breezes seem to whisper "I love you"

"Birds singing in the sycamore trees

"Dream a little dream of me."

"By the way, do you know where we are?" Mikkel asked.

"New Orleans," Toris answered, "you've been here before."

"Yes, but it seems different somehow."

"It could also be that we're in the nineteen-twenties," Toris stated.

"How would you know?"

"Maybe because I was there—or here or—" the brunet massaged his temple. "We must be in a dream, but how we self-aware? And why are we having the same dream?"

"You know, after the night we had, this seems pretty nice. I say don't question it," Mikkel finished his drink and gestured to the waitress for another.

"I think we should question this, just a little bit," Toris countered.

"Liet," he wrapped an arm around the brunet's shoulders, "don't cast a kitten, we got jazz, drinks—" as he said this the waitress brought forth his drink. "Thanks sweetheart," he winked and the beautiful woman gave a charming smile in return.

Mikkel turned them both around, allowing them the opportunity to watch her tight apple shaped bottom strut away. "And we are surrounded by beautiful women." He spun back to face the crowd, "how about you find yourself a pretty lady or fella and have a nice wet dream."

Before Toris could object, a large figure collided into them from behind. Wrapping both of his arms around their shoulders as he asked, "ya'll having a good time?"

Both Mikkel and Toris froze, instantly recognizing the voice. They turned and found the former nation of America grinning at them with his dazzling trademark smile.

Toris was the first to speak, "Al-Alfred . . ."

"In the flesh," he snorted, "well, sorta. Listen, we don't have a lot of time here, so I'm just gonna to cut to the chase. Abigail's alive. Amy's in danger. I need you both to wake up."

Swiftly, he lifted them by the collars of their shirts and threw them off the balcony; his words resounding as they fell. "Wake up! Wake up! WAKE UP!"

Mikkel jolted; his heart pounding as the rushing of his blood muffled his ears but he could still hear the faint echo of Alfred's words. His eyes slid to the brunet beside him, who had also been jerked awake from his sleep.
Toris met his gaze, "did you-" he didn't finish his question for a bigger concern rocked him to the core.

Mikkel followed his train of thought instantly, "Amy!"

Have you ever felt like you were ever being watched?

Cause that's how I felt at that moment, curled on the couch in the bride's room. My gut twisting and my head throbbing as if they were alerting me, shouting at me to wake up. A part of me wanted to ignore the instinct, just bury myself even further in my blankets and pretend everything was okay. An older, wiser self, jumped started my brain and forced me to open my eyes.

I was greeted with a leering gaze, "wakey, wakey, time for a snack."

*Is too late to pretend to be asleep and think everything's okay?*

I wish I could say that I immediately punched that bitch in the goddamned face but truthfully, I froze. A scream cut off as she curled her hand around my throat. I tried to move my arms and legs, but they were bound by an invisible force.

Abigail, taking notice of my struggle, giggled, "I do love it when they squirm."

She lowers her head, shoving her thumb into my mouth and wrenching my jaw wide open. I retaliated by biting her and she responded in kind, fistling a hand in my hair and yanking my head back.

"Now, now," I hissed, "be a good little girl and hold still."

The door slammed opened and Mikkel lunged for the witch, tackling her to the floor. He threw a punch, the blow making a direct hit to her cheek. The force of flesh hitting flesh bounced off the walls and it wasn't long till another blow followed. His knee pressed into her thigh and his fist found her gut; the cracking of bone caused me to wince. Abigail didn't seem to feel it as she backhanded him and kicked him off to collide into the full-length mirror behind them.

The glass shattered as he fell to the ground and she rose to her feet. I was free from Abigail's hold, allowing me the chance to grab her arm and twist it behind her. Then I wrapped both of my legs around her waist and dropped her back to the floor. My free arm bound her neck and held her tightly in a choke hold.

"Now, now," I hissed, "be a good little girl and hold still."

She answered with a heating arm, burning my hand. I cursed; crawling back as she spun with a face twisted in a snarl and fire engulfing her arms.

"Get down!" Toris shouted, wielding a fire extinguisher.

I ducked and a blast of gas soared above me, completely covering Abigail in white foam. She stepped back and Mikkel met her with a jagged shard to her rib cage.

He smirked, "Not so tough without your flames, huh?"

The Salem Witch snorted, "You really think fire is my only weapon?"
A gust of powerful wind smashed Mikkel to the wall and then casted him around the room to crash into me. We instantly collided into Toris, our bodies slamming against the wall.

I shoved Mikkel away and rolled off Toris; all of us groaning our own choice of curses.

"Shit," Mikkel hissed.

"She just air-bended," I said, "she just fucking air-bended."

Toris grunted something in his native tongue before he commented, "that's not good."

Abigail clicked her heels; making a point to wrench the shard out of her side and wipe away the access foam and blood. "This. Is. Chanel." she gestured to her dress before sending another wave of air our way.

It pounded into us and then settled as we dropped back to the floor. Abigail laughed, casting another gust to crash into us once again. These swirls of wind were so violent that it tore through clothes and ripped skin. If any of us had screamed, I didn't hear it over the roar of the whirling vortex.

She repeated this cycle for five . . . seven times, I really don't remember. Everything started to blur around the third collision.

We dropped with a loud thump and I released a wounded moan. My body was covered in cuts and bruises. My limbs felt like jelly and my head was throbbing; maybe that was due to the fact that my eardrums had popped. Blood trailed down my neck and oozed from every cut. Every time I inhaled, my ribs cracked and my lungs burned. I pushed myself onto my side, my muscles screaming in protest.

It even hurt to blink as I glanced to Mikkel and Toris; both were just as battered as I was.

Oh. Fuck.

Abigail sneered above me, grinning with a superior smirk, "is that all?" She whipped my cheek with a brutal kick and smacked my face to the floor. She pressed down, crushing my head with the sole of her boot.

"Powerful nations, my ass," she jeered and pinned the heel into my forehead. She dug it in, drawing blood. I hissed out a groan and she hackled, "does it hurt? Try having a dozen arrows lunged into your skull, bitch."

She pushed harder and I clutched my jaw, preparing for the blow.

"Oh, giving up so soon," she remarked, "heh. Too bad England isn't here to save your sorry ass-"

She was cut off with a grunt as a chain whip curled at her wrist and hurled her against the opposite wall.

"Then it's a good thing I'm here."

I followed the chain to find Father O'Connor at the end, wrapping it around his fists as he pulled.

Abigail released an irritated shriek, her wrist smoking at the touch. "This iron-" She snapped her gaze to the priest's, her eyes blazing scarlet, "You're a Seeker?!"

He met her gaze with equal intensity as his simple brown eyes began to glow a vibrant shade of dark green. "I am Braden Campbell, a Seeker of the Grand Council and I have come for your head,
Abigail Williams."

She laughed harshly, "Oh, if I only had a dime for every time I heard that line." She tore the chain away, her wrist still marked with a scorching burn.

Braden whirled the chain back and sent it hurling towards her. She blocked it with a gust of wind but he wasn't fazed. He split the whip in two and flung the second to strike her face. She screeched and he curled the first chain around her leg and thrashed her to the floor. Quickly, he hooked the second chain around her neck and craned her head back.

Her skin sizzled as the whip charred with a pulsating green heat. Abigail screamed, clawing at the chain as Braden jerked her back even further.

He spared me a glance, "are you all alright?"

"Besides the muffled hearing and the pounding of my skull, I'm great," I remarked sarcastically.

Before he could say anything else, Abigail howled; it was piecing, earth-shaking and not at all human.

We turned to face her and my jaw immediately hit the floor.

She reared her head towards the ceiling as her chin and nose morphed together in a long narrowed snout. Yellowed brown fur sprouted at rapid speed; causing her black hair to fade and the pelt to expand. It covered her face, collar bone, arms and legs. Her hands enlarged, the once clean French manicure grew into long pointed claws. Her pearly white teeth extended, sharpening into fangs and her boots were left in tatters as her feet stretched into paws.

With one swipe, she broke the chain from her leg and snapped the other from her neck.

I gawked, not being able to tear my gaze away from her. Luckily, the guys recovered quickly and made a mad dash for the door. Mikkel grabbed my hand and pulled me forward as Toris and Braden rounded the rear.

Abigail gave chase, giving a bloodthirsty roar as we entered the service hall. Her claws mere inches away from gripping Braden from behind as he dove for the doors. He slid inside and we slammed them into her snout. She growled and banged at the wood, pounding her entire body into it. I was shoved between Toris and Mikkel, using my back to barricade the doors while they used their sides.

"She's a werewolf," Mikkel huffed, "a fucking werewolf!"

"She's not a wolf, she's a coyote," I corrected.

He raised a brow and I tsked, "My father is a park ranger, you really think I wouldn't know the difference!"

"Does it matter?!!"

"This is not the time to argue!" Toris interrupted.

Mikkel laughed, shaking his head, "just-what is she?! Some vampire, witch, were-coyote hybrid-tribrid? Is that even word?!"

"She has studied shifter magick," Braden answered, examining the state of his two whip chains. "A person has to be truly connected to their spirit animal for it to work. Unfortunately for us she's had
"decades to master this technique and her spirit animal also happens to be part of the canine family."

"Yeah," I dragged out the word, "Today has just not been our day."

"She called you a Seeker. What's a Seeker?" Toris demanded.

"Uh, well," he hesitated, "think of me as a police officer. I keep the peace in the witch community and hunt down witches that kill innocent people."

"Where the hell were you on Christmas Eve?!" Mikkel snapped.

"She's been off the radar for nearly fifteen years! Sorry if we were a little blindsided," he exclaimed.

Abigail punched through the wood, her hand grasping for Toris. He snatched it, fractured her wrist and she yelped.

"We need weapons," Toris stated.

"We're in a church! All we got is holy water!" Mikkel interjected, then he thought for a moment, "Unless . . . do you think that will work?" Mikkel questioned.

"She's immortal not demonic," Braden proclaimed.

"Is there really a difference?" I remarked as she punched through the opening of my arm and waist. "Oh shit!" I stepped closer to Toris, avoiding her claws.

"Don't worry," Braden reassured, "I have weapons." He proceeded to remove his shirt, revealing toned muscles and dark inked tattoos. These tattoos cascaded down his arms, roamed his chest and stomach and I was pretty sure that his back was just as covered. The pictures were clean, smooth and very realistic; swords were drawn on the inside of his forearms and down his triceps. Axes crossed on his shoulders as daggers sat on his ribs and a shield stood in the center of his chest.

"Dude, love the tats, but that is not what we meant!" I shouted.

"I know," he placed a hand over his forearm and the black ink glowed in a blazing green light. He sunk his fingers into his skin, but no blood came. Instead he pulled, yanking out a long, very sharp, very real claymore.

He thrust the blade in front of him, his hands on the handle, "this is what you meant."

My jaw dropped as Toris blinked and Mikkel threw his head back and laughed, "If you can pull an ax out of your ass, we're in business."

Braden smirked, tore off a hooked ax from his shoulder and tossed it. Mikkel caught it and swung, chopping off Abigail's hand.

She screeched as blood gushed from her arm and her hand plummeted to the floor.

He flipped the ax and grinned, "Still got it."

"Uh, Mikkel," I pointed to the severed hand as it began to twitch and stand on the tips of its fingers. We watched with a mix of horror and disbelief as the hand scaled up the door and squeezed through the hole.

"She can put herself back together," Mikkel nodded, "good to know."
"No matter how powerful an immortal is," Braden lifted an arm as tattoo shimmered and a second claymore appeared. "They are useless without their head."

He hurled the weapon towards Toris and he caught it easily. The Seeker wrenched out another blade and handed it to me.

"Do you know how to use one of these?"

"Uh," a mental flashback of the slumber party of terror appeared in my mind's eye, "somewhat."

An ear-piercing roar erupted from the corridor as Abigail slammed herself against the wood. I pushed against the doors, "on the count of three, we let her in, one . . ." I held two fingers up and once I hit three, we jumped back.

The Salem Witch burst through and Mikkel charged, swinging his ax over his head. Abigail blocked the attack, grabbing his arm as she made a clean blow to his gut. He weaved back, pulling her arm through the hook of his weapon. Abigail jerked to side, leaving her open for Toris to strike.

The Lithuanian slashed through her torso and she reared, dropping low to swipe him off his feet. Toris leaped; jabbing the blade into her ankle to keep her in place. She wailed and he kicked her down, pressing a foot into her chest as the other craned her head back; revealing her neck.

Braden lunged ready to plunge his sword into her neck. Abigail countered with a blast of fire, breathing scorching hot flames at Seeker. The men shot back and she roared, her blaze reaching new heights as the joists caught fire.

"Please tell me you know water magick!" I shouted at Braden.

"No," he blocked Abigail's claws, "sorry!"

I cursed, then quickly recalled the fire extinguisher in the hallway. I dropped the sword and darted for the corridor. Abigail sprung for me but Mikkel slid forth to block her way.

"Go! We'll hold her off!" He exclaimed as he backhanded her with the ax.

I snatched the fire extinguisher and dashed back for the service hall. I aimed the hose up and clicked it on, spraying the white foam over the flames. Once they were out, I took a moment to settle my breathing, "alright . . . alright, we're good, we're good."

Mikkel came hurling into the pews beside me and landed with a loud crash. He groaned, "Good job Amy, now would help us with her?"

"Right, right," I pointed the hose straight for Abigail. "Say hello to my little friend," I clicked and the foam spluttered before it died, "Oh come on!"

She lunged for me and I dodged, spinning back to smack her over the head with the dead extinguisher. She slumped to the floor and I wielded the extinguisher above my head, ready to hit her again. But before I could make contact, she threw her hand, sending a gust of wind my way. I flew back and smashed into the far wall.

Toris stepped forward, swinging his blade to meet with Abigail's face. She took the hit with her forearm and slapped the sword out of his hands. She twirled into a roundhouse kick and Toris grabbed her leg, flipping her to the floor.

He dove for his sword but Abigail yanked him back. He spun, elbowing her in the snout and
followed with an upper-cut to the jaw. She threw a clawed hand but he caught it and snapped her elbow back. He proceeds to kick her in the side and whirl her around to dislocate her shoulder.

Then he craned her head back and the Dane charged, swinging his ax towards the witch's neck. She jerked back, smacking her head into Toris. The brunet lost his hold and Abigail ducked as Mikkel's blade nearly missed Toris by a hair.

She growled as she straightened her shoulder and elbow with two sickening cracks. Shadows danced behind her, swirling around her legs as she hissed, "play time's over."

The vapors dove for them and I screamed, "Get down!"

They hit the floor and the vapors soared, colliding into Braden and hurling him into the confession box. The demons expanded as they circled the stall, trapping him in a cloud of darkness. Mikkel and Toris shared an alarmed glance before two other vapors appeared and lunged for them. They curled around their ankles and wrists and flung them to the wall above Mary and Jesus. The vapors kept them pinned down, spreading them apart as they constricted their limbs.

I leaped to my feet, grabbed Toris' sword and charged straight for Abigail's throat. I swung the blade and she swerved gracefully. I swung again and she twirled as her canine features vanished in a blink of an eye. I lunged forward and she stepped back, the point of the blade a mere inch away from her throat.

"Let them go," I demanded.

She snorted, "I don't think you are in the position to be making demands."

I pressed the blade into her skin, "I don't think you are in the position to be pissing me off."

"Oh, Amy," she held her hand up, displaying her two fingers against her thumb. "With one snap of my fingers-"

Two more vapors flew from the shadows and gripped Mikkel and Toris by their necks.

"I can break their necks."

"Ha!" Mikkel snickered, "is that the best you got?! Do you know how many times I broke my neck?"

The vapors squeezed and both he and Toris choked on their air flow.

Abigail sighed and turned her head to face them; completely ignoring me as she thrust her arm out, her palm wide open. She began to curl her fingers as if beckoning them to follow her.

I didn't question this and was about to plunge the blade into her flesh, until both Toris and Mikkel released a blood curdling scream. I shot them a quick glance to find their mouths wide open as globs of golden light climbed up their throats.

My jaw dropped, "what are you doing?!"

"Ripping out their souls," she answered nonchalantly. "It would've been easier if they were 'dead,' but they wanted it the hard way."

Rage boiled under my skin and I thrust forward, the blade going clean through. No blood came as she evaporated into air, swirling around to take form behind me. Her claim on the nations' souls
remained firm.

I blinked, still trying to process that she could literally become air.

She giggled, "tell me Amy, what are you gonna do now?" She emphasized her question with a severe tug of the nations' souls. "Your allies have fallen, you have zero sword skills and you are extremely out classed. Hm," she leaned her chin against her spare hand, "what to do . . . what to do?" she grinned.

I panted as my earlier rage faded and the inevitability of my impending death crept up my spine. A million thoughts ran through my mind, but none of them held the key to beating her. What could I do? She controls air, breaths fire and can turn into a fucking coyote! How the hell was I supposed to fight her . . . let alone kill her?!

I darted my eyes around the room, searching for an idea, for an answer but found nothing. I glanced to the sword in my hand and ground my teeth in frustration and fear. Abigail was right. I had no experience with a claymore and I was clearly out matched. Toris, Mikkel and Braden were going to die and I was their only hope. An eighteen-year-old girl barely trained in combat and was a below-average sniper.

I squeezed my eyes tight, trying in vain to silence the voices; the insecurities and anxieties of what could and can go wrong.

Think Amy, think.

Brute rage and muscle isn't going to save you this time.

You have to get the upper hand!

Make her lower her guard!

I shook my head, how was I going to do that?! Tears threatened spill and I allowed them, I was tired of acting tough. I was literally scared out of my mind and a part of me knew that this was it.

I collapsed to my knees, tossing the sword aside as I cried.

Abigail tilted her head, "that's it, really?"

"What's the fucking point?!" I snapped, wiping my tears away. "You're just gonna kill me either way, and," I paused, my breath hitching as I inhaled. "And . . . I'm tired . . ."

"Of what?" she asked, her tone condescending.

"Of this," I gestured to the room, "of . . . of," my anger was returning but it wasn't for her.

"Of them!"

Her brows rose in genuine surprise as she dropped her hold on Toris and Mikkel's souls. The nations swallowed, struggling for air as their gazes met my glare.

"I'm so tired of their complicated shit!" I shouted, my voice containing all of my pent-up anger and resentment that I truly didn't realize I had till that moment.

Toris' eyes widened, "Amy-"

I jumped to my feet, screaming, "I don't want to hear it!"
He wouldn't let it go, "Amy, that's not-"

"Shut up!"

I stride forward, hurling one of the wine bottles that were left beside Mary and Jesus. The bottle shattered in between their heads, nearly missing both of their cheeks.

"Just shut the fuck up!" I panted, watching as the pieces fell to the floor beside my feet. I bent down, noticing the sharp edges and how simple it was to break something . . . and someone. "I hate you . . ." I whispered at first but then I screeched, hoping that the outside world would hear every word. "I hate you! I hate everything you are! And I hate that you are forcing me to become just like you!"

They were silent and I continued, "I am nothing like you! And I refuse to be anything like you! You selfish, manipulative fuck-boys!"

I allowed the words to echo before I spun to face Abigail, "I see now, what the vapors were showing me. . . Their warning . . ."

"Amy!" Mikkel yelled, "She's just screwing-"

The vapors wrapped themselves around his mouth silencing him, along with Toris.

"No, no," Abigail tsked, "let her speak."

I inhaled, the bitter sweetness of cruel honesty pooled in the bottom of my stomach. "They showed me. . ." I swallowed, "them. . ."

"Those two," she pointed to Mikkel and Toris.

I nodded, "they were comforting me . . . and I let my guard down." I raked a hand through my curls, pulling at the roots. "They were kind, gentle but then. . ."

"Then?" she stepped closer, her voice soothing.

"They . . . tried to eat me. . ."

"Oh my," Abigail gave a small laugh as a vapor appeared beside her. "You are such a naughty demon," she cooed. "Well hon, I don't think they want to eat you . . . will not literally I hope."

"It's a symbolism . . . a really fucked up symbolism, but I got it." I turned back to them, "This trip! The training! The bet! It's all an excuse for you act like the possessive pigs that you are! You selfish assholes took me away from everything I knew and loved!"

I ground my teeth, "So that way, I would be vulnerable . . . giving you the chance to creep into my heart. But the only way you could ever have this chance, was to take me away from my family and friends! To take away my very dreams! My freedom!" I paused, trying to swallow back the tears, "But it won't be enough . . . it will never be enough for you! You'll keep taking and taking till there's nothing left of me!"

I sobbed and Abigail wrapped me in a warm embrace, "Oh, there, there, it's cruel I know but the truth usually is." She gently pushed me back to brush my hair off my face, "in this world men take and conquer; leaving women drained and broken. It's just the world we live in," she hugged me once again, rubbing my back tenderly.

"But there is way to change it," she added, "a way to create a better world and you could be part of
that change."

I blinked, "how?"

"Sweetie, a nation's soul holds more power than you think and I need all of them to grant my wish."

"Your wish?" I questioned.

She grinned, "For a better world but the only way a new world could be born is for the old to be destroyed."

I nodded, "I see . . . Abigail. . ."

"Yes?"

"I would like to make a deal with you."

"A deal?" she raised a brow in good humor, "Whatever for?"

"You just need the souls of the nations, right?"

"Yes."

"So, you don't need any humans. . ."

"Only when I'm hungry."

"Well, there are plenty of other people to go around. What I want is for you to leave Summerland alone."

Abigail tilted her head, smiling like a sly cat, "I see . . . and what will you offer me for their safety?"

I didn't miss a beat, "Information. I know where the German brothers live, the Italian brothers, India and if you leave right after, you can be able to catch the rest of the Nordics. The other two Baltic states, Poland, England, France, Canada-"

"You are willing to give up your family-"

"They are not my family."

"Hm," she thought for a moment, "nope."

My brow flinched slightly, "what?"

"Hon, when someone eats another's soul, they see all of their memories, take part in all of their experiences. You know I'm going to get your soul but the information-giving it to me willingly or not-was already on the table." She explained as she sighed, "So . . . anything else you can offer me?"

I clutched the shard from the broken wine bottle. The one I was hiding in the sleeve of my sweater. *Fuck! I should've cut that bitch's head off when I had the chance. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid!*

*Come on Amy, you've gotten this far.*

*You need to get close.*

*Closer than you are now.*
The thought came and I knew what I had to do.

I stepped forward, hooked my arms around her neck and kissed her.

She froze but I ignored it, working on her lips as I playfully nipped and licked them. I drew back, looking at her with hooded eyes, "I can give you what they want but can never have."

Slowly, a provocative grin spread from ear to ear as her gaze slid from me to the men above. "And right in front of them," she pulled me back, slapping our hips together as she whispered, "such a naughty girl."

A repulsive shiver ran down my spine but she took it as a sign to thrust her tongue down my throat. She gripped my chin and curled an arm around my waist, the tips of her fingers teasing the inside of my leggings. I forced myself to relax, sliding a hand to her neck as the other rested on her hip.

Before I could dig the shard out of my sleeve, Abigail pulled back and bit my bottom lip; hard, drawing blood. I yelped and she giggled, no doubt amused at the sound of my voice being unusually high.

"You're so real," she caressed a thumb over my sore lip as the blood smeared and darkened. The droplets of crimson fading and crustsing into dirt. "It's still hard to believe that you've been created out of inanimate matter," she laughed and patted my cheek. "Well, you certainly are a pretty golem."

She attacked my lips once more, becoming even harsher as she bit along my jaw line and neck. She yanked my hair back and tore my sweater and undershirts aside to expose my shoulder; giving me another 'love bite'. I hissed at the pain and she used the momentum to push me to the floor.

She climbed over me; pinning me down as her hands roamed, searching for skin. For being an all-consuming, fire breathing witch she had freezing hands. I ignored the chill and kissed her with equal intensity and aggression. She nudged my legs apart with her knee and rocked her hips against mine.

I flinched and she licked the shell of my ear, "you should see their faces."

Heat rose to my cheeks and I swallowed back the lump in my throat. I was reminded of my false betrayal and I immediately wanted to hide. I turned away from their eyes and kissed Abigail once more. Deepening the kiss as I pulled her closer and twined my arms around her neck.

I distracted her with an onslaught of kisses and caresses. Shaking at my sleeve for the shard and once it was in between my fingers, I aimed for her throat.

But Abigail had grabbed my wrists and slammed them above my head. I panicked, tossing aside the shard before she could see it.

She grinned mischievously and continued to nip along my collar bone. Not even realizing that a second ago, I had a large, sharp, threatening weapon to use against her and I threw it away.

*I threw it away!*

*Fuck!*

Subconsciously my eyes darted around the room, searching for an escape but there was none to be seen. My heart rammed against my rib cage as my air came out in shallow pants. Abigail paid no mind, her hands finding my chest and teasing each mound of sensitive flesh.

I shut my eyes, trying to erase her image from my mind. Visualizing myself far, far away from this
church. Somewhere warm and sunny, surrounded by the people I love. Summerland came into focus but it wasn't the town I left behind. It was Abigail's version; with every building, man, woman and child set ablaze.

My blood boiled at the image and I fisted my hand into her dark locks. I felt her lips part in a smile along the nook of my shoulder, assuming that this was part of the play. Her guard was down and I took a page from her play book and bit her; hard.

My teeth sank into her neck, tearing into the jugular's main vein as hot iron flooded my mouth. Her scream was gagged by her own blood and she wrenched herself from my jaws. I spat out the patch of her flesh and clawed into her throat, digging my fingers into her tender opening.

Her blood sprayed over our clothes and the floor as she attempted to shove me off. I knee'd her in the gut and dug my fingers in further, feeling bone.

Her eyes widened and I muttered, "Deal's-") I curled a finger around her spine and snapped it. "Off!"

"Deal's-") My voice bounced off the walls as the sound of skin ripping followed.

Blood showered as the body collapsed and the vapors screeched in distress. The demons shook violently, releasing the men as they dispersed into the shadows; their screams fading into the darkness.

I was left on my knees with Abigail's head in my lap. Her stunned expression forever imprinted on my mind.

I looked to Mikkel and Toris, "are you two alright?" I whispered.

Both of their faces were unreadable as they gave one stiff nod.

Their expressions and silence sent an unnerving chill down my spine. I couldn't bear to look at them. My chin fell, meeting Abigail's dead eyes once more.

"Amy!" Braden's voice broke through as he busted out of the confession box. "Get back!"

The decapitated body lunged for me and I froze, not being able to react in time. Fortunately, Mikkel did. He leaped forward, chopping off Abigail's arm before it could make contact. Toris followed, tackling the body and pinning it to the ground.

The body thrashed as her last arm desperately tried to reach for me.

I jumped back, "she's still alive!"

"I said get back!" Braden pulled me to his side, "As long as the head is separated from the body, she can't do magick nor heal."

I glanced to the severed head, "will . . . the head start talking?"

He knitted his brows, "of course not, that would be ridiculous."

"And this is normal?!!" I exclaimed.

"You know, before we get into any other topic," Mikkel remarked as he and Toris wrestled with the body. "What the hell are we supposed to do with this thing?!!"

"As long as the head is near, it will continue to move," Braden stated.
"We can burn it," Toris suggested.

"She breathes fire!" I countered.

"Sink her into the ocean," Braden added.

"We did that," I pointed to the moving, headless corpse. "Didn't work so well."

He paused, thinking, "The other element she used was air correct." He waited for me to nod and continued, "That must be her natural element."

"Natural element?" I questioned.

"Every human is born with natural affinity to an element, each one holds their own strengths and weaknesses."

"Earth is the opposite of air," I concluded.

"Thus, bury her," he implied.

"But everything is buried in snow and the ground is frozen solid," Mikkel interjected.

I glanced to the wooden floors, noticing for the first time how deeply set the lines were made. I shoved Abigail's head to the Seeker and punched through the wood, finding new space. I pulled out the floor boards with haste, tossing them aside with ease. Once the hole was big enough, I jumped in, clawing into the ground like a mad dog.

"Amy, stop your hurt!" Braden chided.

"I'm not!" I barked. "Now make yourself useful and get me a fucking shovel!"

After five minutes, he dropped one beside me and I caught it instantly. I plowed into the ground, heaving the dirt behind me. As I dug, the men wrapped the body in a maroon rug that lined the aisle. Braden secured the limbs with what remained of his iron chains, tying them tightly with steel plated locks.

I leaned against the shovel, my energy completely drained. "Is this enough?" I panted from my eightyth foot depth hole.

Braden looked down and nodded, "yes, this is perfect."

I sighed in relief, using the last of my strength to climb out. The men threw the (still moving) body inside and I ignored my screaming muscles to bury it. The others joined, piling the dirt in quickly. As the earth hit flesh, the body's struggles ceased and shriveled into itself. It sank to the bottom, accepting its defeat.

When the hole was filled, I pulled myself out of the crypt and collapsed against the wood. "Where's the head?" I panted.

"It's over there," Mikkel gestured to a bloody makeshift bag.

Mentioning the head, Braden moved to pick it up, "We need to get some distance." He looked to the windows, "the storm has ended," he stated and turned back to face us. "Thank you for your help. Merry Christmas to you all."

"That's it?" I exclaimed, "you're gonna leave, just like that?"
"I'm not good with goodbyes," he rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know exactly what happened here," his eyes lingered on me, "but I have a gut feeling that you all are not entirely human. And what I've learned from all my years of being a Seeker is that you always trust your gut, and when it's telling you to run like hell. You run."

With those final words he strides down the aisle and walked out the door.

I knitted my brows in irritation, "what the hell did he mean by that? He should be grateful we saved his goddamn ass."

The guys were quiet till Mikkel suggested, "you should probably go clean up. We'll take care of the floor." His eyes slid to the doors, "and the doors."

I raised a brow but I didn't argue, "Fine, whatever."

Once inside, I switched on the light and immediately jumped at the slight of my own reflection. I realized now why Braden got out like he did. If I had seen me, I would've run like hell. My entire front was covered in blood. My hands were stained with crimson and clots of dirt had formed under the nails. Splashes of red soiled my clothes and crusted my hair but what really held my focus was my mouth.

I lifted a trembling hand to my dyed lips; blood had streamed off my chin, along my neck and down my chest. This stream met with the flood of crimson that stuck to my clothes and skin. My mouth instantly went dry but the taste of iron was still fresh along with the tang of salty skin.

I slapped a hand over my mouth and dived for the toilet. I threw up; coughing out my dinner, wine and hopefully her. The thought of Abigail caused me to dry heave, forcing myself to be rid of her but nothing else was left in my stomach.

I breathed in short gasps, inhaling my air quickly and hectically. The only thoughts that raced through my mind were of Abigail. The ghost of her hands and lips caused my skin to crawl. Then in a series of flashes, my teeth met her neck, my hands found her gash and her head ended up in my lap.

_I did that. . . . I did that. . . . I did that! I-I-I-

The air was stiff and my heart was ramming itself against my chest. I tried to take in slow, even breathes but I couldn't . . . I couldn't breathe!

A knock came from the door but I didn't notice till Toris knelt beside me, gently tugging me away from the toilet.

I flinched, shoving him away, "don't touch me," I cried weakly, "I'm . . . I'm-

Dirty.

He ignored my cries, rubbing my back as he soothed, "Amy, breathe. Breathe."

"I can't . . . I can't," I whimpered. "I can't."

"Yes, you can," he answered in a calm, even tone. "Breathe in."

I choked when I tried and he placed a palm on my beating heart while his spare aligned my spine. He straightened me and whispered, "Breathe in."
I wheezed and he added, "Hold it."

After he counted to three, he said, "Breathe out."

I exhaled and he encouraged, "good, again. Breathe in." I inhaled and he followed, "breathe out."

We continued these exercises till the pounding of my pulse settled. He dropped his hand and I slumped against his shoulder, closing my eyes to stop the room from spinning. He stroked my back, humming a lullaby I couldn't place. I don't know how much time passed and personally I didn't care. At that moment, Toris was my anchor and I didn't want to let go but, in the end, he pulled away and I had to.

"Leave your clothes outside, I'll take care of them," he assured.

He turned for the door and his shocked eyes flashed before my mind's eye. "Toris," I called out and he stopped, turning back to face me. "What's scarier?" I asked, "Facing your greatest fear? Or becoming that fear yourself?"

He was silent for a minute longer than I would've liked, "You did what you had to do. It doesn't matter how you did it."

I snorted sarcastically, "Are you sure?"

This time he didn't hesitate, "yes."

I glanced to the floor and he took that as his cue to leave. I twisted the knob and hot water blasted from the faucet. Stiff, white steam filled the room as I peeled off my clothes like they were second skin and tossed them outside. I popped the tap up and the shower head squirted to life. The scorching water plumping into skin like bullets but I didn't care. Instead I just stood there, watching as the colors of red and brown swirled down the drain.

Alfred observed the church from a distance, grinning as the screams of fleeting vapors scattered into the shadows. He sighed in relief, knowing that Amy and his friends had won the battle and were safe for another day. The barrier that had kept him from entering the holy grounds (most likely Abigail's doing) was crumbling down. He sprinted forward, now that the vapors had finally cleared he can get a closer look. As he entered the grounds, he caught sight of the Seeker hurrying out of the front entrance. He pulled a piece of cloth from his pocket and shook it; the cloth became a cloak and he draped it over his shoulders. Disappearing in a blink of an eye and with a bloody bag under his arm.

Alfred's eyes darkened, knowing full well what it was, "rest in pieces you goddamn bitch."

He reached for the door but a figure materialized in front of him, blocking his path. This figure was a man, tall with a broad chest and had long blond hair that was tied in a low pony tail. He was dressed in modern clothes and had an uncannily resemblance to a blue-eyed German he had known for years before.

"Hey Alaric, been awhile," Alfred greeted with a smile.

The larger blond was silent and Alfred's smile fell, "listen, I know it looks bad but I swear they won't see me."

"We're not here to stop you," a Latin voice purred from behind, "we've come to get you."
"For what?" Alfred asked, mocking innocence.

"You know what," Alaric replied.

"Oh, come on Romulus," he pleaded with a dark-haired man, "you've done the same if not worse. I just need to see them-

Alaric pushed him back, "they are fine. He has called a meeting with the Ancients and he wants you there."

Alfred groaned, "He's mad, isn't he?"

"Humans didn't call him the Sun God for nothing," stated Romulus.

With those fleeting words they vanished from the Earth Plane, reclaiming form in their home realm; the Spirit World. Fields of lush green grass were laid out before them as sky-scraping trees scattered along their train of sight. In the distance were a collection of snowy mountain tops and the scent of fresh sea salt blew from the west. Romulus and Alaric had abandoned their modern clothes, preferring their robes and sandals. Alfred remained in his shirt, slacks and jumper jacket not being a fan of skirts.

Alaric gestured for them to follow as he led them out of the forest, towards an aging bronze and ivory building. At the entrance sat two Egyptian Pharaohs; on the right was Hatshepsut one of the few female pharaohs that was known to dress like a man. On the left was Ptolemy I, the pharaoh that launched the project of the real Library of Alexandria over two thousand years ago.

"It's about time ya'll showed up!" A voice echoed from the lap of Hatshepsut.

Alfred grinned, "Good to see you too Clovis."

The aqua eyed spirit flipped off the statue and landed in front Alfred with a wide grin. "Have I ever told you how much I like you? Before you came back, I was bored out of my mind, but here you are," he wrapped a lanky arm around Alfred's shoulders. "Stirring up trouble, raging war," he waved his hand and claymore appeared in his palm, "gets my blood pumping!"

Alaric smacked him and he hissed, "Ow! What was that for?!"

"You know the Law, no weapons in the Library of Alexandria," the blond warned.

Clovis dropped the blade and it vanished, "it's not even the real the library-"

That earned him another hit from a golden staff that was wielded by a beautiful tanned woman, "It may be a copy but you will treat it with respect."

"Hello Nanu," Alfred greeted with a dazzling smile.

The young black-haired woman returned that smile, "Causing some trouble is truly your knack in life, Alfred."

He nodded and offered his arm, "may I escort you in?"

"Such a gentleman, you three can learn a thing or two from this one," Nanu proclaimed as they climbed the stone steps.

"I was Rome!" Romulus exclaimed, "Passion runs through my veins!"
"Does it look like anyone cares," Nanu waved him off.

Clovis smirked and followed them as Alaric reassured Romulus with a pat on the shoulder.

Alfred took this moment to marvel at this extraordinary library. The Egyptian styled outer walls, were made with bronze marble and outlined the entire area. Inside held glamorous Greek temples that gave praise to the ancient gods; an inside joke among the spirits. In the center stood a massive Roman hall, where spirits both living and human, come for heated debates and mind-blowing lectures of astronomy, alchemy, mathematics and history. An Ottoman dome was placed at the end, used to store art and was the primary place for music and dance. This entire space was stretched vertically filled with spectacular gardens and rectangular pools with endless depths.

Aligned the stone walls stood multiple dorms where scholars live and study. The love of knowledge bringing spirits of young and old together from all over the universe. Gathering all forms of teachings through scrolls, tablets and books and storing perfectly made doubles among these walls.

"Was a statue of Anubis always here?" Nanu asked, pulling Alfred from his thoughts to face the figure of a giant, dog headed man.

He raised a questionable brow, "isn't the temple of Anubis down that way?" he pointed left.

Then the massive dog-man bent low at eye level and gave a vigorous roar; both Alfred and Nanu were unimpressed.

The dog-man whined, "Oh come on! Not even a yelp?" The creature shrunk, taking the form of a fourteen-year old boy with long wavy brown hair and green eyes.

"It's nice to see you're still very much the trickster Balkar," a woman, dressed in a vibrant gown and wore a golden headdress entered from their right.

"I don't know if nice covers it," a woman appeared by the other's side; this one wore brilliant blue robes and had tanned skin, dark eyes and braids.

"Helena, Erish," Romulus greeted them with kisses on each of their hands.

"A charmer as always Romulus," a brown haired young woman commented.

"Oh Kaelee, do you wish for me to kiss your hand?"

"Come anywhere near me and I will light you on fire," she remarked.

A red eyed teenage girl stepped forward, "now, now, there's no need for violence."

"Dalia!" Balkar shouted in excitement and collided into her with a crushing hug.

The embrace only lasted for a minute for a tall, intimidating male moved to pull him off, "hands off," he warned.

Balkar laughed, not at all afraid of the long-haired blond, "Hey Jaroslav, long time no see."

Before any other comment could be made, a mermaid leaped from the pool. Her radiant green tail splitting into two long legs as the brunette created a toga from thin air to drape herself in.

Erish rolled her eyes and pulled up her blue shawl to cover her head, "that one always has to make an entrance."
"Sophia!" Nanu squealed and ran to give her friend a squeezing hug. "Still on that search for those mermaids I see."

"They are out there, I just know it," Sophia proclaimed, determination burning in her green eyes.

A dark skinned young man crossed his arms, "or maybe they just went extinct like we all thought."

Sophia glared, "don't you dare jinx it, Kojo!"

The said Songhai laughed, "It's just an educated guess."

"Hate to interrupt this beautiful moment," a Persian man announced from on top of the stone staircase of the Roman hall, "but we're waiting."

"Relax Armand," Alfred reassured, "we're coming."

The Ancients scaled the steps, weaving through wide columns as each of them took their seat around the center stage. The meeting room was drilled downward, sculpting the seats around the rim as a flat surface was left at the bottom for the speakers.

Alfred scanned the area, finding his mother, Karen sitting between Qasi and Bolivar, the ancient civilizations of the Inca and Nazca. Seeing the pair caused him to wonder about the Aztec and Mayan.

He turned to Clovis, "hey, um I've been wondering what ever happen to the Aztec and Mayan?"

"Oh," Clovis sighed, "poor guys, their Mother Stars burned out while they were nations. . . Why do you think the Mayans disappeared? They were all scared shit-less when they lost their nation, thought it was the end of days, woo!" He waved his hands in mock fright.

"How do you know this?" Alfred asked.

"Karen saw it, she's really old Al."

"Alfred F. Jones!" a commanding voice bounced off the walls.

"And speaking of old," Clovis smirked, "He comes Gisli. Good luck."

The blond slid next to Kaelee as Alfred turned to a broad shouldered, marble white skinned man. He wore toga around his waist, revealing his muscular chest and stomach. He wore no shoes and had his golden hair braided and draped over his shoulder. His youthful appearance was wasted, for his scowl caused him to look much older.

"What have you done?!"

Alfred shrugged, "you know, you're just gonna tell me anyway-"

"Silence!" he roared, "What is the Law of the former nations?"

Alfred gritted his teeth, "you can't speak to the current."

"And what did you do?"

"Oh, come on Gisli, you can't count that! I did it in a dream."

"He's right," Karen defended her son, "I highly doubt Lithuania and Denmark will pay any mind to
"I love my boy," Siggy added, her Scandinavian accent just as thick as ever, "but he's not the brightest."

"That does not matter," Gisli countered, "you still spoke to them."

"In a dream! At least I wasn't like Romulus. Who physically checked up on Italy during World War II," Alfred argued.

"Hey, hey, I did my time," the Roman objected, "Seventy years I will never get back!"

"It was twenty," Ade corrected. "I swear, every time he tells the story he adds another decade," she crossed her arms as her son, Adisa nodded in agreement.

"If you ask me the guy didn't do anything wrong," countered Kojo. "The Law says we can't speak to them physically."

"So, speaking to them in dreams was a handy loophole," Feker smirked.

Gisli slid his glare from Kojo and Feker to Clovis and Kaelee, "don't think you two are off the hook! You physically revealed yourself to America."

"She never knew us as nations and we never told her. To her we were simply spirits, giving her a helping hand," Karlee proclaimed calmly.

Clovis sang, "Loophole."

"You all are not supposed to find loopholes!" Gisli snapped, flames sparking from his hands and hair. "The Law, which you all created in the first place were to help your successors more on. They couldn't keep looking into the past for guidance. Weren't those your words Kaelee?"

The brunette grew quiet as Clovis fought, "but she didn't know us, so technically-"

"No! No, technicalities! You three will be punished-"

"And I say you are over stepping your authority," Helena rose, looking down at Gisli with a heated gaze. "You may be our Elder but you cannot speak to us in such a way."

"I have every right! All of our Elders, my friends, have either died protecting this planet or died giving birth to you ingrates!"

"Ingrates! How dare you?!" Obi jumped to his feet, "we know of the struggles our Elders had gone through! We know of the heartache of our oldest stars that have lost their child to those alien scum! We know what you all had to give up to give us our home."

"Do not say we are ungrateful," Erish added, "for that's far from the case."

"Will I wouldn't say that for all of us," Izem asserted, turning to face Alfred. "Have we forgotten about him befriending their kind?"

Alfred narrowed his eyes, "Tony is different. He protects this world."

"Keeps taps on it most likely," Izem hissed. "Just waiting until he can call up his precious 'Galaxy Police Force' to come and capture each and every one of us."
Alfred lunges for him but Clovis and Balkar reeled him back as Izem chuckled harshly. "Did I hit a nerve? Could it be you also have doubts about him?"

"No," Kaelee stood, holding her head high, "you didn't meet this Tony, he was strong and faithful, a true friend and ally."

"And you actually brought that?" Armand countered bitterly, "They're aliens; they lie and cheat-"

"And humans are any better?" Sophia asked sarcastically.

"They don't know what we are, they treated our kind like gods," he smirked.

"And we all know how that turned out," Jaroslav proclaimed. "They started believing that they were truly gods and nearly tore this world apart to prove it."

"At least we know that humans would never dare cross us," Izem leered at Alfred. "But he allowed that abomination to remain by his successor's side and look what happen; she was nearly killed in the process."

Alfred broke free from his friends and slammed a punch into Izem's cheek. The dark-skinned man howled in fury and jumped for him, swinging an elbow. Cries and shouts erupted from all sides as the men threw punch after punch. Kojo, Chi and Obi ran forward to pull back the bulking Izem while Clovis and Balkar yanked at Alfred's shoulders.

A clap resounded and a powerful solar flare knocked everyone off their feet.

"Enough! We are getting off topic, there is more than just these three that I wish to discuss. Now all of you sit down and behave." Gisli demanded.

A dark tanned man rose, rubbing his head as he groaned, "you do realize you were the one that started it right?"

"Silence Hannibal!"

He raised his hands up in mock surrender.

As the spirits claimed their seats once more, Gisli grumbled, "By the Divine, this is why I didn't want any of you becoming nations in the first place."

"This, coming from the spirit that was known as Helios and Apollo," Sophia remarked.

"At least I knew my boundaries," he hissed.

"Ha! Tell me . . . how are your kids?" she asked, condescending.

"Oh, she went there," Clovis whispered and Alfred covered a grin behind his hand.

Gisli's golden eyes darkened, "You seem to like my stories Sophia and if I remember correctly, you were more than willing offer me anything I wished."

Sophia glared, "I thought you were a god, now I see you're just a bitter old man that has nothing better to do but complain."

Gisli opened his mouth to object but stopped when his eyes landed on someone above them. His expression immediately softened and Alfred followed his gaze to a young woman with black onyx skin, wavy dark brown hair and multicolored eyes. She was dressed in a gown of shimmering green...
and alluring blue and with every step she took the colors danced.

The spirits rose to their feet and bowed in respect as she crossed their path.

"I know, you never approved of their wishes but I believed humans would be good for them, humbling even." her voice was like honey, smooth and sweet.

"But humans didn't need-"

She raised a hand, "in some way or form, yes they did. It allowed two worlds to connect, to be closer. Isn't that what we wanted Gisli?"

"We allow humans to come here after they die and spirits can wonder the Earth Plane, wasn't that enough?" Gisli urged.

"Clearly it was not," she replied, "besides, we allowed spirits to wonder and all they did was scare humans or make them worship them."

"Ava, no offense but your children aren't the sharpest tools in the shed."

"Such a thing to say about family," she sighed.

"We are not family-"

"Yes, we are. For in the beginning, when a great spark gave birth to the Divine. The Divine is neither good nor evil but simply energy, energy that flows through all of us. This energy back when it was young gave birth to the stars," she waved a hand to the spirits and they grinned. "And to the elements, these elements were then used to give birth to comets, moons and," she gestured to herself, "planets."

She flashed a kind smile towards Gisli, "and with the help of these elements and of a warm sun," she stroked his cheek lovingly. "I was able to give birth to many creatures, so in a way the humans are your cousins."

"Distant cousins," he muttered.

"Still family none the less," she spun to face Alfred and her smile widened, "Alfred, I've missed you. We don't seem to talk anymore . . . and I always did love our talks about the universe."

"I'm sorry Ava, things just keep happening and I'm worried about Amy," he confessed.

"I know you are and so am I . . . but you did violate the Law."

Alfred stiffened as Gisli smirked, "yes he did and for that he shall be sealed for ten years, along with Kaelee and Clovis."

"Ten years!" Kaelee exclaimed.

"You can't take us out of the game now," Alfred argued.

"You need us!" Clovis added.

"Oh, ten years, please, at least you didn't get eighty," Romulus stated.

"For the last time you got twenty!" Ade snapped.
"Silence both of you!" Gisli turned back the three spirits in question, "And we can handle things from here."

"No, we can't, we need all the help we can get," Ava interrupted.

"But-"

"No buts. Sit." She commanded and he muttered a string of curses as he sat beside Qasi.

The spirits snickered as Karen proclaimed, "All praise the one true Great Mother."

Ava grinned but the smile didn't last, "they may have violated the Law but they didn't break it. Amy was in danger and Alfred needed to awaken his friends to save her, and it was just a dream." She gave Alfred an understanding glance, "I know you miss them, so do I but you have to realize how much pain you cause when you visit them. They believe you're dead and such pain," she inhaled sharply, "is just too much for some."

He nodded and she smiled, "you did what you had to do and it was to save your successor, so I believe we can let this . . . slide? Is that the phrase the young people use?"

He laughed, "Yeah Av, it is." Clovis then elbowed him in the ribs, gesturing him to bow, "oh, uh, right." He bowed his head, "thank you Great Mother."

She nodded and then focused her attention on Clovis and Kaelee, "now you two indeed broke the Law-"

"Yes, they-"

Ava turned back to Gisli, silencing him with single, piercing glance. He immediately looked to the floor and Armand whispered to Erish, "Well, I guess we know who runs the show."

Erish giggled in response.

"But like you said Amy is a young nation, she had no idea you were once the nations of Gaul and Britannia. You also revealed yourselves to save children, I believe the good deed outweighs the crime. You two will not be sealed."

Kaelee bowed, "thank you Ava."

"Always so kind and just, my lady," Clovis fisted a hand over his heart.

"You spoil them," Gisli muttered.

"Oh, hush," she shooed him. "Besides you were wasting time, we have more pressing manners to discuss."

"Like the fact that Abigail wasn't Iya," Karen proclaimed and the room went dead quiet. "I'm sure you all felt it, the vapors are still lurking and they don't seem to be dispersing any time soon."

"But Abigail used them," Chi added, brushing a frustration hand through her thick black curls. "She was able to control them and we know Iya's a woman."

"All we know is that she prefers the she pronouns," Jaroslav chimed in, "not much else."

"Nina said that all she knew of Iya was her voice," Alaric recalled.
Nanu sighed, "That's not much for us to go on."

"But Abigail was able to use the vapors," Adisa reminded them, "How could she do that? I thought Iya was the only one that claimed control over those things."

"Unless Abigail worked for Iya," stated Romulus.

Everyone grew silent once more, realizing the terror behind his words. Iya was able to gather humans into her fold. Influence them to do as she saw fit . . . she was getting stronger.

Dalia held her hands together to stop them from shaking, "this is bad."

"Ya think," Hannibal cursed.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Clovis proclaimed, "We still have time; we can get answers from Abigail."

Alfred crinkled his nose, "she's dead, Clovis."

"Not yet," he assured, "we still got a few days."

"What are you suggesting?" asked Kaelee, her voice steady and calm.

Clovis didn't miss a beat, "we track down the Seeker, take her head, dig the rest of her up and bring her in for interrogation."

"You want to bring back a witch that nearly burnt Salem to the ground," Bolivar exclaimed.

"That killed hundreds of people," stated Qasi.

"And almost killed my granddaughter," Karen hissed.

"We got no other choice," Clovis reasoned. "Abigail's our only lead!"

"I agree," Kojo stood, "we need the information."

"Besides," Balkar followed suite, "if we all work together, we can handle her."

"Or she'll eat our souls," Feker argued.

"And then the nations would definitely be screwed," Izem proclaimed.

"What's this? Is the former Axum Empire scared?" Clovis jeered.

Before he could insult the blond, Ade interjected, "we are not scared but cautious. Abigail was unpredictable."

"And dangerous," Sophia added.

"But she is only one person," said Nanu, "We can handle her."

"What if we can't," Erish interjected.

"Is that anyway for us to speak? We were some of the greatest empires," Romulus proclaimed, "and here we are frightened of some witch."

"He's right. We have fought armies and beasts alike, we can certainly take her. Besides," Siggy
cracked her fists, "I won't let that bitch get away with hurting my boy."

"And she'll be weak," Dalia said, the hope returning to her voice.

"That would only mean she has nothing else to lose," Jaroslav stated.

"She'll take bigger risks," said Helena.

"And some poor, cocky spirit will let his guard down," Armand added.

"Allowing her to have the chance to eat him, thus gaining more power than ever," Kaelee concluded darkly.

Gisli shook his head, "we cannot take that chance. We'll find another way-"

"It's the only way!" Clovis exclaimed.

His eyes blazed, silencing the blond, "Then we'll make another."

The meeting passed and no one could come up with a better plan. The spirits; confused, frightened and irritated scattered, not at all in the mood to catch up with small talk.

Clovis decided to take this time to practice his sword skills and take his anger and frustration out on a rock.


He was about to swing his sword upon the rock for the last time but a hand gripped his forearm. He groaned and turned, "I don't want to talk Kaelee-" but it wasn't the brunette he was expecting.

Instead it was Balkar, along with Kojo and Hannibal, "what the hell do you want?"

Hannibal crossed his arms, "What do you think?"

"Gisli and the others are grasping at straws. We need a plan of action," Kojo proclaimed.

Balkar grinned, "And you have one."

Clovis blinked, understanding their train of thought, "you know if we fail we'll be sealed."

"But we won't. We'll revive Abigail, get the information we need and ding-dong, the witch is back to being dead," Kojo reassured. "Simple."

The blond raised a brow to Hannibal, who answered his silent question with a nod. Clovis smirked, "Alright, but first we need to find the Seeker, and I know just the person to ask."

Chapter End Notes

Romulus: Rome
Alaric: Germania
Clovis: Gaul
Kaelee: Britannia
Balkar: Iberia
Nanu: Ancient Egypt
Sophia: Ancient Greece
Siggy: Scandinavia
Dalia: Baltia Aestii
Helena: Byzantine
Erish: Mesopotamia
Jaroslav: Kievan Rus
Hannibal: Carthage
Armand: Persia
Izem: Axum Empire
Ade: Kingdom of Ghana
Adisa: Mali Empire
Kojo: Songhai Empire
Feker: Ethiopian Empire
Obi: The Mossi Kingdoms
Chi: Benin Empire
Qasi: Inca
Bolivar: Nazca
Chapter Notes

WOAH.... this was 60 pages on word... over 22,000 words... ha... I've gone mad.

Amy hadn't said one word.

Not when she slipped inside the dining hall, wearing nothing but a towel as she shivered and gestured for her clothes.

Not when Toris protested that they were still wet and she retaliated by yanking them out of his hands.

Not when Mikkel tried to lighten the mood as he jokingly reported the damages. They were able to patch the hole and cover it with an extra rug but they had to use the doors for the extra wood. The scorch marks on the walls and joists were far too high for them to reach and running seemed like the best option.

Again, not one word; not even a smile graced her lips.

Once Mikkel had warmed the car, Toris and Amy piled inside; he by the Dane's side while she curled into a ball in the backseat. Assuming she was cold, Toris unbuttoned his jacket and tossed it over her form. She looked up and he gave a small, tender smile but received only a firm nod before facing the window.

She remained silent the entire trip.

When Mikkel pulled into the driveway, Amy burst out of the car, ignoring Toris' concerns about her wet hair and clothes. The two followed only to be greeted by their friends who were either happy of their return or incredibly angry.

"What the hell were you thinking?!" Feliks all but shouted as he entered. "I was worried sick! Would it kill you to turn on your phone? I mean, really Liet what's the point of having it if you won't answer it?"

As he scolded Toris nodded and apologized but that didn't stop him from sneaking worried glances towards Amy. Francis had wrapped her in a warm embrace, rubbing her arms as he made a concern comment on how cold she was. Toris had taken note that the young blonde still wore the same unreadable expression. Once Francis released her Arthur immediately jumped in, lecturing her to no possible end in sight.

Finally, she spoke; her tone calm but unfeeling. "Arthur," she advised, "not now."

She didn't allow anyone to comment as she climbed the stairs and shut herself away in her room.

Tino being the first to react turned on Mikkel and Toris, "what happened?"

"You remember Abigail right," the blond smiled, making light of the topic. Everyone instantly froze, clearly not at all amused but Mikkel pushed on. "Well, she wasn't dead."
Arthur narrowed his eyes, "Explain. Now."

Toris remained silent as Mikkel summarized the tale, "we found Toris-Amy was able to track him with her music because of her headphones were wireless. Anyway, to avoid the storm we stayed at a church run by an Irish priest, but he wasn't a priest at all. But I'll explain that later. Later that night we..." he spared Toris a glance before proceeding, "we all had some freaky nightmares. At that moment we didn't know it was Abigail's doing till she attacked us.

"She was about to-well I guess eat Amy's soul but, yours truly took her down and our boy here," he grinned and slapped the brunet on the shoulder, "gunned her down with a fire extinguisher. But then she blasted us with a gust of wind and we were then saved by Father O'Connor-which is not even his name-its Braden something or other." He waved his hand, not putting much thought to it, "he said he was a Seeker-"

"A Seeker?!!" Arthur's eyes widened at the title, "for the Grand Council?"

Toris nodded and then asked, "You know of them?"

"Yes..." he muttered and gestured for them to continue.

Mikkel raised a questionable brow at Toris before reporting, "All hell literally broke loose. She turned into a beast! Growing out a snout, fangs and was covered in fur."

"Shifter magick," Lukas concluded.

"Yeah, turns out she was more powerful than any of us thought. She was even able to control these demon snakes made of darkness," Mikkel cringed, no doubt recalling the memory of their cold skin on theirs.

"Then how did you win?" asked Berwald.

"Amy… she was able to get close to Abigail, trick her into believing that she was willing to give up information for the safety of her human family… then she..." he scratched the back of his neck, losing his nerve.

Toris could understand the hesitance. It wasn't their story to spread, it was Amy's and they had no right to speak of it unless she wished. "She slit her throat with a shard of glass. The attack left her open, leaving me the chance to remove her head," he asserted.

The others blinked, either in calm resolve or silent surprise. Feliks on the other hand, grinned wickedly, "That's my Liet, the ultimate badass."

"Hey, I was a badass too," Mikkel countered and Feliks shooed him off.

Francis wrinkled his brow, darting his eyes to the second level before facing Toris with skeptical look. "I feel like there's something you're not telling us."

He didn't flinch away from the Frenchman's glare, "the only thing you need to know is that Abigail is dead, and she will remain dead."

The moment I closed the door exhaustion took hold, draining my strength. I fell against the wood, drawing my knees to my chest and wrapping my arms around my legs. I sat in my cold jeans, clinging undershirts and soggy sweater, not even having the energy to change or kick off my boots. My head throbbed and I tried to blink away the pain.
My gaze found the bed and I forced myself to stride forward, collapsing into the mattress. I clung to the sheets, twisting them around me as I curled into myself.

Sleep, I mentally chanted, *just go to sleep. . . Forget . . . and just sleep.*

I don't know how long I was out but when I awoke in a half-dazed state everything was dark. I grunted and turned onto my opposite side, where I was met with pair of scarlet eyes.

Abigail's detached head smiled, "wakey, wakey. . ."

A silent scream was caught in my throat as I crawled back. Kicking the sheets off and slamming back first against the floor. I hardly felt the pain and jumped to my feet with my fists raised and teeth bared.

But nothing was there.

My hands lowered, clutching the hem of my sweater as they trembled and twitched uncontrollable. My breathing came in short pants and my skin grew tight with a sudden inner chill. I gritted my teeth to stop them from shaking as my legs quivered, either about to buckle or sprint. I tried to inhale through my nose, tried to imagine Toris as he soothed, "*breathe in, breathe out.*"

I blinked hard, finding dark paint splattered along the walls and floors. My hands felt wet and slightly warm. I lifted them towards the moonlight but the scent of iron hit me first.

It was blood.

I gasped and hit the door, struggling to twist the knob. Wet metal engulfed my nostrils and flooded the pits of my stomach, causing me to dry heave.

*Air… I need air!*

I threw the door open and ran through the hall, down the stairs and out the front door. The chilly night air hit me like a bus, filling my lungs as I sprinted across the lawn and down the street. My fingers twitched; the thought of red staining them caused my breathing to hitch. I kicked up the speed, stomping my feet against the pavement as the neighborhood slept in a dreadful silence.

With every blink, I was transported back to Allen Church. Abigail's hands on my body, her breath on my neck and her mouth on mine. I ran faster, my vision blurring into a red hue as I felt a trail of blood tickle down my throat. I desperately rubbed at my neck, finding it dry but yet the feeling didn't disappear. My clothes clings to my chest as if my front was once again caked with gore. Hair bounced into my line of sight and in the corner of my eye, I swore I found scarlet splashed against the blond.

I shook away the thoughts, shouting in frustration as I ran faster and faster and faster. Out running the images till my mind was clear of any thought. My lungs burned with each pant and my feet screamed in protest. My hands curled into fists, sinking into the sleeves of my sweater; cold and numb. Yet I kept running; running till I skidded on a patch of ice and fell with a loud smack.

I crashed against the pavement, my right side throbbed in pain as I hissed out a curse, "fuck."

With a weak groan, I rolled onto my back and was met with a sky dusted with stars. I inhaled deeply, feeling the rise and fall of my chest as my heart thrummed against the rib cage. I held my hands up and gave a sigh of relief when I found them clean. I subconsciously checked my clothes and hair, they were wet due to the ice and snow but none the less spotless.
I sighed once more and looked back to the stars. My panting eased; coming in even and relaxed. Puffs of warm air disappeared into the atmosphere as the soft glow of the streetlights hummed with a low pulse. The ground was cold but it felt good against my sore and tight muscles. I didn't want to move, not for a very, very long time but like always, fate had other ideas.

I blinked and a boy with long wavy brown hair and green eyes hovered above me. "Hi," he greeted with a wide smile.

I immediately leaped to my feet and he held his hands up in a soothing gesture. "It's okay, you're among friends." He looked to be about fourteen and had a skinny frame.

I narrowed my eyes, prepared for a fight till a pair of strong hands grabbed me from behind. "Calm down--"

I thrust an elbow into his gut and he hissed through his teeth as I yanked out of his grasp. I spun to find a dark-skinned man with shoulder length dreads and onyx eyes. Another silhouette came in on my left and I turned, facing a lanky built and brown skinned man. I held my fists up, ready to attack till a familiar voice announced.

"Relax Blondie, they're with me."

I spun to my right, "Clovis?"

He grinned, "your hair has gotten longer, looks good."

The corner of my lip curved slightly and I dropped my hands. "What-what are you doing here? And who are these guys?"

"I'm Balkar," the younger one proclaimed as he grabbed my hand in a tight handshake. "It's nice to meet you. Well, technically you knew me—we both knew each other… but you don't remember… so I guess this is our introduction even though we have known each other for years but again you don't remember… so hi!"

I wrenched my hand away from him, "hi," I replied irritated with him already.

"Ignore him," the tanned one quipped. "He's just excited… for what I don't know."

Balkar pouted and waved a hand towards him, "That sour puss is Hannibal."

"Hannibal? As in Hannibal Lecter?" I felt nausea build in my stomach as the taste of iron burned in my mouth.

He rolled his milky brown eyes, "I had that name way before him."

"And the fellow you elbowed in the gut is Kojo," Clovis pointed a thumb at the last man.

"It was my fault, shouldn't have grabbed her like that," he gave a blinding smile filled with straight white teeth.

"Yeah," I muttered, "you shouldn't." I focused my attention on Clovis. "What's going on? Why are you here? And, where's Kaelee?"

Clovis sighed through his nose, scratching the back of his neck as he stated, "Kaelee's not here. We're on a mission."

"A mission? What kind of mission?"
"To gather intel on Iya," Kojo answered and I turned to face him with wide eyes. "And he thought," he gestured to Clovis, "that you would like to join."

"What..." I was caught dumbfounded but I quickly recovered. "Clovis, what are you actually doing?"

"We're tracking down the Seeker, the one that helped you last night," he said.

I furrowed my brow, "why?"

"To get Abigail's head so we can revive her," he stated casually. Like he wasn't talking about bringing back a three-hundred-year-old murderous witch back from the dead.

I instantly felt numb as dread pooled at the bottom of my gut but that didn't cool my temper. "Are. You. Crazy?!" I shouted, "You want to bring her back-you can't be serious."

"Oh, but I am. We need information on Iya and Abigail's our only ticket."

"She's dead Clovis," I hissed. "Dead."

"Not yet," he remarked, "it will be awhile for her body to start decomposing, we got three days, a week tops."

"Besides, she will be too weak to fight," Balkar added.

"And it won't be that hard to handle her," Kojo grinned. "We just torture her a bit, get the intel we need and voilà she's back to being dead, simple."

"Have you ever heard the saying of letting sleeping dogs lie? Well, let this one lie!" I chided.

"Amy, Iya isn't going away, she's only getting stronger! Abigail worked for her, meaning there could be others," Clovis argued.

"Others?" I paled, "like Abigail?"

He nodded, "possibly even worse."

I shook my head, stern as I countered, "Then find them."

"We got no other leads-"

"I don't care!"

"You should care!"

"Yeah, I care of the fact that she would come after me once she's back. You want to know why? Because I killed her! I ticked her then I killed her! And I have a pretty good guess that she is a prideful, spiteful woman and she will do everything in her power to make me pay!" I nearly screamed the last string of words as my air came in deep pants. "She'll come after me and everyone I love... I can't take that chance Clovis, I just can't."

I didn't notice that I was shaking till Kojo wrapped a fur cloak around my shoulders. "You may not be able to catch colds but you can still get frostbite."

I clutched the warm fabric, bringing it closer to my chest, "thanks," I said softly.
He grinned and stepped forward to calm Clovis, "We should leave; she clearly doesn't wish to join us."

The blond sighed, "Fine. Just tell us his name-"

"I'm not telling you shit," I snapped.

"Oh, you're tell me, even if you want to or not."

Before I could say or do anything, he appeared in a flash and gripped my shoulder. He slapped his spare hand on my forehead and squeezed. My head throbbed, splitting in two as images flew through my mind. Braden portraying as a priest. Braden removing his shirt, revealing his tattoos. Braden snatching the make-shift rug bag that contained Abigail's head. Finally, the memory of Braden curling his chain whip around her neck as he announced, "I'm Braden Campbell, a Seeker for the Grand Council and I've come for your head Abigail Williams."

I released a shrill scream as Clovis moved back and I collapsed to the ground. My head continued to pound like a jackhammer as the rest of me trembled. The men were talking but I couldn't hear them. Blood was rushing through my ear drums, muffling everything. Warm fluid trailed from my nose and down my chin, dripping red against the pavement. Spots clouded my vision and the next thing I knew, I was lying on a bench with the cloak covering me like a blanket.

My head pulsed but it wasn't as bad as before. My mouth was dry and my lips were blistering. I groaned and I sat up, finding myself alone.

*Oh fuck.*

"Clovis..." I called; he didn't answer. "Clovis!" I forced myself to raise, "Clovis!" I ran down the street, ignoring my aching muscles and splitting headache. I howled his name, covering the area twice but he and his companions were gone.

"Oh no, oh no, no, no, no," I crouched down, tugging my hands through my hair in frustration. "What did he do? Oh god, what did he-"

*He just mind wiped you like Professor X,* my inner voice exclaimed. *He's going to find Braden and bring back Abigail. Say goodbye to Summerland and say hello to human baroque!*

"Shut up!" I shouted and then muttered, "Just think; think." Arthur instantly appeared in my mind and I sprinted for Berwald's house.

I burst in, never really locking the door in the first place and scaled the stairs for Arthur's room. I banged on the wood, shouting at the top of lungs, no doubt waking everyone.


The door swung inward and I was greeted by a pissed off Brit, "What the hell! It's three in the bloody morning?!"

His face was twisted in a scowl but when he noticed my wet clothes and chapped lips, his gaze softened. Worry had mixed with his anger, "were you outside without a coat? What were you thinking?"

I didn't bother to answer as our housemates moaned and yawned and clustered into the hall. Muttering their own choice of curses as they found me in the center of the noise but I didn't care.
"We need to warn the Grand Council! Clovis is after Braden and he's trying to get Abigail's head!"


"He's a friend I made in Berlin, turns out he's a magick user and is trying to get Abigail's head." I answered, bending the truth only slightly.

"Why would he go after her head?" Toris stood at ready, as if psyching himself up for another round with the fire-breathing hag.

"They need information. Turns out Abigail was working for someone and there could be others."

"Others?!" Mikkel exclaimed, "Vampire, witch, werewolf tri-breeds?!!"

"Yes-I guess-I don't know," I replied, frustrated as my head pounded. "He got inside my head-my-thoughts."

"A mind reader?" Arthur's eyes widened in horror, "this isn't good."

"Yeah, I kinda figured that out when he mind-raped me," I took a moment to breathe. "You gotta know where the Grand Council is right? I mean you're a wizard and junk, can't you send an owl or something?"

"Do I look like Harry Potter to you?" he remarked.

"Unfortunately, you're the closet thing we got!"

I and everyone else grew quiet as we waited for Arthur to answer. He muttered a string of curses as he raked a hand through his messy, bed head hair. In the end, he sighed and proclaimed, "There's no way for me to contact them. We will have to go to them. Lukas?"

"I'll pack a bag and have three tickets ready for the next flight to London," he was about to head back down stairs till Arthur called.

"No, make it Edinburgh. That's where they'll be."

Lukas nodded and hurried to his room as Arthur turned to me, "pack a bag, we're leaving."

I spun on my heel back towards my room, but I was able to catch Francis' worried tone as he whispered with Arthur. "Are you sure about this? The Council and you haven't been on good terms for years… and let's not even begin with your siblings."

"I know," Arthur emphasized, "but we can't allow Abigail to be risen."

"Then why take Amy? She seems unstable…"

"It's a side effect of the mind reading. It's a harsh process especially if it's forced upon."

"What about before? Why was she outside to begin with? Something must've happened. Something Lithuania and Denmark won't tell us about-"

"Something did happen. But we can't push them and we can't force her, Francis."

"But I'm worried about her-"

I tuned them out after that, I wasn't really keen on listening to them gossip about me. I packed my
carryon, taking extra shirts, a pair of jeans and underwear and shoving them inside. With my passport in hand, I grabbed my coat and ran down the stairs to find Berwald waiting for me.

"You should eat-

"I'm good," I interrupted him and headed for the door.

Berwald yanked me back, dragging me to a seat at the kitchen table. Tino slid forward, sitting a bowel of cornflakes and fruit before me.

He flashed me a warm smile, "the filmjölk will be ready soon."

"Yeah," I tried to match his smile but it came out forced.

I avoided both of their eyes as I swallowed a spoon full of fruit. Before long, Eduard, Francis, Matthew, Erik, Peter, Raivis and Feliks joined us around the table, it was uneasy and the tension was thick but Tino's smile didn't falter.

Unlike the others, Lukas and Arthur were dressed and packed as they took their seats beside me. Arthur poured himself a cup of tea while Lukas reached for the coffee pot. The strove bell beeped and Berwald moved to place a hot loaf with lingonberries at the center of the table.

Erik began slicing the bread, handing out pieces to each of us. I chewed mine quickly as my leg bounced impatiently.

Arthur noticed, "We have time, our plane won't leave for another three hours."

"Yeah," I mumbled.

Toris and Mikkel were the last to arrive, both were dressed and had a duffle hanging off their arms.

I tensed but luckily Lukas was the first to speak, "You know I only booked three tickets."

"Well, I can book two," Mikkel replied, "we're coming-

"No, you're not," Arthur declared firmly, "it will be too much of a hassle to take you two along. Three is a better group to travel with."

I released a tiny sigh of relief; we barely held our own with Abigail. Clovis was entirely different story, he was a shape shifter, a trickster; he could become anything or anyone. Mikkel and Toris didn't have any magick, but Lukas and Arthur did; they could defend themselves.

"If you think we'll get in the way-" Toris responded but Arthur cuts him off.

"Of course not, but let's face it, your sword and ax won't make it pass security."

Mikkel was about to object till I added, "guys, just let this go. Clovis and his friends are something else… and I don't think you can handle them."

"We handled Abigail-"

"I handled Abigail," I snapped.

Mikkel's eyes widened and I winced at the harshness of my voice. "Just stay here okay. We won't be long."
"Right, and personally I would rather not see you fraternizing with my sister," Arthur rose from his seat.

Mikkel narrowed his eyes, "Yeah, don't want to make it any more awkward than it's already going to be for you."

Arthur met his glare and Lukas interjected, "Sve, can you drop us off at the airport."

He nodded and moved to grab his coat and boots. Lukas, Arthur and I followed, saying quick goodbyes as we made our way to the door. Before I crossed the threshold, Toris grabbed my hand and gave a concerned squeeze.

"Please be careful," a slight beseeching tone laid underneath his warning.

I squeezed back, "I will."

Before we boarded our plane, I did a quick sweep of my phone, wishing my family and friends a delayed Merry Christmas. Most we're too late to call so I just sent emails and text messages but luckily it was early enough to grab Dad.

"Hey kiddo," Dad greeted cheerfully, "Merry Late Christmas."

Hearing his voice made my nerves melt away and I smiled for the first time that day. "Merry Late Christmas. I'm sorry I didn't talk sooner."

"It's fine, we heard about the blizzard," he made a chilling rattle with his teeth. "Just thinking about it gives me goosebumps."

My smile widened, "yeah it was pretty crazy."

"What did you all do during the storm?"

_Not battling an evil, psycho witch with Toris, the knight and Mikkel, the Viking._ "We watched movies… you know what we do."

"That's nice," he said, "Did you eat anything good?"

"Ham," I answered, "cookies." _Not the flesh and blood of my enemy as I ripped off her head with my bare teeth. "The usually."_

He chuckled, "Make sure you tell your mother you ate some greens."

"How is she? Can I talk to her?"

"She's in bed early tonight, she's taking a winter semester at UCLA."

I nodded; Mom had decided to go back to school for her doctor's degree right after I graduated. "She's really pushing herself huh?"

"It's her dream, you and I both know how determined she is."

I chuckled, "yeah. What about you? Planning on going back to school yourself?"
He snorted, "I don't care if it is affordable, I will not go back to that hellhole."

"Hey, isn't that where you met Mom?"

"Yes, why do you think I call her my angel?"

"Amy," Arthur called out, "our plane's boarding."

"I have to go," I told Dad, "my plane's leaving."

"Oh, where are you going now?" he asked, quickly.

"Scotland… about to meet the extended family." That wasn't a total lie.

"Oh," he was quiet for a moment, "Good luck then… love you, be safe."

"I will. Love you too, bye." I ended the call and turned my phone off.

The lift off was smooth, barely any turbulence. I leaned into my seat, watching as the morning sun emerged.

"Please turned down the curtain," Arthur grumbled as he closed my window. "I would like to get some sleep before we land."

"What did you mean?" I asked, recalling our moment back in the hospital in New York. "That we're spirits?" Could he remember his life before being a nation? Could it be why he has magick? Yet, Kai had said that all nations forget and are stripped of power.

He cracked an eye lid, "I didn't mean like ghosts or anything like that, what I meant was…” he searched for the word.

"Mascots," Lukas asserted and turned a page from his book; an old yellowed journal. "We're like mascots for our people's moral."

"Mascots," I repeated; picturing the Oakland Raiders' Raider Rusher; with his giant, angry head and a pair of legs and arms popping out of him. The San Francisco 49ers' Sourdough Sam, with his smiling face and a miner attire; he would walk around the field with his pitch ax leaning on his shoulder. Both would do crazy stunts to get the crowds cheering, "I can see that."

As if reading my thoughts, Arthur mentioned, "Do not put us in the same circle as your silly clowns that fool around during your American football games. We are much more than that. We represent a culture and strength of an army and people.-"

I rolled my eyes, "yes, yes, I know… but why say spirit?"

He cocked a thick brow and thought for a moment, "Well, spirit could also mean strength and moral such as Lukas explained. To have spirit is to fight and," he paused, "that's what my mother always said."

"Mother?" my eyes widened, "you had a mom?"

"My patron, but yes, I did call her mother. Lukas had one as well," he added.

I looked passed Arthur, "you too?"

Lukas smiled, "her name was Siggy. She was a shield maiden and the most fearsome one at that."
Brave too, she was remarkable."

"Yes, especially when she was raiding other people," Arthur muttered.

"It's what we had to do to survive," he stated casually.

"Then you carried on the tradition with raiding me."

Lukas smirked, "we really liked your lands."

"Wanker," he hissed but Lukas didn't take it to heart.

"Tell me about your mother," I asked Arthur, "what was she like?"

He hesitated at first, "Her name was Kaelee-"

"Kaelee?" I blinked, recalling a brunette with green eyes, "was that a common name?"

"Back in that day yes," he raised a brow, "why are you asking that?"

*It can't be the same person… Just curious. What else do you know of her?*

He inhaled a deep breath and scratched the back of his head, "she was a powerful sorceress and was even seen as a goddess of magick by some. Over time she found others with magick, most were human, others were like her."

"You and your siblings," I urged.

"Yes. I was young, I don't remember much of her or of that time but what Fiona has told me… she brought together witches and warlocks from all over the country. Together they called themselves the Druids… at first, they used their magick for religious practices but when people began to be attacked and used by other magick users. The Druids made it their mission to protect the innocents and they continued this throughout the ages."

"Didn't they practice human sacrifice?" I asked, skeptically.

"Where do you think they got their sacrifices?" he smirked, "The warlocks and witches that harmed innocents were sacrificed to the gods."

"Did the gods really like getting criminals as sacrifices?" I joked.

He shrugged, "I guess not." He continued the story, "over time the Druids had many names but, in the end, they settled and became the Grand Council."

"So, your mother began the Grand Council," I stated.

"And my siblings have protected them with every fiber of their beings," he sighed through his nose, leaning against his seat.

I sensed that something off and my curiosity piqued. "But they're your people too… right?"

He remained silent, which lead to Lukas explaining, "He and the Council have bad blood between them."

Arthur snapped his head left to glare at the Norwegian but he wasn't fazed. "She's gonna find out sooner or later, so you might as well tell her."
"Tell me what?" I pressed.

Arthur sighed once more, "I was young when Britannia disappeared; I was left in the care of my brothers. Fiona would make round trips from Ireland to come and train Dylan and me in magick. When she wasn't around the Druids would take over."

"Not Alistair?" I questioned, recalling the red-haired Scot from the meeting in April.

He smirked, "didn't have the talent for it… The only way he can defend himself against it is to make charms," he snickered. "Killian is the same way."

I wrinkled my brow, "Whose Killian?"

"Another brother, he represents Northern Ireland, before that he was known as Ulster," he answered.

"So, you, Dylan and Fiona were the only ones with real magick."

"Yes."

"So, if the Council helped you why are you guys fighting now?" I asked.

"He betrayed them," Lukas added casually.

Arthur glared, "did anyone ask you?"

He shrugged, "it's true."

"You betrayed them?" I repeated, a little disappointed.

Understanding my tone, Arthur avoided my eyes, "it was more complicated than that. But yes I did." He inhaled deeply, "like I said, Mother disappeared when I was very young, leaving me in the care of my siblings. A little time after that Rome fell. We were then plunged into the Dark Ages and Christianity came into full swing. Witchcraft was seen as the devil's work and the Druids had no other choice but to run.

"I was still young and I couldn't control my magick… I'm sure you know back then people blamed the witches for the Plague. I was warned to never do magick in public and I was moving constantly due to my slow aging… But one day I was sloppy, I wasn't careful and I was accursed. Even when I had the appearance of a small child… it still didn't matter. I was trialed and burnt at the stake."

My jaw dropped, "did you-"

"Die," he finished. "Yes… Two days later, I awoke in a mass grave filled with burnt, rioting corpses."

I swallowed, "that's horrible."

He nodded, "yes, it was… Due to my fear and of my people's influence, I forsook my magick and everything involved with it. I became a loyal member to the church being of Catholic or Protestant I went. Fiona still tried to teach me but I refused her, only using charms to keep my power contained. I guess that explains why I'm so horrible at it," he tried to joke but his heart wasn't in it.

"Over time, I began to truly believe that magick was the devil's work. And I thought my siblings were under its control. When we started expanding, I realized it was for the best…" he flushed, embarrassed of his next sentence. "The only way to save them from the devil."
"I'm sure in your own misguided way you were only trying to protect them," Lukas snickered and Arthur gave him a look.

"Your sarcasm is not needed," he hissed.

"So you started forcing Christianity," I proclaimed, pulling Arthur's attention back on me. "And your family retaliated."

"Not just for that," quipped Lukas, "he also took control of their land, their government-"

"Who's telling the story," Arthur reminded.

Lukas buried himself in his journal and Arthur sighed, "He isn't wrong. I did terrible things, awful things . . . I even aided in finding members of the Druids and sending them to the stake."

"All of them?" I questioned.

"No. Three. Most were innocent humans accused by jealous neighbors or rueful family members."

"Hm, surprising," I muttered under my breath.

"Fiona never forgave me for that," he continued, "she fought me very way she could and for that they wished to make her an example."

"Example?"

"They burnt her."

"Of course," I mumbled.

"I tried to stop them," he defended, "but I was ignored. That didn't stop my brothers from blaming me and frankly I… I agreed with them. But back then I was clouded by…"

"You're so called destiny to rule?" Lukas guessed.

"Again, who is telling the story?"

"Just making sure you stay honest."

I shook my head and moved the story along, "so you sent your sister and members to the fire and your siblings held it against you."

"For centuries but I tried to mend our bonds, sometime in the ninetieth century but…it didn't go so well."

"What happen?" I asked and Lukas shifted in his seat, clearly uncomfortable.

"My brothers took me to a gentlemen's club and got me drunk… I came to my senses when I found myself in Scotland with Fiona slapping me awake. She then brought me forth to the descendants of the Druids; now known as the Grand Council. They trialed me, but it wasn't fair a trial, heh, it wasn't like I deserved it. I sent their brothers and sister to the flame… So, I would suffer their same fate."

"They burned you…"

He nodded, "And my siblings were more than content to watch."
Silence grew thick among us and for moment we allowed it to take hold, giving us time to collect our thoughts.

"But, you guys are the United Kingdom, expect for Ireland but you all clearly made up," I urged.

"Only because of the World Wars," he proclaimed, "you know common enemy and all."

I reached out, holding his hand in mine, "you gonna be okay?"

He gave a small smile and squeezed my hand, "yes, I'll be fine."

"You know, you got me, right?" I grinned.

He blinked and smiled even wider, "yes, thank you."

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We arrived at Edinburgh Airport a little after eight, which means it's been five hours since my last coffee fix and I needed another one; stat. I can excuse this need from the lack of sleep but whatever the case by be, Mom was not going to love this new habit of mine. I speed walked to a small Starbucks shop and ordered a double chocolate frappuccino.

"Another coffee?" observed Lukas, "I believe you have a problem."

"And I believe you should fuck off," I muttered as I took a sip. I licked my lips and slid my gaze back to the blond, to find him in a bright red cap with a blue cross outlined in white. The very cap I had knitted a week before. "Lukas…is that-"

"The cap you made me?" he finished, "yes, it is."

I took notice of the lopsided top and crooked stitch work and winced, "do you like it? I know it's a little rough and dorky."

"I like it," he smiled, "and I live with Mikkel, I am used to dorkiness."

I laughed, "Good to know... wait, does that mean you opened gifts without us?"

"We were bored and Arthur was crawling off the walls with worry and Francis thought it would be a good way to distract ourselves. It didn't work. Francis was nearly in tears when he saw the scarf you knitted him."

That made my heart swell, "I feel kinda good about that… Is that wrong?"

He smirked, "no that man cries easily."

I giggled and he asked, "Also, next year could you make me a scarf to match my hat?"

"Sure, no problem."

"If you two are done braiding each other's hair," Arthur called out, "the cab is here."

"You're just jealous of our friendship," I proclaimed as we bumped fists.

Arthur rolled his eyes and gestured for us to follow as Lukas and I shared a smile.

Outside laid a fresh pile of snow, thanks to the flake shower. The gray clouds were beginning to part,
allowing the sun's rays to beam through. The city was steeped in Celtic and medieval structures. Aging dark brick towers soared above, cathedrals were scattered along the area, each one more spectacular than the last, and there was a castle. A bold stoned castle sat pretty much at the heart of the city.

"Wow. It's…" I raked my brain for the right word, "striking." I grinned and caught Arthur's glare from the review mirror, "Oh, don't be like that, London's nice too."

He wrinkled his brow in confusion, "when have you ever been in London?"

Shit. "It's called the internet," I saved face, "duh. Anyway, did you call your family? Are we going to meet them somewhere?"

He sighed, "They didn't answer any of my calls, so we're going to surprise them."

"But what if they're not even here? What if they're in Wales or Ireland?"

"They're here. They always come to Scotland for the holidays. They would most likely be in a pub in Old Town, the only problem is there are dozens of them."

"A pub. It's almost nine in the morning," I stated, a little worried about their habit.

"Alistair likes to work in one during the holidays," he explained.

I raised a brow, "Wait… You guys can get jobs, other than the one you have?"

"Not now, but a few years back I was able to work in a book store..." he recalled and then added, "Francis was a hair stylist once."

"I'm still registered as a substitute teacher," Lukas begun to count off his fingers. "Tino was a teacher too, Erik worked as a tour guide for the penis museum-

"P-penis museum?" I giggled, "Seriously?"

He nodded and continued, "And Mikkel was a DJ once and Berwald was an accountant."

I blinked, absorbing this new bit of information, "So… I can be a dancer."

"No," Arthur cuts in bluntly, "it will be too much exposure."

"But Mikkel was a DJ," I countered.

"Only for a couple of nights," Lukas reminded. "When producers started to take notice, he had to stop."

I rolled my eyes, "Fine. Whatever," my tone had become bitter. "So how are we supposed to track them?"

Arthur thought for a moment and glanced to Lukas, "do you have a sheet of paper I can use?"

He tore a blank page from his journal and handed it to him. Arthur began folding the paper, bending it into a crane, "here we are." He presented proudly, "this will find them."

"I don't want to question your logic Doctor Who, but how is a paper crane gonna find your siblings?" I asked sarcastically.
"Simple, blood finds blood," he proclaimed coolly and asked the driver for a pocket knife. The driver's expression became worried and Lukas leaned forward, staring into his eyes.

"Do not question him," he coaxed. "Give him your knife."

The driver's face became blank and emotionless as he pulled out a knife from the glove apartment and handed it to Arthur. With one quick switch, he snapped the blade open and sliced his palm.

The driver cursed, "what the hell-"

Lukas grabbed his temple, "you see nothing; you're remember nothing. Now keep your eyes on the road and drive."

Like a zombie, the driver turned back to the wheel and drove on. His face frozen and unblinking like a doll.

My eyes widened in horror, "... did you just go all Scarlet Witch on his ass?"

"If you're asking if I compelled him, then yes. I just wish Britain could give me a little bit of a heads up," he gave the nation a narrowed look, "Compulsion isn't my strongest skill."

"It's working isn't it?" he continued his spell, waiting for his blood to become dirt. Then Arthur blew it at the crane, covering the paper in flecks of brown as he chanted, "blood finds blood."

"But, we're not related by blood," I stated.

"We are," Lukas corrected, "Somewhat."

"All nations bleed dirt, for that we are related," Arthur reminded as the crane began to flap its wings. "This spell will track nations, granted it won't track a certain nation but it will work in our situation. I highly doubt there are other countries here in Scotland besides my family."

I started to rub my temples, "so to recap, we're related but yet not related?"

"It's-"

"Complicated," I grunted. I should just get that word tattooed on my forehead, it's quickly becoming a definition of my life.

He ignored my tone and added, "once we get to Old Town, we follow the crane on foot."

"Won't people notice a paper crane flying?" I questioned.

His finger glowed as he wrote a sigil above the bird and it vanished. Before I could sarcastically ask how we would be able to see the bird; Arthur turned on me and wrote another sigil in front of my eyes.

I blinked away the brightness and the bird was back, "what-"

"I blocked the vision of the average people but magickal users can still be able to see it. The sigil I just did for you, allows you the sight for now."

"Uh, cool," I said uncertainly, then joked, "Does that mean I can also fairies and trolls now?"

Both Arthur and Lukas fell silent, avoiding my eyes as Lukas continued to compel the driver. He pulled over next to a museum and we climbed out of the car but not before Lukas demanded the
driver to forget their meeting and drive away.

Arthur tossed the paper bird into the air and we followed. I fell into step behind them, neither of them were in any mood to talk. I bit my lips together; I must've crossed into unspoken territory and I should've left it be but my curiosity only grew.

"Do you guys see them?" I asked, "Fairies? Trolls?"

Lukas glanced to Arthur as he sighed, "We did. But they haven't shown themselves for nearly twenty years."

"Why?"

"The modern world grew, people forgot and they disappeared," Lukas proclaimed.

With that they grew quiet once more and kept walking. I sighed through my nose, thinking of Nina and her fairy form. What I gathered was that the Faire Folk were actually spirits and they have been close to our world. But Lukas and Arthur weren't in the loop; why? Why did the spirits hide their true nature from the nations? And why have they gone radio silent?

I recalled Kaeliee's comment about all their man power going into protecting the balance; which lead to even more questions. What balance were they protecting? And from who or what?

My gut churned and I knew it had something to do with Iya, which had something to do with Abigail, which led to Clovis-ugh! Enough Amy, deal with one thing at a time. Get to the Council, stop Clovis, make sure he doesn't raise the dead and beat him for answers.

The walk was short as the crane lead us down a public street and unfolded into Arthur's hand. We looked up to a bar with large pine windows and a sign that said, The Blue Blazer. He twisted the knob but it was locked.

I smirked, "you guys gonna pull out your wands and unlock the door like Harry Potter?"

Both chuckled as Lukas pulled out his barrette from under his cap and picked the lock. "Not everything can be solved with magick," Arthur stated.

"Besides," Lukas clipped his barrette back in place and twisted the knob the open, "knowing Arthur he would blast the door right off its hinges."

"Ha, ha," the Brit huffed and followed him in.

A voice with an Irish accent vibrated from behind the bar. It was slightly different from Braden's, it was deeper and flat. "Dylan! Did you forget to lock the door?!" The auburn-haired man was facing the wall of liquor bottles before he turned to face us. "Sorry, we're clo-" His voice died as his dull green eyes widened, then narrowed. "What the bloody hell are you doing here?"

"Good to see you too, Killian," Arthur greeted with a nod.

"I locked the door," another, younger voice exclaimed as a boy rounded the corner. He had a mop of strawberry blond hair with green eyes just as vivid as Arthur's. But he had the appearance of someone young, possibly mid-teens. He blinked at us before glancing behind him as a red-haired man followed close behind. Now, I remembered him. Alistair Kirkland, the nation of Scotland and Arthur's oldest brother.

He raised a thick brow and smirked, "Well what brings you here dear little brother?"
"We need to speak with Fiona," Arthur announced bluntly.

"Fat chance," Killian hissed.

Alistair raised a hand to settle his brother and asked, "What for?"


"As long as you walk this planet the Council will always be in danger," a feminine voice resounded from the door frame.

We spun to face a tall, green eyed woman with wild curly red hair. She wore a long brown skirt, a thick, dark red jacket and tied a wool green scarf around her neck.

Dylan tilted his head, "I thought you were still at the house?"

"I was, till I felt their magick set foot inside of Edinburgh," she hanged her jacket and scarf on the coat rack and sat herself at a bar stool. But not before nodding to Lukas and he returning that nod in mutual respect.

"Wait, you can sense magick and even track them with it?" I glanced to Arthur, "why didn't you just do that?"

Before he could say anything, Fiona answered in a superior tone, "he may have raw talent but without discipline and structure that talent becomes wild and uncontrollable. Let me guess, you had to track us done with 'blood' magick?" She smirked, "very novice of you, Arthur."

I noticed that his hands had curled into fists, "Fiona, we need to warn the Council. They're in danger."

"By who?" Dylan asked, generally worried.

"Clovis and his friends," I answered, catching Arthur's fist and squeezing it. "They're magick users and they're trying to find a Seeker that has the head of Abigail Williams."

Dylan's eyes widened as Killian tensed and Alistair whistled, "That witch is finally dead."

"Wait!" Arthur exclaimed, "You knew Abigail was alive! All this time? Why didn't you say anything?"

Killian glared, "It was Council business. It had nothing to do with you."

"It won't matter either way," I interjected. "If Clovis gets her head, she won't be dead for long."

"Why raise her?" Fiona questioned, "Are they minions of her's?"

"He wants to question her," I remarked.

"About what?"

"Others like her, immortals bent on… I don't know, world domination?" I added quickly, growing frustrated with the wasted time. "Whatever the reason, I'm sure we all agree we need to stop them."

Everyone fell quiet, till Fiona broke the tension, "I'll send word." She waved us off, "you may leave."
"Is that it, really," Arthur exclaimed, "Four warlocks, ones that seem to be very powerful are going to attack the Council. Wouldn't it be best to send aid?"

"Oh, we'll go, but you; it will be a cold day in hell before I ever let you get anywhere near them," she threatened.

"I'm here to help."

"Help," she hissed at the word, "I don't think that word exists in your vocabulary. Just as Killian said, this is our business, there was no need for you come all this way."

"Well, if any of you answered your damn phones maybe I wouldn't have," he snapped.

"He's got a point," Dylan stated.

"I don't care. The Council is the only thing we have left of our mother and I refuse for him to come anywhere near them."

"She was my mother too," Arthur claimed.

Fiona snarled, "You don't get to say that. Not after everything you've done. You forsook everything she stood for, all for your Christian god and your Protestant whore."

Arthur lunged for her and I pulled him back, wrapping an arm around his waist as Lukas stepped forward, "We are not here to fight. We are just trying to make sure Abigail won't harm anyone else. I'm sure you've heard of what happen at Svenska."

The group fell silent once more and Fiona lost the venom in her eyes and sighed, "Yes, it was horrible… too painful for anyone to go through. That cannot be tolerated."

"A Seeker already took care of her," Killian added, "I'm sure he can handle whoever this Clovis fellow is."

"The Seeker didn't kill her," I announced, releasing Arthur once I made sure his breathing slowed. "I did."

Alistair's eyebrows rose as a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, "well aren't you quite a feisty lassie."

"Thanks," I said dryly. "Lithuania and Denmark were there too," I was able to catch Fiona's eyes widening at the mention of the goofy nation. "And he needed all of us to help, so no he won't be able to handle Clovis and his friends. Even with a group of Seekers and witches, they will get what they want."

"How do you know this?" Fiona asked, "What makes you think they can take on the Council."

"Because… they're shape shifters. They can become anything or anyone," I stated.

"Like the Faire?" she questioned, her brow wrinkling.

I went with it, "I think so, the way they move and act, it's not human."

The nations grew tense once more, mentioning the supernatural allowed a chill to consume the air. This time Dylan was the first to speak, "We need him."
"No-"

"Yes," he pushed, "Arthur has magick, unpredictable and wild sure but Lukas more than makes up for it."

Arthur looked like he wanted to protest but I gave him a firm shake of my head. Luckily, he listened and remained silent as his siblings debated.

"We don't have magick," Alistair reminded, gesturing to himself and Killian. "They do."

"She's more powerful than him," Killian argued, "and she has control."

"And there will be Seekers and witches," she added.

"But if we are dealing with the Faire, they are going to need more of us," Dylan gestured to everyone in the room. "Even America will be helpful, with that strength of her's."

I painted on my best, most innocent smile as Arthur muttered something under his breath and Lukas examined his nails, disinterested with the conversation.

"Oh fuck," she cursed and slammed her hands on the table, "I'll go rent a car." She grabbed her coat and stormed out of the bar.

Awkward silence engulfed the room till Killian slammed a bottle of scratch on the table, "Anyone want a drink?"

"Please," Alistair took his seat across from him as Dylan and Arthur sat at his sides.

"Guys it's still morning," I chided.

They ignored me and I turned Lukas, "are they always like this?"

He shrugged his shoulders in response.

Fiona pulled up in a red Outlander, it was an older model from the year 2013 but it had upgraded sun panels on the roof to power the battery.

"Where are we going?" I asked as we piled in. Alistair took the passenger seat beside Fiona while Killian, Lukas and Dylan took the middle seat and Arthur and I were squeezed into the back.

"We're going to Fionnphort," she answered.

"Ugh, that's nearly six hours," Killian complained.

"Pfft, six hours?" I chuckled, "I was on the road for almost two days straight when I was visiting family in Tulsa."

Everyone turned to give me their own expression of horror and awe.

"That's impressive," admitted Dylan.

I grinned, "Thank you. Now the key to a good road trip is snacks, good music and games."

"You have two choices," Fiona interrupted, "you either sit down and be quiet or I tie you to the
"O-kay," I muttered under my breath as I leaned into my seat.

The first two hours were completely silent and incredibly boring. I mostly stared out window, watching as the snowy scenery passed by. I glanced to Arthur; he was in a deep trance, staring at nothing, his gaze miles away. I looked through my carryon once more, searching for my iPod but I knew it wasn't here. It was back in Stockholm, on my night stand, charging. Mostly I did it to distract myself, but this time I dug deeper finding Grandpa's journal at the bottom of my clothes.

I furrowed my brow in confusion, did I pack that by mistake? Granted I wasn't really thinking. I pulled it out, figuring it would kill the time but I noticed Arthur once more, looking so lost.


I finally broke him from his trance but he didn't seem to notice that I used the nickname he despised so much. "Yes?"

I gestured to the journal, "this was my grandfather's. It talks about his young days and about the time he spent with Al."

His eyes widened and I smiled, "you even met him once. Does Alabama ring any bells?"

He blinked in confusion till his jaw dropped, "that boy, he was…"

I pulled back the inner cover of the book and showed him the photograph of Grandpa when he was in late teens. "Recognize him?"

He huffed a short chuckle, "all this time, he kept him-you… right under our noses." He sighed and rubbed his eyes, "I continue to underestimate him, even now."

"Do you want to read it?" I asked softly.

His eyes darted to the book before his gaze fell back on me, "are you sure?"

"Yeah," I assured, "why do you think I'm telling you this?"

I pushed the journal forward and he held it with such care as if it would crumble in his fingers. He smiled, "thank you."

I returned his smile, "No problem… but you're not allowed to go past my bookmark."

He laughed, for real this time, "You have my word."

We made two pit stops in the next hour, being that most of these guys weren't used to being in a car for more than three hours. After the stops, Fiona was determined to make it to Fionnphort in the next two hours. She drove rapidly, ignoring the speed limits and Dylan's pleas to take it slow. Either way, it was thirty passed three when we arrived at the small fishing town. Snow had hit them hard, covering the rolling hills and houses but the sea was still free to crash against the shore. It was peaceful.

I sat on the rocky shore as Fiona spoke on the phone in a language I didn't understand. Arthur remained by the car, still reading the journal. Lukas was beside him, lifting a curious eyebrow to the book but not saying a word. Killian and Alistair were taking a smoke break and I made a face when
the scent traveled through the wind. I subconsciously moved closer to the sea, taking in the salty air.

I inhaled through my nose and combed my fingers through my hair, "what am I doing?" I muttered to myself. Here I am, in some fishing town in Scotland, trying to protect a witch coven from a rogue group of spirits. Everyone believes it's the work of fairies and they were... somewhat. The fairies, trolls and any other mythical creature were spirits... but we're spirits... but earth bound?

_Ugh._

I rubbed my eyes with my palms, what was all this about anyway?

Clovis said that Iya was getting stronger, gathering immortals... gathering an army. For what? Does she want to take over the Spirit World? Earth? Both?! Wasn't that what the original Iya wanted? But we're dealing with a whole new Iya and Grandma knows... I paled, she knows. Karen warned her for a reason, does that mean Iya was after my family? But why them? She's after me and if Abigail's first target was Arthur, then Iya must be someone from his past. But they didn't seem to care when it was Toris caught in their trap; so, were all nations free game? Does that mean were dealing with someone that's bent on revenge on all of them? A human from their past?

The bigger question was who? Hitler? Vlad the Terrible? Wait, we're dealing with a woman, so my money would be placed on the vain obsessed Hungarian Countess that bathed in the blood of young girls.

_Wait, no, they're dead._

_Well that's what everyone else thought about Abigail, look how well that turned out!_

I groaned as a pool of anxiety filled at the bottom of my gut. _Amy, you can tackle these questions later, right now focus on Clovis._

But that led to a bigger headache; how was I supposed to fight him? With one slap to my forehead I was rendered a screaming, trembling mess on the side of the street.

"You seem conflicted," I looked to up to find Dylan, handing me a cup of hot chocolate.

"You have no idea," I mumbled as I blew at my drink and took a tiny sip.

A horn roared from the distance as a rusted blue fishing boat sped into our line of sight. It slowed passed as an elderly man waved to us from inside the wheelhouse. He sailed his little boat to the concrete dock, where we quickly assembled. Once the boat was steadied, we climbed in and Fiona greeted the bald, kind eyed man with a friendly hug.

"Miss Fiona, you're still as beautiful as ever."

"And you have grown more handsome through the years," it was the most genuine smile I have seen on her face.

He laughed, "You flatter an old man." His eyes darted from Fiona and her (closer) brothers to Arthur, Lukas and me. "Who are?"

"Tadgh, meet our black sheep of the family," Killian pointed a thumb to Arthur, "Also known as England."

Tadgh grew silent, losing his smile as he eyed Arthur suspiciously.
To beat the awkward silence, I asked, "so… you a councilman?"

His smile returned, "I was once, now I just run the boat." His eyes fell back to Arthur till he spun to the steps that led to the wheelhouse, "We should get going."

As Tadgh clicked on the engine, he twirled the wheel, stirring us away from the dock and into open water. I moved closer to Fiona, eyeing her curiously, "so… the Council knows about us?"

"Yes," she answered, then smirked, "Well to be honest, there are others that know of us beside the governments of the world and the nations themselves don't even realize."

I blinked, "who?"

"The entire world of magick knows or at least heard of beings like us," she replied. "Aside from the Council members, the other covens have suspected but never really bothered with checking."

"How many members are in this coven?"

"Well the Council is not a coven, they are chosen by vote to watch over the other covens throughout West Europe."

"What about the rest of the world?" I asked.

"East Europe is watched over by the Romanis."

"Romanis?" I questioned.

"Gypsies," she answered.

"Wouldn't they also be in West Europe too?"

"There are," she assured, "but they follow the eastern code."

"Oh," I nodded and asked, "what else?"

"Let's see… you have the Iron Council of Scandinavia, the Priestesses of the Mediterranean, and the Imams of the Middle East. Then in Asia, there are the Hindu Pujaris, the Tibet Monks and the Shinto Shrine. Then there are the Egyptian Priestesses and Voodoo Priests throughout Africa-"

"Hold up. Hold up, hold up, hold up," I interrupted. "These people are magickal? And they know?"

"Not all are magickal, only a few. Think in terms of ten percent of them if that helps."

"Why haven't they said anything?"

"And risk the magickal world being discovered? We all know what happens when witches and magick become too real for the public eye."

"Oh, come on, I think Harry Potter kinda smoothed things over. People love wizards."

"Well not everyone can be wizards," she replied, "and humans are jealous creatures. If they can't have it, no one else can."

I grew quiet and leaned against the rail, looking out to the sea and the fading fish town. "What about America? Are there?"
"Aye," she nodded, "but it's a little complicated. You have the Witches in the east but in that cluster, there are the Pujaris and Imams within major cities. The south is dominated by the Voodoo Queens and Kings but a few Brujerias have taken some territory in Texas. The west and north are a complete mess, with the native tribal shamans, the Romanis, the Chinese Sorcerers, and even more Brujerias scattered among the area. But then again, the Romanis, Brujerias and Sorcerers have spread to the south and east as well. It's not as clean and simple like it is with us."

"Because," I stated, "it's a nation made of immigrants."

She nodded, "so is Canada. They have their natives, Pujaris and Witches but they only focus on their own people. Then the Central and South Americas are home to the Brujerias but also to the Calundureiras, the Cuban santerias, the Haitian voodooists, Chamanes, and the hungaros. As you can see the Americas don't have a council, along with Asia and Africa the continents are far too vast for them to have one council."

I took a moment to absorb all this information before I asked. "How do you know all this?"

"The magick community had a meeting back in 2015, it didn't go so well."

"What happen?"

"They were supposed to form a World Council but the North Americas kept fighting among themselves and the Romanis, both from Eastern Europe and the Americas, wanted nothing to do with us and of course West Europe just had act all superior, which only angered your natives…" she groaned. "And I thought normal politics were stressful."

I ran a hand over my face and through my hair, "this is nothing like Harry Potter," I muttered bitterly.

Once again the boat horn pulled me away from my lingering thoughts. Fiona snapped to attention, staring straight ahead to a small, snow covered island. It was elevated with dark gray stone and a spacious plain was expanded over the top. Lines were craved into the rock, stretching vertically from top to bottom. A large, gaping hole emerged at one side as the walls inside were craved like stepping stones, being placed on top of one another.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Fingal's Cave," Fiona answered, "the meeting place of the Grand Council."

Tadgh stirred us along the shore, tying his boat beside a paved walk way. A dangling chain rail ran along the path, it was old and worn but strong as Tadgh reassured. The elderly man took the lead as Fiona and her brothers followed, I tailed behind Arthur as Lukas brought up the rear. I stepped slowly, ghosting a hand along the rail in case I slipped. My gut continued to churn at the thought of this Grand Council and what these people were like. Were they old fork nosed women, dressed in black robes and pointed hats? Were they like Abigail? Cruel, calculating and vicious? Granted they ordered for her head, so they couldn't be that bad… right?

When we entered the mouth of the cave, six cloaked figures were waiting for us. These figures were scattered; two were lounging on the tallest towers, watching us through their dark hoods. One sat at the bottom, remained perfectly still, not once bothered by our arrival. The last three were loitering along the crystal blue stream that ran through the middle.

One flinched and removed his hood; it was Braden Campbell, "what the bloody hell are you doing here?! How did-"

"Hush boy, these are our guests," Tadgh scowled.
"Grandfather, that-that girl," he spun, facing the two cloaked figures. "She's not human."

"Then enlighten us," a voice above proclaimed as both figures removed their hoods.

They were male but that's all they had in common. One had dark skin with braided hair, tied into a thick pony tail. Even under the cloak, I could tell he was built like a horse. The other was lighter with chestnut hair and dark brown eyes. He was smaller at average height and built with a lithe grace of a cat. He was the one that spoke and he was young, might've been in his late twenties. The silent giant beside him was older, my best guess would have been mid or late forties. The young brunet cocked an amused brow at me and then turned to face Braden.

"Should we run screaming for our lives?" he teased, his words laced with a Spanish accent. "This girl," he beamed a brilliant smile my way, "seems like someone that I would take on a date," he winked.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes and it seemed Braden was in the same boat; for when he replied, his voice was edged with annoyance. "Councilmen Marino I would highly suggest otherwise, and also this is not the time or place."

"But you are right," a French accent resounded as the two figures behind him revealed themselves. Both were women with light skin tones but one had a head full of tight dark curls while the other had limp ash blond locks. Her hair was cropped close to her head, revealing a slender neck and tall physic. The brunette was shorter, rounder with plump cheeks and large breasts.

This woman slid her gaze to the blonde, a sly smile tugging at her lips. "Dear say Astrid, whatever do you mean?" her Irish accent was thick but carried a sweet undertone.

Jade green clashed with amber as they both shared a secretive grin.

Braden caught on quickly, grinding his teeth in irritation. "Would someone mind letting me in on this?"

"Oh, do relax mate," the dark giant stated nonchalantly, "no need to be so mellow dramatic." His accent was lighter, it reminded me of Sam's.

"She's a nation," Astrid proceeded, "they all are."

"Catching on now Braden," Councilmen Marino smirked.

"Nations..." he stated as he raised a puzzled brow in our general direction.

"Beings that are forever intertwined with the land and its people," the last cloaked figure finally spoke. The voice was feminine but hoarse, worn with time but still carried a youthful pitch. She rose to stand and pushed back her hood, brushing her hands through her short, snow white hair.

Alistair gave a genuine smile, "it's good to see you lass."

The old woman laughed, her ice blue eyes glittering, "I am no longer a lass."

"You'll always be one to me Isla," he proclaimed sweetly.

Before I could even make a guess on their relationship Braden asked, "But what exactly are they?"

"Some have called them spirits," Isla continued, "others have called them gods. Even our ancestors have called them guardians, but they are all one of the same. Granted real spirits can't last on the
Earth Plane as long as they can. Gods can be monsters and guardians can switch sides." She gave a pointed look to Arthur that last comment was a stab at him and he knew it.

Braden's face only grew more puzzled, "guardians? From what?"

"Well in the beginning they were meant to protect us," Councilmen Marino examined his nails. "But," his eyes slid to Arthur, "not everyone is cut out for the job."

"To be honest, they don't really guard us," the plump woman added, "it's not like we need it anymore. They belong to the government and they don't even believe in us. Just a bunch of stories to tell children at night."

Braden blinked in surprise, "They work for the government?"

"More like owned," Killian proclaimed, rather bored with this conversation.

Fiona twitched a brow at his direction but ignored him, "it still doesn't matter. Our first priorities will always be you; at least mine will."

The plump brunette sighed, "Miss Fiona we know that you would fight tooth and nail for us but remember you are Ireland. You not only represent us… the 'mythology' side of Ireland. You also represent your government, people and culture."

"Saoirse-"

"Wait," Braden exclaimed, "you're Ireland?"

Fiona sighed, "Yes I am; and the others are my brothers." She gestured a hand to Alistair, "Scotland," then to Killian, "Northern Ireland," and finally to Dylan, "and Wales."

"And the rest?"

"The blond," the giant announced, "is my nation; England," he gave a slight nod to Arthur.

"Wow, Jasper, you almost sound prideful," Councilmen Marino chuckled.

"My family came to the UK long after this whole Druid mess," he shrugged his shoulders. "I really have no need to be angry at him, besides… he regrets it."

Arthur blinked, narrowing his eyes, "you're a reader?"

"Empath," he answered with a smile.

"He may look like he could crush people's skulls with his bare hands, but he's nothing more than a fluffy teddy bear," Councilmen Marino snickered.

Jasper gave a slight push, causing the slender man to tip over the edge. He yelped, gripping the stone as he fell. He maneuvered to the next tower with a swing and landed gracefully. Jasper smirked and he hissed, "That wasn't funny."

"Now, now, Adrian be a good little boy and mind your elders."

"Enough," Saoirse exclaimed, "both of you."

Braden took a moment to think, "So… if they're not guardians… are they mascots?"
I laughed as Arthur rolled his eyes, "we are not mascots."

"To be honest, we kinda are," Lukas quipped. "It's not like when we were young and I was out raiding with my people. When you would ride into battle on a horse with your sword and shield ready to take us on... hell we don't even see battle anymore."

"We see battle-"

"Not after the Middle East, where you had your little crusade."

"Crusade?" I exclaimed, "What did he do?"

"Interrogated all the Middle Eastern nations; trying to find information about your predecessor. He was certain that they had kidnapped him," he replied and then clapped his hands, "spoiler alert, he wasn't there."

Arthur glared and the realization hits me, "wait a minute! We don't even see battle anymore?! Then why am I being trained in military combat?"

"You never know," Lukas shrugged his shoulders, "but it has come in handy."

I nodded, "true."

"But still," Arthur hissed, "we are not mascots."

"Yes, we are," Lukas stated.

"Where is your pride man?"

He waved him off, "I let go of my pride years ago."

"Not like this isn't entertaining," the plump brunette known as Saoirse crossed her arms. "What is this all about? Why are you here?"

"A group of warlocks are after you," Fiona warned. "After him," she gestured to Braden and to the bloody bag tied around his belt.

I instantly froze; the image of Abigail's slacked jaw and wide, unblinking eyes flashed inside my mind. I shuddered, squeezing my eyes shut for a moment. When I reopened them, I found Braden staring at me with a conflicted gaze. It was hard to tell what he was thinking, but my best guess it was about me and how I wasn't... human and now he had the proof.

"They want Abigail's head," Arthur claimed.

Astrid narrowed her eyes and they flashed violet, "are they working for her?"

His brow twitched at the sight of purple eyes but he moved pass that. "What Amy has told me, is that they are after information on Abigail's employer."

"Employer?" she turned her violet gaze on me, "Who was she working for?"

Violet eyes... she carried the Sight; meaning I can't lie nor avoid the topic of Iya any longer. I sighed, feeling a weight being lifted but before I could say one word, the ground beneath us trembled.

The cave ceiling shook as the stones cracked and plummeted to the floor. Arthur tackled me to the
ground, covering my body with his as the others scattered. Alistair and Killian huddled beside Fiona as Dylan and Lukas grabbed each other for balance. Adrian screamed, falling till he vanished and reappeared on the ground with Jasper by side.

"Out of the cave!" Saoirse shouted over the roar of tumbling stones, "Out of the cave now!"

Water burst from the cave's inner creek; this mighty surge sky rocketed to the ceiling, twisting and turning till the end formed the head of a dragon. The liquid hardens, freezing into a moving ice sculptor. The creature gave an earth-shattering screech and drove for us with sharp, crystal teeth.

Fiona shoved her brothers aside and sprinted for Saoirse. Fire sputtered and sparked in both of their hands as a blast of scorching heat clashed with the ice dragon's teeth. It screamed and recoiled as steam engulfed the cave.

Arthur moved quickly, pulling me towards the opening. Everyone followed, stepping onto the craved pathway as the ground quivered with another rumble. The stacking towers shook but they didn't fall, instead they shot out. Randomly popping in and out of the island like a game of Whack a Mole.

We tried to get the boat but a wave rose and crashed it against rocky shore. It smashed into pieces, leaving us trapped. Jasper moved like lightening, swinging Astrid over his shoulder and hopping from tower to tower. Saoirse tailed behind, jumping at such a speed that she was just a flash of cloak and curls. Adrian, no longer fazed by the spectacle, leaped from one tower to the next. Again, he moved with this grace that didn't seem human and as he landed at the top of island; I could've sworn he had horns.

The path shook once more as another tower exploded and catapulted me into the sky. I flew through open air, flailing my arms and legs as the wind whirled; muffling Arthur's cries and my own shrill scream. The soar was descending and I tensed, preparing for the splat.

But it never came.

Instead I was floating, rocking back on a current as it slowed my momentum into a pair of gentle hands.

"It's alright," Isla soothed, "you're okay now."

Ironically, I gasped for air, curling my hands into her shoulders as we glided back to the land. I released her and dropped to my knees, trying to control my thundering heart. Tadgh dropped beside us with his grandson by his side.

"Amy!" Arthur came running, with Lukas and his siblings right behind. I rose shakily, assuring him that I was okay but that didn't lessen his worry. The council members joined, huddling together with the nations as they spoke of their next strategy. I subconsciously slid a glance to Adrian and just like I thought, he had two horns sticking out of his forehead. The pair were long, brown and curved into a wide V over his head.

He caught my dumbstruck gaze and he grinned seductively, "See something you like?"

I ignored his flirty tone and pointed, "those are horns… are-are you a fawn?"

He laughed, "No, I'm human but if you like the horns, they can stay."

"Adrian," Saoirse snapped, "this is not the time."
Astrid turned on me, "Is this their doing? The warlocks?"

"I don't know-"

A swish of wind tore between us, cutting me off as we blinked at one another curiously. It happened so quickly that we didn't know it was an attack till we heard Isla choking. Everyone turned to face her and we each shared a stunned gasp as Saoirse screamed and Alistair reached for her; a silent cry dying on his lips.

A deadly sharp icicle had plunged itself through Isla's throat.

I stared wide eyed as crimson streamed from her wound and dripped off the pointed edge. Isla's mouth pooled with blood as she spluttered and collapsed into the snow.

Before anyone could utter a word, Adrian spun to the left, "another wave, heading our way!"

Jasper stepped forward, electricity sparking at his fingertips. He threw up his palms and the currents connected, circling us in a protective, pink hued dome. Just as the force field was complete a bombardment of deadly sharp icicles showered upon us. The crystal shards crashed against the dome but the shield held.

Alistair kneeled beside Isla, brushing her hair aside as he muttered sadly, "oh lass."

"How did they know?" Saoirse questioned, "How did they know she was a power-stripper?"

"One of them is a reader," Lukas recalled.

"But," I breathed, looking away from the dreadful sight, "but Clovis wouldn't do this and he had to grab my head to read it."

"But you were on guard," Arthur stated and then cursed, "None of us were."

"Something is in the sky," Tadgh proclaimed and we looked up to find a pair of wings speeding across the air.

"A bird?" I questioned.

"No," he blinked and his pupils grew, nearly covering his entire eye as a small sliver of amber circled around the edge. "A girl with wings."

"Shifter?" Astrid questioned.

"No. Ice magick," he answered, "she's flying with a pair of wings made of ice."

The bird flicked a wing and fired another wave of spikes our way. Jasper's shield vibrated with power as the sparks grew and expanded to take on the assault.

"I'll bring her down," Tadgh's eyes never left the skies as gray and brown feathers spouted throughout his head and neck.

Braden grabbed his shoulder, "No, Grandfather you can't. You're not a young man anymore."

"I can still fly!" he argued.

Saoirse ignored them and demanded, "Jasper, shoot her down!"
"Gladly," he snapped his fingers and sent a current into the sky.

The figure ducked, plummeting to earth in a flash of black, blue and white. A girl's face came into view; her cheeks were round, with thick brows and black hair, curled into ringlets. She was young, no more than eight. Her wings were beautifully sculpted with each individual feather carved in perfect detail. Her eyes were ice blue till the irises faded; flaring in a brilliant white light.

Jasper shot another spark and she swerved the left, using the air to glide and dive out of sight.

"She's a Seer!" Astrid shouted as the ground shook once more and a blunt tower slammed into Jasper's head from behind.

He grunted and the shield fell, forcing us to scatter as another swarm of ice came flying. It was my turn to shove Arthur to the ground as a shard sailed past me, nicking my ear. I ignored the sting and Arthur rolled me over, his hand gleaming gold as he slapped another icicle aside.

"You still remember the deflecting spell I taught you," Dylan slid to his side, his hands were bright as he slammed each shard to the ground. "That warms my heart, little brother," he smiled.

"Oh, do shut up," Arthur hissed as he smashed a shard to pieces.

I wobbled on shaky legs but was pushed to the ground once more by Astrid. Her hand was lit with violet flame as she blocked two icicles. These spikes would have stabbed me in the back if she hadn't come to my rescue. I panted my thanks and scanned my surroundings. Adrian was hopping from place to place, spinning and back flipping as he dodged each icicle with ease. Saoirse and Jasper were darting out of sight, moving in flashes. Both were outlined in a soft glow of color, Saoirse was a fierce red while Jasper was a bright pink. Lukas blocked the spikes by reforming them into his own personal shield. Fiona lit the onslaught on fire, melting them to steam as Killian and Alistair stood behind her.

Killian cursed, "We need weapons!"

"On it!" Braden shouted and dipped his hands into his chest. He yanked out two long bladed claymores and thrust them forward.

The redheads caught them swiftly as each slit a shard in half, defending their sister from behind.

With Braden being distracted, Tadgh took his chance to leap into the sky. Braden spun, screaming for his grandfather as he morphed; a pair of gray and brown wings spouted from his back, expanding into a nearly twenty-foot wing span.

My jaw dropped, "he just popped out wings…"

"He's a shifter," Astrid stated, "he's very skilled but the older a shifter becomes, the harder it is to shift back."

I blinked, still slightly stunned but I did notice that the flying icicles of death had stopped. I followed the pair in the air as the young girl focused her shards solely at Tadgh. They circled each other, swirling in a lethal dance of air and ice.

"Tadgh!" Astrid cried, "She's a Seer! Don't think! Act!"

"A Seer?!" I exclaimed, "Like a physic that sees into the future? Like That's So Raven?"

"Yes," she answered quickly.
"How the hell is he supposed to fight someone that sees into the future?"

"The future is never set in stone; there are too many variables, too many people that make different choices each day. Even the smallest of choices can change the future in an instant. As long as he doesn't think too much on his moves, he'll be fine."

I glanced back to the pair, "She's just a kid…"

"She's no child. She's an immortal," Astrid cautioned.

I flinched, "how can you tell?"

"Her aura, it's clouded in darkness." She proclaimed, "When a human soul eats another, their soul is forever marked."

The dark-haired girl dropped, twisting around and kicking Tadgh square in the back. Tadgh sank, twirling and twisting in the air as he tried to right himself. The girl dived, slicing a wing with her own. Tadgh screamed and Braden cried out as feathers scattered into the sea. Tadgh shook it off and surged forward, holding nothing back as he threw a gust of wind, shattering her wings.

She descended and a lean figure jumped for her. The silhouettes fell together as two hoses of water burst from the ocean. They collided into the pair and a new set of wings formed behind the young girl's back.

"Another one," Astrid hissed as they glided back to land.

They dropped with ease, the young girl was now in the company of an older girl in her late teens. She had long black hair, dark eyes and soft copper skin; she was native.

A suffocating tension fell over the group as we exchanged one anxious glance after the other. The two immortals seemed unnerved, even when Tadgh plummeted; a jagged beck ready to strike. The oldest of the pair never moved from her spot as a boulder shot out and slammed into Tadgh.

A loud sickening crack ringed in my ears as his head snapped to the left. His wings dissolved; scattering into broken, withered feathers and his beck morphed back as his mouth. He slumped to the snow, his eyes wide and unblinking.

The tension rippled as Braden pulled a cross bow from within his cloak and aimed an arrow at the older girl. It launched and soared but was swiped aside by the younger girl's wing. The same wing melted and reformed in a blink of an eye as it flew into a shard. The jagged ice would have killed Braden if Saoirse hadn't caught. The pointed end was an inch away from making contact.

"Someone should teach you some manners little girl," Saoirse proclaimed coldly as the shard sizzled into steam inside her fist.

"It's too late for that," the girl replied in a bored tone.

Saoirse strode forward in a flash, her hands aflame. The older of the immortals moved just as fast, slapping Saoirse's hands aside and slammed the heel of her foot into Saoirse's chin. Saoirse reared back with grunt but dove back with a blast of fire. The immortal dodged left and was met with Killian's blade. She ducked and swiped him off his feet.

Killian maneuvered right, swinging for the immortal's neck. She weaved and plunged her fist into the snow. The earth trembled as thick, giant roots spouted and dove for us. Arthur yanked me back, keeping me pinned between him and Lukas. Fiona shot out a surge of flame. They caught fire but it
didn't slow them down. They swung for us; completely ablaze as they swayed and twirled around us, becoming as flexible as rubber.

"Stop the flames," Adrian shouted, "they're not helping!"

"We just need a second dose," Saoirse glided to Fiona's back and sent another blast of extreme heat. Arthur continued to pull me away from the fight, keeping distance as far as he could. "Stay down," he ordered.

"We can't keep running-"

An icicle slit through us, forcing us to jump apart. The blue-eyed girl hurled another three shards and Lukas stepped forward, forming a shield out of her ice. The child immortal was unfazed and continued her assault, sending wave after wave of ice.

"How long can the shield hold?" asked Arthur.

"Not long," Lukas grunted as a shard plunged a hole through his left. The icicle had grazed through his shoulder, staining the ice with his blood.

His eyes began to glow as another wave flew. He shoved the shield aside and raised his hands at the incoming shards.

I reached for him, "Lukas-

"Arthur pulled me back, "don't distract him!"

I blinked in confusion till I noticed the icicles had slowed, coming to a halt in mid-air. Lukas smirked, turning the shards back on the girl, "think fast." He flung them back with a blast of power; soaring at a remarkable speed.

The girl leaped into the sky avoiding her spikes but a firm hand snatched her ankle. Jasper tightened his grip and a course of lightening shot through the young girl. Pink sparks and currents swirled around her as a shrill cry escaped from her lips. Jasper dropped her to the powder, her body twitching.

His fist illuminated with another surge of pink electricity; ready to make another blow but in one split second, the girl sat up and clapped her hands. This clap resounded in a shock wave, sending Jasper flying through the air. The girl turned on us and clapped once more, directing another wave our way. The air roared as we were thrown across the field. We skidded against the ground, the snow becoming a cushion at least but we were nearly tripping over the edge.

"What the hell was that?!" I exclaimed.

"Thunder," Arthur answered with grunt, his gaze firmly on the girl as he spoke. "Thunder and water," his eyes shift to the older girl. Her battle still raging as Alistair thrust forward, trying to distract her as Braden aimed. The immortal noticed instantly and slammed a boulder into Alistair's chest, colliding him into Braden.

"Earth and wood," Arthur continued, "dangerous combinations."

"Thanks for the assumption Sherlock," I proclaimed sarcastically, "couldn't have figured that out without you."
He furrowed his thick brow, "Is this really the time?"

"It's the perfect time," I exclaimed, "I always start a sarcastic banter when I'm facing death; it's how I cope."

Lukas snapped, "Can you two stop-

He was cut short due to a jagged spike through the heart. He blinked, his expression confused for a moment till another larger shard flew; slicing through his neck in one clean slash.

He fell over the edge and I jumped for him, catching the arm of his decapitated body. His head tumbled, bouncing like a soccer ball along the shore. I resisted the urge to scream and pulled Lukas up.

Arthur gasped and I turned to my right; the immortal child stood beside me. Her face wore a bored expression as she dropped over the edge. She leaped from one stone tower after the other, moving in a flash of dark curls and ruffled skirts. I tried to follow her movements but she was too fast, before I knew it she stood behind us. Her face blank as she held Lukas' head in her hands.

Anger overrides my fear as I rose and demanded, "Give. Him. Back. Now!"

Her mask revealed nothing as her gaze fell on Lukas and back to me. Her eyes glowed white for a moment, "Things are going to get much harder for you." She closes her eyes and reopens, displaying her ice blue irises, 'I'm sorry." She stated and plunged her fingers into Lukas' left eye socket.

"No!" I lunged for her but she weaved, yanking one eye out with ease. She moved for the other and I twirled, slamming my fist square into her jaw. She reared back, dropping Lukas and I pushed forward; throwing one punch after another. Two blows to the gut and an elbow to her temple sent her to ground. I towered over her, grabbing her throat with one hand and squeezed.

She tried to bring her hands together for a shock wave but I snatched her wrist in an iron grip. "Let go of it," I shouted.

"It's either his or yours," she choked and I blinked in confusion.

"What the fuck does that mean?!"

Her eyes widened, "Mara!"

I tensed as a shadow moved over me. I craned my neck to the left and found the older girl looming over me. Her face was covered in golden fur, aligned with huge black spots around the frame of her face and neck. The bridge of her nose was slighter larger, her irises were flaring in a bright yellow flame and her pupils had formed into slits. Her jaw was opened wide, showing her long, jagged fangs. Her hand was raised, claws at the ready.

I tried to duck but I was too slow. Her nails dug into my cheek, grazing the teeth inside. I took the hit, rolling left and righted myself into a squat. She dived forward, her jaw open. Adrian slid between us, hooking his curved horns into her flesh and tossed her aside. She landed gracefully and charged with another swipe of her clawed hand. He leaped over her, spinning in mid-air as he kicked her in the face.

Mara didn't move; not even a flinch.

Adrian cried out and dropped to the snow. She clutched his cloak and threw him to my feet.
I looked to his foot, well more like hoof. It was swelling and a giant purple bruise had completely covered his ankle. "What happened?"

"She used petrification," he grunted.

"Petrification?"

"The ability to turn anything and anyone to stone, even one's self."

She appeared before us, her claws ready to strike once more, "you're awfully slow for a councilmen."

A blast of golden energy soared and Mara reared back, turning to face Arthur. His wand at the ready as his face twisted into a lethal snarl. "Get away from my niece!" Another surge of energy came flying but Mara didn't more. Instead she grinned and weaved left at the every last second.

Skin ripped and my jaw dropped.

Astrid appeared out of nowhere, her left arm and shoulder completely gone. Leaving a gaping hole where her heart should've been.

Mara smirked, "using camouflage to sneak up on me huh? Didn't seem to go so well."

Adrian cried out for her and someone screamed but I remained silent, too shocked to utter a word. Blood gushed from her wound as she collapsed into the snow, straining the pure white with scarlet.

Mara dashed out of sight and I scanned the area in a frantic, till I found her standing behind Arthur.

I cried out but it was too late.

With one effortless swipe, she ripped his head off.

A cry died on my lips as Mara tossed his head up into the air, like a cat playing with ball of yarn. "It seems you lost your head Mister England," she stated casually.

I was overcome with rage as I charged, socking her square in the face. My hand screamed in pain but I ignored it, hurling punch after punch. I was only able to get two more hits before she jumped back, putting a yard between me and her.

I strained to look at her face, wishing more than anything I left some kind of damage. I was answered with a spider crack that sat between her nose and forehead. I smiled and flexed my bruised knuckles. I charged once more, aiming for another face hit. She dodged and Jasper appeared behind her, clutching her by the hair and flinging her left. She spun to her feet with ease but hadn't notice Alistair and Killian at her sides.

They thrust their blades clean through her torso and Braden remained in the distance, aiming another arrow. She gasped and together, they twisted their swords tearing at her insides. She coughed, blood pooling at her mouth.

Alistair dove his sword in deeper as Braden released the arrow.

In one swift move, Mara raised her arms and slit Killian's throat and twirled Alistair around to take the arrow through the head. Braden cursed and tried to reload but Mara had yanked out the blades and sent them flying. Pinning Braden down through his forearms.

He screamed and Mara rolled her shoulders, "Giselle, end this now."
I tensed, "the kid! Where's the kid?!"

I was answered with another barrage of spikes from the sky. Jasper flashed to our side, placing another force shield above our heads. Braden was swung over his shoulder, blood streaming down his limbs.

"Quickly, Adrian, heal his wounds," he ordered, focusing all of his energy on the shield.

Adrian turned to me, "Bring him down for me."

I nodded and carefully lifted the man off Jasper's shoulder, flinching when a current of blood had thickened. "He's losing a lot of blood!"

"Just lay him out and keep pressure on the wounds." He instructed as he dung through the snow, looking for solid earth.

"How am I supposed to do that?!" I hissed, "Both of his arms are cut and I need both hands to cover one!"

"Calm down, I got a plant for this," Adrian's hand was outlined in a soft blue light as he patted the ground, drawing out a spout. He raised his hand and the spout followed, growing quickly into a bushy stem. It was yarrow, a plant used to stop a bleeding wound. Three more stems spouted and he tore them apart, crushing them between his glowing hands till they were mushed together as a chunky, green ointment.

He offered a hand full to me, "Cover his arm with this."

I scrapped as much I as could from him and spread it over Braden's arm. He hissed at the contact and I soothed, "you're gonna be okay now."

"Not yet," Adrian moved to straddle himself over Braden's chest and placed his hands at each arm. The soft glow from before became a glimmering light as blue energy streamed into Braden's arms. A minute passed and Adrian moved back to collapsed at his side. His horns were descending into his forehead and his legs shook, becoming human once more.

"Now," he panted, "he'll be okay."

"What about you?" I asked.

"Oh, this is nothing," he reassured as Jasper cocked a skeptical brow his way. "I'll be fine, mostly I'm worried about you."

"I can hold the shield, but the others seemed to be at their wits end."

I strained my eyes through the force shield, finding a gigantic ball of fire melting the flying spikes.

"Is that."

"Saoirse," Jasper answered, "and she is pissed."

"Where's Fiona and Dylan?"

Jasper sighed and pointed to our right, "Dylan… didn't quite make it."

I adjusted my eyes, finding a figure face down with three spikes through his back. I clutched my jaw and scanned for Fiona; found her exchanging fists with Mara. The immortal and nation held nothing
back as they sparred; Fiona's hands were ablaze as she threw each punch. While Mara clawed and
snapped her jaw, always aiming for the other's throat. Fiona weaves through each attempt and
socked a flamed fist into Mara's face. Pieces of her stone armor flew and I cheered.

"Get her, Fiona! Get her!"

She moved in for another blow and Mara ducked, tackling Fiona to the ground. She waved her
claws and Fiona snatched her wrists, kicking her off with the toe of her boot. Mara recovered quickly
and dashed for Fiona's back.

Before I could warn Fiona; Saoirse flew forward, shoving Mara to the floor with her shoulder. Then
Giselle bombardment them with another rain of spikes. Mara was prepared as she danced around the
icicles. Saoirse and Fiona found each other's backs and shot out another gigantic blast of heat.

We hadn't noticed Mara charging into the flame, not at that moment.

I was glaring at the dark cloudy sky, scanning for Giselle, "we gotta shoot her down."

Jasper nodded, formed his hand into a gun, pointed to the sky and closed his eyes. I raised a brow at
his gesture but remained quiet. For two long heart beats, he made no move. Then his eyes snapped
open, the irises ablaze in a pink hue as his finger swayed right. A blot of lightened surged through his
finger and straight into the sky. A shrill scream was met at the end and a body came crashing to
earth.

We cheered but it didn't last for long. When the flames cleared, Mara was standing alone with
Saoirse at her feet and her hand fisted into Fiona's fiery locks; her head dangling in mid-air.

Jasper dropped the force field and charged. I shouted for him to stop but he wasn't there for a fight.
He weaved past the immortal and dived for Saoirse. He sprinted back to Adrian and slid her into his
arms.

"How is she?" he asked.

Adrian sighed in relief, "she's just unconscious."

I sighed but I couldn't shake off the tension in my shoulders. My instincts told me to turn and I did;
Giselle was struggling to her feet, forcing herself to stand. She was panting and holding a broken
arm. At least she had taken some damage, unlike her partner. Mara strode forward, her eyes gleamed
and her fangs were bared. Her clothes were torn and clotted with blood but her wounds had healed;
even the spider crack I had left was gone.

She gave a wicked grin, "ready for round two?"

Jasper and I immediately tensed and raised our fists in a boxer's stance.

"Okay," I whispered, "I was able to hold my own with Mara. You take Giselle-"

Mara lunged for Jasper, kicking him aside as Giselle prepared her shards. But she wasn't aiming at
me but for Adrian and his wounded companions. She fired and I dove myself into the crossfire,
taking the hits as the spikes ripped through me like Swiss cheese.

The icicles weren't as large as the others but they were just as sharp. One had stabbed through my
forearm; another through my calf. Three had torn through the outside of my right thigh while one had
wedged itself in my side.
I reached for the spike but Adrian stopped me, "Don't touch it! You could bleed out!"

All I could do was nod as my wounded leg gave out and my knees buckled. I glanced to Jasper, he was keeping himself on his toes but all he could do was keep Mara at bay.

Giselle stepped forward and Adrian rose to his feet but his legs with unsteady. He fell back on to his knees, gasping for air. He was tapped out, so was Jasper, neither of them had any energy left.

"Go," I proclaimed, "you and Jasper take Braden and Saoirse and get yourselves out of here."

"What about you?!"

"I'll be fine! Doesn't matter if she kills me," I reasoned. "...I'm not human, so it's okay."

The immortal formed a spike above her head, "I'll make this quick."

In a flash of golden light, a figure glided forth and kneed Giselle in the gut. This figure than grabbed her dress from behind and tossed her back, sending her skidding across the snow.

"Sorry for the lateness, turns out that Seeker was harder to track down than I thought." Clovis threw me a triumphant smile, "but better late than never right?"

I huffed with a bitter laughter, "nice entrance you fuck-turd."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, what's with the language?" he proceeded in a hurtful expression, "I just saved your life."

"The fuck-turd was for the mind rape, you ass!"

He sighed, "I'm sorry, but I did ask nicely. Besides," his gaze turned back on Giselle, "it was necessary."

Giselle lunged for him and Clovis summoned his blade, slashing the immortal back. She recoiled at the blade's touch, the cut sitting diagonally across her chest. She blinked at the wound, placing a hand over the slice and winched.

"Didn't expect that huh?" Clovis smirked and held his sword to chest level. "This sword was created out of my energy, that wound isn't going heal anytime soon."

Her eyes blazed white as she conjured two more spikes and hurled them at me. Clovis cursed and dove for me slashing the spikes in two. Giselle took her chance to escape, making her way to Mara.

The native girl slid a glance to her and ended her fight swiftly. She backhanded Jasper with ease, not even batting an eye to the crack of bone that echoed across the field. She sprinted towards Giselle, reaching a hand for her.

"Damn, she's a Seer," Clovis muttered under his breath and commanded, "don't let them get away!"

Kojo and Hannibal appeared in a blink of an eye, blocking their met and lunged. Kojo spun a spear and thrust for Mara. She ducked, gliding to the left but Kojo maneuvered; twirling his weapon over his shoulder and around his head, he hurled the blunt end at her temple. The hit made contact, knocking her off her feet. Hannibal moved like smoke, snaking his hand around Giselle's neck and tossing her across the field with one flick of the wrist.

"Balkar, watch over Amy," Clovis added and leaped for Giselle, keeping her pinned to the ground.
Balkar appeared at my side, his hands burning with a golden flame. "Hold still, okay. I'll be quick." His tone was calm as he yanked the icicle out of my waist. I ground my teeth, grinding them tight as pain throbbed and blood gushed. My eyes blurred as Balkar placed a palm on the wound and I winced, but the heat didn't burn. It was warm as it spread over the gash, seeping into my flesh like water. My skin tingled at the sensation sending a shiver down my spine. Once I had finally relaxed, he pulled away and moved on to my leg. I looked down and found my side completely healed; it didn't even leave a scar.

Clovis gripped the girl's broken arm, digging his nails into her flesh. "Why did you attack the Council?" he asked calmly.

The girl craned her head left, narrowing her eyes in a rueful glare.

"That's not an answer," he remarked and twisted her arm.

It was a slight twist but the pain was visible in her eyes. Her jaw clutched and she turned her face away, remaining silent.

"Why did you attack the Council?" he demanded, pulling at her arm.

She hissed but formed no words.

"Why are you here?" he continued, bending her elbow back.

She gasped and he proceeded, "What's your purpose?!"

Silence was his answer and he decided on his final question.

"Are you in league with Iya?"

She flinched and he gripped her arm with both hands, bending the arm back as far as it could go and then farther. "Where is she?! What does she want?!"

She turned and smiled, "it's for me to know and for you to find out."

He slammed his palm on top of her head, "Alright, but remember, I did ask nicely."

Her eyes blinked white, her aura keeping her mind locked. "Sorry, we're closed."

Clovis cursed and reclaimed his hold on her arm. The white flare faded as he snapped her shoulder, dislocating it. She released an ear-piercing scream, alerting the other immortal.

The older girl spun but Hannibal blocked her path, "Your fight is with us."

He lunged, his blade grazing her shoulder blade as she fell to the floor. She slammed a foot to his chest but he weaved as Kojo leaped, spear in hand. She rolled to her feet just in time, nearly missing the shard from making direct contact to her neck.

She slid back, keeping her distance as Kojo rose to his feet. He smirked, curling his finger, "here kitty, kitty."

Clovis watched as the dark-haired girl straightened, inhaling deeply; then dropped, disappearing into the earth as if it were water.

Both Hannibal and Kojo stared, wide eyed as Clovis cried, "Fuck! She's an earth user-"
She appeared, crashing the heel of her palm under his chin. He was thrown back and she wrapped an arm around the younger girl's waist pulling her into the soil.

Mara panted, hiding within the darkness of the earth. She ran a clawed hand through her hair, groaning out a curse in her native tongue. This was meant to be a simple extrication but she was careless; toying with the nations was just too much of a temptation for her.

She glanced down to Giselle, seeing her perfectly through the eyes of Jaguar, "did you see this?"

The young girl gasped, holding her limp arm close to her body. "No," she answered through a shaky breath.

Mara growled in irritation and then noticed that the wound across Giselle's chest hasn't been restored. Even if the men's blades were conjured out of their auras, it should have at least started to heal.

"You're not healing," she observed, "when was the last time you ate?"

Giselle shrugged her one good shoulder and Mara sighed, "I shall get you a meal."

Clovis scanned the area, his back against his allies'.
"Do you think they're gone?" Kojo asked.

Clovis was about to object till his eyes found Balkar. His back was to him, his attention to Amy as he healed each wound. He was on the last cut, a gash that ran across Amy's cheek. Clovis proceeded with his scan but a flash of black hair snapped his eyes back to Balkar.

"Balkar!" they raced for him, moving in a blur.

But they weren't nearly as fast as the immortal.

She stabbed her hand into his back, her claws splitting through his chest. She reached for his face and pulled. A string of gold followed, pooling into her hand with one tug. Balkar barely made a cry as his skin harden and paled into a gray hue. His wavy locks froze in place, his eyes lost their emerald shine and his surprised expression was forever captured in stone. Mara ripped her hand back, causing the spirit to crack and break into a pile of stardust.

They arrived at the moment she dived back into earth, disappearing once again.

Dreadful, engulfing silence lingered in the air as Clovis stared at the pile of dust that was once his friend.

Amy covered her mouth, shaking like a leaf as she tried and failed to form words. The human behind her looked away and Kojo cursed. Then he turned to Hannibal, another curse dying on his lips.

Clovis spun, finding Hannibal steaming with golden light. It surged around him as his eyes blazed from gold to red, taking on a murderous gleam.

"Hannibal," Kojo approached him with caution, "calm yourself."

Hannibal grabbed his wrist and hissed, "Don't tell me to be calm." His pupils formed into slits as he hurled Kojo across the field. "She's still here," his hands expanded into claws as his skin hardened into black and red scales. "That bitch is still hiding," he fell back into his native tongue of Carthage. "And I won't leave here till I rip her to shreds."
His body rippled, losing form as he became a golden flame but his light was smeared with scarlet. His energy grew as gold, red and black swirled into shape. Scaling to new heights as his neck, arms and legs stretched. Floppy, skinned wings took form and a pointed tail curled around his clawed paws. His light faded and black scales took its place; along with a rounded snout, sharp horns, and piercing fangs.

"Please tell me you have a plan," Amy asked Clovis, her tone filled with pure terror.

"Just stay behind me, I'll protect you," he answered.

"Unless you're turning into dragon I'll won't be so convinced."

Hannibal gave an earth-shattering roar as he turned away and spat fire, scotching the snow into stream.

Amy knitted her brows together in confusion, "What is he doing?"

Clovis’ eyes widened, "he's going to rip apart this island to find Mara." He turned his gaze back on her, "you need to get out of here-"

"We can't," she interrupted, "the boat was destroyed! We're stuck!"

"Dammit," he shouted and charged for the towering dragon, "Hannibal! Stop!"

"Clovis!" Amy cried and was about to follow till the human pulled her back.

He slid to a stop and yelled, "Enough!"

The dragon turned, cocking his head to the side as he growled.

Clovis stood his ground, "She's gone Hannibal. A skilled earth user would've already gotten herself to Europe by now-"

He bared his teeth in protest and plunged his claws into the ground, flinging boulders aside as he dug. They hurled through the air and Clovis followed their descent as they smashed around Amy and her companions. Quickly, he snatched a rock and chucked it at Hannibal's head.

"Stop!" he cried, "You're gonna get people killed you idiot!"

Slowly, he shifted his gaze on Clovis and he flinched. Both eyes were ablaze, both completely dyed with crimson; no pupils, no irises, no white, just red.

Clovis breathed, "Oh shit."

Hannibal lunged for him but was tackled to the ground by another dragon; one with a tanned yellow pelt. The brightest of the pair roared, displaying dominance but Hannibal would not submit. His jaw sprang forth, gripping Kojo by the shoulder. Kojo growled, smacking Hannibal off his flesh and roared once more. Hannibal rolled them over, gaining the top position but Kojo shoved him off, sending him tumbling over the edge.

"Stop!" he cried, "You're gonna get people killed you idiot!"

Kojo cried out in a shrill screech and kicked him off with a powerful blast of air. Hannibal...
plummeted, body slamming into the sea below.

A mushroom of water surged, showering upon Clovis as new-found waves crashed against the shore. The water churned but didn’t settle as Hannibal sprang forth, gripping Kojo by his hind legs with his own. The pair spun together, snapping and nipping at one another as they fell back to earth.

Esteeming their arrival, Clovis made a mad dash for Amy and the others. Staying out of their way as they crashed into the dirt.

Kojo remained on top, snapping his jaw at Hannibal. The darkest of the pair snapped back with flame, scotching Kojo in the face. Kojo recoiled and Hannibal tossed him aside in a heap of melted snow. He laid there, breathing heavily as Hannibal strode forward, ready for the kill.

"You have to stop him!" Amy cried and Clovis nodded but was beaten to the chance as the human bolted for the dragons.

Amy chased after him, "Adrian! Stop!"

"Dammit! Both of you, stop!" Clovis trailed behind but quickly surged forward, making his way to the front but Adrian twirled around him smoothly; gaining the lead once more.

"What the fuck is he? A cat?"

"Something like that," Amy heaved as she ran passed but Clovis snatched her by the collar of her jacket and yanked her back.

Before she could no doubt curse his very name, the young man slid between the dragons; glaring at the darker one.

Hannibal stopped and growled but Adrian was unfazed, "would he want this…" he whispered at first and when Hannibal stepped forward Adrian cried, "would he want this!"

Surprisingly Hannibal froze and Adrian lifted his fist up, uncurling his fingers to reveal shimmering crystal dust.

Clovis darted a glance at Hannibal, fearing that he would strike the human down. Instead he blinked, the red shrinking back to cover just his irises.

An uneasy tension hovered as Hannibal leaned forward, his gigantic head nearly twenty feet in length and width.

Adrian shook; but not from fear but from anger. "You have made a complete fool of yourself, nearly destroyed Fingal's Cave and almost killed your own friend in the process! Is this what he wants to see?! Is this how he wishes to be remembered?!"

He looked away, curling his hand back into a fist as it dropped to his side. "I have seen enough death for today…" he whispered. "Please… no more," he shook his head, "no more," he fell to his knees, the strain weighing on him. "No more," he breathed, "no more…"

Hannibal's form flickered back to his human shape, his eyes returning to their usually onyx shade. He looked to Adrian and then to his fist. Hannibal reached for him and Clovis tensed, not sure if his friend was stable. Hannibal's hand slid over Adrian's fist, gently tugging in forward as he kneeled in front of the human.

He gripped it harder, his hand shaking as tears streamed down his cheeks, "Balkar…" his accent
grew thick; his ancient language taking hold. "May you live on in the arms of Ava..." he wept, rocking forth to set his forehead against Adrian's arm.

The young human did nothing but simply sat, brushing the spirit's hair with his remaining hand.

Clovis sighed once more, this time in grief. He felt Amy's shoulders fell, losing their tension as she moved forward to rub Hannibal's heaving back.

Kojo slid to Clovis side, his expression anxious, "I can't find it," he hissed in his ear.

Clovis flinched, knowing full well what he meant. "What do you mean you can't find it?!" he whispered harshly.

"I swept this place twice," he proclaimed, "but it's gone."

"What's going on?"

They jumped at the sound of Amy's voice and turned to face her. She stared at them with a mix of worry and suspicion. Clovis couldn't lie to her, not after all he had done. "Abigail's head... it's gone. They took it."

The girl paled, her eyes nearly widening to the size of saucers as the look of complete and utter defeat washed over her. She slumped away from Hannibal, shrinking into herself as she crossed her arms and curled forward; her forehead touching her knees.

"Amy..." Clovis reached for her but a hand tugged at his back, yanking him and his friends from the Earth Plane.

They found themselves in the Library of Alexandria; back in the Roman Hall at center stage before all the former nations, Ava and Gisli.

"You imbeciles," Gisli declared casually.

Both Clovis and Kojo froze in place, the tension building in their shoulders. Gisli had a temper that much was well known, but it was when the former sun god was calm and collected made him truly terrifying.

"I ordered you to leave it be," he proceeded, his cool demeanor perfectly intact. "To let us think of a reasonable plan but no... Instead you purposely disobeyed me; purposely went against every warning your fellow spirits gave and for what?"

His golden eyes burned but his voice remained steady, "What did you learn? What was worth three human lives, six nation defeats and the death of one our own?!" His tone rose at the final words, stirring the crowd to mumble curses and prayers for their fallen comrade.

Clovis noticed Hannibal then; his knees to floor, his face down as his shoulders trembled. The image of Balkar appeared in front of his mind's eye, the Iberian spirit smiling and laughing as he twirled a disinterested Hannibal into a dance. Sung melodies with Dalia and Helena, sparred with Romulus and Jaroslav, and hunted with Alaric, Izem and Siggy. These memories swirled, displaying the extremely long life of Balkar, the spirit and former nation of Iberia.

Clovis ground his teeth together, trying to keep his anger contained.

"What did you learn?" Gisli asked once more, his voice on edge.
He didn't hesitate, "There are two more, both in league with Iya." The crowd gave a collected gasp and Clovis continued. "One's a native of the Northern Americas, she's an earth user with shifter skills… She's the one that killed Balkar." He paused, allowing that bit of information to sink in. "The other was a child, she can manipulate water and ice and… she's a Seer."

Anxiety rippled through the crowd as Ava gasped and Gisli cursed, raking a hand through his hair. "She's one step ahead of us," he muttered.

"More like ten," Kojo countered.

The unease silence resumed, engulfing the air in a thick, unruly tension. Clovis swept a gaze over his peers; Izem was glaring at the floor, his arms crossed as his nails dug into his flesh. Helena was comforting Dalia, rubbing her back in a soothing nature. Nanu and Sophia glanced to each other worryingly as Siggy and Jaroslav cursed in their mother tongues. Alaric sat with his elbows on his knees and his chin against his clutched hands; his eyes miles away. Romulus sat beside him, his thumb nail between his teeth as the wheels in head turned.

Ade held her hands in prayer and Adisa wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders. Erish kept her face composed but she couldn't hide the iron grip of her intertwined fingers. Armand fisted his hands, his eyes flickering gold as Feker placed a hand over his, leveling him with a kind look. Obi held Chi close and Bolivar punched the stone seat as Qasi leaned into Karen's shoulder.

Finally, Clovis came to meet with a pair of emerald eyes; a pair he had known for eons. Kaelee's brows had knitted together in an odd mixture of annoyance and worry as if she had no idea if she should be angry at him or concerned for his safety. Alfred sat next to her as he tried to give a carefree smirk but couldn't quite lift his lip.

"It doesn't matter," Gisli spoke, breaking the tension. "It still doesn't change your verdict. I will not stand for disobedience. Not now."

Tree roots shot from floor, wrapping themselves around Clovis and his companions. They twisted around their ankles and wrists, tied a collar around their necks and crisscrossed over their shoulders. They squeezed and flung Clovis and Kojo to their knees before Gisli and Ava.

"You three will be sealed," he proclaimed harshly.

"But they gave useful information!" Kaelee cried and he snapped, "Silence!"

"It's because of these three, an immortal has eaten the soul of a spirit," he spat. "They now have the capability to know everything about us!"

Clovis grinned, for what he didn't know. Maybe it was fact that he had seen the death of one of his closest friends or possibly, wanted to look like a badass in front of Kaelee. Or maybe, he just couldn't help but love the way Gisli's forehead throbbed at that moment.

"The. Kid's. A. Seer." He emphasized each word, "I think they already know."

Gisli growled, "Get them out of my sight!"

With one grief-stricken look Ava pulled at the roots and someone shouted. Clovis turned and found Kaelee reaching for him as Alfred held her back. Her name was the last thing he uttered as he was dragged back to earth.

He woke up to the sound of screaming.
Hundreds of screeching cries and ear-piecing shrills filled the darkness before him. The only source of light he received was the ray of sunlight that streamed from above his circle shaped jail cell.

He quickly grew annoyed with the screaming, "Hannibal! Kojo! Are you near?!"

His shouts were drowned out by the continued screaming as they clawed at their prisons; demanding freedom. But no one could hear them, absolutely no one.

He leaned against his cell, knowing full well where he was.

He was inside a tree.

In the Amazon Forest.

A.K.A. The Forest of the Lost.

A starry night sky loomed over Allen Church as a soft breeze rustled through the branches of the trees, causing them to shake. The ground was covered with messy foot prints, displaying an active day at the church. When twilight had stuck the flock had scattered back to their homes, leaving their service in blissful ignorance. For no one knew that a witch had been buried there only days before.

But Edward Turner knew.

The teenage boy sat on a trunk of a car, one leg dangling off the edge as he looked to the stars. His brown eyes adjusted well to the darkness, even behind his shades. His iPod in hand, he scrolled through his playlists and smirked when he came to the one he named Badassery. He tapped on the screen and one of his favorite bands, Dorothy, thrummed from his ear buds.

"Oh, after midnight~

"Whoa~ set me on fire.

"Whoa~ kerosene eyes.

"Whoa~ looking right through me.

"Selling my soul for one night.

"Whoa~ doing me dirty.

"Whoa~ telling me lies.

"Whoa~ you are not worthy.

"Telling myself it's the last time

"Cause nothing good comes after midnight.

"Ain't no goodness come from pain~ whoa~ whoa~

"Nothing good comes after midnight~ oohh~

"When you play the devils game.
"Whoa~ after midnight."

His music was interrupted when someone yanked on one of his ear buds and shouted, "Edward!"

He jumped, yelping in surprise, "what the hell was that for?!"

"You weren't responding," Mara crossed her arms as Giselle stood by her side.

Both were dressed in thick coats and heavy scarfs, containing their warmth. Poor Giselle was nearly suffocating in her wool scarf.

"Well look who's all bundled up like a little snug bug," he teased as he re-wrapped a loose end that tailed behind her.

"You should dress accordingly to the weather," Mara lectured, giving Edward's attire a disapproving glance.

He pulled at the hem of his simple blue jean, button down shirt and shook off the powder that stuck to his dark skinny jeans. "I don't need a coat," he smirked as his eyes blazed blue behind his shades. "I got my flame to keep me warm."

Mara sighed, "That may be but people stare when you dress like that in nearly twenty-degree weather."

Edward grinned, "How do you think I attract my meals."

"Speaking of meals," Giselle spoke up, changing the topic, "did you bring one?"

"Yup," he hopped off the car and threw the lid up to reveal a hog-tied man.

The man squirmed, shouting through his gag as his eyes darted from Edward to Mara and Giselle.

"You think he'll be enough?" Mara asked causally.

"He's an old soul, traced it back all the way to the Viking days. Cool right?"

Mara raised a brow, "And how would you know?"

His grin deepened as Jackal appeared by his side, a gray furred Norwegian Forest cat dangled limply from her jaws.

"It took some time but his kitty spilled her guts," he chuckled at his joke, "in more ways than one."

Mara rolled her eyes, "your puns are crude and tasteless."

"Thank you," he readjusted his beanie over his auburn hair and yanked the man up by the back of his collar. Leaning him on the back of his shoulder blade as they strolled to the front doors of the church. One ear bud hummed with the Black Keys', 'Howlin' For You' and Edward couldn't help but smile at the perfect combination of setting and music.

Mara took the lead and Giselle followed at her side as Edward brought up the rear. Ignoring the lock, Mara shoved the doors open, snapping the wood with one effortless push. They strut down the aisle as Giselle snapped her fingers, slamming the doors shut behind them.

When they had reached the statue of Mary and Baby Jesus, Edward crossed himself, "forgive me Lord for I have sinned."
"That joke is getting old," Mara claimed.

"Like you," he smirked.

She narrowed her eyes and he laughed, "I kid, I kid."

She ignored him and commanded, "Move."

Edward and Giselle swiftly reared back as the earth began to shake. Dark tree roots smashed through the wood flooring, carrying forth a rolled up bloody rug. The roots lowered gently, sitting the rug before Mara's feet. The Savannah crouched forward, rolling the rug undone to reveal Abigail's decapitated body.

Edward whistled, "They sure did a number on her."

Mara nodded, broke the chains apart and reached for Giselle, "the head."

The Romani girl drew out a make shift bag from the inside of her coat and handed it over. Mara untied the knot, pulled away the cloth and yanked the body up. "Abigail," she called and waved the witch's head before her neck. "Here's your head."

The body sat limp with Mara's hand as the only form of leverage it had.

"Come on Abby," Edward shook the man behind him, "I got dinner."

Again, the body made no move and Mara sighed, "We're too late."

Abigail's one good hand lunged for her head and Mara jumped back. The body jerked in twitchy movements as she smacked her head against her neck. Twisting and turning till it was placed just right. Her skin grew in heat, illumining an intense light of scarlet as her clothes smoked and her torn skin fused back together.

She released a pained shout and looked to Edward with blood red eyes, "Food. Now."

Edward didn't hesitant to toss the man forward, "he's all yours."

The poor fool didn't even have the chance to scream as Abigail yanked away the gag and slapped her lips over his. At first the man was confused till his dark eyes widened and he struggled against Abigail's grasp. He kicked and punched with his tied hands but they were no use; Abigail had him. His eyes gleamed with a pale silver hue as she pulled, a string of silver trailing just behind. She inhaled and more followed, the string thickening. Her severed arm began to twitch and crawl towards her, fusing back to place with ease.

Abigail flexed the newly reattached limb and inhaled once more, draining the man in one final breath. He dropped to the floor, his lifeless eyes fading back to their dull brown color.

"Silver aura," Abigail wiped a thumb over her bottom lip, "where ever did you find such a rarity?"

Edward grinned, "I may not be born with the Sight but I have been practicing."

Mara's brows raised, "impressive."

"Thank you."

"Yes, thank you," Abigail rose to her feet, her eyes ablaze. "Now if you excuse me, I'm going to rip that bitch apart."
"No," Mara blocked her path, "you must return-"

"I'm not returning anywhere till I kill her!"

"You failed to retrieve us a nation! Then we had to attack the Grand Council to get your head back! We have made enough enemies today, we need to regroup!"

"I don't care!" she roared. "I want that bitch dead!"

Giselle stepped between them, "we saw her there, with the Grand Council."

Mara snapped, "Giselle!"

Abigail smiled, "Really? Now, where are they?"

The young girl shrugged her shoulders, "they must still be in Scotland but before you do anything, please take this." She handed the former Puritan a box, "I hope you like it."

Abigail raised a puzzled brow but she didn't turn down gifts. She ripped the box open and found a black choker with a single dark blue stone attached to the center.

She frowned, "I don't do blue."

Giselle smiled, "I believe you'll make an exception for this one. I tore that out of America's head myself."

Everyone snapped their heads forward to stare at the seemingly innocent girl. Edward blinked, impressed and so was Abigail but Mara knitted her brows together in bafflement. Before Edward could question Mara's expression, Abigail squealed and hugged Giselle.

"Oh, Giselle sweetie, thank you! I love it! I absolutely love it!" she clipped the choker in place and posed, "How do I look?"

"Beautiful," the child giggled.

"I don't get it," Edward raised a hand, "how did a gem come out of a nation, aren't they made of dirt?"

"They are," Mara quipped, "but their eyes are made with precious stones and gems. Rubies, emeralds, sapphires; some even have colored diamonds and black pearls. I heard that most royal jewels are made with their nations' eyes."

"Damn," Edward crossed his arms, "I need to remember that. I would really love a black pearl ring."

"If I have the chance I'll get you one," Giselle reassured.

"Make sure to rip out both eyes," Abigail proclaimed as she admired her reflection from the window. "I want matching studs," she claimed.

"Okay," she smiled and Mara leaned in to whisper, "wasn't that Norway's eye."

"Yes, but for now let her believe its America's. It will keep her content till then."

Mara nodded with approval and patted the top of her head, "Good job."

Edward chuckled and remained quiet himself, not wanting to deal with Abigail's rage.
"Ugh," Abigail glared at her ripped, blood clotted dress, "my clothes are ruined."

"I brought you some," Mara cuts in, holding a plastic bag. "Now get dressed and head back to Summerland."

"Ugh," she groaned once more, "Must I? The Hawkfeathers are painfully boring."

"You have to watch the boy. He's Sight is dangerous," Mara proclaimed.

"I have fooled him plenty of times," Abigail began to change, piling off her tattered dress like second skin. "He is no trouble to us."

"He is learning from his great-grandmother, and she comes from a long line of medicine men and women."

"You know, seeing that you know so much more how about you watch them-"

"Abigail," she snapped, her pupils forming into slits as her irises burned yellow. "This is coming from Mistress herself, you will not question her."

Abigail sighed, unfazed by Mara's threat, "okay, okay." She complied and slipped on a large white sweater and dark jeans.

Once she had boots on, Mara threw her a black coat, "wear that."

"I don't need it," she stated.

"Wear. It." She hissed and tossed another coat to Edward, "you too, wear that."

"Yes, Mom," he muttered loud enough for her to hear.

Mara ignored him and proceeded, "Return to Summerland," she instructed Abigail and turned on Edward. "You continue your watch in New York." Finally, she grabbed Giselle's hand and they spun for the doors till Abigail called out.

"Wait, it's been years since any of us have seen each other. We should enjoy it."

"Abigail," Mara warned.

The witch raised a palm, "hear me out." She slid her dark eyes on Giselle, "Giselle, sweetheart, where would I have the most fun?"

The girl's eyes flickered white before she answered, "Paris."

"Paris," Edward chimed, "I always wanted to go to Paris."

"No one is going to Paris," Mara exclaimed, "end of discussion."

"Oh, come on Mara, it's every little boy's dream to go to Paris. Well mine was," he smiled. "Come on, it wouldn't be any fun without you."

"We have our orders," she proclaimed.

"We can have one day off," Abigail interjected and then asked Giselle, "when?"

"New Year's Eve," then her gaze slid to Mara's, "they'll be there."
"Ooh, now we must go," Abigail gave mischievous grin.

Mara sighed and crossed her arms, glancing to Giselle and Edward before meeting her onyx eyes to Abigail's dark brown. "What are you planning?"

Her smile widened, "pure chaos."

In the distance a series of murderous howls carried through the wind.

Mara gave her own cheeky grin, "It seems we have Iya's blessing."

"Yes!" Edward cheered, "We're going to Paris!"

"And leaving a trail of destruction in our wake," Abigail struts forward, taking the lead as Mara and Giselle followed and Edward tailed behind.

His iPod still played as it continued onto the next song; another indie rock number from Dorothy.

Edward grinned from ear to ear as Abigail slammed the doors open and the lead singer boomed.

"Gotta raise a little hell!"
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I wanted to leave right at that moment but Alfred refused; keeping me in place as James finished his debut and walked off stage.

"Can we leave now?" I hissed.

He hushed me and waved for the musician to come our way. I rose but was jerked back to my seat, forgetting about Alfred's uncanny strength.

"You want to know what kind of man he is don't you?" he whispered in my ear. "This could be your chance."

Before I could argue James strode forward, greeting us with a wide grin, "you came. How did you like the performance?"

"It was amazing, you had the crowd eating out of the palm of your hand," Alfred smiled and elbowed me in the shoulder. "Isn't that right Johnny."

"Yeah. Great. Wonderful," I muttered curtly and drowned the rest of my scotch.

Alfred didn't skip a beat, "So James, tell us about yourself. You grew up in Bywater?"

"Born and raised," he pulled up a chair and ordered a beer.

They ran through multiple topics, it was hard to keep up. One moment they were talking about the city and music. From favorite places to avoid the tourists to where the best gumbo could be found. Where the jazz scene really took place; both of them howling in laughter when they heard New York tried to take credit. New York may have been the platform but New Orleans was the birth of jazz. They discussed the greats such as Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Paul Whiteman to the up and coming: Clifford Brown, Sonny Stitt, Charlie Mingus and Art Blakey. Next, they were discussing politics and the great change that was taking place in the country. The newly formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference and their president Martin King.

I was once again, astounded by Alfred. He had only met the man yet there they were, chatting amongst each other like old friends. It was fascinating to watch; how he was able to connect to people with such ease.

Was it because he was the nation of our country, he's somehow connected to us?

Did all nations have this ability?

Was it something they had possessed since birth?

Or something they had to earn?

Or is the bond already made?

Granted my words may not be making much sense. My vision is blurring and I can already hear my mother lecturing me for drinking too much…or was that Alfred as he carried me home?
I closed Grandpa's journal, my anxiety forcing me to lose interest in his tale. It was the twenty-ninth of December and Arthur was still unconscious; along with the other nations. We were staying at a church on the Isle of Iona, right across the fishing town of Fionnphort. The church was extremely old; founded by Saint Columba to spread Christianity and then raided by Vikings in the year eight hundred. It never died though, becoming a nunnery till 1560 and then the heart of Iona and of its community. It had gone through major construction in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century; repairing the roofs of the four structures that stood at all sides of its wide tower.

Now, why would I know so much about a church in Scotland?

Well, I had a major enthusiastic tour guide.

Two days ago…

Donald Grant, a hunch back, old man with dark eyes dragged on with his ramblings. Explaining that Abbey of Iona was only beginning its healing process. Further back, away from the main service hall was where the nuns had slept, ate and lived for centuries. The buildings were in need of new roofs, walls and a better foundation. Causing the reconstruction to last longer than planned, well into the nineteenth-sixties.

"A fun fact that normal people never knew was that most of these nuns were witches. Finding new ways to worship and practice the craft, all the while hiding in plain sight. That's why you will find plenty of religious leaders as magick users." Donald continued. "Well… now-a-days, people are no longer invested in burning us so we are free to break from the church but it has been a long time. Many of us have combined Christian customs with the old Pagan ways… Well in all honesty, Christianity took our customs and made it their own."

I simply nodded along, waiting for this long-winded man to take me to my friends. My patience was growing thin, for even before the tour I was taken in for questioning. A Seeker named Hugo Kistner led the interrogation. He was a calm man with dark hair and piercing green eyes, he asked the questions and I answered, a bit irritated that I was treated as the criminal.

"Well you were the only one conscious," he stated simply, his voice laced with a light German accent. "Also… what Adrian has muttered in his sleep, the men that appeared were able to shift into dragons; only a handful of people can shift into those beasts of legend and the men you described were not in our records. My allies believe they were Fair Folk but you say warlocks… What were they? And where did they go?"

"Like I told you! I don't know! And also, I'm new to the whole magick thing, forgive me for getting my terms mixed up." I was annoyed and I used this to fuel my lie. Hugo didn't seem to be a human lie detector. "And also," I lift my cuffed hands, "are the chains necessary?"

"Yes. For you even said that the only reason you're here was because these warlocks were searching for one of our own. You were familiar with them?"

"Only one," I hissed.

"And how is that?" he asked.

"He was a friend I made in Berlin. I thought he was normal."

"Clearly he wasn't."
"How the hell was I supposed to know that?"

"I think you know more than you are letting on," he narrowed his eyes, searching for a kink in my armor. "I know about the nations... I've seen my own country and I know you had stayed with him."

I glared, "so?"

"You disappeared from Berlin and was then spotted in London. The next hour you were back in Berlin. No ticket stamps, no paper trail-"

"Why would any of you care about the nations," I interjected. "I thought you guys saw them as government property or something?"

"Oh, they are. Most are more embedded with the modern world, like mine. He does not believe in the old tales or of magick. But we do keep tabs... we were also investigating the child abductions and funny thing it was to find that you were spotted in Paris as well."

I tensed, misjudging his detection skills, "how would you know-"

"We are everywhere," he smirked as his irises burned with an orange flare before returning back to green. "We have to be, to keep our worlds separate... Your kind was once a bridge but you chose them over us."

"So you're following me-"

"Not entirely," he informed, "just only when we spotted you."

"Then," I hesitated, "you don't know what happened?"

He leaned himself forward with his chin on top of his intertwined fingers, "do you?" he challenged.

He smiled and I glared, neither of us refusing to back down from each other's gazes.

Our stare off didn't last long for we had received news of Saoirse, Jasper and Braden pulling through and remaining in stable condition. Having new witnesses, Hugo dismissed me and I was handed over to dear old Donald. My friends, the Council and Seekers were stationed in the back buildings, allowing us plenty of room for the wounded. One of the largest rooms were given to the nations. With three beds to the left and four on the right, all occupied expect one. Which I had a pretty good guess was meant to be mine but I never bothered to use it. A round table and set of chairs sat at the far back with our luggage placed on top. I didn't bother nor care to ask how they got there. I simply grabbed a chair and dropped it between Arthur and Lukas; where I have sat for nearly two days, waiting for them to wake up.

Both were on their backs, breathing softly through their noses. I remembered how relieved I was when I first saw the rise and fall of their chests last night. At first, I thought it was trick, conjured from my lack of sleep but when I pressed my ear to Arthur's chest. I was met with a faint heartbeat. I cheered but then covered my mouth with both palms, quickly recalling that the Council and their Seekers were sleeping across the hall.

I checked the others to find that all were breathing and carrying a steady pulse. I sighed once more and collapse back in my chair.

I didn't realize that I had fallen asleep till the sun's rays had streamed in through the window. I rubbed my eyes, hoping to find everyone up and about with Arthur lecturing me about not eating or...
that sleeping in a chair was bad for my back. Unfortunately, I was met with the same scene I had left last night, with everyone bedridden and out cold.

I remained by their sides not bothering to move when someone had called out for breakfast.

"Staring at him won't make him heal any faster," a familiar voice spoke from the door frame.

I turned to Adrian as he took his seat at the foot of Lukas' bed, a pair of crouches by his side. I glanced to his wrapped ankle and the memory hits me like a wave.

"Amy! Amy!" Adrian shouted as he shook me by the shoulders, "Snap out of it! They don't have time! Get me their heads!"

That pulled me out of my daze, "huh?"

"I need their heads," he exclaimed. "Help me look! Before they decompose!" He sprinted off, his leg limping behind him.

I blinked, not fully understanding the situation till Adrian cursed and I snapped to attention. He was coddling Fiona's head in his arms, frantically trying to keep her hair attached to her skull. Yet the thick fiery locks dropped, pooling below and then crumbling into dust. I instantly jumped to my feet, scanning the area for two bodies and a pair of missing heads. I found Arthur discarded in the snow, his skin was a dark shade of gray; his hair was falling out and spider cracks were forming throughout his cheeks and jawline. I carefully lift his head but no matter how gentle I was small specks of dirt broke away, disappearing into the powder.

I froze, not entirely sure if I should move but Adrian's voice brings me back. "Find the other one!"

I spun and found him dragging Fiona's body to lay next to Arthur's. "Quickly!" he shouted at me.

I nodded, blocking out all uncertainly and handed him Arthur's head. Then I sprinted to the edge where Lukas still remained. I draped his lifeless form over my shoulder and scooped up his head; which was in the same condition as Arthur's.

I slid to Adrian's side as he aligned each nation's head with their body. I laid down Lukas and he proclaimed, "Alright I'll start with Lukas and Arthur, seeing that Fiona still has more time."

I spared a quick glance to Fiona; a few locks may have fallen but she still had her creamy complexion and bright red hair.

Adrian shifted forward, "Hold Lukas, keep his head straight," he instructed.

I did what he asked as he yanked out a single strand of hair from his scalp. His inner blue light flooded his fingertips as he straightened the strand and then pulled; a single blue string followed the end, like thread connecting to a needle.

"Hold him still," he pressed the needle to Lukas' skin, stitching the broken tissue back into place.

"That's it?" I questioned skeptically. "You're just gonna stitch him back together."

He smirked, "I'm not just stitching the skin together. I'm also reconnecting the bone, muscle and nervous system."

I blinked, "seriously?"
"Got the idea from an anime," he winked and continued his work, crisscrossing the blue stitches as they glowed and disappeared once in place. When Adrian had finished, the gray faded as Lukas' white skin returned. Granted it was pale and his hair was nearly gone but he looked better.

Then I noticed his sunken left eye, "Can you do anything about that?"

"At my state," he panted, "it would be best to focus on their necks before anything else..."

I looked to him and gasped.

His face was sporting a nasty bruise on his cheek, the colors nearly black and blue. His right arm was swollen and red, my best guess broken.

"What the hell happened to you?!"

"I can heal myself just fine but," he scoots away from Lukas and moves on to Arthur. "Others...take a lot more. I have to take away from the magick I used to heal myself to fix them."

"You don't have to," I grabbed his hands before he could reach Arthur. "They'll be fine," I huffed, forcing myself to smile. "Their heads will just grow back."

"How long do you think that will take?" he wasn't expecting an answer. "Giving their conditions and nation's stability, my best guess would be a month."

"A month!" I exclaimed in shock.

"They would have to regenerate their eyes, teeth, tongue, voice and their own brain," he explained. "Unless..." he turned to Arthur's head, "I sew their heads back on before they crumble. Unless..." he added once more, "you can wait?"

I bit my bottom lip as I took a deep breath and released his hands, "do it."

He nodded, tugging out another strand of hair and threading his aura into string. I pushed Arthur's head closer to his body and Adrian began his stitching. Lacing his aura into the nation with quick flicks of his wrist.

"Heh," he wheezed, "I knew there was a reason why my mother taught me to sew."

I glanced to him and bit back my surprise when I noticed a line of blood streaking down his face. He noticed my expression though and assured, "I'm fine. It was just a cut. A spike had-had gotten me."

His words were slurring, "are you okay?" I asked, concerned.

He nodded, "sí, sí." He bit at the string once he was done and crawled for Fiona. "Sólo uno más," he panted softly, switching to Spanish.

"Hey, hey!" I reached for him, "Adrian stop, seriously!" When he wasn't listening I screamed in Spanish, "Adrian por favor, no se esfuerce. Tienes dos de los tres! Es mejor que nada."

He turned back, blinking as he switched back to English, "you speak Spanish?"

"Half of my family is from Mexico, of course I'm going to learn Spanish." I gripped him by the shoulders, jerking him towards me, "You're cold and you're losing blood... just-just stop."

He shook his head and repeated, "Sólo uno más." which meant, 'just one more.'
I sighed and then asked in his native tongue, "Can you live from this?"

He nodded.

I shook my head and moved to grab Fiona's head, "do it before I change my mind."

He nodded again and created another needle and thread. He worked swiftly, reconnecting the skin and muscle with absolute focus till he screamed. His needle stopped as he gripped my wrist, squeezing with every ounce of strength. Before I could even utter a word, I heard the snap of bone. I looked over and found his leg, the one he used to kick at Mara when she had turned herself into stone. The ankle had twisted, pointing the foot at a crooked angle as blood dripped from broken skin.

"Oh my god!" I reached for his foot, yanking at my scarf to wrap his ankle in.

He didn't stop, continuing his stitches till the final one was set. He breathed a sigh of relief and fell back.

I caught him, shaking him by the shoulders to keep him conscious, "Adrian. Adrian! Is there anyone I should call for help?! Adrian?! Adrian!"

His eyes fluttered, looking past me as he smiled and whispered, "About time."

His head fell back and I turned around to find a cloaked figure looming over me. This figure removed their hood, revealing a middle aged Indian woman with a British accent, "what happen here?"

I snorted bitterly, "A lot."

This woman proceeds to pull out her phone and call in reinforcements. Well I thought they were reinforcements till tree roots spouted from the ground and wrapped themselves around my waist.

"Word of advice," the woman proclaimed, "Don't fight it."

With those final words I was yanked backward, slamming to the ground. The root yanked harder, sinking into the earth with me along with it. I clawed and kicked, desperately thrashing for the light as I disappeared within the darkness.

I didn't even have the chance to scream.

The next thing I knew I was in chains with the woman standing beside me. Her name was Annisa Dara, a Seeker who had received Jasper's distress signal minutes before he had been rendered unconscious. She was also the person who had hand delivered me to Hugo the Dickhead.

"I heard they started breathing," Adrian's voice brought me back to the present. "That's good right?"

"Yeah," I mumbled and brushed my hand through Arthur's hair.

He was quiet for a moment till I asked, "are there people here? I'm hearing a lot more voices."

He gave a tight lined smile, "they're holding the funeral for our lost. It's also the time where the families of the departed claim the bodies."
"Oh, I'm sorry for your lost," I offered.

He nodded, "thank you," then turned to the window, "but I believe your words are needed elsewhere."

I followed his gaze to the courtyard where a crowd of people had gathered. Most wore heavy cloaks festooned with stitched runes, printed patterns and embroidered animals while others were in casually suits and jackets. I scanned the group, spotting Braden in a dark suit and coat. An old woman stood beside him, clutching onto his arm as she sobbed. I glanced to the figure before them; it was laid out straight, wrapped in pink cloth and tied with gold twine.

"Is that Tadgh?" I asked.

"Yes," Adrian confirmed.

Another body lied several feet away, this one was smaller and covered in mint green silk. "Isla," I stated and he nodded once more.

A little girl, no more than five wailed. She had bouncy red curls and a million freckles on her face but she had her grandmother's ice blue eyes. She howled once more, calling out for her 'Nana' as her mother wiped her tears and soothed her with comforting words.

The last body was painfully bear with only Jasper and Saoirse as constant mourners. Few had come to pay their respects but no crowds had formed. Astrid was swathed in violet sheets, tied together with thick rope and red ribbons. Saoirse was kneeing beside her, wrapping each ribbon with shaky hands.

"Is the ribbon supposed to mean something," I queried, genuinely curious.

"Each ribbon represents a year the two were together," Adrian replied, his eyes growing dark with grief. "Red is the color of Saoirse's aura, while purple was Astrid's."

"Oh god." My heart cried out for Saoirse, the loss of a loved one was always painful. "Where's Astrid's family? Why is it only Saoirse and Jasper?"

He sighed, "Astrid was born to a normal family. Blood does not decide on magick ability. Many believe so but it all relies on the aura. The strength and will of that person to take control of their aura, to understand it…to understand oneself. Anyone could be a witch if they truly tried to open their senses, ones that have been closed off either through ignorance or fear.

"Like any Sight wielder, Astrid was born with her senses open. Not like other children who are taught to either experience these sensations or fear them. Her parents never understood the things she saw and they never tried to." He smiled, but it was sad and forced, "she told me once that… Saoirse was her only family."

"But…compared to the others-"

"Astrid may have found acceptance when she had found the witch community but," he grew silent, closing his eyes as he looked away from the scene. He inhaled deeply and continued, "Witches, warlocks, sorcerers, whatever you want to call us… it makes no difference. We all use aura to invoke our magick. Aura is our life blood, our chi, our very soul leaking from our bodies. It belongs to you. No one has any control over it."

His jaw clutched before he spoke, "do you know that there are not many Sight wielders? Including Astrid there are three. One in the east, an old monk that lives in a hidden temple and the other is a
woman, a Voodoo Queen in the south of the US. Now there could be others, but most have kept to
themselves."

I knitted my brows in confusion, "why?"

"Because we're afraid of them."

"Afraid," I repeated, irritated with his grim tone. "How can you be afraid of people that see colors? I
saw your auras when we were fighting-"

"Because I allowed it," he countered. "Aura is not just about colors, these colors are our energy,
twisting and churning within us. They are our feelings, our power and our vulnerabilities. People put
up walls to hide their insecurities, their weakness. Some try so hard to build a facade, most taking
years and... for someone, a complete stranger to take one look at you and break each one in seconds.
To strip you completely naked and see everything that you are and can never be. Terrifies most
people."

"So, get over it," I chided. I know; I was being incredibly insensitive but all I could think about was
Blake and how even in a community of flying, fire conjuring, animal human hybrids he would still
be considered an outsider. "So, they can see that you're a liar or like to watch gay porn, who cares?
They're still people."

He gave a genuine laugh, "if only there were more people like you."

I blinked, taken by surprise as he added, "But that is not the only reason. They have an ability, one
only they possess; to turn a person's aura against them."

"What do you mean?"

"Think Star Wars... you know when Darth Vader would strangle people with the Force? It's pretty
much like that except it's your own soul strangling you from the inside."

My eyes widened in shock, "That... can't be-"

"Oh, but it is; have you heard of people spontaneously combusting? When a soul overheats it
destroyed the body and Sight wielders can make a soul overheat."

I rubbed my temple, trying to absorb this new information, "but why didn't Astrid use this against the
immortals?"

"That kind of magick can't be done from a distance," he breathed in once more, "she was trying to
get close."

I dropped my head into my hands as a slow, reckoning throb began to form in the back of my skull.
This shed a whole new light on the Sight and what it could mean for Blake. To control another's
aura, another's will to destroy themselves... It was almost too much to process. Should I tell Blake?
Should I tell him of this intense power that lurks inside him? He deserves to know but would I only
end up scaring him?

A hand squeezed my shoulder, jerking me back from these dark thoughts. "Come on," Adrian gave a
small lopsided grin, "you should join us."

"I-I-" I stuttered, "Are you sure that's okay?"

He nodded and gestured me to follow him.
Once we entered the courtyard, large men were carrying the bodies on top of a huge pyre. Spacing each one a few inches apart as members of the crowd moved forward to place flowers, stones and herbs with the bodies. Logs carved with runes were added, circling the departed as they were doused with gasoline.

Donald stepped forward, "I've known Isla and Tadgh since childhood. They were skilled, filled with great power and they used it with a clear mind and sound heart. Granted I might be talking more of Isla than of Tadgh." That earned him a small round of laughter. "Tadgh was a little more reckless, I mean the fool tried to shift when he was eleven to prove point. That man always preferred to be in the skies… he was never meant for the earth."

He blinked back tears and turned to face the pyre, "Now you can soar to your heart's content. Do not worry about us old friend… I'll watch over your family…both of your families, that is a promise."

He fell back, allowing Saoirse to take the center. She sniffled, wiping her face with one hand. The golden band around her ring finger glistened for a moment before dropping to her side. She inhaled a shaky breath, "The first time I met Astrid… she was a student at the university Oxford. I was starting out as a Seeker, searching for a professor that was using his students as power sources."

She paused as a small, grief-stricken smile formed on her face, "She was in the library late at night… with piles and piles of books beside her. She was so lovely… I could not keep my eyes off her. And the only time she bothered to look up at me, was when that bastard was trying to attack me from behind." She huffed, "If that doesn't scream romance what does?"

The crowd snickered and she continued, "She refused to leave my side that night… and every night since." The tears returned and she looked away, rubbing her face with the back of her hand. Silence filled the courtyard as the crowd watched one of their leaders tremble before the pyre. She inhaled through her mouth, "She has told me countless of times that she never had a home till she met me… our home…our place was at each other's side…and now I…"

Her voice trailed off, no longer functioning as a ball of fire sparked from her palm. She tossed it forward and the wood caught the flame. It began with small crackle but once the fire had tasted gas, the pyre lit into a blaze.

It was custom that the pyre would be watched over by the next of kin, but Saoirse assured that her fire would not perish as the crowd was guided into the dining hall. Where an Irish Wake was waiting for us; a band of men and women pulled out a range of instruments, from string to brass they began to play. Drinks were handed out as food was catered in from the kitchen, my eyes immediately went for the door. I know; it would be terribly rude to leave but I needed to check on my friends.

Adrian reached for me, "seat with me?"

I hesitated at first, glancing to the exit one last time before following him. He hobbled to a far-off table and dropped himself into a chair. I sat beside him as Jasper came forward with food, tea and hot chocolate. He wasn't as bad off as Adrian but he did have bandage wrapped around his forehead.

"Here we are," he placed the tray down, "eat up."

Adrian grabbed a plate, filled it with food and slid it in front of me, "you can't leave till you eat every single thing on your plate."
Before I could object, Jasper cuts in, "Annisa says you barely touch the food she brings you."

"I eat some of it," I argued.

"But not all of it," he concluded, "you need to have a hardy meal. Now eat."

"Fine," I gave up and scooped a spoon full of mashed potatoes into my mouth.

As I ate, I took in my surroundings, of the music that thrummed and the laughter that followed. Men and women were drinking, taking shots of hard liquor as they told stories of the deceased. Braden was among them, giving me the chance to see his hands and arms; both were wrapped in tight bandages. His eyes flickered to my line of sight and he gave a slight nod as he took a sip. I smiled but it didn't reach my eyes. I found Saoirse with Tadgh's widow and Isla's family; each member gave their condolences as the young red headed girl sat beside her and held her hand.

Jasper sighed and pulled out a flask, "it's gonna be a while…but she'll get back on her feet."

"But what are we gonna do?" blurted Adrian, "We lost two members would this mean another selection?"

"Most likely," Jasper shrugged and took a swing from his flask.

They grew quiet and I finally asked a question that has been eating at me since the beginning of the pyre. "Why did you burn the bodies? I thought—with the whole Druid thing you all wouldn't want to go out like that."

Both Adrian and Jasper raised their brows to their hair lines and after sharing a look, Adrian answered. "We used to bury our dead but thirty-some years back a witch traveled from every corner of the earth, digging up bodies of powerful witches. Even in death, our blood, our bones and our flesh still carry magick. This witch would then conduct experiments… such as chimeras and summonings."

"Summonings?" I questioned, "Like what?"

"Creatures of darkness, faceless demons and murderous spirits," Jasper named a few and then shrugged, "the usual."

"The usual," I huffed sarcastically, "yeah, this is so normal."

"We sent out our best Seekers to capture this witch…we even had the added help of the Iron Council's Berserkers. Apprentices sent in from the Americas, Voodooists from Africa and Warriors from the east." Adrian sighed through his nose and gestured for Jasper's flask, "Even with our combined power, we couldn't capture the son of a bitch."

"So, he's still out there?" I remarked, "Grave robbing?"

"It was over thirty years back," Adrian waved it off.

"But we are still on the lookout," Jasper added, "but all we can do is give him less of an opportunity. We took a page from the Greeks and took on the tradition of the pyre. Not many witches were thrilled with the idea but it was a secure way to have their loved ones rest in peace."

"And the Irish Wake?" I questioned, "I mean, wasn't Tadgh the only one Irish?"

"We prefer to celebrate life rather death," Jasper stated as his eyes glanced to a group of children that
were spinning each other in a dance. "It's easier on them…giving the life we live."

"But why? It's not your job to save the world," I remarked.

"But we are in charge of witches that we bring into this world and if they gather too much attention, for whatever reason," a spark of pink lightening flickered in his eyes, "they have to be put down."

Jasper's words followed me as I walked back to my room; his last line was nearly haunting. His tone was neither hateful nor sorrowful, purely neutral in his verdict. I rubbed my eyes and released a tired groan. I needed sleep but any attempts these past few days were met with nightmares and anxiety. I briefly remembered a hot plate and kettle inside and noted that another cup of hot chocolate might help.

As I reached for the door, I heard a muffled grunt, "ugh…bloody hell."

My heart jumped and I burst inside, "Arthur?!"

Instead of the blond Englishman was met with a half-naked Scotsman.

He smirked, "wrong brother love."

My rush of excitement lasted shortly, "oh…sorry."

"Oi, no need to sound so disappointed," Alistair quipped and then asked. "How long have I been out?"

"Two days," I answered and added, "Why isn't everyone else awake?"

"Well," he dragged out the word as he rubbed the back his neck. "That depends upon their injuries. I know Killian took a claw to the throat before everything went dark. What about them?" he gestured to his siblings and I summarized.

"Dylan was hit with spikes and everyone else got…" I swallowed and subconsciously reached for my throat. "Beheaded."

Alistair's eyebrows rose in surprise, "That can't be… these three would still be headless if it's only been two days."

"Adrian sewed their heads back on," I declared. "He used these blue strings and reattached their skin, muscle and bones back together."

"That's amazing," he stated.

I nodded, "yeah."

He released a tired sigh as he opened a duffle bag, digging for a new shirt. "That certainly saves us a couple of weeks but they were attacked with a direct form of magick. It will still be awhile before they wake."

"What do you mean?"

"Magick is conjured from our aura, our soul."

I nodded again, "yeah."
"Our soul is what gives humans magick and it leaks out giving them an aura-"

"Uh-huh."

"Everyone has an aura; all living life does. Which goes to show that all humans are capable of magick but only to a certain degree-"

"Yes, I know that too."

"But," he hissed in a warning, "When magick is used to harm someone, it not only effects the body but the soul."

I blinked, confused, "okay, now you lost me."

He smirked, "then don't interrupt. It's just like a person experiencing PTSD. Even when the event has passed and the wounds have healed, it still leaves a mark on the soul. Humans that survive from an attack will heal, but if they died, well they don't come back. I'm sure you're aware that rule doesn't apply to us."

I bit the inside of my cheek as a glimpse of my death at the hands of Klipto nudged at me from the back of my brain, "yeah."

"We don't see a light or anything like that, we simply go to sleep. Well, I wouldn't call it sleep, it's more like a cut. Our death cuts us out and then when we regenerate we cut back in. How long we're out for depends on how we were killed. Not even counting the status of our countries, it could take hours to a day to a week to a month-"

"A year." I added.

"Now that only happens when your country is in a real shit hole," he remarked.

"Huh," I hummed and sat back next to Arthur, "so how long?"

"My best guess, later on tonight or tomorrow, estimating that Adrian did his sewing right. Even if he didn't," he glanced to Fiona as a soft, tender smile formed across his face. "They got better odds, growing back a head is difficult no matter the injury."

"Why?"

His smile fell as he turned to face me, his expression was cautious, "did anyone tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

He sighed in frustration, "of course not. I bet he didn't want to bring it up."

Now I was irritated, "why does the head take longer to heal," I repeated and then guessed, "Is it because of the brain?"

"Partly, I mean even if only a section of it was blown off, it would still heal faster than a nation with no head. Now a nation would not only have to regenerate their brain but their eyes."

"What?" I chided, "Okay, I get that a brain would take some time, being it pretty much controls everything, but our eyes? What makes them so special?"

He chuckled, "they really didn't tell you."
"Tell me what?" I exclaimed.

"Our eyes, unlike the rest of our bodies don't crumble into dust when injured or torn away from us. Instead they form into jewels."

"Jewels?" I inquired skeptically, "like diamonds and rubies?"

"How else to explain our strange eye colors," he quipped.

I recalled Matthew and Gilbert's eyes; one pair were nearly violet while the other was crimson. "So, our eyes are gems," I huffed in good humor, "what else should I know? Are our teeth made of wood? Is our hair grass? Oh, and I am assuming that the dirt we bleed comes from our native lands, so does that mean Egypt bleeds sand?"

Alistair laughed, "no, no and yes."

"Ha! Got one right!"

"Yes," he fell silent, allowing the good mood to fade. "But you are familiar to how gems are made?"

"Um... I know diamonds need pressure to turn into one," I replied.

"Yes, but it also needs time and depending on what type of gem and of the emotional trauma, it could take months; a year even."

He took a seat and leaned back to stare at the ceiling, "Back when I was young...nations used each other's eyes as a way of dominating other nations. Wearing their eyes as jewelry or presenting them to their rulers as treasures was the ultimate form of control." His voice had lowered into a soft whisper yet there was an edge; a harsh reality to his words. "It was also one fucked up mind game. Crowns, scepters, royal necklaces and rings, most if not all of their jewels had been ripped out of a nation's head."

My back twitched as a cold shiver ran down my spine, "that's horrible."

"Not all were unwilling," he stated nonchalantly, "I mean, Arthur had purposely gouged out his own eye for his queen."

"Elizabeth," I asked and quickly added, "The first?"

He tilted his head to the side, giving me a lopsided smile, "you're catching on." He faced the ceiling once more, "it wasn't that uncommon...but they weren't given lightly. Purposely tearing out one's eye for their leader was the highest form devotion and respect."

"Yeah; no. I'll just stick to thank you notes," I muttered under my breath.

Alistair didn't hear me as he added, "that's why most of his portraits back in his pirate days have him with an eye patch."

My eyes widened in surprise, "Wait. Arthur was a pirate?!"

"Yup."

I pointed to the sleeping lump beside me, "this Arthur."

"Yes."
I glanced to the blond in question; the one that always proclaimed of his gentleman standards as he sipped his tea with his pinky finger lifted. "Really? Him?"

"Yes," Alistair proclaimed.

I giggled, "I still can't see it."

"Maybe that's why he didn't want to tell you about our eyes," his voice became harsh once more. "Of the pain and destruction he left in his wake. Tell me, do you know anything from his colonization days?"

I crossed my arms, growing defensive, "he purposely got my natives sick."

A couple of beats passed and he stated, "Is that all?" Then he gave a mean chuckle, "that's not even the tip of the bloody iceberg; more like a chip on top of the tip." His voice fell deeper as he began his tale, "he went around colonizing nearly half of the world, and we were his firsts." He spread out his arm, gesturing to his siblings, "our dear little brother tore out our eyes without even a second thought. Every country he claimed had their eyes added to his queen's crown. Every country he defeated in battle, he made sure to grab at least one."

His words chilled me to the bone, keeping me in my place as my thoughts swirled. Memories of Arthur swam; of him drinking tea with my mother and grandmother as they gossiped. Of him discussing the superiority of rugby over football with my father and brother. Of him dancing with my kid cousins and lastly, of him humming a lullaby to Raiden as the babe cried. That was the Arthur that I knew and called family, but the image of the blood thirsty, one-eyed pirate refused to disappear.

I squeezed my eyes and acknowledge, "He's changed."

"Yes, he did," Alistair admitted, "all because of Alfred."

I furrowed my brow and he continued with a cruel smirk, "Arthur ripped out the eyes of his family, of his enemies and even of his lovers. Yet," he paused, turning to me with unwavering eyes, "he couldn't bear the thought of hurting his precious baby brother."

I blinked, absorbing his words, "he spared Alfred..."

He closed his eyes slowly, tired from the weight of his story. "He may not have had magick, but that boy had a gift. He was able to turn a beast back into a man." His gaze finds mine, "I wonder has his gift been passed down to you?"

I hesitated, not really sure on how to answer till I realized that silence was my best option.

I spent the rest of the day by Arthur's side while Alistair joined the wake below. It was quiet, peaceful till my phone rang again and I ignored it... again. The only calls I did bother to make were to my family, making sure that they were safe and that they had no run-ins with a pissed off witch. It's not like I wanted to avoid Francis and Matthew, it's just I didn't know how to explain the situation or where to begin. It was easier to keep it to myself, with people that already knew. It was also easier to just lay on my bed and stare at the ceiling.

Within the next hour Alistair returned with two bottles of alcohol, "hello love." He winked and shook the bottles, "want some?"

"No," I remarked, "I'm good."
He shrugged, taking his seat and placing his feet on the table, "more for me." He poured himself a cup of rum and raised it, "for Isla," he announced and drowned his drink.

I raised a brow, curious about their relationship but after seeing his sad, tight lipped smile I decided against it.

Another hour passed till Lukas stirred, waking with a dry moan and fluttering eye. I jumped to my feet and leaned in close, "Lukas."

He groaned, "Amy…?"

"Shhh," I combed my hand through his hair, "it's okay; you're safe now."

"Why…" he breathed, "why can't I open…" he reached for the bandage that covered his left socket.

"No, don't," I gently grabbed his hand but he pushed it aside and rose, ripping off the patch with one tug.

His face was lowered, hiding his expression as his fingers roamed his face frantically. His shoulders began to shake and his spare hand curled the sheets into his fist.

"Where is my eye…" he asked, his voice low and hard.

I took a deep breath before answering, "One of the immortals, the little girl took it. I'm sorry Lukas, I tried to get it back-" I reached to place my hand on his trembling back but he slapped it away.

"Don't touch me!" he snapped and leaped off the bed, heading straight for the door.

Alistair reacts swiftly, cutting him off from the door, but that didn't stop Lukas.

"Out of my way!" with a wave of hand, he threw Alistair to the wall and pinned him there with his unseen power.

Alistair wouldn't submit so easily, fighting against the hold but that made Lukas push harder, nearly crushing Alistair. The Scotsman gasped painfully and I cried, "Lukas! Stop!"

My voice broke through as Lukas' hand dropped to his side. Alistair had taken a sigh of relief but he was still pinned to the wall.

I stepped forward, "if you are planning on going after her, it's too late. You were out for two days, they're gone-"

"Silence!" his voice bounced off the walls, causing me to tense. He craned his head to the side, revealing his empty eye socket. I froze at the sight of the black hole and my eyes instantly found the floor. In two strides he was before me, gripping my face between his fingers and thumb as he forced me to look at him.

"Don't you dare look away."

I swallowed, "I-"

"No," he interrupted coldly, "you don't get to talk. You don't get to say 'I'm sorry'. They don't change the outcome." He fell silent, his one good eye analyzing every corner of my face. "You will never understand this kind of pain…this kind of humiliation. You were born into this world but have you been born into ours…" His thumb reached up, slowly caressing the bottom lid of my left eye. "These pretty eyes would be sitting on top of a king's head."
I tried to speak but no words came, my throat had grown tight and my jaw had clutched.

Lukas continued, "I wonder…what kind of gems you process? Are they aquamarine? A softer shade of sapphire like mine or are they blue diamonds?" His fingers twitched, digging into my skin as his index and thumb circled around my eye, "let's find out."

Instinct kicked in as I threw an upper-cut; the blow making a loud, resounding smack as the hit knocked him off his feet. He fell to the floor; unconscious as Alistair was released from the wall.

Before either of us could even comprehend the situation, a young man with strawberry blond hair and amber eyes swung the door open.

"Found them!" he announced in a heavy eastern European accent. He gave a wide, friendly smile revealing sharper than usually canines but that smile faltered as he took in the scene. "Did I interrupt something?"

Alistair was the first to speak, "Romania? What the hell are you doing here?"

Romania didn't miss a beat, "they asked me to track you."

On cue Mikkel slipped inside with Toris and Feliks in toll. The familiar blond was prepared to greet us with a huge grin till he found Lukas on the floor.

"Lukas!" he cried out in alarm and kneeled beside him. "Hey, hey, are you-" his face paled once he had a decent look at Lukas' eye. He turned to me, his blue eyes wide and worried, "What happened?"

I didn't know where to begin. All I could do was look everywhere but Mikkel's gaze.

"Amy," he asked once more, his voice rising, "what happened?!"

My voice had left me, my throat constricting, causing me to gasp for air. Toris noticed this change and stepped forward, "Amy-" anything else he tried to say muffled due to the blood rushing through my eardrums, becoming white noise. He got closer, his hand reaching for my shoulder and I jerked back, avoiding his touch.

"I-I-" failing once more at human speech, I darted for the door. Toris called after me but Feliks stepped aside, not bothering to stop me.

I slammed the door behind me but the hallway was no better. I inhaled short, quick breaths as my heart pounded and my body trembled. I reached for the window, needing air but my hands fumbled; failing at the simple task. I growled in irritation and slammed my fists on the stained glass before dashing through the hall. I rounded the corner and headed for the stair case, taking two at time. I hit the bottom floor with a stomp and inhaled, hoping the distance was enough.

It wasn't.

Music thrummed from the dining hall as I scanned the corridor, searching for an exit. The witches paid no attention to me as they continued to sing and dance while drinking and laughing their pain away.

I ignored them and sprinted for the door ahead, swinging it open with a shove. A blast of icy air filled my lungs, forcing me to take in deeper breaths but it wasn't enough. I treaded through knee deep snow, not at all bothered by the cold as I raced through the field; tripping twice but the snow was there to cushion each fall.
The third fall on the other hand was much harder, due to falling off a two-foot cliff and landing on frozen sand. Pain shot through my right side as I slowly peeled myself off the ground. I sat up, massaging the ache out of my shoulder and spitting out any bits of sand that were grinding against my teeth. I shut my eyes, forcing myself to inhale through my nose to end my thrashing heart. Then I briefly recalled Toris' exercises; breathing in for a count of three and exhaling for another count.

Once my heart was no longer ramming itself against my ribcage. I opened my eyes to the crashing waves of the ocean. Due to the cloudy sky there was no moonlight; no reflection of light bouncing off the blacken waves, just darkness and for a moment everything was silent. Till an image of Lukas formed before my mind's eye. I tried to shake the thought away but it was relentless; his teeth bared as he snarled at me and his hand, rough and unforgiving as his fingers dug into my skin.

My eye twitched at the memory and I subconsciously curled into myself, running my hands over my face and hair reassuring myself that he wasn't there. Yet, his image would not leave me alone. His one-eyed gaze burning into me, that empty socket pulling me in as his words resounded:

"You don't get to say 'I'm sorry'…"

Then what do I say?!

"This kind of pain...this kind of humiliation..."

I-I-

"You will never understand…"

"Maybe I don't want to!" I screamed out loud, the words echoed as my voice fell into a whisper. "I don't-I don't want…"

I caught a blur of movement from the corner of my eye and I threw a fist, more in surprise and fear than of anger.

Braden snatched my hand and held me back with his spare, "It's alright," he soothed, "It's alright."

I dropped my hand and moved to sit back on the ground. A blanket was thrown over my shoulders and slowly, I released the tension in my shoulders and curled into the soft wool; pulling my knees to my chest to conceal the little warmth I had.

"I don't know if your kind can catch colds but you can get frostbite," Braden gestured to my hands.

I glanced down, finding that the skin was forming a sight bluish hue around the nails. "Huh. I didn't even feel it," I remarked honestly.

He cursed in response and turned to scowl at me, "you didn't feel it? You decided to run out in negative degree weather without a proper jacket and you can't feel the cold?"

"It happens okay," I snarled harshly and used his own words against him. "If you haven't notice I'm not entirely human."

He was silent after that and I smirked, winning this round but he wasn't done.

"What happened?" he asked calmly.

I cocked a brow in question and he sighed, "Annisa said four more nations arrived. I know the spiked blond and the brunet… let me guess the blond is Denmark and the other is Lithuania… that's
what he said he was from."

"Yes," I said curtly, "Toris is Lithuania and Mikkel is Denmark and short blond-Feliks is Poland and the new guy, I just found out he's Romania."

He nodded, "Annisa said something fell before they entered and someone was shouting-"

"You want to know what happened?!" I snapped, "Lukas woke up and when he found out that his eye was gone he-" I closed my eyes, "he got mad-he-" I shook my head, not sure on how to proceed.

"I thought you can heal-"

"Oh yes we can but eyes take longer it seems, cause unlike the rest of our bodies our eyes are jewels."

"Jewels-"

"Yes jewels! Diamonds and sapphires and rubies and emeralds-they're all there! Inside our fucking skulls!" my voice fell into its default setting: sarcasm. "You see, our bodies are made with dirt. We are walking piles of mud and clay and the only shred of worth we have is our eyes. But there's more to it than that; taking another nation's eye was like a power trip for most of these sadistic assholes and Arthur's one of them. Did you know that most of the crown jewels were made with gems from colonized nations? I had no idea, did you?"

I wasn't looking for an answer, instead I continued, "Taking another nation's eye was also another way to dominate them, leaving them blind and disfigured. And Lukas said, I wouldn't understand." My voice cracked, becoming even harsher, "I wouldn't understand the pain and humiliation and then he tried to gouge out my own eye."

Braden didn't say a word, his face perfectly expressionless.

I panted after my rant and turned away to look at the ocean, "I just couldn't be there anymore. I just… I just…" my train of thought was interrupted as Braden's final words at Church Allen resurfaced:

"What I've learned from all my years of being a Seeker is that you always trust your gut, and when it's telling you to run like hell. You run."

A broken laugh escaped from me, "I bet you're not surprised. After what you saw…" I bit my bottom lip to stop it from quivering, "you know, after you left, I saw myself in a mirror… and I agreed with you. If I had seen myself I would've run as far and fast as I could." My eyes watered as my shoulders began to shake, "I mean who does that? Who bites a woman in the neck and then rips off her head with their bare hands. Who does that?!"

I looked to my trembling hands and I swallowed, "I did that."

"I did that," I repeated as I laughed once more, letting the realization hit me. "I'm just like them." I allowed the sentence to linger, forcing them to become real, "no matter what I said or did…trying to make myself believe that I wasn't totally like them. That I was different." Flashes of a giant alien head came into view as I tore into it with its own tooth. "That I wasn't like them." Klipto was on his knees as I stood before him, my finger on the trigger; only seconds away from blasting his head open. "That I was... above them..." The taste of Abigail's flesh resurfaced as blood streamed from her detached head and down my arms.

Tears finally fell, "I'm a monster… I'm a monster..."
Braden grabbed my shoulders and forced me to look at him, "you are not a monster."

"But you said-"

"I know what I said," he snapped and inhaled quickly, trying to calm himself. "I just didn't understand, not then. But now I see... a monster wouldn't go out in a blizzard to find her friend. A monster wouldn't cry and cling to a priest over a nightmare. A monster wouldn't fight tooth and nail to protect her friends. A monster wouldn't bother to travel hundreds of miles to warn a man she barely knew and was also a complete ass when he left."

I huffed, shutting my eyes as I tried and failed to control my sobs.

Braden sighed and added, "What I do know from history, is that all nations have done horrible things. I might not know their personal demons but they've made mistakes and in all honestly who hasn't. You're going to make mistakes and you're going to have regrets and its okay. What's important is to not let those mistakes hold you back and make you believe you're something you're not."

I blinked slowly, absorbing his words as I wiped my face and slumped against his shoulder. His hand found the side of my head, stroking my hair as we allowed a comfortable silence to form between us. Minutes passed and exhaustion finally took its toll; plunging me into a dreamless sleep.

Lukas groaned; his head foggy due to a rueful sleep and a throbbing ache from the back of his skull. He blinked, adjusting to the harsh light and quickly noted that his jaw was sore. His chin pulsed with every subtle movement, sending a tremor of pain throughout his entire face.

"You're awake!" a familiar blond excitedly leaped to his side. "How are you feeling?"

He immediately registered Mikkel's voice and sighed, "Sore."

"Yeah, taking a punch from Amy can do that to ya," the Danish man remarked casually.

A punch from Amy, he thought curiously till a flood of memories slaps him in the face. Lukas waking with the young girl by his side. That same girl trying to comfort him as he shook uncontrollable; from anger or pain he didn't really know. Before he knew it, he was at the door with Scotland pinned to the wall. Amy cried out for him and he turned on her, his words sounding foreign even to his own ears.

"You will never understand this kind of pain... this kind of humiliation. You were born into this world but have you been born into ours... These pretty eyes would be sitting on top of a king's head."

Amy's eyes grew wide at the comment, her irises filled with shock and fear as her bottom lip quivered. He closed his good eye, attempting and failing to scrub the image away but it was unforgiving. Refusing him the luxury to forget and shining a relentless light on his actions as his fingers curled around the girl's eye.

He shot up, wishing with all his being that Amy was unharmed. "Where is she? Is she alright?"

"If you call running as far and fast as she can away from you alright," Poland chided from the table as he slipped his tea. "Then yes."

Lukas raised a brow and finally felt the restraints around his wrists. He didn't bother to ask why he...
was tied to the bed, he knew the reason. He then took notice that Lithuania and Romania were also in the room. "Vladimir? Why are you here?"

"Uh, he called me," he gestured to Mikkel, "he wanted me to track you cause you weren't answering your phone."

"And I informed him we were dead for two days," Alistair added as he poured himself glass of scotch.

"All of us?" Lukas asked.

"No. Amy survived," the Scotsman replied as he drowned his drink.

"She picked up Liet's bad habit of not picking up her phone," Feliks remarked. Toris sighed and massaged the bridge of his nose, "Feliks, please."

"Not now," he held a hand at the brunet and proceeded with his rant. "I mean come on, we all want to know what the hell is going on and the least Amy could've done was give us ten minutes of her 'busy life' to explain. Instead she just leaves us hanging and we have to call the vampire to fetch you."

"I'm not a vampire," Vladimir stated, his voice tired from the centuries old joke. Feliks either didn't hear him or ignored him, "and here we are-in the middle of nowhere."

"You're on the Isle of Iona," Alistair informed.

"Like I said, nowhere. In a church filled with witches and with news that immortals have pretty much declared war on them."

"What?!" Lukas and Alistair exclaimed in unison.

"Didn't they declare war when they were fighting you?" Feliks questioned.

"They were only after Abigail's head," Alistair countered, "They didn't say anything about war."

"They attacked the Grand Council, that's a declaration of war right there," a new feminine voice was added as a figure rose off the bed.

Mikkel cracked a flirtatious grin, "Fiona, good to see you're awake."

"How could I possible sleep with everyone shouting," she muttered.

"Still," Alistair moved forward to hand his sister a cup of tea, "for three immortals to go up against not just the Grand Council but every coven in Europe. They have to be either suicidal or completely mental."

"Or they have goal worth the risk," Toris proclaimed and turned his gaze on Mikkel. "Remember what Abigail said, about a nation's soul having power. The kind of power to grant a wish or change the world?"

Mikkel nodded slowly, "yeah, but if they were after nation souls why didn't they take any of theirs?"

"Hold up, Abigail's collecting nation souls?" Feliks interjected.
"It seemed so," stated Toris.

"Then why didn't you say anything?"

"We thought it didn't matter giving to the fact she was dead."

"Was," Lukas remarked.

Both he and Mikkel sighed, "The church came on the news the night you all had left."

"The church had been vandalized," Mikkel proclaimed, "at least that's what everyone believes. A hole was dug up at the end of the aisle, before the statue of Mary. A hole where we buried Abigail… no body was found."

Fiona cursed in her native tongue and abandoned the tea for the bottle of rum.

"So, they are working together," Feliks concluded, "yet if they have the same goal-why didn't they take your souls?"

After taking a swing from the bottle Fiona proclaimed, "Because they can't simply contain a soul. It needs a body… was she going to eat them?" she asked Mikkel.

He shrugged, "it seemed like it… but in all honestly everything was spotty, I don't really remember."

She nodded, thinking to herself before proceeding, "When an immortal devours a soul, it becomes a part of them while the identity of the soul, along with its power fades. That's why they need to keep eating souls to live. Eating our souls is not an option for them; if what they are after is all of us, they can't retrieve us one by one."

"Unless they have vessels or… make us into their pets, to keep us near," Toris added grimly.

Mikkel shuddered, "is that what she would've done? Cloak us in that disgusting blood worm armor?!"

"Blood armor?" Vladimir raised a curious brow, "what was used in the ritual?"

Toris gave a tired sigh and raked a hand through his hair, "Strange runes, some I haven't seen since I was young. There was a circle, an upside-down triangle and these swirls of knots."

"What materials did she use?"

"Blood from the cats and dogs but she also had a hyena-wrote the circle with its blood first. Used a crescent blade," the brunet paused, inhaling and exhaling through his nose. "She spoke in Latin… maybe?" He shook his head, "I really don't remember much."

Vladimir nodded understandingly and faced Fiona, "That's some ancient blood magick right there. Abigail is only what? Three hundred? This kind of magick must be thousands of years old. She must be working for someone older-way older."

Fiona shook her head, "it can't be… we don't have any record of an immortal thousands of years old. Well expect us. How could a human immortal live for so long without detection?"

"No offense to your detective skills, but you guys didn't even know where Abigail was for fifteen years," Feliks quipped.

Fiona glared and Alistair laughed bitterly, "He has a point."
She sighed massaging her temples, "something's missing…it's just not adding up."

The room fell silent and Lukas sighed through his nose and clutched his jaw. The shift of movement caused his chin to throb, reminding him of his hideous actions.

"Did I hurt her?" he asked in small voice, low enough for only Mikkel to hear.

Mikkel rubbed the back of his neck, "if you mean she had both of her eyes, then no."

"Her eyes?" Fiona knitted her brow and took a moment to scan the room, "where's America?"

"Oh, funny story," Alistair smirked, "Our friend Lukas here threw me up against the wall and almost gouged out little America's eye."

Lukas was slammed back into the mattress with a pair of hands curling around his neck. He gasped for air as his vision blurred but he was able to register a messy blond with green eyes.

Arthur's gaze burned with a murderous gleam as he pressed his entire body on Lukas' jugular. Blotches of black spotted in his vision as he fought for each breath and tugged at the restraints. Another pair of hands appeared, twisting Arthur's wrists and hurling him to the side. When the pressure was taken off, Lukas wheezed, choking on his air.

Noise erupted but it was all muffled as Lukas blinked away the spots and rose; meeting with Arthur as he struggled out of his older brother's hold.

His face twisted in a snarl as he cursed, "if you ever touch Amy again, I'll tear out your other eye and shove it up your ass!"

Alistair chuckled darkly, "now there is the England we all know and love."

"Fuck off!" Arthur shoved him off and Mikkel instantly stood between him and Lukas.

"Touch him again and your head will be flying," he threatened.

Vladimir stepped forward, "now, now, let's all just take a deep breath and-"

Both Mikkel and Arthur snapped, "Shut up Romania!"

"Okay," he drew back as the door swung open and before the frame was an Indian woman. She strolled in stepping aside for Braden to follow, with Amy coddled in his arms.

Immediately the anger and hate vanished from Arthur's gaze; replaced with worry. "What happened? Is she alright?"

"She's fine," Braden scoffed, moving pass him to tuck Amy into a bed beside Arthur's.

"The lack of sleep finally caught up to her," the woman spoke with a smooth British accent. "She wouldn't leave your side for two days."

Arthur's eyes softened, "silly girl," he whispered and combed a hand through her hair. "I would've been alright. It's not the first time I've been beheaded."

Mikkel crossed his arms, "And it certainly won't be your last."

"Enough Dane," Lukas sighed, exhausted from this entire ordeal.
The Danish man raised his eyebrows at him, "he just tried to kill you."

"It's not like I didn't deserve it," he muttered.

"Well if all of you are done," the woman added, taking center stage, "The Council and elders have a message for you all." She paused, waiting for their full attention, "We ask of you to pack your bags and leave, a boat is ready to take you back to Fionnphort"

Another silence fell as hesitant looks were exchanged and Lukas felt his blood run cold.

Fiona's jaw dropped slightly, "What do you mean? You need us-"

"No, we don't," the woman remarked in a professional tone. "You are the reason why they attacked the Council. The immortals are after nations, not us."

Mikkel furrowed his brow, "this room's bugged."

The woman gave a tiny smile, "the walls have eyes." Her honey irises flashed indigo as bright, animated eyes appeared throughout the room. Dozens popped through the walls and ceiling, aligning in checkered rows and blinking at random times.

"Well," Feliks' voice dripped with sarcasm, "this isn't creepy."

The light in her irises vanished, along with the added eyes, "Don't misunderstand, we appreciate all that you do for us Miss Ireland. Unlike most nations you still try and keep the bridge alive but in all honesty some bridges are meant to burn."

Lukas caught Fiona's fists at her side, shaking as embers sparked in and out of life.

"The magickal and the ordinary were never meant to merge and most of the personifications have chosen to leave the old world behind. We don't blame you, after all you been through, you deserve to enjoy the modern era."

"I will not abandon the Council!" Fiona snapped.

The woman remained calm, "We are not asking you to; we are asking you to leave it to us. We will find them, but we can't have you near. You are their targets and we prefer to keep our distance."

"Um, okay, but wouldn't it be better for us to work together," Mikkel suggested.

"In all honesty Mr. Denmark, we don't need you. We have handled worse situations than this," she stated simply. "You have twenty minutes to gather your things, the boat will be waiting at the bay."

"Annisa," Braden called out, "can't they at least leave in the morning? Three of their members are unconscious."

She sighed, "The Council and our elders agree it's for the best. No worries nations, we will stop them."

"No offense, but how?" Feliks asked, irritation nipping at his tone. "Three magickal immortals want our souls. Two of them were able to kill three of your people and that was with our help. Sorry if I'm little doubtful."

"Mr. Poland when was the last time you dealt with magick?" Annisa inquired, her tone matching his. "When was the last time you discussed magick with a witch?"
Feliks clutched his jaw and she continued, "You chose their world, leaving us to roam in the shadows, left to our own devices. Before then most of Europe tried to burn us. We got the message loud and clear, you prefer to leave us in myths and stories and we have grown to prefer that you all stay out of our business."

With those final words, she struts out the door with an apologetic Braden following right behind.

Ella Chasse sketched another design; adding vibrant colors and asymmetrical patterns becoming more like a cartoonish costume than an elegant ball gown. She tsked at the result and crumbled the sheet between her hands. She threw the crushed wad to the floor, a force of habit brought on by stress and lack of creatively. She brushed a hand over the new sheet and began the outline of the model; picturing a curvier figure as the dress took on a fish tail.

A clearing of a throat jerked her away from her drawing and forced her to look up. A dark-haired stewardess narrowed her eyes and handed Ella her discarded paper ball.

"Please, madam," she hissed, "stop tossing your trash in the aisle way."

Ella huffed in annoyance, it wasn't the first time the stewardess had to inform of this. "Yes, sorry," she snatched the ball and shoved it into her tote bag. She tried to get back to her model but the stewardess tapped her on the shoulder. "What?" she snapped.

"We will be landing in five minutes, please buckle in," she insisted.

She sighed, losing the spark and closing her sketch book.

Once the plane landed and the gates were in place, Ella swung the strap of her carryon over her shoulder and merged into the crowd of aisle. She crossed the grate and headed straight for the lobby, searching for her name. She found it written in graceful print on a sheet of paper. The sign was held up by Albert Voclain; a middle-aged man with tan skin, dark eyes and graying dark hair. He stood tall with a dazzling smile and a well-dressed suit; he was quite the contrast against the avenge jeans and sweaters.

"Miss Ella," he gave a soft wave, gesturing for her carryon, "how was your trip?"

She sighed, handing him her bag, "the stewardess kept bothering me."

"How dare she?" Albert quipped playfully.

Ella pouted, knowing full well that the man was teasing her, "it wasn't all my fault. I was going to pick up but after I had five new sketches."

"And did you?" he raised a brow.

"No," she answered, "she kept picking them up and pestering me with them."

"The nerve," he chuckled, escorting her to the front doors and popping open an umbrella. "Wear your coat Miss, the cold is bitter this year."

He was not exaggerating.

The doors opened and a gust of wind came; the cold sinking deep into Ella's bones. She curled into herself, stuffing her hands into her pockets as she took long strides for the Lincoln Sedan. Albert
walked at the same pace, pulling out his keys and clicking the doors open. Ella immediately slides in and Albert closes the door, sealing her inside with the heater turned up high. She relaxed into the leather seats as Albert packed her bag into the trunk. He then climbs in behind the wheel, maneuvers them out of the parking lot and onto the A16 highway.

"How was Miss Daniela's family?" Albert asked, striving for conversation.

Ella smiled, it was genuine and warm; "they're wonderful. Great Aunt Adalia showed me how to make churros."

Albert smiled back, "that's nice."

"Yes," she sighed through her nose, "yes, it was."

She closed her eyes and instantly she was back in the sleepy town of Collado Villalba; inside the Aguero's family home. It was a simple gray brick house on a large plot of land with patches of trees and wild flowers. The house was itself was filled with the scent of pastries and hot chocolate as Dani's parents, Esteban and Isa Aguero cooked together in the kitchen. Her younger brothers, Amelio and Izador were always outside; the older of the two would be in town while the younger would be found on a football field. Adalia Puga preferred the indoors, the cold being too much for her 'old bones'. It's the phrase she used dozens of times as she watched her soaps in the living room with Pico, the fat orange tabby laid about on her lap.

It was always crowded; either with extended family or close friends, all were boisterous and brash but she didn't hate it. She even wished to stay well after New Year's but with a single phone call from her father, she was on a morning flight back to Paris. Delmar Chasse, a chairman on the Nightingale school board was hosting a party for his peers and he needed his recently graduate daughter to promote more sister schools in Africa. Of course, those weren't his exact words but Ella knew the subtext. Her father wasn't the kind to call 'just to check' on her.

Refusing to waste her time on irritating thoughts, she pulls out her sketch pad and redirects her frustrations on her designs. Possibly hoping that it would spark a new fire of creatively.

Nearly two hours passed and the floor of the car was littered with wads of paper. Albert says nothing, placing his focus on making calls with carters and florists. Ella's mother always preferred to have fresh lily bouquets, no matter the season.

When they entered the city, Ella raised a brow curiously, "are we making a stop?"

"Yes Miss," Albert answered as he turned onto the main road, "just a pickup of extra indigents for your favorite dish, chicken fricassee."

The corner of Ella's mouth twitched into a half smile; nodding her thanks she subconsciously glances outside her window taking in the view of a dark, murky Paris. Gray clouds covered the sky, showing no sign of sun today. The rain, once a soft sprinkle was now splattering against the glass. She watched indifferently as people propped open their umbrellas while others that weren't so lucky; tourists no doubt, scattered for coffee shops, boutiques or book stores. A stop light approaches and Albert slows to its command.

Ella sighed, annoyed with the rush hour traffic, "could we listen to some music, please."

"Of course," Albert switched on the radio and an old Coeur de Pirate song thrummed from the speakers.

The soft melody helped soothe her agitated nerves but she was restless. She didn't have the energy to
deal with the city today; it was loud, crowded and all she wanted was her bed. She sighed once more and tilted her head against the window. That's when traffic began its shift, favoring her wishes. It was also the moment a figure caught her eye. He was familiar, with auburn hair, brown eyes and a swimmer's physic.

She knitted her brows in confusion, "Ethan?"

The young man fell to a knee, tying his shoe while a young girl with long raven hair held the umbrella.

The car advanced; putting distance between her and the pair. She spared one final analyzing glance before turning forward. *No, it can't be*, she thought to herself.

Giselle watched as the black Sedan disappeared into traffic.

"What you looking at baby girl?" Edward grinned as he rose to his feet and took back the umbrella.

"One of your friends are here," she tilted her head slightly down the road.

He blinked, confused for a moment and then cursed, "Oh fuck. I think I know who you mean. I thought she was in Madrid?"

"Now she's here," Giselle quipped, "Which means she has a bigger role to play."

Edward raised a brow, "does she get in our way?"

"Yes," she answered bluntly.

"Hmm," he paused and then shrugged his shoulders, "it can't be helped. Heh, in all honestly I never really liked her." He offered her his hand, "come on, we still got a lot more to see."

Giselle gave a tiny smile as she took his hand and hummed a Russian lullaby to herself.

Behind them an ancient sigil illuminated from the ground, scorching into the cement; lying in wait for the main event.

Chapter End Notes

Romania: Vladimir Lupei
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mara crouched forward, her fingers sliding over a trail of hoof prints. She closed her eyes and inhaled. Once she caught the scent her eyes snapped open; her irises flaring with a brilliant yellow light as her pupils tightened into slits. She discarded her jacket and shoes quickly, channeling Jaguar through their bond.

"Red deer…" Jaguar observed.

Mara nodded, her body hair thickening as her feet and hands expanded into paws.

"Kill?" Jaguar inquired.

"No. Capture." She surged forward, her feet kicking up snow in a trail of powder behind her.

She weaved through the trees, skidding on the ice with the grace of a dancer. Jumping and twirling from each obstacle that stood in her way. The scent grew stronger with each leap and she picked up the pace, not at all worried of the deer out running her. The male's head snapped to attention and he broke into a sprint. There was no chase as Mara pounced and tackled the stag to the ground.

He squealed and Mara stabbed a needle into his neck. He bucked and kicked but she held him down with ease, waiting for the tranquilizer to take effect. The male's struggles weakened as his dark eyes blinked slowly and his breathing became slow and even. Mara sighed and released her hold on Jaguar's power.

Back in human form Mara rose; carrying the deer over her shoulder as she made her way back to her jacket and shoes. She dressed quickly, covering her exposed skin against the cold. Dusted off the snow left behind on her coat and sinks into the earth. She swims through the soil, dragging the male by his horns behind her. She breaks for the surface in Tuileries Garden, choosing the more wooden area of the park to avoid crowds but she wasn't prepared for the bitter chill of snow she had to dig through.

"Snow has come early…" she muttered and yanked herself up, pulling the deer along with her.

Mara flipped the stag over her shoulders and sprints for Park Hyatt Paris-Vendome; cloaking herself with an invisible charm to avoid suspicious looks or questions. The hotel was on the Place Vendome, just outside of the first arrondissement. It was known for its luxury and elegant taste. From lavish hotel rooms and suites to the striking blend of contemporary architecture and classic design. The surrounding neighborhood was just as extravagant, with glamorous department stores, brightly lit brasseries, theaters, and cinemas. It was also the home to the famous Palais Garnier opera house.

Abigail preferred nothing but the finest.

Mara didn't care as long as it was quiet.

"Of course, it is," Mara recalled Abigail's mischievous grin, "We wouldn't want anyone to hear their screams."

She strolled into the lobby, the charm still in effect allowing her to walk across a room full of people and not be questioned for having a live deer swung over her shoulders.
The charm didn't work on everyone though.

"Mara!" Abigail called out, waving a hand for the Savannah to hold the elevator.

Mara flinched but kept the doors opened, "don't call my name! The charm only works when I avoid attention," she whispered.

"Oh hush, no one saw you," Abigail pressed the doors closed as her spare hand carried a blanket covered bird cage.

Mara sighed and shook her head.

"So…" Abigail dragged the word in a long low tone, "what do we have here?" She reached out for the head of the stag, palming his chin in her hand as her thumb caressed the fur.

"It's a red deer," Mara answered curtly.

"Oh," she examined the male with a critical eye, "my, my, such magnificent horns. Yet not that… what's the word? Vicious?"

"They have strong legs and horns for defense," Mara countered.

Abigail snorted, "A good defense is a good offense," she lifts the blanket off the cage to reveal a Peregrine Falcon. "Now not only does this bird have claws and a keen eye sight, it also has speed."

Mara smirked, "this chimera well certainly be interesting."

They reach the top floor and head straight to their shared suite. Abigail opened the door to find that most of the chairs from the living room were stacked along the wall. In the middle of the living room was a teenage boy; gagged, naked and tied to a chair. He was beautiful with soft brown skin, amber eyes and dark curls, he was very much Edward's type. The boy's gaze found them and he cried out for help through his gag. The immortals ignored him. Steam was coming from the kitchen, the scent of lemon and mint floated in the air. Books were scattered along a desk table with talismans and small bowls of herbs and stones.

Edward was pacing back and forth from the desk to the kitchen with his pocket journal in hand. "Welcome to headquarters ladies," he looked up from his journal, "what did you bring me?"

"Red deer," Mara presented.

His smile faltered, "A deer? I was kinda hoping for a lion."

"If you wanted a lion we should have gone to South Africa," Mara chided.

"Doesn't Paris have a zoo?" he implied.

"If I took an animal from the zoo people would notice," she emphasized.

"Now, now, no need to fight," Abigail stepped forward revealing her falcon. "Where Mara has failed, I have succeeded."

Edward grins, "Oh Abby I knew I could always count on you."

Mara rolled her eyes and drops the stag to the floor, "I suggest you hurry… he'll wake in a little more than an hour."
"That's fine," he stated, jotting down another note. "Giselle!" he called out, "How's that tea coming?"

"Almost done," she answered as she added chamomile to her pot.

Abigail raised a brow, "What's the tea for?"

Edward pushed up his glasses, the eyewear was mostly for show now but it reminded Mara of the first time she met the boy. Beaten, bloody, and coddling the motionless body of his beloved. "I might have found a way for a chimera to use magick."

Both Mara and Abigail were stunned, "that's impossible," said Mara.

"Oh, but it isn't," he snatches one his heavy books and skims through its pages.

"But animals can't do magick, thus a chimera is magick-less," Abigail explained.

"Unless fused with a human," Edward reminded.

"But even with a human for the transfusion," Mara spares a glance to the boy, "their soul is so traumatized by the ritual that they'll incapable of doing magick."

"Hey I'm not saying they would do anything big but they might be able to control their element." He flips to a page in his book and displays a chapter on awakened senses. "Each element has herds and stones associated with them. If a person drinks their element's herbs while clutching on to their stone, it could awaken their senses."

"It takes more than that," Mara argued.

He shrugged, "Yes, well elemental magick is the basic for all magick users it's the first thing you guys taught me before doing anything else."

"But we eased you into it your senses before even touching elemental magick," she proclaimed.

"Oh yeah, feeding me a soul from one of my asshole classmates was your way of easing me into it huh?"

"So, we feed this the boy a soul," Abigail reasoned.

Mara shook her head in disapproval, "No. Chimeras would need to eat more than their fair share if they became immortal. Some wouldn't even know their limit and just keep eating."

"So how else do you open one's senses?" Edward asked.

"Well I had a voodoo witch open my senses with a ritual involving a chicken," Abigail casually tossed out.

Edward snapped his fingers, "That's it!"

"So… we need a chicken?" Abigail concluded.

"No. We already have a bird. The guy I have is air natured, like you Abby."

"How can you tell?" Mara asked.

He gave a cheeky grin, "I can tell by the shape of his aura. Air users have a smoky aura, almost like
they're surrounded by incense fumes. Fire users like me flicker, our aura is like campfire; Giselle's
thunder natured so her aura makes sound and Mara your aura breaks, like little pieces of dirt
burning away."

"God," Abigail groaned, "if I wanted to hear a damn Sight lesson I would've gone back to the
Hawkfeathers."

Mara smiled, feeling an enormous sense of pride in her former student. "It takes great dedication and
patience to learn the Sight and nearly impossible to master it."

Edward scratched the back his neck, his ears taking on a pinkish hue, "I can never master it… only
to a degree."

Mara slipped a hand into his hair, ruffling his locks, "still I'm very proud of you."

He broke into the biggest, sweetest smile Mara has ever seen on him, "earning such praise from
Mara, it must be a Christmas miracle."

Abigail made a gagging motion and Mara sighed, turning on the witch, "are you done?"

"I think Abby's jealous," Edward snickered.

"Don't make me throw you out that window," The Puritan pointed for the window in the kitchen.

"Oh, like you did back in the nineties," he muttered.

"What? How did that happen?" Mara furrowed her brow in concern.

"I was high off coke and I thought he could fly," Abigail replied with a shrug of her shoulders.

"You knew I couldn't you dumb bitch," he snapped.

"It was the coke," she claimed, "also, it was over twenty years ago, let it go."

"Enough," Mara called out and massaged the bridge of her nose, "you two are gonna be the death of
me."

"I bet it will be Abby's fault," said Edward.

Abigail gasped, "Rude."

"The tea's done!" Giselle informed them as she strolled over with a filled cup.

"Oh, thank Iya," Mara muttered and turned on Edward. "How exactly will this work?"

"He needs to drink the tea, hold his stone and then with the falcon-"

Abigail whined, "That's too much work."

She takes the tea from Giselle and strides for the boy. She removes his gag and he whimpered in
French, "Please… please don't kill me…"

Abigail answered in his mother tongue, "Oh honey, when we're done with you, you're gonna we
wish did."

Tears formed at the corners of his eyes as Abigail surged forward, forcing the scorching tea down his
throat. He cried out, drowning in the liquid. Once the cup was empty, Mara watched as Abigail dragged the boy by his chair and heads straight for the window in the living room.

"Abby," Edward called out, "What are you doing?"

"The quickest way to open someone senses are for them to go through a near death experience." She grinned as her eyes glowed red, "he's air natured right? What's the best way to get acquainted with your element, then by jumping right in?"

Mara knew what the Salem Witch was thinking, "Abigail, no."

"Abigail, yes!" with those last words, Abigail shoved the boy out the window.

Edward screamed, "Catch him!"

"Yes, yes," she jumped after him as Mara and others ran for the window. Both Mara and Edward sighed in relief as they found Abigail clutching boy in her arms. Edward thanked god that he didn't lose his main ingredient while Mara was glad that Abigail had enough sense to cloak her presence.

"No good," she called out as the crowd kept walking, not even batting an eye to the attempt of murder that had just played out. "I think we need to take it up a notch."

"What?! No!" Edward shouted, "If he dies, I have to go out and look for another boy. I mean I could but I don't want to."

"Oh relax, I'll catch him," she threw herself into the air, soaring above their hotel. She then began to swing the boy back and forth. She counted to three and on the third swing, she let go hurling the boy through the early night sky.

Giselle whistled, "Look at him go."

Edward craned his neck, "Oh god I can't see him! Is he still in the air?!"

Giselle tilted her head as if hearing a voice, "Martin says he's descending."

"Abby! Get him!" Edward cried out.

The said witch was too busy examining her nails, "Hmm, I think it's time for a manicure."

Mara roared, "Abigail!"

"I'm going, I'm going," she threw her head back as she racketed out of sight, her echoing laughter was all that can be made of her fading presence.

Edward slumped against the window frame, "if she's not going to be the death of you, she'll certainly going to be the death of me."

Giselle leaned forward, "she's coming back with the boy in toll."

"Oh, thank you baby Jesus," he crossed himself.

Mara crossed her arms, ready to give Abigail a piece of her mind. The said witch slipped through window as she exclaimed, "Are you insane or just stupid? What if someone with magick saw you?!"

"Oh hush," Abigail grinned, "you're not going to be mad at me for long." Her voice flowed like velvet as the presented the boy forward.
His skin was red due to the cold and his hair was tousled with flakes scattered in his curls. He was shaking as his fingers dug into the arms of his chair, almost denting the wood; but what really commanded their attention was his eyes. No longer were they bright shade of honey amber but a vibrant green.

Edward couldn't resist a grin stretching from ear to ear, "You crazy bitch."

"You know you love me for it," she winked.

"Wh-what are you people," the boy stuttered in broken English.

Abigail smiled as she tied the gag back in place, "we're witches and you're our new toy."

"Put him back in the center," Edward instructed, "right above the scorpion."

Mara took a moment to examined Edward's circle; two triangles, one upside down to represent water and above that was a right side up triangle with a line crossing the bottom of the shape. That one represented air for the boy. Placing these two triangles together created a star of David but with an extra level below the star. In the center of the triangles was a design of a scorpion; Iya's scared beast. Within the smaller triangles where the Nordic runes Ken for new life, Tir for creation and the old rune for binding. Scattered around the circle were symbols and incantations written in the Alchemical alphabet. Along with the addition of Magi, the Witch's and the Rosicrucian alphabets. The entire circle was written in red spray paint but Mara could smell the blood mixing with the paint fumes.

She glanced to Edward as he walked back to his desk and opened his pocket journal to a marked page. His eyes flared blue as he dipped his fingers into the paper and yanked out a long, yellowed femur.

She flinched, "Do you really need to use that?"

"Yes. This bone belonged to a sorcerer from China, he was a dragon shifter." He stopped talking when he noticed Mara whispering a prayer. "Oh, come on Mara, we're done worse than stealing from the dead."

"I was raised to respect the dead," she protested.

"Yes, yes, the dead must be laid to rest or their spirit will haunt the earth-blah, blah, blah," Abigail mocked. "Hey mister Chinese Sorcerer, if you have a problem with us using your bone speak now or forever hold your peace."

"Abigail," Mara hissed, "this is not a joke!"

"It doesn't matter," Giselle spoke from her window, staring out into the City of Lights. "That bone is over three thousand years old...he must've been reborn by now...he must've lived countless lifetimes. I don't think his current life will ever know that he was a sorcerer."

"See, even Giselle isn't scared," Edward turned his focus on to the animals. "Bring the deer and put him on the left and the falcon on the right."

Mara and Abigail followed his orders, placing the animals within the circle but outside the triangles. Then they marched to their corners; Abigail taking the east corner while Mara stood in the north. Giselle stood at the west and Edward came to the south with a bowl in hand. He lit the herbs and blew out the smoke; the scent of sandalwood, jasmine and mint engulfed the room. He tossed in three stones: topaz for air and the boy. Garnet for the increase of energy and power. Lastly, opal for water and the physical change that was about to take place.
"Alright ladies, I need you to chant the Blood Armor incantation," Edward proclaimed.

"The Blood Armor?" Abigail raised a brow in amusement, "Dear Edward what are you planning?"

He smiled, "you'll see. Now quick-chant!"

Abigail took center stage as she sang those ancient verses. Mara and Giselle followed, their voices harmonizing with the Salem Witch. It wasn't long till a series of whispers vibrated from the walls, growing louder with each note. Iya's children slithered in from the shadows, chanting and swaying to Abigail's dark melody. The vapors circled them, dancing like ribbons caught in the wind.

Mara looked to Edward as he pulled a knife from his pocket and began to sharpen the bone at one end. Even though the scene made her uncomfortable, she swallowed her superstitions and focused on the chant.

Once the bone had become a wand, Edward poured his aura into it and wrote sigils in the air. As each sigil was written, lines followed; carving into his victims. The boy gave a muffled scream as the falcon cried and flapped in its cage. The stag began to stir but the drug had worked better than Mara thought, it didn't feel the pain at least not yet.

Runes of creation, sigils of binding and the alchemist symbol of fusion covered the boy's skin. Blood was dripping from his arms and legs, staining the scorpion below him. Blood pooled beneath the deer and he moaned a wounded cry. The falcon fought; throwing himself against the bars of his cage.

The boy struggled against his restraints, his eyes flashing green as he screamed. A blast of whirlwind kicked at his feet, the blades of air cutting into the rope.

Edward raised his eyebrows, "Oh it seems he's more powerful than I thought."

The boy freed his arms and Edward shook his head, "no, no, none of that now."

The vapors pounced; ringing themselves around the boy's arms and keeping him pinned to his seat. While the rest lunged for the animals. They ripped into their flesh; spilling even more blood as they licked it off the floor. Accepting the offer, they dove in mixing themselves within the scarlet. They trembled at the sensation as the blood curdled black and with one final cry the falcon and deer began to liquefy. Their fur, feathers, horns, claws, flesh and bone molten into black puddles.

When both animals were fully dissolved, the vapors turned on the boy. Surrounding him in a whirlpool of blood and darkness. They seeped into his wounds, fusing their magick and the animals' flesh with him. He kicked and screamed but no one could hear him; no one could save him from this fate.

The vapors twisted within him causing his body to shake and ripple under the skin. His bones stretched and his muscles grew forcing him to be taller and wider. Black fur spreads from his waist and down his legs. His feet shriveled in-ward; breaking each bone down as his flesh became hard and stomped into hooves. White and black feathers spouted on his arms and shoulders as his hands expanded and his nails became long, jagged talons. The feathers continued to spread, covering his torso, neck and face. His hair fell out in heavy chunks and his mouth and nose fused; the flesh blacking into a beck.

The beast bit off his gag and tore himself off the chair. Horns broke through the sides of his head, growing large and wide with pointed antlers. His back rippled as two massive black and white wings burst from his shoulder blades and aligned his spine. The wingspan stretched, the tips of his feathers
nearly reached Giselle and Abigail. Finally, his body settled and he collapsed to his knees, panting for air.

Mara closed the circle as the femur in Edward's hand shattered into pieces; its magick drained. He slapped the bone dust from his hands and grinned at his creation. "Well ladies what do we think?"

"He's gorgeous," Abigail proclaimed as she caressed a wing, "and so soft."

"But…" Mara spun to face Edward, "why was the Blood Armor needed?"

"Chimeras are not like shifters, they can't hide their form but with the Blood Armor and the shifter bone." He looked to his creation and commanded, "Change!"

On cue the chimera's features rippled as the Blood Armor shivered. With a rise and fall the newly formed chimera was back to human form.

Mara gasped as Abigail's jaw dropped and Giselle's eyes grew wide.

Edward gave a mad grin, "ladies I present you the first Level Five chimera."

Alfred entered the Ottoman Dome, scanning the area for a familiar face. His brows furrowed in annoyance when his friend was nowhere to be seen. Music no longer played, instead what took place was the clashing of blades and exchanging of fists. Severe combat training filled the dance floor. Spirits had split into partners of two or three as they fought and polished their skills.

Alaric caught him at the corner of his eye and the larger blond waved for Alfred to join him and Romulus. Alfred shook his head and points to the corridor of stairs beside him. Alaric understood and spun on Romulus with his blade swung high over his head. Romulus easily blocked with his shield and directed his sword to Alaric's side. The blond ducked and swept his foot at the Romulus' legs, knocking the Roman off his feet.

Alfred sped down the dark stair case, taking two or three at a time till he made the break in the light of the library. The actually library, the main hall where most of the books and scrolls were stored in. He jumped off the steps, falling nearly hundred feet till he landed on the marble floor with the grace of a cat.

"Show off!" John shouted from his table in the center of the room.

Alfred smirked, "You know, you can do that now Johnny."

"Yeah," the seemingly young native man narrowed his dark eyes, "I'll stick to the stairs."

The blond chuckled, "fine, you masochist, have fun climbing all those stairs."

John shook his head and turned back to his book, "are they still fighting up there?"

Alfred sighed, "Yeah, the law has been lifted so we could train."

"It's getting bad isn't it?"

Alfred ignored his question and tried to change the subject onto a lighter one. "Whatcha reading?" he asked in a sing along tune.
"A book from the Mythology hall, I'm trying to find more on Iya but it turns out they have many names." John gestured to his books, "There is Tiamat a Babylonian mother goddess of the deep ocean-isn't that where so-called Abyss is? In the deepest part of the ocean within the earth." He didn't allow Alfred to answer as he continued, "Also there is Itzpapalotl an Aztec goddess, she's also been known as the Bone Collector in more modern times. She's fearsome and was the goddess of the stars?"

That statement ended in a question but he moved on, "Then there are the Egyptian gods Apophis and Kuk. Apophis is a serpent god, deification of evil and darkness while Kuk is an un-created god?" He paused and opened another book, "it says that un-created is just another word for no form... Kuk was also the god of primordial darkness.

"Then you have the Greek goddess Achlys who was said to have been born from sadness and misery... Also, her form comes in a black mist." John turned to Alfred, "what do these gods and goddesses have in common?"

"Uh, they all have a thing for darkness?" he shrugged.

"That," the brunet agreed. "But most of them don't have a form. Tiamat, Kuk, and Achlys are said to be made out of mist or darkness. While Apophis does have a snake form but what do these shadow demons-vapors look like? Faceless snakes. And then there's Itzpapalotl... she is skeleton woman... it's said she has no eyes... just empty black holes that stretch for miles. Nothing inside."

"Okay, okay, slow your roll there. Did you read all the way to the last paragraphs of each of these guys?"

John opened two more books and read the last paragraph of each god, "It says Itzpapalotl and Apophis where sealed? What does that mean?"

Alfred took a seat across from him, "You know that most gods were played by spirits right?"

"Yes," John nodded.

"Well these spirits... they just fell too deeply into their roles and they began to believe that they really were gods. And gods need followers. Some needed sacrifices to remain on earth. I mean look to the Aztecs, they took sacrifices very seriously."

"But why? What was the point?"

"At first it was a way for them to show devotion but over time the spirits began to take these souls as way to stay on the Earth Plane. Then it became a game; how many followers and sacrifices can I get and so forth." Alfred sighed, "But that wasn't the worst part."

John raised a brow, "How is that not the worst?"

"They fueled most wars between man; saying that what their neighbors worshiped were false gods and demanded for new followers. Some just wanted to stir up trouble and watch the humans kill each other for entertainment."

John shook his head and asked, "You said most gods... but not all?"

"We usually stayed with the more popular gods-like Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Aztec and Mayan and some Asian gods too. So, no need to worry, not all of them were real... well somewhat real. We may have played gods but we don't have god-like powers."
"Did you play a god?"

Alfred laughed, "No I was more of a prankster… I was still a kid, in star terms when the god turf wars were going on. Being a prankster meant that you had many names depending which area you were in. I was called Loki and Hermes but mostly I fell more in the category of the Faire Folk like Tricksters or Kitsunes."

"Tricksters and Kitsunes are Faire Folk?"

"They're in the same flock, not good but not bad either."

John smirked, "yeah I can see that."

"Hey I'm pretty good," Alfred countered.

"Of course," John rolled his eyes but something was still eating at him, Alfred knew that much.

"What's on your mind John?"

John's smile fell, "There are still so many questions. What's the Abyss? Where did it come from? What about this," he gestured to the room and the eight hallway entrances, "Human History, Witch History… I understand those, but 2nd generation and 3rd generation Spirit History what does that mean? And where is the first? Then the gods Tiamat, Kuk and Achlys were never sealed so they were either never played with or purely man made. Yet what does that mean? Sealed? You didn't even answer that."

"Whoa, whoa, one at a time," Alfred combed a hand through his hair, trying to collect his thoughts. "To answer where the first-generation section is, you're in it."

Alfred waves his hand around the room, where nine work tables stood in the center as bookshelves aligned the stair case but the shelves only came to the tenth step.

John narrowed his gaze, "are you kidding me? The other two have entire hallways, granted the third is much bigger but the spirits are stars and stars-"

"Have existed just as long as the universe and the universe is over fourteen billion years old," Alfred stated.

"Exactly," John glances back to the sad bookshelves, "that doesn't look like fourteen billion years of history."

Alfred knew it was impolite to laugh but he couldn't contain his laughter, "dude the Spirit World hasn't even existed for that long."

"Then where…" he rubbed his face, "I'm so confused."

Alfred took a deep breath, "I'll try to make a very, very long story short. Long ago at the beginning of the universe there where billions of stars-"

"This doesn't sound short," John muttered.

"Hey I'm telling you how they told me when I was young," Alfred exclaimed. "So, sit and listen. Stars are born from the gases in the universe and spirits are born from those stars. At first the universe was our home, we traveled through the galaxies, from star to star, from planet to planet we were nomads. Peaceful shape-shifters that changed their forms constantly and passed down history
through story-telling."

"Shape-shifters…so you what's your true form?" asked John.

"We don't have one, we're made of pure energy. The only reason I don't change my form often is because I'm so used to this body. Being Alfred F. Jones is me but not all of me. It's kinda hard to explain…when I was a nation, that's all I knew but now being back…" he sked. "Almost twenty years back and I'm still trying to wrap my head around it. Like I said, before being a nation. I was a Trickster, a wanderer, a…" he paused, clutching his jaw.

"Alfred?"

Alfred broke out of his trance, "sorry… Like I said, it's hard to explain. One moment, you know who are the-next you don't and later once you think you know who are. It turns out you're much more than what you are."

"That makes no sense," John replied.

"Heh," the spirit scratched the back of his head, "yeah… The ancients get it, so they help me through it.

"Also, I don't like changing my form cause Ava put so much work into it; making my body, choosing my eyes. You should really ask her about it, she gets this look in her eyes when talks about giving 'birth' to us," he chuckled at the memory.

Ava's voice rising in excitement as she explained the process with so much detail and affection. Her eyes would shine as her hands waved with exaggerated gestures and the widest, most beautiful smile would form on her lips. The image made his heart swell with love; in a way Ava was his mother.

His good mood dropped when he had to get the hard part, "For the first few billion years that's how we lived and everything was fine till alien species figured out that they could use us to run their power plants."

John's eyes widened and Alfred continued, "They tried capturing us and imprisoning us on their planets but they quickly realized our kind couldn't last long. We need to be in the space, to drink in the energy of the universe. Funny how the aliens thought we were limitless energy but in reality, we need be recharged. That's where the satellites came in; keeping our kind imprison inside metal boxes, orbiting around their planet as they slowly drained us but yet fed us… I have no idea what that could be like but Gisli said that it feels like death is so close but it never comes. It's just an endless stretch of pain and fatigue till they feed you but once you begin to feel alive again they instantly drain you."

Alfred paused, allowing his words to sink into him, "that's no way to live. We weren't fighters so we ran. The aliens had trackers, devices that could find us anywhere in the universe and the more there were of us, the easier it was for them to find us. So, the only way to survive was to stay away from each other, cause if we formed clusters, we would all be captured.

"This went on for about five billion years…"

Alfred darted a glance at John; he could see the wheels in his head turning, trying to add up the math in his head. "Maybe I should answer more pressing questions."

"What?! No. I want to know how this ends…how did your people get away? What about the stars in our Solar System? We're they safe?"

"Ok, ok, um, this whole star capturing business was happening at one corner of the universe. Even
though the Milky Way is almost as old as the universe it was on the other side, way, way, over there," Alfred emphasized, gesturing to the far wall for show.

"It was just pure luck and location that kept the Milky Way in peace but it wasn't going to last. The Daevlaions were making their way to this galaxy, to colonize any livable planets." Alfred's teeth ground together at the mention of these hideous creatures, "This race was the worse of the worse. They colonized early worlds and slaughtered any intelligent or would be intelligent species on that planet. Every male, female and child-slaughtered; no exceptions."

Hard blue eyes met sad dark eyes, "They were coming for us at first; Gisli and his friends didn't listen to their Elders' warnings. Ironic really, he complains that we don't listen to him." He couldn't even laugh at his own joke, "Then they saw Earth, its massive amounts of water and fertile land, it was a major prize. Early humans were just coming into their own over two million years ago, meaning ya'll were just discovering fire. So yeah, none of you had chance of winning."

John held up a finger, "I have one more question, how old are you?"

"Heh, uhh," Alfred thought about it, "I'm over five hundred thousand years old. Actually, if I think about it, most of the spirits now are around that age or a little older. Including Amy and the nations," he smiled at the mention of his successor and friends. "We're just a bunch of teenagers to Gisli."

"How much is a little?"

"Hm, besides Gisli the oldest spirits around here have reached their first million. Now those guys were born right after the war. The one between us and the Daevlaions; now they were ones that were done running. It was time to fight back. These guys were Gisli's generation, the 2nd generation. The warriors that fought to protect Earth and the Solar System, to protect the only home they ever knew. This war lasted for nearly two million years."

John blinked, "how could a war last for two million years?"

"I am using Earth years, but keep in mind some parts of space can be slower or faster than Earth," Alfred explained.

"But still-"

"Daevlaions were not the kind to surrender," the blond interjected. "They had the numbers, the technology, and the weapons, they thought they were going to win but we were just as stubborn and we had to a lot more to lose than them. We battled; most were kept away from Earth but the biggest battle couldn't be avoided. This battle is where the birth of the legend of hell and heaven's war came from."

"But Christianity didn't exist then," John added.

"Yet, it was passed down. Granted a lot of it was changed but the plot didn't. It was a story about celestial beings fighting against an evil race of 'demons'. Also, we kinda bragged to the humans, a lot," he gave a cheeky grin.

John smiled, shaking his head as Alfred continued:

"The only way we won was when word reached to the satellites. When the spirits trapped inside heard of our struggle, they cooked up a plan-one that would end the war but at the cost of their own lives.

"They dug deep inside themselves and their mother stars, crying out due to their fear and pain. We
don't think our mother stars have conscious thought but something must be there cause the next thing those spirits knew, they were burning. They were filled with massive amounts of energy, the kind that couldn't be contained. They literally made themselves into a super nova bomb, completely leveling any planet they were orbiting.

"Any planet the Daevlaions had colonized where wiped out in minutes. When word had reached the fleets, the 2nd generation were preparing for a counter attack but Gisli stopped them and walked straight to the commander and said:

"Nearly half of your colonies have been wiped out and with one word, the rest can and will be obliterated unless you leave our galaxy and never return. Spread the word, the Milky Way is under our protection and if any alien race steps foot inside, they will be annihilated!"

Alfred roared those final words, feeling the triumphant of his ancestors surge inside him. He looked to John to find the brunet grinning along with him. Alfred boasted, "They left with their tails between their legs and the Earth was ours."

"But what about the Spirit World?"

"I'm getting there," Alfred assured, "The last battle was won but with a heavy price. Not only did we lose spirits in the satellites but also in battle, most if not all Gisli's friends were killed."

"Then how could they even form a counter attack?"

"Dude, they bluffing big time. Frankly if the satellite spirits hadn't sacrifice themselves Earth will not be like it is today." He inhaled deeply, "it's thanks to the fallen that day that Ava was able to create the Spirit World."

John's eyebrows rose, "Ava created this world? How?"

"With stardust," Alfred answered. "When a spirit dies they leave behind gray diamond like ash, also known a stardust. This dust has great power; it could purify planets, make dead ones fertile and in Ava's case make a mirror world inside its own pocket dimension."

John's jaw dropped, "Ava's a goddess, isn't she? A real one?"

"Yes and no, I mean she had a lot of help with the dust and it's not like this is an entire new universe. It's just a small pocket, a small thank you gift for saving the world."

"Making a dimension is small gift?" John questioned, his tone becoming sarcastic and skeptical.

Alfred shrugged, "Creating something like this took a toll. The only way the Spirit World could function was to connect it to the Earth. So, Ava transported her soul-the tree of life from the Earth Plane to the Spirit World, connecting each root to a tree on Earth. Doing this, Ava had separated her body and soul. She could never have the power she once had but she can still control her body. Not often but she doesn't seem to mind.

"She wanted to be close to Gisli and he could never stay long on her surface so the next best thing was to join him here. Thanks to the tree of life, the Spirit World is a direct line to the universe, so we don't have to leave to recharge. Just being here or drinking the nectar from the tree is enough for us.

"The 2nd generation gave up their lives for this world. We, the 3rd generation owe them a lot. We would still be running for our lives if they didn't fight back." Alfred sighed heavily, "and what did we do to show our appreciation? By nearly tearing this world apart with our childish games. The war of the gods. The monsters...we really fucked up."
"Monsters…so you played those too," said John.

"Yes, and just like when playing gods, the spirits forgot who they were, believing that they were monsters. Why do you think we always warn each other about taking those kinds of forms for too long? Cause if they're not careful they can lose themselves to the roles and wreck chaos onto the world."

"But spirits can't last on Earth, what happens if they stay too long?"

"They either die or start eating humans."

"Eating humans?! But you all don't even have a body?"

"Your flesh isn't what they're interested in. I mean they had to rip into the person to get what they wanted and that was the soul. Human souls are made with the atoms of the universe, so technically you all are walking energy drinks to us."

"Good to know."

"Relax John no one will hurt you," he promised. "Humans were terrified and other spirits wanted to help but humans didn't trust them. The Faire Folk and Tricksters, were not meant to be trusted. That's when some of the first nations were born, well back then they were called guardians. With their clay bodies they were more human in the peoples' eyes and were even beloved. But they were unstable, humans were more nomadic at that time so countries weren't really established. A lot of earth bound spirits didn't last for more than a couple decades-a century if they were lucky.

"Then when countries did form and empires came into play, the monsters and gods were at their peak and seeped into myth and story. But records were being written, nearly almost counted as history…we had to put a stop to them. So, the rest of us tracked them down and tried to talk them out of it. The gods were annoying as hell, being like 'I'm the ruler of the cosmos' 'the creator of man'. God, Zeus really got on my fucking nerves."

Alfred sighed as he rubbed his face, "the monsters on the other had were just…sad. No matter how we screamed and begged, they truly thought they were monsters. Most I had to be put down… Some of them were my friends," Alfred closed his eyes, "that's how I got my name from the Native Americans. To them, I was Monster-Slayer."

John didn't say a word, instead he reached for Alfred's hand and gave a comforting squeeze.

The blond took in his strength and continued, "Ava's heart broke most out of everyone's. We were like her children and like any devoted mother, she believes that there is good in her children. Thus, she sealed them away in the Amazon Forest, the place we call the Forest of the Lost."

"Hold up! Powerful gods and murderous, man-eating monsters are in the Amazon Forest?!

"No. They're sealed inside of trees inside the Amazon Forest," Alfred corrected.

John gave him a terrified look, "people cut down trees there!"

"Why do you think we pushed for the Green Laws and sabotage construction jobs, cause if someone cuts down the wrong tree it would be the end of days."

John shook his head, "how long have they been there?"

Alfred took a moment to think, "Most have been there for two, three thousand years…some almost
"for four," he answered.

"And they're still alive?"

"Ava keeps them alive. She transports energy for them, waiting for them to snap back to normal, but," he paused. His eyes closed as he inhaled through his nose, "I saw them. I fought them. I've seen the darkness in their eyes. They're gone but Ava still holds out hope. Hope that they'll come back."

Alfred grew quiet, leaning against his chair as his thoughts came to Clovis, Kojo and Hannibal. Being trapped inside their tiny cells as they endured the howls and curses of angry spirits.

"What of the Abyss?" John broke him out of his thoughts. "Where did that come from?"

"It's always been there…in the deepest depths of the ocean like that goddess Tiamat. Some even think it's another grate between the Earth Plane and the Spirit World. Yet that would mean it hasn't always been there."

"And Tiamat, Kuk and Achlys were never sealed or claimed…"

Alfred thought for a moment, "They could have been played by the same spirit-like with any gods or goddesses related to the Earth were automatically tossed to Ava."

"Then it's just as I thought, Iya goes by those names as well," John concluded. "But these gods didn't have a form does that mean Iya does?"

Alfred groaned and yanked at his hair in frustration, "goddammit! We are just back where we started!" He slammed his head on the desk and muttered, "This sucks."

"I'll figure it out-"

"It's not your job to figure it out!" Alfred snapped.

"Yes, it is!" John rose to his feet, his hands curled into tight, shaking fists. "Iya is after my granddaughter. I wasn't strong enough to stay on Earth so I have do everything I can from here."

The blond fell silent as he watched John sink back into his chair, "I know that Amy and I are different. She's thousands upon thousands of years older than me apparently…" he tried to laugh but his voice failed him. "I took part in raising her in her nation life. I watched as she became the person she is today but I can't help but think would she have been better off not being a nation. If she just stayed here…maybe, just maybe she would be safe."

"Another spirit would have taken her place and I still would've given them to you."

John glared, "Why couldn't you have been stronger? Why would you or any of the ancients infect such a life on them?"

Alfred sighed, his shoulders slumped back as he leaned into his chair. "They chose to become a nation."

"Yes, but you could've said no and sent her back!"

"Iya's motives involve all of us, so it's not like she would've have been totally safe-"

"But she would be prepared! She would have magick and fighting skills! She's defenseless on Earth!"
"She's got the other nations," Alfred said calmly. "She's being trained and she even held her own against immortals. She's learning and growing stronger each day."

"But is it enough?" John exclaimed and the spirit fell silent once more. The native man closed his eyes, "why," he asked. "Why would she become a nation?"

Alfred bit his bottom lip, preparing himself for John's impending wrath, "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?!" John shouted. "She took your place!"

"Yes, but I didn't know about being a spirit when she came to me." Alfred said to his defense. "I thought I would take part in raising her myself, like with Feker did with Elene."

"Who is Elene?!

"The current Ethiopia, Feker's sister and successor," the blond rambled. "She came into play with the empire dissolved in the early twentieth century but Feker was able to stick around for a bit to take care of her-

"And you thought you would do that for Amy?"

"Yes-

"Then why didn't you?!" John interrupted.

"I don't know!" Alfred slammed his fists on the table and took a moment to contain his frustration and anger. "You don't think I tried? I tried to stay. I wanted to stay. I wanted to raise her. I wanted her."

John was taken back at his comment, no doubt recalling Alfred's sad gaze whenever he looked at John's family photos.

"But I couldn't," he admitted. "Some predecessors could stay to raise their successors, like Romulus and Feker but others can't. I was one of the one's that couldn't. None of us know why…it something that just happens."

"But why?" John questioned, his tone softer than before, "is it something to do with strength? Stability? Or is it just fate?"

Alfred shook his head, "I don't know."

"Then did the other spirits know-

"No. Not even Nina," Alfred replied, "she just jumped. She surprised everyone; she was the last spirit anyone would've thought to become a nation. She didn't like them."

"She didn't like the nations?" John questioned, his face twisted into a skeptical expression.

"She didn't like the concept of them," Alfred explained. "She thought they were just as bad as the gods and monsters. Their minds are wiped so they don't remember each other before…but we do. Imagine; friends, some as close as family-fighting each other. Hurting each other, nearly ripping each other apart in battle. The reasons behind it vary but most were just cruel and senseless. Some of us just couldn't watch…Amy was one of them."

"She despised the nations and what they had become…she, Nina and a few other spirits had even
joined Gisli's campaign to end personifications of countries and pull their friends out before it got worse. This was around the Middle Ages, so yeah it was pretty bad." He sighed, "But Ava wouldn't do it, she had made a promise to them to keep them on Earth as long as they wanted and she attended to keep it.

"Of course, the argument was only met with the nations not knowing there was a way out. Amy was the most vocal about it. Saying that they weren't the spirits they once knew, that they were becoming different people..." Alfred raised his head, feeling a sense of pride when he said, "But that wasn't true. Arthur was a sarcastic pain in the ass before becoming a nation and Francis loved all things beautiful even before becoming a snotty Frenchman.

"Even me. The reason I became a nation was to stop them from fighting. I was tired of watching them hurt each other and I was tired of watching Mattie cry. So, when Karen began to disappear Mattie and I took our chance." He huffed as a tiny, tight lipped smile took form, "I remember that day... Amy screaming and begging for us not to go but we did anyway, making a promise that we would stop the violence."

He combed his hands through his hair as Amy's cries from centuries past pounded in his ears. "But I didn't. I joined in and made everything worse. The Revolution, the Civil War, the World Wars, Vietnam... Yup, I did awesome," the last statement dipped with sarcasm.

"I guess she thought that I had lost sight of it. I tried to stop the fighting, I cared for my fellow nations...maybe a little too much but I just wanted to help. I wanted to help the lost spirits find their way. I wanted to stop my friends from fighting and the other half to stop crying." He blinked back the tears, "but I only made things worse. Nina made sure to give me a good punch in the face the second I came back."

He squeezed his eyes shut before saying, "she said I only left a bigger mess for Amy to clean up before storming off. I didn't fight her. She was in pain...because to her, Amy... her Amy had died that day."

"But she didn't die that day! Her life is in danger now and I don't have time to raise your self-esteem!" John exclaimed, slamming a hand on the table, "yes, you messed up but who hasn't? Nobody is perfect. Not you. Not the spirits. Not the nations. And definitely not people. We are creatures that learn the hard way. We need to break a few eggs before we get something right, granted we need to fuck up a shit ton of eggs before getting anything right but we try. Isn't that what you told me? That if we keep trying and pushing for a better outcome, for better a world it still counts.

"So, stop with your self-loathing, pity party and get a fucking grip!"

Alfred blinked and John panted, his breathing short and quick at first. Then as he began to take in longer periods of air, he began to laugh. "God. I haven't talked like that since I was a kid."

That snapped the blond back, causing him to grin, "Have you seen yourself? You look like your seventeen."

"Hey, this is what I looked like when I was in my twenties," John mentioned.

Alfred mockingly studied him, "oh yeah, you didn't have hair back then."

"Oh, ha, ha, ha, glad we can laugh about that now huh?"

Alfred raised his brows and grinned even wider as he and John laughed even more. This laughter
cuts through the tension, easing them back into a peaceful silence. "I'm sorry," John proclaimed, "I didn't mean to get so emotional."

"This involves Amy, involves our family and friends, if this is not the time to get emotional; when is?" Alfred remarked.

John smiled but it didn't reach his eyes, "... I'm scared Al. I'm scared for Amy. I'm scared for my family. I mean Aponi is teaching Blair and Blake magick," he shook his head. "I'm terrified," he took in a shaky breath, "and I don't know what to do."

Alfred was quiet for moment till a spark of brilliance lit behind his crystal blue eyes, "I know someone that can help."

Alfred led John to the dormitories on the far left-side wall, beside the Roman Hall and across the Ottoman Dome. They entered through a side door and scaled up the stairs taking two at a time. They were met with a series of corridors filled with doors of every shape and color. These vibrant, whimsically doors were tall, short, round, and oval. Some were long dis-proportioned rectangles while others were perfectly straight, French garden gates. There were entries made of crystal, titanium plated hatches and sliding paper doors.

With the concept of space being somewhat ignored, these halls would literally stretch for miles. Direction was greatly ignored; these halls would take spirits up and down, and from left to right without stairs or attached corridors. One spirit could start on the bottom floor on the right-hand wall (possibly near the front entrance) and find themselves on a fifth level of the left side with the Ottoman Dome right outside their window.

"This is irritating," John muttered through his clutched teeth.

"The dorms are connected." Alfred simply stated, "It's easier for us to stay close and keep tabs on each other."

"Have you ever heard of functional stair cases, elevators and room numbers? You know, structure?" John remarked.

Alfred chuckled, "Spirits don't usually get lost. If they need to find someone, they seek them out with their aura. Call upon their friends or their door. You've done it before."

"Because I couldn't find my room," John exclaimed. "It turns out that the rooms change places. Now why the hell would rooms need to change places?!"

Alfred shrugged.

John glared, "do you even know where you're going."

"Yes... I think."

Before John could snap at him, Alfred saved his ass by shouting 'ah-ha' and sprinted for a simple red door. He knocked and the door swung inwards, revealing a familiar face.

The man was much younger now than when Alfred had first met Vincent Barbaret. His dark skin no longer sagged and wrinkled but vibrant and smooth. His dreads shorter, coming at mid-back but they were thicker. He was taller now as well, with lean muscle and a straight posture he was more than happy to tower over Alfred. Even if it was only an inch or two.
"Well, well, well, if it isn't Alfred F. Jones," Vincent fell against the frame, crossing his arms. "What brings you here old friend?"

"We need your help," said Alfred.

"Last time I heard that I ended up dead," Vincent remarked but his words held no real venom. He grinned as his dark eyes slid to John, "Oh how rude of me not to introduce myself." Vincent then proceeded to remove his worn brown cowboy hat and place it over his heart, "I am Vincent Barbaret, at your service."

John extended his hand, "John Hawkfeather."

"A pleasure," Vincent smiled and then jerked his chin towards Alfred. "Now what did this fool get you into?"

"Hey, who said it was my fault?" argued Alfred.

"Isn't it always," Vincent smirked as he flopped his hat back into place, "trouble follows you Monsieur."

He gestured for them to enter and Alfred instantly caught the scent of French lavender and vanilla. The space was massive with mahogany hardwood floors and white walls. A decorative Turkish rug was laid out in the living room as a dark red love seat and matching plush chairs were placed around a simple coffee table. On the right was an elevated open concept room with bay windows and a small table set in the center. The walls were covered with bookshelves and spice cabinets as drawer sets were positioned below. Each drawer was labeled with either flowers, herbs, stones, crystals or oils. On the left was a gourmet kitchen with the same elevated design and curved walls.

"Is that necessary?" John pointed a thumb at the kitchen, "We don't need to eat."

"We don't need to eat but we can. I love to eat and being dead won't change that," Vincent strides for the stove. "How about I make ya'll some fried catfish and hush puppies," he offered.

"Oh, hell yes!" Alfred jumped for a stool at the table in the center.

Before he could relax into his seat, Vincent raised a brow, "your friend certainly has a knack for the evil eye."

Alfred blinked in confusion and turned to find John looming over him with crossed arms and a vicious glare. "Have you forgotten why we're here," this was a statement not question.

"No," Alfred whimpered and spun to face Vincent, "Sorry Vince; another time?"

Vincent waved it off and grabbed the kettle, "tea then?"

"Perfect," Alfred smiled as John nodded.

Vincent filled the kettle from the tap and placed it on the stove, "so what can I do for you?"

"We want a reading," Alfred proclaimed. "And you are the only Seer I know."

"He's a Seer? You're a Seer?" John exclaimed.

Vincent sighed through his nose and narrowed his eyes at the blond, "Alfred."

"Relax Vince, Johnny won't tell a soul," he assured.
John reached for Vincent, grabbing his shoulders as he rambled, "You're a Seer! You can see what happens! Please tell me, will Amy be okay? Will my family be okay?"

"Okay, one: back up," Vincent shoved him off. "Two: there are different types of Seers, some could see only one or two possible outcomes. Others could see thousands. Some could see the past while others see the future-sometimes both. Some can close their eyes and see an outcome while others need to channel their powers through crystal balls and tarot cards. Guess what? I'm the latter."

John blinked and gripped his hands together, "I'm sorry."

Alfred could feel the poor man's anxiety, "Vince, our friends and family are in danger and we have no idea what to do. I need you to clear a path for us, please," he pleaded. "We need you."

The voodooist paused before snapping his fingers and a drawer from the parlor room burst open. Large, colorful cards swarm the tiny room; swirling and churning in mid-air, dancing in a sequence of an organized chaos.

Vincent strolled into the storm and the cards slowed, floating down to his outstretched hand. "Take a seat gentlemen," he snapped his fingers once more and conjured two chairs.

Alfred and John took their seats across from him as he shuffled his deck once more for good measure. "A simple a three-card reading or a Celtic Cross?" he asked.

"Celtic Cross," Alfred answered.

Vincent nodded and slapped a card on the table with another card on top of it. He moved the second card on its side and then placed a card on each side of the first one. One on the right, left, above and below; then four more were added beside the cross.

He set the deck aside, "let's begin," he slid the second card off the first and flipped that said card up. It displayed a young man, skipping along a cliff with a white dog running behind him. "Heh," Vincent smirked, "the Fool."

Alfred immediately felt John's eyes on him, "of course."

"Okay. Okay. I'm a fool, I know," Alfred muttered and waved his hand over the cards. "Continue, please."

Vincent chuckled, "alright, alright... The first card represents the present and shows the current state of mind of the querent. The Fool represents intoxication, delirium and frenzy… I believe the last word fits you two rather well. I mean, ya do seem stressed."

Alfred and John shared a knowing glance before Alfred remarked, "you have no idea."

The Seer nodded and turned the second card over, he was met with the Moon. A shiver ran down Alfred's spine as a quick intake of air passed through Vincent's lips.

"This is the same card I showed you back in the seventies," Vincent recalled.

"Yeah, it was my future back then…" Alfred remarked.

"Now it's your challenge," Vincent scorned. "You mean to tell me you didn't settle this already?"

"I thought I did, you know with the hunters and the witches-"

"Well clearly it wasn't that," Vincent retorted.
"Can someone let me into the loop here?" John interjected.

Alfred snapped a quick glance to John as Vincent sighed, "The Moon represents evil and darkness. Look to the scorpion, it is the creature that emerges from the abyss, taking form."

"Iya," John breathed.

Vincent raised a curious brow, "I've heard that name around the Library. What in God's name are we dealing with?"

"We," Alfred couldn't help but smirk, "does that mean you're in?"

Vincent made a face, "I have half a mind to throw you two out and throw away the key. But if the Moon is the challenge, it not only affects you but all of us."

"Whose 'all of us'?" asked John.

Vincent muttered a curse, "the spirits, the humans—at least that's what the wolf and the dog represent. But if we're already freaking out over the first two cards I'm kinda nervous about the rest."

He sucked air through his teeth and grabbed his head, massaging his temple, "damn."

"Are you alright?" John reached for him and Vincent waved him back.

"Tea. I need tea."

At that moment the kettle whistled and John rose to retrieve it. Alfred watched as John hurried into the kitchen, pulled three cups from cabinet and called out for which tea. Vincent ordered for chamomile and Alfred asked for the same.

He then turned his attention back on the Seer, "what's wrong?"

"The cards," Vincent muttered, "they won't let me go. I need to read them."

"I'm sorry," said Alfred, "I shouldn't have dragged you into this."

"I had a feeling you were going to visit me Alfred. If I didn't want to be part of this, I would've put wards up to keep you from finding me."

Alfred huffed out a chuckle as John bought a tray of three prepared cups to the table. They thanked him for the tea and took tiny sips as Vincent moved on to the next card to the right. "The Ten of Cups in reverse means indignation, violence and a serious quarrel."

"That's supposed to represent the past right?" Alfred inquired.

"Violence and a serious quarrel," John repeated. "Like a battle or a war?"

"But which?" Alfred added, "my past, being spirit or nation was pretty violent."

"I think you're only a part of it," Vincent implied and flipped the card on the left.

It was a picture of a man dressed in armor as two sphinxes sat below him, "The Chariot," Vincent proclaimed. "It represents triumph, vengeance and war."

John swallowed, "war? With Iya?"
Vincent nodded, "most likely."

"This is bad," Alfred muttered under his breath.

Vincent reached for the card above the Fool and turned it over to a man riding a horse, wielding a stick as five more followed suite. "Six of Wands translates roughly to the victor wining-meaning us."

"Oh, finally some good news," said Alfred.

"Yes, but the above card only represents the goal of the querent, doesn't necessary mean you'll win," explained Vincent.

"Nice to know you believe in us," the blond countered sarcastically.

Vincent rolled his eyes and flipped the card below the Fool. The card was vibrant with a wheel in the center as a sphinx sat on top and four other mythical beasts soared around it. "The Wheel of Fortune, means destiny and luck."

"That's good," the blond smiled but was met with Vincent's uneasy gaze. "Right?"

Vincent shook his head, "the below card represents the querent's inner mind or self but with the challenge, past, future and above cards being what they are it only reveals that there are more people involved. Destiny is threading these people together, assigning roles to each of them."

Both Alfred and John remained silent as Vincent proceeded to the four cards that had aligned the cross. He started with the bottom card, reveling an elderly man dressed in armor and robes. "The Emperor represents stability, power, protection, and realization…the placement of the card is meant to be advice."

"So, is the universe telling us to be stable? To have power? To protect? To realize something?" Alfred bombarded his questions, each one becoming more hectic than the last.

Vincent ignored his tone, "Possibly all four."

"Oh, wonderful," Alfred laced his words with the harshest form of venom.

John nodded to the eightieth card, "let's move on."

The next card displayed a crying woman on a bed with swords over her, "the Nine of Swords in reverse, means suspicion, doubt, reasonable fear, shame and imprisonment. The eightieth placement is meant to show the people or events that will affect the outcome…but being that its doubt, fear and suspicion. It doesn't look to good for us." He paused, "It also only proves my theory of more people being involved."

Alfred combed his hands through his hair, "but who?"

Vincent smiled, "well, I am certain on one."

"Who?" Alfred asked again.

Vincent chuckled and John shook his head, "it's you, you idiot. Hello the Fool was the first card showed."

"Oh," Alfred muttered and rubbed a hand behind his burning neck.

John sighed and mumbled a 'we're doomed' under his breath as Vincent flipped the ninth card over.
The card was upside down and pictured a dark woman dressed in fine robes, holding a pentagram in her hands.

"The Queen of Pentacles in reverse means suspense, evil and mistrust and with the card's placement of representing our hopes and fears well…"

Alfred groaned, "I'm guessing this card mostly represents our fears."

"Darkness thrives off it," Vincent stated. "Fear, mistrust, violence and doubt, this all feeds the scorpion."

John eyed the last card, "what does that placement mean?"

"The outcome; don't get it confused with the future placement. The future placement is not the final outcome, the tenth one is." Vincent turned the last card over and froze.

Alfred clutched his jaw, "oh fuck."

The card was displayed in dark colors of a lightning bolt striking a tower, setting it ablaze as two men fell to their deaths.

"What does this one mean?" John asked in trembling tone.

The Seer locked eyes with John and Alfred, "catastrophe."

"But the Chariot is right side up," John argued, "that means triumph, right?"

"Yes, but it's also the promise of war, and with these four cards being what they are," Vincent gestured over the four cards beside the cross. "The odds are not in our favor."

Alfred banged his fist on the table, "dammit."

Vincent reached for his temples and began to massage them.

"Vince, what's wrong?" Alfred asked concerned.

He covered his eyes becoming sensitive to the light, "that card has something to say."

"What card? Which one?" John questioned.

"Not the ones here," he moved to the deck. "It's a blank card. One that appeared a year back. It-" he paused, processing his words. "It changes-shows me different pictures each day. Things that have happen, will happen or probably never will."

Alfred didn't hesitant, "let us see it."

Vincent shuffled through his deck and set the card before them. It was blank at first but as Vincent instructed to wait the white began to fade into black. Small, delicate lines appeared taking the shape of feathers as the picture shivered and the wing shot out, revealing white feathers inside.

That wasn't all that was revealed.

A beast with gigantic black and white wings, deer hind legs, and a pair of jagged antlers took center stage. Its lower half was completely covered in dark fur as the upper was coated in black and white feathers. It had massive hooves, sharp talons and a curve tipped beck but its eyes were still human.
"What is that thing?" John exclaimed.


Vincent shook his head, "it's not a Level Four."

"Vince, this chimera was fused with a human," Alfred emphasized.

"I'm not saying you're wrong about that," Vincent looked to the beast. "It's just...this chimera feels different."

"A chimera? Like in Greek mythology?" John interrupted. "But this doesn't look like anything from the books."

"There are different types of chimeras; these creatures are animals fused together to create new beasts," Alfred summarized. "There are four levels: Level One and Level Two are chimeras created from DNA splicing. The differences between the two are based on power and life expectancy. Level Ones tend to live for a few months to year while a Level Two could live up to three. Level Threes are old school; it's when fully grown, live animals are fused together," he shook his head. "It's not a pretty process. Level Fours are chimeras created with human and animal fusion. These beasts could only live for a few months, depending on what kind of strain their put through."

"It's not a Level Four," Vincent repeated.

"Look at its eyes," Alfred remarked, his tone filled with justified anger and compassion. "It was a person."

"I'm not it saying it wasn't," Vincent shouted in frustration. "I'm saying this thing isn't an average Level Four chimera!"

"Guys! The card!" John exclaimed and they snapped their attention back to the card.

The beast's wings flapped and took flight, soaring through a dark skyline as the Eiffel Tower stood in the distance.

Alfred leaned forward, "Is that Paris?!"

The beast made a sharp turn as if in pursuit.

John squinted his eyes in concentration, "I think it's chasing something."

Its wings flapped faster, picking up speed and gaining distance on a small blue bird. Alfred looked closer, spotting the bird's white underbelly and black stripes; it was a blue jay. The bird beats its wings faster, but no matter how hard the bird pushed it couldn't escape the beast. With one outstretched hand, the chimera snatched the bird. Its talons digging into the bird's flesh with one squeeze. The bird cried out as it struggled against the beast's hold. Blood leaked from its wounds but it continued to fight, freeing a wing in the process.

The picture froze when the chimera immediately grabbed that wing and tore it off.

Alfred rubbed his eyes, "okay, what the hell does that mean?"

Vincent thought for a moment, "A blue jay means gossip, arrogance and selfishness but it's also quick to adapt."

"Ella," John said in a trembling voice. "Her guide is a blue jay. This thing is after Ella."
The earth shook under my feet.

Sending me back first into the snow.

Astrid rose above me, her body whole.

Till it tore like paper.

Blood splattered and pooled, staining the white powder red.

A dark figure sprinted, leaving a trial of bodies behind.

Each dropping like flies.

Till Mara appeared behind Arthur.

His head flew and I screamed-

My eyes snapped opened, meeting the sun's rays that broke through a window. I groaned at the light and turned onto my back, blinking up to a white ceiling and wallpapered walls. At that moment, I didn't care where I ended up or how I got there. All I wanted to do was sleep. I turned away from the light and curled into myself, hugging my shoulders as a form of comfort.

My stomach had other ideas.

It growled and I cursed in annoyance, refusing to leave my warm bed. My nose seeking food, caught the whiff of cinnamon and I sat up in defeat. Plush, ivory chairs and a small, iron table set were placed at one corner of the room, where a hot meal was waiting for me. I rose off the queen-sized bed and flinched when my bare feet made contact with the cold, hardwood floors. I found a pair of fluffy slippers and a matching robe at the foot of the bed. Feeling the chill in the air, I put them on and reached for my breakfast. The croissant was warm and the milk was still cold, so I figured whoever had left it was here just recently.

The clock on the wall informed me that it was eight-thirty and judging by the natural light, it was morning. I scanned the room, taking note of the white double doors and shelves on the opposite wall of the bed. A turquoise vanity on the left side of that bed and a pair of massive windows that doubled as door on the right. Another door stood just inch away. It was too wide to be closet and when I opened it, I wasn't too surprised to find a parlor room.

It was painted in a light shade of ivory with high ceilings and white tile floor. A single cream-colored couch was placed on the left, its back facing a pair of glass doors and a window that stretched from floor to ceiling. Two matching chairs were on the right with a dark coffee table in the center. A huge mirror sat above the chimney and another, just as large was placed between the windows.

I closed the door and looked to the shelves beside me; each shelf was filled with books, picture frames and decorative figures of horses. The books were mostly written in French but some were in English; the genres ranged from bios to fairy tales. Most of the frames held pictures of Matthew and Arthur others contained photos of Antonio, Gilbert, and other various nations but each photo had one thing in common: Francis. He was in every image; either setting up the camera from a distance or holding his phone at arm's length.

*He has a thing for selfies*, I smiled at the thought.
Then on the bottom shelf in a back corner was a lone picture of Alfred. It was dated, probably taken in late nineties early two-thousands but it was well kept in a simple brown frame. He was leaning against a bridge, grinning widely at the camera almost as if he was seconds away from blissful laughter.

Next to the image was a recent photo of me in Rome, overlooking the Seven Hills. I wasn't looking at the camera, with only the side of my face being shown. Yet, anyone looking at the picture could tell I was at peace as a calm breeze blew through my hair and a small smile graced my lips.

Beside my picture was a note:

Dear Amy,

I do hope you love the room. I personally designed it with you in mind.

There might be too many pictures of me, but is that even possible? There can never be too many pictures of me.

I rolled my eyes and kept reading:

I don't know if you noticed but there is another room on your left. Don't worry, you can lock the door so no one can bother you. The closet is on the right, I put your bag inside and Lithuania left your iPod on the vanity.

I think he's sweet on you.

My dear Amy you must have inherited my allure to have Romano, Denmark and Lithuania to be so smitten with you...maybe you should get that bat.

I laughed, "Maybe."

Anyway, look out the door. I gave you the best view.

I raised a curious brow, walked to the glass door and pulled back the curtain.

My jaw dropped, "oh my god."

Just outside my window was the Eiffel Tower; and this was no black outline far off in the distance. The structure was literally only a few miles away from me, I could practically walk to the tower if I wanted to.

I opened the door; ignoring the cold and light layer of snow that covered the balcony. I soon realized that the balcony was actually a terrace, stretching to the parlor room and beyond; wrapping around the entire house. Naked trees were scattered along the area, giving us a bit of privacy but I could still hear the traffic of the city.

"It's nice huh?"

I jumped at the voice and spun to find Matthew at my door with Kumajirou at his feet.

"Oh," I inhaled, "damn Mattie you scared me."

"Oh, I scared you," Matthew chided. "Just as you scared me when I called your phone thirty-two times."

His voice was calm, which made his sentence far more harsh and bone-chilling. I clasped my hands
together and stared at my feet, avoiding his piercing violet eyes. Before I could whimper out an apology. Matthew pulled me into a warm hug, squeezing me for an extra measure.

"Don't scare me like that," he whispered. "Please, just call back-you don't have to explain. Just-just let me know you're okay."

I swallowed, feeling a lump grow in the back of my throat, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry Mattie."

He nodded, accepting the apology as he and I clinged to each other but I could only handle the cold for so long.

"Um, Mattie," I poked his shoulder, "I'm cold."

He snapped his head up, gestured me back inside and closed the door behind him. "I forget, you're not so used to this kind of weather."

"Well I didn't grow up in the North Pole," I joked.

"Funny," he quipped.

I smiled and sat at the foot of my bed, "so...is this Francis' house?"

"Yeah," Matthew nodded, "it's a duplex overlooking the gardens of Champs de Mars."

"A duplex? Is this the top floor?"

"Yup. It has six rooms, four baths, a gourmet kitchen and a huge living room. Right now Francis is having the place decked out for the party."

"A party? What party?" I asked, confused.

"A New Year's Eve party, it's tonight."

"I spelt for an entire day?!" I blurted.

Matthew simply nodded.

"But, how did I get here?"

"By plane," he answered smoothly. "Francis asked Mikkel to tell Arthur to meet us in Paris. He and I left Berwald's place once we knew you and Arthur were okay. Francis then sent an invitation to the European nations for his annual party."

I gave him a look, "Did Arthur not tell him what happened Scotland?"

Sensing my irritation, he answered in a low tone, "he did but-"

"That idiot," I hissed under my breath as I leaped off my bed and stomped out the door.

I strut down the hall, checking every room along the way as I muttered every curse word I knew. I almost made a complete lap around the duplex before finding him in the kitchen. It was an open concept with a spacious living room attached to it. The room, like everywhere else in the duplex was surrounded by windows and designed with the French country side in mind, with an added vintage touch.

The scent of baked goods engulfed the air but it didn't lessen my anger. "You must be the biggest
"idiot on this fucking planet!"

"Good morning to you too, Amy," Francis didn't bat an eye to my tone as he pulled a freshly baked cake roll from the oven.

"There are three immortal witches that are out to get us and you thought inviting all the European nations to a party was a good idea?!!"

"To be fair, I had this party planned before all this," he mentioned.

"That doesn't matter," I exclaimed.

He slammed the cooking tray on the stove and removed his gloves, "yes, it does." He spun meeting my gaze with fierce determination. "We are having a party."

"We can have one next year, you know, when our lives are not in danger!"

He snorted, "When are they not? Amy, you cannot live your life in fear."

"Does immortal witches mean anything to you?!" I shouted. "One of them can make earthquakes and turn into a Cat Woman-literally. Another controls water and sees into the damn future. Oh, and let's not forget Abigail; who can fly, breathe fire and is a complete psychopath! Most likely brought back from the dead and hell-bent on killing me and everyone I love. Which includes you, you idiot!"

He blinked, taken by surprise, "you love me?"

"Of course, I do! You know that."

He sighed, avoiding my eyes as he rubbed the back of his neck, "you don't usually say it. Not the way you say it to Jessica and John."

My eyes widened, feeling my heart squeeze at the mention of my parents' names. I tried to speak but the lump from before had appeared again.

"Just once," he said, "I wanted to have a happy memory with you."

"Y-you do," I assured.

"Yes," he agreed unwillingly, "but they all involve your family."

I furrowed my brow in confusion, "but-but you like my family?"

"I do. Truly, but," he paused. "I'm a selfish man Amy, and once, just this once I wanted to make you happy. You spent Christmas Eve witnessing the aftermath of a massacre, breaking a blood spell and almost being killed by a witch. The next day, you run off with Denmark looking for Lithuania and then get snowed in at some church with a fake priest and was almost killed by Abigail; again." He was slipping from English to French, his voice rising higher with each sentence.

"Then you come home-distraught; you won't talk or leave your room and when you do, you're assaulted by a group of men you supposedly met in Berlin. Next-you're gone. Off with Arthur and Norway to Scotland and almost dying, again." He emphasized, "Then as if to spite me, you don't answer your phone! Leaving me to think of the worse!"

He stopped; taking a shaky breath as he hid his face in his hands. I reached for him but I held back, not certain on what to do or what to say.
As my hand returned to my side Francis looked up, his blue eyes shining with unshed tears. "I was so worried. Amy, I thought-I thought-"

"I'm sorry," I blurted. "I-I didn't know how to explain about Arthur being…"

"Beheaded." he finished. "Amy that's nothing new-

"Well I'm not used to it okay!" I screamed at first but I forced myself to take a quick breath. "I-I've never seen someone I love die…not like that and not in front of me…not-not since Grandpa…"

I didn't realize I was crying till Francis glided his hands over my cheeks, wiping them away with his thumbs. "I'm sorry," I choked, "I'm sorry I didn't call. I'm sorry for worrying you. I'm sorry for ruining Christmas-"

"No, no," he soothed, kissing my forehead as he pulled me into a hug. "You didn't ruin anything."

"B-but-"

"Hush," he whispered, threading his fingers through my curls. "That's why this party is so important to me. I want to make you happy. I want you to have fun. I want…" he paused, nudging his nose into the side of my head. "I want to make memories with you."

I squeezed my eyes closed and leaned into his embrace. A part of me wanting to let go and roll with Francis' whims but a wiser half wasn't going to hear it. This inner turmoil churned in the pit of my stomach causing me to groan out loud.

Francis pulled back, his expression concerned, "what's wrong? Are you still hungry? I can whip you up something."

"No, no, I'm okay," I lied, and breathed a long sigh. "Let's have a party," I smiled, admitting defeat.

Francis' eyes widened at first, then they crinkled as a gigantic, toothy grin spread from ear to ear. He was practically beaming with light and joy, "Oh yes, yes!" He yanked me back in for a tight hug.

"Is it safe to come in?" Matthew peeked in from the corner.

"Yes, yes," Francis assured, smiling with a new-found light in his eyes. "And I have the perfect dress for you! Wait here! Wait here!"

Once he was out of earshot, I slumped into a chair at the kitchen's table. "I'm so going to regret this."

"Maybe this is a good time as any to give you this," Matthew held a red box in his hands, wrapped in a gold bow. "Merry…delated Christmas?" he said uncertainly.

I gave a small smile and took the gift with a quiet thank you. Before I opened mine, I asked, "Did you like yours?"

"Yes," he replied, "now opened it!"

"A Canadian being pushy, never thought I'd see the day," I teased and untied the ribbon.

Inside were freshly made pointe shoes.

"Oh my god," I squealed. "Are they-are they from-"

He nodded, "They're from the same shoe company you buy from. Your mom told me that your last
pair had seen better days."

I jumped on him, hooking my arms around his neck, "thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!"

He laughed, patting my back, "I'm guessing you like them."

"Like them? Mattie, I love them! And I'm pretty sure my feet want to make sweet, beautiful love to you!"

He laughed even harder, "I'm sorry, I'm not into feet."

I giggled, briefly remembering when I tried dancing on pointe without the support of pointe shoes back at Church Allen. "Let's just say it's not easy to dance on pointe without these babies," I caressed the pink satin and grinned. "Thanks Matt. This means a lot, really."

Matthew grinned as Francis announced, "here we are!" He was carrying a huge black and white box with the Chanel logo on the front.

He presented the box, his face beaming, "Merry Christmas Amy."

I nodded my thanks and opened my gift to find a white, short sleeved dress covered in fine, detailed gold lace. It was backless with a single string of pearls down the center, connecting to a zipper on the lower back to a pearl button at the top of the collar. The front of the dress revealed nothing but the delicate lace of flowers and ivory vines; which spreads to decorate the entire skirt. The skirt was thin and flowed with ease around the mid-thigh.

"Oh wow," I gasped. "Francis, it's beautiful."

"Of course, it is. It's Chanel. Now go put it on! I want to see it!"

It was his day, so I didn't complain as I walked back to my room.

Francis watched as Amy turned the corner, "oh she's going to look so beautiful."

"Yeah…but I have to agree with her though. Papa this is not a good idea," Matthew claimed.

"Don't worry Matthieu," Francis reassured. "I have already taken precautions."

"What kind of precautions?"

"I asked Angleterre to put up-how you say…a ward around the house. Well to be honest I didn't want it but he wouldn't let me have the party without it."

Matthew sighed, "You know you should've opened with that. So, what is this ward supposed to ward off?"

"Anyone with ill intent, that's what Arthur said," Francis answered with nonchalant shrug.

"You do realize that Gil could easily fall in that category, right?"

"I personally told him to be on his best behavior."

Matthew arched a brow, "and when has he ever listened to you?"
Francis narrowed his eyes, "you used to be so cute. I blame Arthur for your satirical skepticism."

"That's uncalled for, especially when I had just put up a ward for your bloody party."

_Speak of the devil_, Matthew sighed internally.

Arthur walked in from the terrace, shrugging off his coat and hanging it on a coat rack. "The ward covers the duplex and the surrounding area. It isn't much, about a twenty-meter radius but it was all I could manage at short notice."

"No offense Arthur but how good are your wards?" asked Matthew.

The Englishman furrowed his brow in annoyance, "if you must know, Fiona and Dylan helped."

"Oh, thank god," Matthew mumbled under his breath.

"I heard that," Arthur quipped as he took Amy's seat.

"Well Arthur you haven't really been practicing," Francis added.

"I know," Arthur muttered into his hand as he massaged his temple. "I think it's time for me to take this more seriously."

Both Matthew and Francis stiffened, "it's that bad?" worried Francis.

"Heh," Arthur snorted darkly, "the Council won't help us, three powerful witches want our souls and even with Fiona, my brothers and Norway we were killed almost effortlessly. I'm afraid none of us are equipped to handle this."

They both grew silent, the tension growing thick as a small voice came from the corner.

"Um, Francis… I think the dress is too big," Amy mumbled.

That snapped the Frenchman out of his trance, "what? Let me see."

She stepped into the room, the dress hanging off her shoulders as the backless design revealed more than it attended to. Amy had to keep her arms pinned to her sides so the cloth would cover her front.

"Oh, I must've got the wrong size," he sighed and then snapped his fingers, "I'll call a tailor!"

She raised a brow, "they still exist?"

"Yes," he claimed. "Now go wait in the parlor room; he'll be here in ten minutes."

"How do you know-"

"Don't question me. Go, go, go."

Amy arched her brow even higher but she didn't question him. She spun back for the corner and Francis turned on Matthew, "Could I borrow your phone?"

"Why?"

"I need to make a call and I know he would pick up for you."

It finally clicked for Matthew, "He doesn't always pick up…” but he handed his phone anyway.
Francis gave an amusing grin and dialed a number.

Matthew and Arthur watched; one slightly nervous while the other was curious on how the situation would play out.

The phone picked up and Francis greeted, "Bonjour Romano!"

The phone clicked and Francis pouted, "He hung up on me."

"I would hung up on you too," Arthur remarked as he poured himself a cup of tea.

Francis spared a glare and handed Matthew back his phone. "I'll call Antonio," he pulled his smartphone from his pocket and tapped on the screen.

Francis would never admit it but he had terrible hearing, so he always kept the volume on the highest setting.

"Hola Francis," Antonio's cheery voice chirped from the speaker.

"Hello Antonio, is Romano with you?"

"Yes."

"What does that snail-eating bastard want?!" Romano interrupted.

"Oh Roma, no need to be so rude," Antonio scolded and then asked Francis, "What do you need?"

"I need Romano to tailor a dress."

"A dress?"

"Oh God. Are you cross-dressing for the party?" Romano questioned, his tone harsh. "If so I'm not going."

"It's not for me this time," the Frenchman assured.

"When have you ever needed a dress?" Matthew asked confused.

Francis shot a flirtatious smile at Arthur and the said Englishman quickly looked away, hiding a blush behind his hand. "That's not important."

Matthew's thoughts spiraled, conjuring unwanted scenarios as to why Francis would need a dress and why Arthur had gone red at the mention of it. He shook his head, "you're right I don't want to know."

Francis chuckled and switched his focus back to Antonio, "It's for Amy. It seems that I got the wrong size for her and I know that Romano is quite skilled with a needle and thread so…” he paused for dramatic effect.

Matthew could just picture the two in their hotel room; Romano growing quiet as a light blush dusted his cheeks. While Antonio gave a knowing smile, the same one that Francis displayed at that very moment.

"Do you have supplies for him?" Antonio asked.

"Oui, I do."
"Then we'll be there in ten minutes," and then he whispered, "Make that five. Roma looks so cute when he's excited."

Francis grinned and pressed the red button, ending the call. "Oh young love," he sung.

"Young? The man's over two thousand years old," said Arthur.

"Oh hush, that does not matter," Francis waved him off. "Love is in the air!"

"If you ask me, I don't approve."

Francis glared, "No one did."

Arthur ignored his comment, "He's far too rash. Amy would only get impatient with him and then those two would end up fighting all the time. That doesn't make for a healthy relationship."

Matthew rolled his eyes, "Said the pot to the kettle."

Matthew had joined me in the parlor room shortly after with a tray of hot chocolate and vanilla macarons. I was grateful for the warm drink but it didn't do much against the cold. Even with the burning liquid running through my veins, I was still clutching on to the dress in a desperate attempt for warmth. "Is the heater even on?" I muttered through trembling teeth.

"Here," Matthew throws a blanket over my shoulders, "better?"

I tucked my legs to my chest, making sure that my body was completely covered by the woolly material. "Better… I guess."

"How did you ever handle Sweden?" Matthew chuckled. "Paris isn't nearly as cold."

"Well for one, I wasn't wearing a backless, mid-thigh Chanel dress," I said sarcastically.

"True," he replied and began to toss logs into the fireplace. He stuffed lint in between the wood and pulled out a lighter from his pocket. Once it caught fire, he proclaimed, "This should help."

I crawled to the end of the couch, trying to get as close to the flame as I could, "thanks."

He smiled as his phone vibrated, he quickly pulled out his phone and checked the screen. His smile broke into a happy, almost love-sick grin.

"Ooo," I wiggled my brows, "whose got you smiling like that for?"

Matthew looked away, embarrassed, "no one-it-it's a meme."

"Uh-huh," I raised a brow curiously, "let me see."

"G-give me a moment-"

"Give you a moment? You just got it."

"T-there's just somethings you don't need to see."

"Oh god, do you have naked pictures of yourself?"

"No!" he exclaimed, horrified by the thought.
"It's okay if you do, I won't judge," I snickered.

"Okay," he sighed in defeat, "it's a message from someone."

"Oh, oh, oh," I smirked. "Is it a girl? A guy? Someone that prefers to be neither?"

"It's a girl," he assured.

"Is it someone I know?"

"Yes," he said.

"So are you two just friends or…" I wiggled my eyebrows once more.

He shook his head at my behavior, "friends for the most part."

"But…" I added.

"No buts," he stated, "we're just friends."

"You don't smile like that if you're 'just friends'," I remarked.

"What do you want me to say? That I jump at every message hoping that's it her. That every time we spend together all I want to do is make her smile. That she was one of the few that remembered me even when I was beside my brother." He paused, taking in a long, tired sigh, "When Al had disappeared, she was probably the only one I could really lean on. The only one that could make me bear the thought of my life without him."

My lips formed into a sad smile, "so when are you gonna tell her?"

He sighed again, "No, telling her would only make things complicated-"

"No!" I shouted and hurled a pillow at his face. I quickly grabbed another and began to repeatedly hit him with it, "No! That word will not be used! I am sick and tired of that word!"

"Okay, okay," he gripped the pillow aside, "stop hitting me already."

"Seriously Mattie," I panted, falling back onto the couch, "I'm tired of that word practically defining our lives."

"You don't understand-"

"I don't want to understand!" I interrupted. "Does she make you happy?"

"Amy-"

"Does she make you happy?" I repeated.

He was hesitant but answered, "Yes."

We grew quiet as we watched the fire crackle and a log split in two.

"Does she feel the same way?" I finally asked.

"I don't know," he reluctantly answered.

"Do you think there is a chance?"
He thought for a moment, "maybe."

"Then ask if she feels the same way, no harm in asking right?" When he made a face, I exclaimed, "Oh come on Mattie, someone should get laid tonight and it should be you."

"And I agree," Francis announced as he walked in.

"Oh god," Matthew hid his face in his hands, "how much did you hear?"

"Not much, just enough," he grinned as a familiar brunet followed him in.

"Lovino? What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I'm here to work on that dress," he remarked, titling his head to examine the side.

It hits me. The blanket had dropped the moment I had attacked Matthew; leaving me in a baggy dress that completely exposed my half naked side. "Lovi!" I screamed, yanking the cloth to cover myself.

He blinked as if registering what he was actually looking at. His gold eyes grew wide as his face flushed scarlet, "What? No! I wasn't looking-I mean, I was looking but I'm here as a professional."

Francis chuckled, pulling Matthew towards the door, "we'll leave you two be."

"Wait, Fran-" he shuts the door, "cis…"

I glanced back to Lovino and he in returned turned his gaze on me. I divverted my eyes, "so…you're a tailor?"

"Yes," he proclaimed, digging into a sewing box to avoid looking at me.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, contemplating on what to say next. "So…how you been?"

_Seriously? Three minutes of thinking got you that?_

He arched a brow as if he had shared the exact same thought. "I've been good but…" he hesitated, but, in the end, he only asked. "May I?" He nodded to the dress, displaying a pin cushion on his wrist.

"Oh, uh, yeah, um, could-could I stand at the fireplace," I blurted awkwardly.

"Yes, of course," he answered smoothly, gaining composure as a professional.

I stood before the flame, wiggling my toes at the warmth. Lovino stepped forward, pinching the shoulders of the dress up.

"This needs to be pinned up," he stated calmly, yanking two needle point pins from the cushion and stabbing them into the fabric.

"Obviously," I joked, trying lighten the mood.

He cracked a smile, "yes, we certainly don't want you flashing anyone else."

"Hey, I wasn't the one peeking," I countered.

"I was estimating the damage," he argued, "a completely different thing."

"Uh-huh, sure," I smirked.
He rolled his eyes, "that is how my master taught me," he said as he pinned another section of fabric together.

My eyebrows rose, "Master? Lovi I didn't know you were into that sort of thing."

"It wasn't like that," he exclaimed, his cheeks flushing pink. "You've been hanging around France for too long."

"Is that a bad thing," I winked.

He grinned and just like that the awkwardness faded away. I relaxed my shoulders, feeling like I had done something right for once.

"So, is that how you became a tailor? Because of your master?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Well in the beginning, I would stitch or patch up holes in Spain's clothing. The man was in battle constantly when I was young; would come home with torn shirts and ripped pants." He huffed, "thank god he had enough sense to wear armor."

"Aw, I can just imagine little angry Lovi sitting in the corner as he pricked himself with a needle trying to sew up Antonio's clothes," I giggled, giving him my most innocent smile.

He narrowed his eyes, "hey I got the hang of it and I was a very cute kid by the way."

"I'm sure you were," I pinched his cheek.

He shook it off, "You can ask Antonio-I was adorable."

"Dude all I'm picturing is a little Lovi glaring at Antonio for doing something stupid." I shook my head, "not cute at all."

"He's always doing something stupid," he said to his defense.

As we spoke, he kept working; adjusting and readjusting the garment in steady precision. I studied his hands as he kneeled before me, measuring the hem of the skirt. "This will rise when I hitch up the waist. Nothing much, just a centimeter or two."

"That's fine," I tapped my heel, a question bouncing inside my head. "Who was your master?"

He blinked, taken by surprise, "oh, um… God this is embarrassing. I-I don't remember," he finally answered. "I had gotten my apprenticeship back in the seventieth century. I had the appearance of an adolescent and I had connections thanks to Austria." He paused, his eyes falling into a daze, "He lived in Naples; he was old but skilled. I think he told me once that his mother was a seamstress."

His hands slowed and his eyes closed, "I remember his hands, his stitch work… it was always so clean and smooth." He opened his eyes and stared into the fabric, caressing the pattern with his thumb. "Sometimes, I could feel him looking over my shoulder, watching me work. His voice used to be so clear; 'Lovino, watch that stitch work.' 'Lovino, the seam is crooked, do it again.' 'Lovino, that embroidery is terrible. That is not how I taught you.'"

He tried to laugh but it held no real warmth, "That man taught me everything I know." He paused again, his eyes glazed over in deep thought. "The least I could do is remember his name."

"Lovi…" I breathed, calling out to him as I slipped my hand into his hair.

He stirred as if waking from a dream; his gold eyes finding my blue. I combed my fingers through
his locks, carefully avoiding his curl. Then as my hand slid to his cheek, he snatched it; nudge his face into my palm.

"That's what happens when you get old...", Lovino whispered, "You begin to forget names and faces," he squeezed his eyes shut, leaning against my hand. "No matter how hard you try, they just slip away."

A million thoughts whirled inside my head. Some were selfish; saying that I would never allow that to happen to me. Some were plans of action, like backing up family photos on multiple flash drives. Others simply couldn't comprehend the thought that I could end up like Lovino. That he had lived a life that was worth a hundred lifetimes but he couldn't even remember the name of his mentor.

I didn't know what to say so I decided that comfort was my best option. I caressed my thumb over his cheek bone, going back and forth in a steady rhythm. He responded with pressing his lips to my wrist.

The act caused goosebumps to spread up my arm and before I could pull away, he gripped my hand not at all rough but firm enough to hold me in place. His eyes bore into me, the gaze burning with desire.

The look conjured an image of Astrid and Saoirse; their eyes shining with love and adoration for one another. Then in a flash Astrid was ripped from Saoirse, her body placed before a pyre as Saoirse broke into heartbreaking sobs.

"Amy," Lovino's voice brought me back, "you're crying."

"Huh?" I reached for my face finding my cheeks wet. I quickly wiped them away, "it-it's nothing. Just ignore it."

He didn't listen and rose to his feet, "did something happen?"

"It's nothing," I repeated through clutched teeth.

"That didn't look like nothing-"

I snapped, "Just drop it!"

Lovino froze; his words dying on his lips as his eyes revealed the shock and hurt that I had inflicted.

I swallowed my guilt, "you should finish the dress. We don't have a lot of time before the party."

Lovino squared his shoulders, his eyes growing hard, "right."

He continued his work in silence, finishing the rise of the waist and moving on to the neckline. He pulled it to circle around my neck and pinned the pearl spine to the collar, trying to straighten it. He turned back to the waist, tightening the fabric between his fingers. I flinched when his tips had grazed my naked side; the same side that had a jagged icicle wedged in it only a few days ago.

The wound may have healed without a single scar but it didn't erase the memory. The pain. The feeling of blood gushing from my side, leaving me cold and blurry eyed as Giselle loomed over me. A shard prepared above her, ready to give the finishing blow.

A frustrated voice, one that seemed so far away, called out. "Did I hurt you?"

I was snapped back to reality when a pair of hands slapped my cheeks, "huh?!"
Lovino furrowed his brow in worry, "Did I hurt you?" he repeated.


He clutched his jaw, "it isn't nothing."

I looked away, "please Lovi just leave it."

"No," he remarked stubbornly, "Amy, talk to me."

I closed my eyes and shook my head, trying to break free from his grasp but he held on tighter. "Amy, please," he beseeched, "talk to me."

"I-I don't-" I choked on my words.

Lovino leaned in, pressing his forehead against mine. He soothed me with sweet words in Italian, coaxing me to relax, "just talk to me. I'll listen."

I looked up and was met with blood red eyes.

I screamed and shoved Lovino, knocking him back against the chimney. He grunted out a curse and rubbed the back of his head. Then he glanced to me, his irises the color of gold again.

I ground my teeth together and whimpered, "I'm sorry." I spun for the door and slammed it behind me, sealing me off from Lovino.

In the safety of my room, I sunk to the floor, curled into a ball and cried.

Chapter End Notes

Current Ethiopia: Elene Lemma
Elizabeta climbed out of the cab with two tote bags filled with food in toll. Victoria followed after, combing back her newly braided hair as she grabbed another bag off the car's floor. Bella paid the driver and strapped a large wine cooler over her shoulder. Together, they walked towards the duplex, double and triple checking their bags.

"Will this be enough?" Elizabeta asked.

"I'm sure Francis has everything he needs but this," Bella gestured to the bags, "is just a precaution."

Elizabeta rolled her eyes, "I'm sure this is just an excuse for free labor."

They reached the door as Victoria pulled out her key, "Well it's not like he could trust Arthur around the kitchen."

They giggled and Victoria opened the door to find a familiar voice shouting, "What did you bastards do to Amy?!"

The girls flinched and each exchanged a glance with one another.

"We can still turn back," Elizabeta offered.

Victoria stroked her chin, pondering on the thought in a mocking manner, "I kinda want to see where this leads," she grinned mischievously.

Bella laughed, "You always say you don't like drama but here you are-taking a front seat."

"I prefer to watch not take part, besides," she stepped in, "men are just so dramatic."

Elizabeta and Bella shared a knowing smile and chased after Victoria. They turned the corner to find Antonio trying to calm down a heated Lovino.

"We didn't do anything," Arthur remarked, irritated.

"Bullshit," Lovino sneered. "Then why has she locked herself in her room, crying-"

"She was perfectly fine till you showed up," Arthur interrupted.

"She was acting strange," Lovino retorted.

"How can you tell? You barely know her," stated Arthur.

"She's traumatized!" Lovino roared and would've charged for him if Antonio didn't step between them. "Something happened in Stockholm and I want to know what!"

"Would you believe that a three-hundred-year-old witch tried to kill her," Arthur remarked casually, "twice."

Lovino blinked, completely taken back, "a-a witch?"
"Yes, Romano, a witch," Arthur's voice dripped with sarcasm. "And this witch has friends, who are hell bent on capturing our souls."

"What would they want with our souls?" Bella asked, her question announcing their presence.

"Ladies," Francis straighten to attention, "we didn't hear you come in."

"Obviously," Elizabeta dropped the bags on the counter, "now answer the question."

"I'm sure you're aware that a nation's soul contains massive amounts of energy," Arthur proclaimed. "We're not certain on why but taking that Abigail is part of the group it's not good."

Elizabeta froze, her jaw falling slack. The name sparked a memory of a teenage girl with raven hair and dark eyes. She was being fitted into a fine violet gown with loose sleeves and a tight corset. Her hair was curled into a high up-do, styled after the ladies of the French court.

"Don't I look ravishing," she grinned at her reflection, admiring her newly painted face.

Elizabeta closed her eyes, quickly composing herself before anyone could notice. It can't be she assured herself, yet she couldn't deny the twist of her gut and the itch to reach for her phone.

"Who is Abigail," asked Antonio, "is she the ringleader?"

"Possibly," Arthur shrugged, "there's another theory that she's looking for someone more powerful."

"Okay," Victoria dragged out the word, pondering for a moment till she pointed a heated glare at Francis. "Are you just a whole new degree of stupid? If these people are after us maybe we shouldn't have the entire European Union under one roof."

"To be fair," Francis raised a finger, "I had this all plan weeks ago."

"That doesn't matter," Bella exclaimed, "if witches are after our souls, we need a plan of action not a party."

Arthur snapped to attention, "That's it. Will use ourselves as bait."

Once he suggested the idea, the others retaliated with a bombardment of questions and complaints:

"I didn't sign up to be anyone's bait!" Lovino chided.

"What do I tell my guests?" Francis crossed his arms, "Hello! Welcome to the party, oh and by the way, we gonna be using you all as bait for three immortal witches."

"Wait! These witches are immortal?!" Antonio eyes grew wide at the thought.

"One of them is over three hundred, of course they're immortal," Lovino snapped.

"Also, it's not like they know where we are," Francis stated.

"They have a Seer," proclaimed Arthur.

"It's not like they see everything," Francis argued. "This all could be some paranoid hutch."

"Yes. A paranoid hutch that could lead to the capture of these witches."

"What if they get the upper hand? Are you willing to sacrifice our allies for a hutch?" Bella said,
The nations' attentions were strictly on Arthur allowing Elizabeta to slowly sneak back around the corner. She pulled out her phone and dialed a number.

I jerked out another tissue and blew my nose, trying to clear out my nostrils so I could breathe. I rubbed my temple, trying to soothe the impending headache that throbbed on my right side. I had peeled off the dress, taking extra care not to remove the pins. Preferring to be back in my thermals and jeans with a sweatshirt and a baggy wool cardigan; yet I still felt a chill as my skin tighten with goosebumps.

Lovino was shouting at Arthur because of me. I should go out there, explain myself but I couldn't. I didn't want their eyes on me and I certainly didn't want them to hear that Abigail and I had a fucked up make out session.

I immediately flinched at the image and I could've sworn I felt her hands on me. I crossed myself, rubbing my hands all over me to insure myself that I was alone.

Then a voice whispered harshly behind my door and I strained my hearing; recognizing Elizabeta's voice as she spoke in her native tongue. I stepped forward, cracking my door open as softly as I could to watch her.

She had her phone glued to her ear, whispering in an aggravated tone. The voice on the other line was feminine and seemed rather calm. Any other clue I got was Liz calling her Katherina. I tried to follow their conversation but I had no idea what they were saying.

*Note to self: learn Hungarian.*

Abigail continued and I grew annoyed but there was one word I was able to understand.

My hand gripped the door as Liz waited for the woman to respond. Once she did, Liz headed straight for the door, grabbing her jacket along the way.

I didn't think. I strapped in my boots, wrapped a scarf around my neck and yanked my coat off the hanger. I waited till she was out the door and waited once more when her figure was at the bottom of the duplex.

I flipped my hood up and followed, keeping a good enough distance between me and her. I kept my head down, using the fact that Liz had never seen my winter coat. Still I was paranoid; so, when I spotted a woman on her phone with her purse open. A tourist no doubt. I didn't think twice with snatching her sunglasses and kept walking. My heart pounded mostly with the fear of being discovered as a pit pocket and blowing my cover but when I heard no outcry. I sighed and kept my pursuit, till a hand grabbed my shoulder.

"Stealing are we now Miss America?"

I recognized the voice instantly and reduced the urge to bolt, "Shit. Bell, you scared me."

The blonde gave a cat like smile and crossed her arms, "first rule of stalking, make sure no one else is stalking you."
"Noted," I said.

"Now, why are you following Liz?" she asked.

I gestured her to walk with me so not to lose sight of the Hungarian. "She was on the phone with someone, talking about Abigail."

"We were talking about her in the kitchen. Maybe it was Prussia, discussing the impending battle," she instated.

I shook my head, "no. It was a woman and she spoke Hungarian. Also, what battle?"

Bella sighed, "Your uncle thinks it's a good idea to place a trap if the Immortals show up to the party."

"We're gonna be bait?" I hissed.

"Yup," she replied.

I exhaled through my nose, keeping my choice words to myself.

"Stop." Bella grabbed my hand, "We're not following Liz like a pair of stalkers."

"She left. Without telling anyone," I argued. "Don't you find that a little bit suspicious?"

"Amy, this is Liz we're talking about. You can trust her."

"But she's hiding something," I countered.

Bella shook her head, "Liz doesn't keep secrets except for the obvious."

"Everyone has secrets. Hell, I was one for nearly eighteen years," I gave my best you-know-I'm-right look. I pulled my hand out of her grasp and turned, "if you don't want to, that's fine but I'm going-"

She snatched my hand back and gripped it tight, "stop this nonsense. Just call Liz and-"

"And what? She ain't gonna pick up. Now let go or you'll be picking up your teeth off the sidewalk," I threatened.

Bella huffed and raised her eyebrows, "You think that's wise? I've fought for far longer than you have and I've seen my share of battle. Do you really want to test me?"

"Do you want to test me," I glared.

Slowly her eyes soften, filling with sympathy and compassion, "Amy, whatever has happened, you can talk to me about it."

I yanked my arm away, "thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

I spun on my heel, almost sprinting to catch up with Liz. I heard Bella call out for me but I ignored her and followed Liz around a corner, only to be met with the brunette. Elizabeta towered before me, her arms on her hips as she stared daggers into me.

"Why are you two following me?" she demanded.

"To be fair, I was following Amy, following you," Bella stated from behind.
I removed my sunglasses and met Liz with my own piercing gaze, "who was that woman you were talking to on the phone?"

Her eyebrow twitched and I continued, "Are you meeting her?"

"I don't answer to you," she quipped and looked to Bella, "Bell, take her back to France."
I shook Bella's arm off, "I'm not going anywhere! What does she have to do with Abigail?"

"This has nothing to do with you!"

"If it involves Abigail, it has everything to do with me!"

"Would you two keep your voices down," Bella stepped between us, setting a hand on each of us. Elizabeta inhaled deeply, "Amy, just know that I'm doing this for our safety. You can trust me."

"No. I can't. Especially when you're sneaking off without telling us and meeting some mysterious woman that you won't even tell us who she is!"

She sighed, "She's an informant."

"Okay," I waited.

"She's also a witch."

"Ah, and…"

Liz rolled her eyes, "and she knows of Abigail."

"And how is that?"

"It's a long story and I don't have time to explain."

"Make time."

Not a moment later, her phone vibrated and she answered with a snapped hello. A quick exchange went by in French, mostly with Liz instructing the caller to come down on Avenue Bosquet. A small, gray car came around the corner, pulling to the side when she raised her hand.

A young man was in the driver's seat, he had brown, wavy hair and green eyes. He was handsome and his smug grin was proof enough that he knew it. "Hello, I'm Jerome, you're blabla driver," he introduced himself in practiced English.

I blinked, "Bla-what?"

"It's like the European version of uber driver," Bella informed.

"Oh-w-wait! Wait!" I shouted after Elizabeta as she climbed into the passenger seat. "We're coming with you!"

"No, you're not," she proclaimed firmly and turned to Jerome, "aller."

He was about to enter traffic till I leaped in front of him. He slammed on the breaks, giving out a high-pitched squeal as he did.

Liz popped her head out the window, "Get out of the way."
I shouted, "Make me!"

She sighed, "I'm getting too old for this."

I smirked, "Does that mean you admit defeat."

Her eyes blazed, "never."

"You have three seconds to let us inside or I tip the car over."

"Ha," she raised a brow in challenge, "you wouldn't dare."

"Do you not know who you're talking to," Bella exclaimed.

I grinned, bent down and gripped the front bumper with one hand. Ignoring Bella's pleas, I rose steadily, taking the front wheels right off the street. Jerome screamed and Liz gripped the dashboard as I lifted the car on its back wheels the bumper nearly grazing the concrete.

"Last chance Liz, or this car is going over the side walk!"

Shouts of shock and excitement erupted all around me as locals and tourists alike pulled out their phones to record and take pictures.

I could hear Bella groan, "oh god."

"Put us down!" Liz ordered.

"Are we coming with you?" I asked innocently.

"No!"

"Oh, I feel my hand slipping…"

"Just let her come!" Jerome screamed.

"Going once," I warned, "going twice…"

"Okay!" Elizabeta yelled and then sighed, "Okay, you can come, just put the car down."

I gave a smug look as I slowly brought down all four wheels to the ground. "Bell, get in," I gestured to the back doors as I climbed in.

Bella grumbled, "How did I end up in this situation?"

Nonetheless, she slid behind the driver's seat and Jerome slowly reached for the stick shift. He gripped the stick and wheel so tight that his knuckles were white. He glanced to me through the rearview mirror and gave a nervous smile before he turned his focus on the road.

"I think you scared that poor boy," Bella whispered to me.

I rolled my eyes, "he'll get over it."

We made a silent agreement not to say a word about our attended destination. Waiting till Jerome dropped us off in front of an apartment complex on Avenue du Roule. He didn't stick around long; he sped away the second we were out of the car. We hardly noticed or cared as Bella and I followed Elizabeta to the main entrance.
The building was a simple eggshell white with a gray roof top, like most of the structures down that block. Also, like most apartments there were intercom boxes with names and buttons beside them or a key pad for people to type in their apartment number and passcode. Liz pressed the button next to the surname Arany and a woman answered, her voice soft and cheerful.

"Allô?"

Elizabeta replied in Hungarian and the woman instantly buzzed us in.

We didn't have far to go; turned out that the informant was on the ground floor, the last door before you hit the courtyard. Liz was about to knock on the door, but it swung inwards presenting a young woman with long deep brown hair and warm chocolate eyes.

"Lizzie," she greeted Elizabeta with a kiss on both cheeks till her gaze fell on us. "Oh, you've never brought your…" she hesitated, "friends to see me before."

Elizabeta glanced to us before suggesting, "Let's discuss inside."

"Of course, of course, come in, come in," she gestured excitedly, ushering us into a brightly lit living room.

It was small but stylish; combined with bright colors like soft amber, mint green and ivory. A cream love seat sat on one side, facing a chimney with a wooden white mantel. Plotted plants sat upon the mantel, along accented shelves and side tables. A tiny work desk was placed beside the chimney and a rug, festooned with flowers and vines covered the hard wood floors. A spacious nook was added to the end of the room, with a bay window, a cushion seat and a charming table set.

"It's a good thing you caught me," the brunette proclaimed, "I was just about to start packing."

Elizabeta raised a brow in wonder, "where are you heading to next?"

"Japan," she answered, "I have some friends I've been meaning to visit and the Olympic Games will be hosted in Tokyo. Can't miss that."

"We didn't come here to small talk," I interjected. "We came here for info on Abigail, so start talking-what do you know?"

She blinked in confusion and faced Elizabeta, "you told them I was an informant?"

"Wait! She isn't?" I snapped, "then who the hell is she?!"

Elizabeta sighed and Bella stepped closer, "Liz?"

The Hungarian squared her shoulders and stood beside the woman, "I present to you Katherina Báthory-Nádasdy."

Bella's gasped, her eyes going wide as her jaw fell slack.

I made a face, "I'm confused. Am I supposed to know who she is?"

Katherina huffed, a smirk forming on her lips, "You might know my mother, Elizabeth Báthory de Ecsed also known as the Blood Countess."

My blood ran cold.

She must've seen the fear in my eyes for she tried to defuse the tension. "I'll go make us some tea,"
she proclaimed as she escaped into the kitchen.

I turned on Liz, "what the hell!" I hissed through clutched teeth, trying to keep my voice down. "You brought us into the lair of an Immortal!"

"I don't think an apartment in Paris counts as a lair," Elizabeta snapped with a harsh whisper.

Bella racked her hands through her hair in shock and frustration, "Liz you said she died… committed suicide."

"She faked it," she stated.

"Clearly," I remarked. "We need to go, let's bust out of the window and run."

Liz rolled her eyes, "she's not going to hurt us."

"Most Immortals I've met, have tried to kill me," I emphasized. "So, forgive me if I have a hard time accepting your word for it."

"Katherina is not dangerous," she argued.

"She eats people!" I snapped.

"How long," Bella asked, demanding for our attention, "How long have you known about her?"

Liz thought for a moment, "over three hundred years."

"And in all that time, you never once thought of telling me," her voice quivered slightly.

"Bell, I couldn't tell anyone! What if the Church found her or worse the witches? You know how they are, any Immortal found are immediately put to death."

"But what makes her your responsibility?" Bella countered, "Liz… it wasn't your fault. Her mother was crazy and the emperor at the time was a complete dick."

"Yet she was punished for her mother's crimes and unlike her siblings, she couldn't escape it. No man wanted to marry her because of her mother's arrest and when she finally got the land she was promised after her death. Matthias that bastard, took that away and stripped her name of power. She was left penniless."

"Oh boo-hoo," I interrupted, "you want me to feel sorry for her? She followed her mother into Crazy Town and took Occult Boulevard but unlike her mother, she succeeded. She found a way to be young and beautiful forever by eating the souls of innocent people."

"If we must discuss my diet, I assure you none of my prey were innocent."

We froze and turned to Katherina, holding a tray of tea, cookies and three slices of lemon cake. She struts passed us and sets the tray on the table, "come, sit and have some cake."

Elizabeta took a seat and I shared a look with Bella. She gave a nervous smile, shrugged her shoulders and sat beside Liz. I spared a glance to the Immortal before taking my seat at the window as she severed us cake and tea.

"Here you go," she smiled as she slid me my slice.

"Thanks," I muttered till I noticed her bite into a cookie. "You can eat food?"
She blinked, looking to the cookie and nodded in realization, "right, yes, I forget. Force of habit you see. When I have guests, I usually offer food and I found that it was better to eat with them than not."

"So… it doesn't bother you?"

"No, eating food doesn't do anything to me. It doesn't give me nutrition nor do I gain weight. I can't even taste it."

"You can't taste? Like at all?" I questioned.

She nodded, "once you eat a soul your taste buds burst in flavor nothing else could ever satisfy you."

I thought about never being able to taste chocolate again and I winced, "screw immortality I want chocolate."

Katherina laughed, "You are an Immortal as well, but with better perks."

"Damn straight," I said as took a bite of cake, "I don't have to eat people."

"Amy," Liz hissed at me in a warning tone.

Katherina raised a hand, "now Lizzie, she does have a point but I assure you, I only hunt the most vile of mankind. Mostly men, few women but never children."

I clapped my hands slowly as my tone dripped with sarcasm, "Congradu-fucking-tions, you deserve a noble peace prize for being a good cannibal."

"America. She is not a cannibal," Liz glared.

I didn't back down, "Oh right, she eats the soul, that's totally better."

"Um," Bella cuts in, "I do have a question… how did you become an Immortal? I mean, I get the whole soul thing but what lead you to this?"

Katherina sighed sadly, "I had a governess named Valise, unlike me she became an Immortal against her will. So, to give her peace, I took her immortality and scattered her remains here in Paris." She huffed, a smile forming on her lips, "well that was her best guess; she was born to a nomadic tribe in Gaul before she was taken by Romans. She didn't have any specific clue on where she was born."

"Romans," I blinked, "damn, if I had to live that long, I'll ask you to kill me too."

Liz either didn't catch that or decided to ignore me, "I always knew something was wrong about that woman."

"Lizzie, you only saw her as many times as you saw me, which wasn't often," Katherina stated, almost backhandedly.

Elizabeta narrowed her eyes as I added, "Well good thing we have nanny review sites, making sure the next person you hire to watch your kids isn't an immortal witch."

Liz turned her glare onto me, "Are you done?" She didn't wait for me to answer, her question being more than enough to threaten me into silence. She looked back to Katherina, "You can't blame me for my absence. I was warrior; fighting against Turkey for my people, which included you."

"Heh, the people…" she muttered, "the people hated my family. They cheered when my mother died and didn't care at all when my siblings and I were dragged through the mud." Katherina took a
moment to sip her tea, "No one fought for us when we were stripped of our power and wealth, but unlike my siblings I was not married, so they too abandoned me. For their new families, new names and new titles. My brother on the other hand, joined the military, trying in vain to redeem our family name."

She paused, her eyes locked on her cup as if she was somewhere else, far, far away. "Only to die alone, his life drained and devoted to the army and our country. His name forgotten, lost in the past with only a mention of him but of no acknowledgment of his pride and belief in his kingdom." She turned on Liz, lifting her drink in mock salute, "for his nation," she declared bitterly.

Liz remained quiet and I looked to Bella as her hand fell off the table and reached for Elizabeta's.

"You can't really blame her," I proclaimed, "or the people, your mother did kill all those girls."

"Yes, but Matthias wanted our land and accused us of treason over our mother's crimes. No one defended us."

"I did," Liz proclaimed.

Silence filled the room as Katherina spared her a glance and took another small sip of tea, "a lot of good that did us."

I curled my fingers into fists, digging my nails into my palms till they strung, "Liz still fights for you even now." I hissed through clutched teeth, "She has made sure you were never found out and could live out your immortal life in peace. That has to count for something right?"

"Guilt is a powerful thing isn't it?"

I wanted so badly to punch her pretty face in and I would've done it too, if Bella didn't snatch my hand and mouthed, "Don't."

I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to calm down but seeing Liz with her head down and her shoulders drawn tight. It only filled my rage, "Let's stop beating around the goddamned bush; tell us about Abigail. Who exactly is she and what does she want?"

Katherina didn't hesitate, "Abigail is my daughter."

My jaw dropped, "what?!"

"You can have children?!" Bella exclaimed, almost angrily.

"They're not blood related," Liz interjected, her tone wielding no emotion. "Katherina adopted her."

Katherina glared, possibly annoyed with Liz's lack of empathy, "she was living in New York, working as a sex worker. She would have died on those streets."

"Oh no," I muttered in a monotone, "that would've been so awful."

Katherina then turned her sights on me, "she was only twelve."

"Oh, look at you dropping the tragic backstory, well guess what I still don't give a fuck," I sassed. "I literally have no fucks to give. You want to know why?" I rose to my feet and slammed my hands on the table, "Cause Abigail is a monster. She turned a nation into her own personal murder toy and forced him to kill innocent people. You know that Svenska animal attack? Well it was no animal! It was Abigail's plan for our friend to kill those people as she ate their souls. And I highly doubt any of
those vets, students or volunteers—the youngest being sixteen by the way, were the most vile humans of mankind!"

Katherina's eyebrows knotted together in worry as she slowly blinked and looked to Elizabeta, "may I speak with you, alone."

"What?! No. Whatever you have to say to her, you can say in front of us!" I objected.

Liz gave a pointed look to Bella and the blonde nodded, "Amy, we should wait outside."

"No! Liz!"

The Hungarian looked up, her energy drained and her eyes tired, "Please… just go."

I admitted defeat but I tried to save some sherd of dignity as I strut for the door and announced. "I killed Abigail before and if I see her face again, I'll make sure to bury her under ten feet of cement."

I slammed the door behind me and stomped for the courtyard, muttering every curse and threat I could muster. The air blew, kicking a gust of snow beside my feet as the chill seeped into my bones. Then I remembered, I left my coat inside.

_Fuck._

I was too stubborn to walk back in, besides my pent-up anger was more than enough to keep me warm. Anger for the fact that Liz tried to hide critical information on Abigail. That Katherina had the nerve to mock her nation, even when Elizabeta did so much to protect her.

Well, she certainly did a one-eighty when I brought up Abigail's crimes; reaching out to Liz like a lost child.

It really pissed me off.

Everything about this just pisses me off.

But what really made me frustrated was this sinking feeling of hopelessness; not knowing on what to do or how to do it.

I didn't have any new info.

No plan.

I was stuck.

I was practically waiting for her to attack and she knew that if she wanted to hurt me, really hurt me. She'll go after my family.

Then I felt it, a faint sensation of a hand caressing my arm as the wind whispered, "such a pretty golem."

My fist flew, instantly colliding into a tree with a hard smack, leaving a dent. The bark ripped into my skin and I dug it in further, trying to erase that god-awful sensation.

I was so focused on increasing my pain that I didn't notice Bella calling out to me till her fourth attempt on my name. "Amy!"

I snapped my head up, meeting with a pair of deeply concerned green eyes.
I quickly pulled my hand back to my side, trying to hide the blood and large purple bruise that it was sporting. "What?"

She was quiet for a moment, almost as if she wasn't sure on where to start. She took a deep breath and asked, "did-did anything happened? With you and Abigail?"

"It's nothing," I interrupted harshly. "I'm no victim. I'm fine." I muttered at first, and then declared, "I'm fine."

She reached out to me and I flinched, "don't."

She pulled back, "okay."

Elizabeta watched as Bella grabbed Amy's coat and followed her out the door. When it clicked behind the blonde it seemed to echo, enhancing the silence between Elizabeta and Katherina. The nation continued to watch Katherina as she looked out the window, blinking slowly, trying to regain her composure.

Elizabeta simply waited, knowing full well what she was going ask.

"If you find her," Katherina whispered, "please tell me."

Elizabeta clutched her fists, ready to shout but she was able to keep her tone neutral, "she's gone too far. What she did at Svenska-"

"That could've been any Immortal-"

"Seven nations witnessed this!" Elizabeta exclaimed.

"Do you realized how easy it is to change one's features," Katherina remarked calmly as she gave herself red hair, a long face and bright blue eyes.

Elizabeta winced, "don't do that."

She laughed bitterly, her face returning, "You have to admit, it came in handy."

"Don't change the subject Katherina," complained Elizabeta, "you've known… both of us have felt something was dark about that girl."

"Could you really blame her? After what she had to do to survive?" Katherina remarked. "She was only twelve, just a child."

"Well she's not a child anymore is she? She murdered twelve people-ate their souls-"

"I can reason with her-"

"Reason with her?!" Elizabeta tried not to shout, but her anger could only be tamed for so long. "She turned a nation into a monster. She tried to kill other nations-"

"She's going through a phase," Katherina instated.

Elizabeta's jaw dropped, stunned for a moment, "a phase? Are you serious? When are you going to realize that she never wanted what you had planned for her? Marriage. Children. She didn't want that. She wanted what you had. Power. Immortality."
"She became an Immortal to protect a working girl-

"And you still buy that shit! Kat... when was the last time you even spoke with her?"

Katherina didn't have to think on it for too long, "The sixties."

Elizabeta cocked a brow curiously, "do you remember what you two talked about?"

"No," Katherina answered too quickly, proving to Elizabeta that she was lying. Protecting Abigail like always.

"She's not your family-"

"And you are?!" Katherina rose to her feet, screaming, "You may have eaten with us, shared in our celebrations and fought alongside us but you were a piece of property. Just an add-on that came with the goddamned castle!"

Elizabeta showed no emotion, flexing her face into a stoic mask. A mask that she had perfected through the centuries. A mask that has caused both humans and nations alike to stop dead in their tracks. Katherina was no different; the Immortal flinched as her eyes flashed green and the pots of plants around the room began to shake.

Elizabeta paid no mind as she squared her shoulders and flipped her hair back, "Abigail is a dangerous woman and must be taken down. Tell me Katherina, would you do it? Will you take responsibility for her?"

Katherina looked away, her eyes fading back to brown, "get out."

Elizabeta didn't say a word as she turned and walked out the door.

Once Ella had finished her shower and lotion routine, she slipped on her robe and drove for the closet; browsing through her collection of party dresses.

She stopped at a red, low cut, mid-thigh length dress, "hmm, too provocative."

She found a floor length, purple ballroom gown, "mm, too formal."

Then a short dark green clubbing dress, "ugh, what was I thinking?"

Finally, she un-hooked a dark blue dress with a ruffled layer hem and a sheer net high collar. She nodded, "this will do."

She laid out the gown on her bed and began to accessorize. She rummaged through her jewelry box, pulling out a sapphire pendant and a matching set of dangling earrings. She then moved to her carry on and dug through it to find her new wooden bead bracelet. Each bead was tiny and smooth, beautifully crafted with fine dark oak. It was simple but yet had a single gold charm that dangled alongside the beads. The charm was an opened hand with an eye lined in the palm; a symbol of the third eye.

She placed it beside the dress and began to massage her ends with Moroccan oil; preparing each strand for the twisted up-do.

"Ella, may I come in," announced her mother, Pascaline Chasse as she strolled in without Ella's
permission.

Ella sighed, *why does she bother asking when she walks right in.* "Hello Mother, is there something you need?"

Pascaline didn't hesitate when she answered, "I have to see what you chose to wear to the party. Your father has important guests coming."

Ella rolled her eyes, *of course he does.*

"Oh really?" she added coyly.

"Yes, and I need you-" once Pascaline finally set her pale green eyes on her daughter, she gasped. "Ella! What have you done to your hair?"

She blinked in surprise, completely forgetting about changing her hair color, nearly four months ago. "I changed the color. What do you think?"

Ella instantly regretted her question when Pascaline's perfectly waxed brows ceased in a distressed knot. "What do I think? That color completely washes you out and it makes those dull eyes of yours even duller-if that was even possible."

"The stylist said it was a good color," Ella tried to defend her choice but her mother only snorted. "An American stylist." Pascaline sighed, brushing a slim hand through short blonde hair. She took a moment to check the strands, "I'll make an appointment with my stylist before you head back to the states." She grew annoyed with the mention of the US, "from all the fashion schools you could've chosen, you decided on some mediocre school in New York."

*It was the farthest school away from you,* Ella thought to herself.

"Mother, New York has quite the reputation. It's been known as a headway in fashion."

"Paris will always be the fashion capital," Ella knew where her mother's loyalty lies, being a former Karin model, Pascaline will stand with her city till her dying breath.

"Anyway, this dress will not do," she looked to piece of garment like it would burn her if she dared touch it. "You need something lighter," she scrolled through her gowns and pulled out a simple, crossed strap lavender dress. "This will do."

"Um, Mother I really wanted to wear the blue one-"

"If you still had blonde hair, then yes you could pull off that dress, but no." Pascaline laid out her choice of dress and discarded Ella's. "The color would make your skin look pale. I mean, I understand the need for dark clothes, given you had gain some extra weight."

Ella wrapped an arm around her waist, unknowingly pinching at a bit of flesh, "I haven't gained that much, just a kilo or two," she muttered.

Pascaline heard her, "yes, but it's a slippery slope. You have your grandmother's body, curvy yes, but you gain weight easily. Men prefer their women fit and well-kept. I would watch the dessert if I were you tonight."

Ella bit her sarcasm back, "yes Mother."

Pascaline turned back to the bed, analyzing the jewelry, "Oh no, the sapphires would clash horribly
with the lavender." She snatched up the pendant and earrings and raised a brow in question when she held the bracelet up like discarded tissue. "And what is this?"

"That's my secret Santa gift from Heisuke," Ella answered.

"That Japanese boy? You still keep in contact with him?"

"Yes. We chat occasionally," said Ella.

"Well, make sure to tell him, if he plans to shop for a young lady, he shouldn't choose something so… boyish." She tossed the beads aside; sending them to skid across the vanity table and stop inside a crack between the mirror and wood.

"Mother, please be careful," Ella managed to keep her voice calm but her patience was growing thin.

"Those things are tacky, it ruins the entire outfit," Pascaline ignored her daughter's plea and dug through Ella's box, making an annoyed click of her tongue as she did. "Oh Ella, you need to take better care of your jewelry. You need something bigger-more organized."

Ella tried to speed things along, "what about the pearls?"

"That would make you look old," her mother banished the thought and tugged out a pair of dangling gold earrings. "Ah, these are better," she combed a hand through Ella's hair only to shout, "What did you do to your ears?!"

She had found the second set of piercings that were aligned with the first. Ella groaned, "Mother there just an extra set-"

"I don't care, one hole in each of your ears are good enough," she snapped. "Ugh," she massaged away the worry wrinkles that threatened to form on her forehead. "And tonight of all nights. We have to make sure they don't show. Keep your hair down tonight, curled with it half up is fine."

"Yes, Mother," Ella answered as Pascaline called for a maid.

Lisa Petit was a short, nervous woman but kind; Ella liked her. "You called Madam?"

"Can you be any slower?" Pascaline criticized harshly.

"Oh-Oh sorry, I was just cleaning the third bathroom when you called-"

"Enough of that," Pascaline silenced Lisa with a wave of her hand. "Curl Ella's hair and make sure her ears are covered. An elegant half-do will suffice."

"Yes Madam," Lisa nodded.

Pascaline stopped at the door, "Be ready at eight sharp, I want you there to greet our guests."

Ella nodded, "Yes Mother."

Once she had answered Pascaline was gone, her heels clicking against the tile floor, growing further and further away.

Ella glanced to the bed, the lavender dress seemed to mock her. How dare she believe that she had a choice? A choice in what clothes she could wear. A choice in what color her hair could be. If her mother didn't approve, it was criticized till Ella changed it. Her choices, her ideas, if they didn't fit into her parents' image it was cast aside.
She was ruefully reminded of her place. She was an object, a tool for her parents to use or show off when needed. Like her mother always said, "children were meant to be seen not heard."

Ella met her reflection, noticing that yes, the chestnut brown did make her pale. Her cheeks were rounder and her clothes did feel tighter. Her dull brown eyes were dark and boring and her ears were unsightly.

"Oh, you changed your hair Miss Ella, it looks lovely," Lisa smiled.

Ella tried to return her smile but all she did was nod and clutch on to her beads. She remained quiet as Lisa curled each strand to perfection.

Perfection.

That word made her cringe.

That word was the driving force of her mother's life; everything, absolutely everything had to be perfect. Her career, a well-respected model that has aged effortlessly with grace and beauty. Her husband, a handsome, world influencer chairman with ties to high society. Her home, a private mansion in the 16th arrondissement in her beloved city of Paris.

The only thing that didn't fit was her daughter. She was beautiful yes, but she was rash and outspoken, not at all graceful. She struggled in science and math while her mother could obtain a career while succeeding in school. Ella may have graduated from Nightingale but not without the influence of her father.

Ella squeezed her eyes shut, forcing the tears back.

"I'm sorry," Lisa handed her a tissue, "Madam was harder on you tonight given that they have important school directors and beneficiates from South Africa coming in. Planning not only to make Nightingale sister schools but public schools across the continent."

Ella snorted, "Oh do they still believe that Africa needs saying?"

Lisa laughed, "People like your parents need to feel like they're needed. They need to feel bigger than they are."

"Well, they're not," Ella met Lisa's eyes through the mirror, "they're human, just like the rest of us."

Lisa smiled, "do you want anything?"

Ella thought for a moment, feeling the need for something warm in her hands. "Hot chocolate would be nice, but with peppermint, please."

"On its way," Lisa announced and headed for the door.

Ella turned to her bracelet, caressing each bead. She thought about calling Heisuke, properly thank him for her gift but she saw the time and did the math. It was three in the morning in Tokyo right now, he would most likely be asleep. She sighed and glanced to her screen where a picture of her and her friends welcomed her. They're goofy grins seemed to radiate with pure joy. She missed them; even Sam but she missed Daniela more. She scrolled through her contacts and hovered over Daniela's icon.

Before Ella could tap on her picture a knock came from the door, "Miss?"
Ella looked up, "yes."

A young man with tan skin and black curly hair walked in, "your coco Miss."

"Thank you but wasn't Lisa-"  

"She got pulled away Miss," he answered. "Told me to bring this to you, sorry for the wait, big house."

She smirked, he must be new. It wasn't uncommon for Pascaline to hire new help when there was party to be thrown. She took the mug of steamy hot chocolate and blew at the top before taking a sip, it tasted fine but it wasn't like the coco Daniela made.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No, no. Thank you for the coco, you can leave now," instructed Ella.

"Right. Um, if you need anything, my name's Rey," he swiftly introduced himself and backed into hall.

Ella didn't respond, simply gazing into her mug instead.

Once Rey closed the door, the armor that cloaked his skin rippled and hissed in his ear.

"Her."

"Yes, yes," he snapped in a hushed tone, "but first, we have to clean up our mess."

Rey opened a hall closet to find Lisa's strangled body slumped against the wall. He bent down and placed a hand on her ankle and instantly the armor leapt for her. The tumors swarm her body, completely covering her from head to toe as they ripped into her skin, drinking in her blood. Followed with by her bones and muscles; absorbing her and leaving nothing behind but the clothes on her back.

I sat myself at the teal vanity set, rubbing my face in frustration and exhaustion. Liz refused to answer any of our questions, being as vague as humanly possible with, "I have what we need," and "she can't defend her anymore." Just a useless way of saying that we were back to square one; to a party that was supposedly to be used as bait with no aid from the Council. Yes, it turns out that they really meant what they said; they didn't want anything to do with us. So, in their absence Arthur recruited Lukas and Vladmir to create a trap within our ward. If any Immortal dares to cross it, they'll be caught in a supernatural net, I assumed.

But would that really stop them? Let alone hold them?

"Ughhhhhh!" I groaned and banged my head on the table.

"Well, that didn't sound pleasant."

I peeked through my curls to find Francis, "oh hey," I muffed against the wood.

"Don't hey me, get up, let's see that face," he lifted me up, instructing me to lean back against my seat. He pouted, "Don't hurt yourself like that."
"What does it matter? It'll heal," I stated.

"Yes but, I would prefer you not hurt yourself purposely," he brushed my hair back and kissed my forehead. "There all better."

I blinked, completely taken by surprise, "uh, thank you…"

"Ohhhh, look at you!" he gushed, "All red and flustered!"

He tried to pinch my cheeks but I covered my face and whined, embarrassed. "Stop it! Don't you have any cooking to do?"

"Matthieu and Victoria are taking care of it, which gives me time to do your makeup," he said gleefully.

"I can do my own makeup," I countered.

"But you let India do it," he insisted.

I sighed, "Fine, just let me braid my hair first."

"Oh, let me, let me!" he excitedly grabbed a brush and began combing it through my hair. "It's gotten so long," he cooed and then measured a lock against my side, "It's about to pass your chest!"

"I was thinking of cutting it," I added.

"No! Don't you dare cut this beautiful mane!" he declared dramatically.

I chuckled, "okay."

Francis parted my hair to the side and tugged out a few strands to frame my face. Then he began to Dutch braid on the side with less hair, "So what did you and girls do? Some shopping? Paris has a magnificent shopping district."

"Uh," the image of me snatching a pair of sunglasses off a tourist came into focus, "something like that."

He hummed in response and continued the braid to the back of my head, he pulled on the strands slightly, making it bigger and more voluminous. "Anything else?" he asked.

I bit my lip nervously, "do you want the honest truth?"

His fingers slowed but his tone was even, "yes."

"We went to see an informant. We were trying to get intel on Abigail," I confessed.

"Oh," he was quiet for a moment, "did you learn anything new?"

Immediately, I thought of Liz and Katherina but it wasn't my place to reveal Liz's secret. So, I went with my trademark half-truth, "Nothing much. She was a twelve-year-old sex worker."

Francis tensed, "that's horrible."

"No offense but after what she did to Toris and those people, I'm not at all sympathetic."

He nodded, braiding my hair up and over my head, completing the halo crown. "You really like Mr.
Lithuania huh?" he wiggled his brows.

I rolled my eyes, "Yes cause he's my friend. I mean, I think he is."

"You think?" Francis raised a brow.

"It's not like we made each other friendship bracelets but fighting an evil immortal witch together counts as something right?"

He chuckled, "oh Amy, relationships between nations are always tricky. It's not always about us, sometimes you can't get involved with another nation if your government doesn't approve or if you're at war with each other. Of course, it makes it more alluring, forbidden fruit and all."

"Mm-hm, I have a feeling you know all about that," I smirked.

"Oh, my sweet summer child," he caressed my cheek. "You have no idea."

I laughed, really laughed for the first time in days. It felt good.

Francis brushed a strand back, "there's my pretty girl."

I blushed, "stop, you're worse than my mom."

He grinned and then clapped his hands together, "now look in the drawer."

I raised a brow curiously and pulled at the middle drawer to find cosmetic products. Palettes of eye shadow sat at the top with foundation and blush at the bottom. Dozens of brushes were laid out to one side along with multiple eyeliners, ranging in color, liquid and clay. They were fancy brands too, like Dior, Chanel and Lancôme.

"Oh, wow Francis, thank you but you know I'm not that big on makeup," I didn't want to seem ungrateful. But I didn't want him to waste his money on things I wouldn't really use.

"Oh, hush it wasn't any trouble, besides you can use them for special occasions," he grinned even wider, his eyes literally sparkling with happiness.

_Those eyes… I can't deny him, "You're right. Thank you, Francis."_

He clapped excitedly and pulled out the primer and foundation, "let's get started! I believe this would be a good color for you."

I allowed him to smear the liquid over my forehead and cheeks, spreading it with a sponge to reach every corner of my face. "Now I was thinking with the eyes, we use a light gold and let it fade to brown at the end."

"Mm," I nodded, simply going along with everything he said.

"Of course, that only works with the cat-eye and no liner at the bottom."

"Okay,"

"And those lips, we will go darker with a nice plum color. It will draw the eye and I'm sure Lovino would love the color," he snickered.

I groaned, "Really?"
"Oh, you think we should go with a different color? I know for a fact that Lovino loves red," he winked.

"I do not want to know how you know that," I pleaded.

Francis moved on to blending a powder and blush along my cheekbones, "you can say he has a bit of an oral kink."

"Oh god no, please, I can't un-hear this," I moved to cover my face but Francis slaps my hand away.

"No touching." He checked the damage and blended in more blush. "And just so you know-"

"I said I didn't want to know."

"I only know this cause I talk with the girls."

"Of course, you do," I sighed.

He gave me a concerned look, "Are you worried? I know he's been with many women but-"

"Wha-no! Francis, that's least of my problems," I assured. "But I guess I am worried about earlier. Is he okay? Did I hurt him?"

"The only thing you bruised was his pride and his head, but he's fine," Francis grabbed the eye-shadow. "He's still working on your dress," his eyes flickered to the door that lead to the next room.

"I better apologize," I was about to get up but Francis stopped me.

"No, no, no, not until the makeup is done ma chère."

Lovino double checked his stitching, making sure that each thread had blended with the embroidery. He was so focused in fact he didn't bother to look up when someone entered the room.

"Goddammit France. I'll tell you when I am done-" he froze, the last word dying on his lips as he came face to face with Amy.

She stood before him dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt with her hair braided into a crown, festooned with pearl and gold pins. Her lashes were long and full and the lids were completely covered with glittery gold and brown eye shadow. But what really stood out to him were her lips. They were painted with a glossy shade of purple, dark and shiny that begged to be kissed off.

"Um, hey," she greeted with a small wave.

For a moment Lovino feared he was caught staring and quickly looked away, "h-hey," was all he stuttered out.

An awkward silence lingered between them till Amy asked. "So, um, how's the dress coming along?"

"It's almost done," he assured, "just checking the stitching."

"Ah," she nodded and stepped closer to the dress, "wow you can't even tell it's been altered."
He swelled with pride, "of course you can't tell. If you can tell that your clothes have been altered than your tailor is shit."

She laughed, "Well good thing to know I have the best."

Lovino's heart squeezed at the compliment as his eyes found their way back to her lips. They were parted with a sliver of teeth showing, the color once again tempting him to the idea of that gloss being smeared across her mouth as he kissed her breathless.

He flushed and looked away, "You should try it on," he suggested. "See if I have to make any more alterations."

"Are you sure?" she asked uncertainly.

"Si. Si." He didn't trust himself to look at her and distracted himself with the pins on his pin cushion.

"Okay," she stripped the mannequin and walked back to her room.

He sighed in relief when he heard the door clicked shut.

"So, do you like her makeup?"

Lovino spun around to find Francis leaning against the wall, "I do remarkable work, don't I?"

His shit-eating grin told Lovino everything, "you bastard. How did you know?"

"Bella and I, we get together some times for mindless gossip," he examined his nails. "So, I take it you like the color, oui?"

"Get out," Lovino hissed.

"But why?" Francis whined and then snapped his fingers, "I should've gone with red."

Lovino glared but that didn't stop the Frenchman, "oh and by the way don't go too crazy on the lipstick it's quite expensive."

"France stay right there while I stab this needle into your eye!" Lovino sprinted for Francis and the said Frenchman screamed as he darted out of the room.

Lovino had a half of mind to chase him but the sound of another door opening stopped him. He turned and instantly froze.

Amy grinned at him and twirled; the waist was pinched causing the hem to be shorter by two centimeters, revealing more leg. The high collar was skin tight and the string of pearls were aligned with her spine. The gown that was once baggy and unflattering, now tighten and shaped perfectly to her figure.

"Lovi, you're a freaking miracle worker," she twirled again, "I love it! Reminds me of something I would wear on stage."

Lovino was stunned; her pure, genuine joy was a beautiful sight and he couldn't help but say: "you're radiant."

She stopped, blushed and looked away, "um, heh, thanks but don't get too used to it. I don't usually look like this."
"Either way you're still radiant, like a ray of sunlight that breaks through at the first sign of dawn," his smile grew wider as the sight of Amy's entire face and neck flushed with a deeper shade of red.

She turned to the side, laughing nervously as she rubbed the back of her neck. "Layering it on a bit thick, don't you think?"

Lovino reached for her hand, lifting it to his lips and kissed her fingers, "I am only speaking the truth."

The light in Amy's eyes dulled for a second before she pulled back, "you only speak what you think is the truth."

Lovino furrowed his brow, confused for a moment till Britain's words emerged from the back of his mind:

"Would you believe that a three-hundred-year-old witch tried to kill her? Twice."

"Amy, Britain told me about Abigail-"

"Yeah," she interrupted, agitated, "you yell, a lot."

Lovino inhaled a calming breath, "I know. I was just… angry."

"Cause I wouldn't talk to you?" she remarked.

"Yes," he admitted, "but… mostly I was mad at the fact you didn't feel like you could talk to me."

She shook her head, "Lovi it's not all about you. I don't want to talk about it with anyone."

"And you think that's healthy?" Lovino countered.

"Right now, yes." She snapped and then sighed, "Its New Year's, let's-let's just try and enjoy it. Okay."

"How can I?" he questioned, frustrated. "When I know you're hurting. Amy I just want to understand."

"Understand?" she tsked, "You know what happened at Svenska."

He blinked, confused with the sudden change of subject, "the animal attack?"

She gave him an unwavering gaze, "It wasn't an animal attack."

Lovino's eyes widened, "Did she-did she do that, to those people?"

"She," Amy hesitated, "forced someone to do that."

"Who," he asked.

She grew silent and Lovino connected the dots, "It was one of us wasn't it?"

Amy avoided eye contact.

"Britain told us Abigail was after nations," he continued. "Who was it? Sweden? Finland?"

"Toris," she whispered as she held herself with shaking arms. "She turned him into…" she squeezed her eyes closed.
"Into what?" Lovino asked, concerned.

"A monster," she finally answered.

He clutched his jaw, the thought of Lithuania injuring her crossed his mind, "did he hurt you? Is that why you pushed me away when I touched you?"

Amy grew hostile, "What?! No! He was controlled by a fucking witch! I'm the last person you need to worry about."

He snorted, "Am I supposed to care about Lithuania then?"

"Yes," she snapped.

Lovino knew he was coming off as cold and heartless yet he can't deny his jealously. "If it came down to you or him, I'd pick you."

He hoped that what he said came out as romantic but the menacing glare she returned proved otherwise.

"Well if I had to pick between you or him. I would choose him in a heartbeat."

Lovino's heart sank as Amy spun for the door and slammed it behind her.

"Ouch," Victoria said sympathetically and poured Lovino another shot of whiskey, "here sweetie, drink the pain away."

He gulped it down in one swallow, "she likes him more, doesn't she?"

Matthew sighed, of all the guys Amy could get involved with, it had to be Lovino.

"Okay wait," Matthew cuts in, "I'm sure Amy didn't mean picking Toris over you in a romantic way. It kinda reminds me of the time you were cutting into Francis and she defended him."

Lovino glared, "You call him Toris? When did you two get so chummy?"

"Oh my god," Matthew groaned, "what? Now I can't be friends with him?"

"He was close to Russia and his friend Latvia, tried to sabotage my," Lovino hesitated, "friendship with Amy."

"And you think they're out to get you now," Victoria quirked brow in humor.

"Si! He's the reason that was I late and soaking wet at the party in India," he informed.

"How?" Matthew asked.

"We shared a cab, then a stupid cow just had to stop in the middle of the damn road. Our driver wouldn't go and he had her ear bud and I got irritated."

"Hold up, you got mad over an ear bud?" Matthew gave him a pointed look.

"Amy left something precious and she didn't think twice about him having it," he argued.
Matthew brushed a hand through his hair, trying not to laugh, "Do you not hear how crazy you sound."

"Listen Lovi, I love your passion but you need to chill," Victoria suggested. "You can only pull this jealous stick for so long."

"I'm not jealous," he stated.

Victoria shared a slide glance with Matthew as if saying: 'does he think we'll buy that?'

Matthew shrugged his shoulders and looked back to Lovino, "Ok, but you need to understand that Toris and Amy, they-they went through a lot. Not only did he become a monster against his will, Amy was part of the ritual that turned him back to normal. Then the next day, she, along with him and Mikkel had to fight Abigail again. They didn't tell us everything but clearly things went down; all that builds a bond."

"So, you're saying the only way I can get closer to Amy is if I help her fight an immortal witch?" Lovino questioned almost mockingly.

"Kinda sounds like it," Victoria stated seriously.

Lovino sighed and served himself another shot.

Victoria turned to Matthew and whispered, "I'm gonna check on the shrimp and cocktail sauce," she pointed a thumb to the stove behind them. "You watch him."

"Why me?"

"He likes you and you're the only one I can trust that won't encourage him to jump off the roof. Remember the last time he went drinking with Francis, Antonio and Gilbert?"

He briefly recalled Gilbert making a bet to see who could make the jump from the roof of a house, to a trampoline and end at the make-shift pool Gil had built the night before. Matthew shook his head, "I still ask myself why and at Arthur's manor at all places."

Victoria thought for a moment, "Didn't Lovino break his arm making the jump?"

"No, his leg. Antonio was the one to break his arm."

"Francis didn't do it right?"

"Yeah, he said he may have been drunk but he wasn't stupid."

She giggled, "it was still fun though."

"The place was trashed." Matthew proclaimed, "There were feathers and silly string everywhere and I'm still wondering, how they got hoof prints on the ceiling. Also, guess who had to help clean it up?"

"Hey, I kidnapped you in the nick of time," she grinned even wider and stepped back for the stove. Matthew was so preoccupied with Victoria that he didn't notice Lovino watching their sly exchange.

"It was always you," the Italian muttered.

Matthew faced him, "What?"
"Nothing," he took another swing of liquor, "I just realized that I'll never be anyone's first choice."

Matthew's heart broke for the man, "Lov," he reached for Lovino's hand and squeezed. "Listen, it's not you-

Lovino snorted and Matthew exclaimed, "Listen to me. Amy's not as old as us and she's going through a lot in a short amount of time. Especially in her official year as a nation. She just witnessed a nation get turned into a monster, fight three immortal witches in the span of three days and then saw three nations, Arthur included get beheaded and then come back to life. It's a lot to process."

Lovino blinked and nodded in agreement, "fuck."

Matthew sighed, "Yeah, I know you don't want to hear it, but jealously and insecurity will be your downfall. Besides, Amy's fiercely loyal, she won't hurt you on purpose."

Lovino laughed bitterly, "that's the thing, she knew that what she said would hurt me and she said it anyway."

"It's because you said that you would choose her over Toris-"

"What makes him so damn special-"

"It's not what you think," Matthew exclaimed. "Like I said, she's fiercely loyal; to a point where she sees herself as expendable."

"What?!" Lovino glared but he couldn't hide the genuine worry in his eyes, "how could she think that?"

"It's what Arthur believes," Matthew paused, "A councilmen came to him, asking Arthur to give Amy his thanks. It turns out that Amy made herself a shield for the councilmen and a Seeker. She took on a wave of spikes for them, nearly dying on the spot. She put herself on the line for people she just met. Just imagine what she would do for people she cared for."

Lovino shook his head and proclaimed, "I get her family but for two people she didn't know?"

Matthew huffed but gave a sad smile, "I think the fact that we don't die so easily helps but it's exactly what Al would've done."

"She's not like Alfred-"

"They do share a bit in common," Matthew stated. "Al would have put himself in front if it meant he could protect someone. It wasn't just for him to feel like a hero, I mean that was one of the reasons but," he sighed. "I-I think he felt like he didn't have much to give."

Lovino quirked brow in confusion, "what do you mean?"

"I think he thought that all he could offer, that would actually make a difference was a body-a shield. That if it ever came down to him and anyone else, he would choose them. Amy has picked up on the same habit but she doesn't cover it up with the hero stick."

"How could she see herself as expendable though," Lovino pondered out loud.

"Deep down, I think we all do," Matthew gave him a knowing look, "to some degree."

Matthew realized he hit a sore topic when Lovino avoided his gaze and poured himself and Matthew a shot. Together, they clicked their glasses and swallowed the burning liquor.
Peter stood in front of a bathroom mirror, combing a hand through his damp hair as he grabbed a toothbrush. He continued to shake out his hair and brush his teeth at the same time with mild difficulty but everything came to a jerking halt when his vision was blinded by a flash of crimson. On instinct, he closed his eyes but it only enhanced the image of broken bodies, severed limbs and pools of blood. He squeezed his eyes tight and the image twisted, the red darkening and forming into a beast of claws and fangs.

He snapped his eyes open and was relieved to meet his reflection. Yet the pale complexion and dark circles were something that didn't go away, no matter how much sleep he got. Any rest he was blessed with was rudely, violently interrupted by an earth-shattering roar and Toris drenched in blood armor. He would practically launch himself off the mattress, his hands curling into the sheets as a single thought haunted him: *it was your fault.*

Even if his spell was hijacked, he turned Toris into a cat and forced Raivis to keep his secret even though it would've saved himself and so many people heartache. All to avoid Lukas' anger; Toris later became a monster, Amy and Mikkel almost drowned trying to fix his mess and innocent people died because of it. Peter's spell was a beckon for Abigail to target them and her allies followed suit; wreaking havoc on his family and friends. Amy witnessed her uncle's beheading, three witches had died, and Lukas lost an eye. Peter shuddered at the image of Lukas, his left eye covered in clean, white bandages. He knew it wasn't like he had ripped it out himself yet he can't help but think that he forced this chain of events to occur.

Guilt and shame consumed him; he knew that none of this could be avoided but maybe if he had owned up to his mistakes and asked for help, lives could have been spared. He sighed, rubbed a hand over his face and spat out the minty paste.

Peter met with Raivis in the lobby of the Relais Bosquet Hotel, the pair took their seats on a plush couch as they waited for the rest of their group to join them.

"Make it out ok?" Peter asked.

Raivis nodded, "just got out before Feliks took the bathroom."

"Oh man," the blond snickered, "good thing you guys aren't big on styling."

"But we are going to Mr. France's party, we wanted to look our best," Raivis remarked, smoothing out the wrinkles from his burgundy sweater and the white dress shirt under it.

Peter had the need to fix up his navy blazer, "maybe we should go shopping, have ourselves a classic 80's montage."

Raivis chuckled, "and who will pay for this 80's montage?"

"Hmm, I'll make sure to swap Britain's credit card," Peter winked.

"No," Raivis pleaded and Peter reassured, "I was joking."

Raivis raised a brow and Peter added, "Really."

The brunet huffed in amusement and leaned against the arm of the couch, "did you hear anything from Amy?"
Peter swallowed the lump that formed in his throat, "no… she hasn't answered any of my messages."

Raivis nodded, "Toris said she wasn't feeling well."

"He didn't tell you everything, no one's telling us everything," Peter stated and then muttered under his breath, "and why should they."

Raivis turned to him, his brows furrowed together in worry, "Peter, you okay?"

He painted on a carefree grin, "Yeah, I'm fine."

Before Raivis could push further, Eduard and Toris walked off the elevator. Peter quickly waved them over, dodging his friend's meddling questions. They decided to have coffee in the lobby while they waited and as the hour slowly ticked away, the members of their group came down in small clusters. The last being his parents and Feliks.

"We are so late," Erik proclaimed as he rose to his feet.

"Oh, come now, isn't it the style to be fashionably late," Feliks grinned.

"There's also a thing called being polite," Toris remarked.

"Oh, lighten up buddy, we are making an entrance," Mikkel grinned.

"For once I'm in agreement with this brute," said Feliks.

Once they had their coats, scarves and hats on, ready to bear the snowy night, they headed straight for Francis' duplex. Their hotel was in the same arrondissement as the duplex, Berwald said it would be faster and cheaper to walk instead of driving.

Peter definitely didn't mind; strolling through the City of Lights during a soft snowfall was a beautiful sight. People were out, picking out spots to see the firework show that would take place three hours from now. Some were singing in the New Year with dated pop songs as they drank hot coffee mixed with vodka. It almost made him forget of his troubles till he saw Lukas sporting a white patch over his eye. The Norwegian must've felt Peter's eyes on him, for he glanced at him and Peter looked away; ashamed.

They reached the duplex within minutes, crossing the Eiffel Tower on the way. Both he and Raivis took a moment to gawk at the structure, ablaze with golden light.

The duplex was the same, every room was lit and filled the chatter of nations and the soft hum of music. They were greeted with a beaming Francis, welcoming them in with a smile and a place to hang their coats.

"We have food and drinks further inside, just head straight and turn the corner," Francis instructed.

Peter made a quick scan of the room, most of the EU was here, along with Turkey and Egypt in the company of Greece and Cyprus. Nations wore stylish suits and fancy dresses, but most were casual, so he didn't feel too underdressed.

He found Amy at the kitchen with Victoria and her sister, Camille Lambert: the independent city-state of Monaco. Peter gestured for Raivis to follow and made their way towards them.

"Wow. Clearly, I missed out on the sleepover," Camille smiled, revealing her dazzling white teeth as she flipped her long, dark blonde hair over her shoulder.
"You didn't miss that much," Victoria assured and then spun to hug Peter. "Seelie!"

Peter ignored the childish nickname, "hey Vicky."

"Yeah," Amy spoke to Camille, "just mindless gossip." Then nodded her head towards Peter and Raivis in greeting, "hey guys."

"Well you must come visit me Amy, I know this superb dance studio near where I live. I go there to practice ballet but it's only a hobby. I would just love to see a professional at work," Camille purposed.

Amy answered unsurely, "okay but fair warning, I haven't been dancing in while so prepare for some disappointment."

"I would never be disappointment in you, ma chérie," Camille grabbed her hand and kissed her fingers. Camille's dark blue eyes lit up seductively, "Come to me for more details," she winked.

Amy blinked, almost stunned while Peter and Raivis snickered.

Victoria giggled along till she looked up, "Oh there's Erika!"

Peter caught Raivis straightening his back as Victoria pulled Camille to her feet, "Come on, you haven't seen her in ages!" She then dragged the taller girl through the room, leaving Peter and his friends behind.

Once they were safely out of ear shot, Amy grabbed Peter by the arm, "help me," she hissed.

Peter blinked, "with what?"

"I was introduced to like a dozen nations and I already forgot their names," Amy beseeched but that didn't mean Peter was going to make it easy for her.

"Okay, well the woman you just talked to is Camille and she's the city-state of Monaco," Peter smirked.

Amy narrowed her eyes, annoyed, "I remember her!"

"Of course, you do, she practically invited you into her bed," Raivis added.

She blushed, "shut up. I'm serious!"

"Okay, okay," Peter continued to snicker, "point them out to us and we'll tell you who's who."

"Alright," she scanned the room, "that guy next to Sadik and Gupta, with his hair longer at one side."

Peter and Raivis followed her gaze and found a tall, tanned skinned man with dark hair and golden-brown eyes.

"That's Ibrahim Masalis, the Republic of Cyprus," Raivis stated.

"He's a polite bloke, not much to say," Peter added.

"Okay," Amy nodded and then gestured to Vlad and his group, "what about those two, the brunets."

"That's Aaren Hinova," Peter pointed to the taller brunet with pale blue eyes, "he's the nation of
“Bulgaria.”

“Bulgaria?” she questioned.

“Google it,” quipped Peter.

“The one that looks around our age,” Raivis gestured to the darker brunet with red eyes, “is Marcel Lupei, the nation of Moldova and Romania’s little brother.”

“Okay, what are they like?” Amy asked.

“Well both are pretty chill,” Peter stated, trying to rack his brain for more info, “Aaren likes anime, cosplays too.”

Amy grinned at that, “that’s adorable.”

“Really?” Raivis raised a brow.

“Yes really, it’s cool, you guys having hobbies makes you a little more-”

“Human,” Peter interrupted.

“I was gonna say interesting,” she added.

Peter rolled his eyes and continued, “Marcel used to be really carefree but he had a run in with Russia and has tried to be more mature after that.”

“He’s done better than you,” Raivis teased.

“Hey,” Peter shoved his shoulder, “anyway, he got his independence in the nineties so it took a while for him to start growing, but he’s gotten to our height.”

Amy nodded and moved on to a blond with pale green eyes, “What about that guy next to Bell.”

“That’s Gabriel Vermeulen the nation of Luxembourg,” stated Peter, “good man, pretty funny but he’s not much into parties. Kinda like he’s brother; the two might have only came along because Bella dragged them here.”

“Got it. What about those two?” Amy gestured to a brunette woman and a blond man.

“Those two were once Czechoslovakia, but they separated,” Raivis informed, “The girl is Rae Horak: the Czech Republic.”

“The chap there is David Laska: Slovakia,” Peter added. “He’s somewhat irresponsible.”

“Somewhat?” Raivis huffed, “he forgot he was the host country once and went on vacation.”

Amy laughed, “He sounds fun.”

“I don’t think you should get involved with him,” Raivis warned. “I’m pretty sure that Czech still has feelings for him.”

“Oh, please those two have been dancing around that sexual tension for years. I think what holds them back was their partnership. They fought a lot, supposedly,” Peter mentioned.

Amy tsked, “The last thing I need in my life is more men.”
As if the universe wished to mock her, a dark, handsome young man strolled right up to the American and offered her a flute of champagne, "for you linda."

Amy smiled, and to Peter's surprise, it seemed totally genuine, "thank you, uh," she glanced to Peter and begged with her eyes: help me.

Peter leaned in and answered quickly, "That's Miguel Avles, the nation of Portugal and don't mention the fact that he looks like Spain."

She didn't skip a beat, "thank you, Mr. Portugal."

"Oh, do drop the formalities," Miguel smiled and gently raised her hand to his lips. "I wish for us to be quite familiar with each other, Amy," he kissed her hand.

"Oh, I see…" she quickly glanced between Peter and Raivis, her eyes begging for rescue.

Peter jumped into action and pulled out his phone. He accessed Francis' Wi-Fi and with his Bluetooth and connects to the speakers. He swiftly cuts off the smooth jazz and puts on a Katy Perry song.

The speakers thrummed to the new beat and Peter cried out, "hey Katy Perry's on! Let's dance!"

"Yes, yes!" Amy exclaimed quickly, "Sorry, Mr. Portugal, you just can't resist Katy Perry, it's impossible!" She placed her flute aside and allowed Peter to pull her to the living room. Where the furniture was pushed back for a dance floor.

"Ah, uh, ex-excuse me," Raivis made a hasty retreat and chased after them.

"Thank you," Amy squeezed Peter in a crushing hug, "how the hell did you do that?"

"Heh, Francis asked me years back to hook up his speakers and Wi-Fi. The chap's never changed the password," Peter grinned, for once feeling like he did something right.

She slapped her hands over his cheeks, "You. Are. Brilliant."

The music slowed, preparing for the upbeat chorus:

"Turn it up; it's your favorite song

"Dance, dance, dance to the distortion

"Turn it up; keep it on repeat

"Stumbling around like a wasted zombie

"YEAH

"We think we free

"DRINK

"This one's on me

"We're all chained to the rhythm, to the rhythm, to the rhythm."

Amy began to sway with the music and drew Raivis in for a spin, "come on dude; shake those hips!"
"What hips?" Peter snickered.

Raivis jabbed him with an elbow and Peter laughed harder.

Amy cuts in between them, "Guys, guys, follow my lead," she gestured to her feet and stomped to the beat as the chorus repeated.

Peter was quicker to adopt to Amy's moves but Raivis wasn't too far off; together they danced in a line as Amy clapped and sang along. She had on the biggest, most genuine smile Peter had seen in days.

An hour later, they were panting as a sheet of sweat covered their skin.

Amy groaned and fanned herself, "ugh, I can't believe I let Francis put all this makeup on my face."

"Look on the bright side, drenched raccoon is a popular look nowadays," Peter smirked.

"Ha, ha," she dropped to the couch and glanced to the left, her eyebrow perk ed up curiously, "who are those people with Arthur?"

"Hm?" Peter followed her gaze and he grinned, "Oh that's Jett, Oliver and Wendy."

Before Amy could ask, Raivis informed, "Jett is the nation of Australia," he gestured to the tall brunet with pale green eyes and a Band-Aid over his nose. Then he moved on to the shorter brunet with curly hair and dark green eyes, "That one is Oliver, the nation of New Zealand and Wendy," he pointed to the girl with chocolate brown eyes and a one-sided pony tail, "is the micro-nation of Wy, like Peter."

"Another micro-nation, huh? What does that even mean?" she questioned. "I know you're not technically-"

"A nation," Peter said bitterly.

Both she and Raivis turned to him with concerned looks, "You know I didn't mean it like that."

"Yeah," Peter snapped, irritated with himself more than anyone, "I'm gonna get something to drink, want anything?"

"Uh, no-"

Peter didn't say another word as he retreats for the kitchen.

I turned to Raivis, "What was that all about?"

Raivis bit his lip nervously, "The micro-nations are a touchy subject for him. He and Wendy are the only ones left." He pulled out his phone and scrolled through it till he found a photo, "these were all the micro-nations."

It was a group photo; the people in the image were squeezed together, trying to fit all seven members inside. This was back in the day before selfie sticks and reverse camera phones. The ages of these people were ranged from young adults to small children. I recognized, Peter and Wendy, they were younger though almost had the appearance of ten-year-olds.

There was also a boy with strawberry blond hair, blue eyes and a large scar across his cheek. He seemed to be a year or two younger than Peter but they both shared the same wild grin. Wendy was
on Peter's left as a boy...maybe a girl? Stood beside her; the kid had violet eyes and long platinum blond hair, woven into two braids.

The back row was where all the older, taller micro-nations stood. All three were men; the one on the left almost looked like Arthur except his blond hair was pushed back and he had a Band-Aid over his cheek. The man on the right was Asian; he wore a green military uniform with the jacket hanging off his shoulders. His dark hair was combed back and his eyes were covered with a pair of black sunglasses. The last member in the middle had auburn hair, green eyes and an uncanny resemblance to Feliciano and Lovino.

"What happened to them?" I asked.

Raivis sighed, "They disappeared. One by one they were just vanished."

"But why didn't anyone say anything?" I questioned.

"This was back in the late nineties and early 2000's and everyone was more preoccupied with your father. Also, it wasn't like it happened in one day, it was through the years till all that was left was Wendy and Peter." Raivis explained.

"Still, why didn't anyone question that?"

"Cause no one expected them to last as long as they did," he stated simply. "They were micro-nations, most shouldn't have become nations in the first place. You know that boy standing next to Peter? That was his younger brother Liam and he was an internet nation."

"An internet nation?" I said skeptically, "how?"

He shrugged his shoulders, "don't ask me, no one knew how it happened, he just appeared like all nations do."

"Then doesn't that make them a nation, I mean Gilbert is still around, and Camille's a city-state," I argued.

"Yes, but they're acknowledged as nations. Wendy is the only one that has come close but Peter..."

It clicked, "is that why he's so desperate to be established as a nation? Is he afraid that he'll disappear?"

Raivis looked to me with sad eyes, "Wouldn't you be?"

Peter came back and I felt the urge to smother him in a crushing hug but I knew he would find that extremely embarrassing. Instead, I grabbed his hand and proclaimed, "It's time."

He raised a thick brow in concern, "for what?"

"For you two to confess your feelings for Victoria and Erika," I smiled eagerly.

Raivis paled and Peter choked, "what-what?! No."

"Yes!"

"No!"

"Do it, or I swear to god, I will hug you and scream at the top of my lungs of how much I love you and cherish you right in front everyone."
"You wouldn't," he said with fear in his eyes.

"Try me," I grinned madly.

He was silent till he finished his flute in one gulp, "let's do this."

"What?!" Raivis exclaimed.

"Alright! I glanced to the clock, "okay, it's gonna be midnight in less than two hours. I'll distract Vash while you two move in."

"You think you can handle him?" Peter asked.

"I think I can annoy him long enough," I assured.

Raivis rose to his feet, fidgeting with hands nervously, "we can't do this, not here-"

"Raivis it's now or never," I proclaimed, "are you with us?"

He glanced between us and sighed, "I'm gonna die."

"No, you won't," I said determined, "Peter, give me your phone I need to make a playlist real quick."

I quickly scrolled through his phone, forming a playlist filled with poppy, electro swing music. "Okay you guys have thirty minutes, make them count. Press play when I give you the signal."

I strut for Vash as Raivis whispered after me, "wait, what's the signal?"

I swung my arm behind my back, waved a hand and gave a thumbs up. Raivis gasped, "That's the signal! That's the signal!"

Peter pressed play and I spun, crossing a hand over my neck, "not now," I hissed through clutched teeth.

He fumbled with his phone as he switched it back to the soft jazz and I sighed. How the hell did this happen? I was never the matchmaker that was always Jamie and Michel's stick. Oh god, I wish they were here; Jamie would know what to say to Vash, how to butter him up. Michel would be the perfect wingman for Peter and Raivis, would know exactly how to get them through this. I on the other hand was always a bit awkward when it came to romance.

Awkward? Try disastrous.

I'm not that bad.

Remember Lovino? How you practically ripped out his heart and stomped on it.

Mentally groaned, not now little voice in my head.

I stride forward and called out in my best Valley Girl voice, "Erika!" I tackled that poor girl into a hug, squeezing her tight, "I haven't seen you in so long."

I caught Vash rolling his eyes, "It's only been a couple of weeks."

"It felt like ages," I profound.

He rolled his eyes again, "no need for the dramatics."
I smirked, that grabbed his attention, "don't be such a grouch, Vash," I gave him my sweetest smile.

"Yes! Thank you," Victoria giggled, "please, Amy, get him to loosen up."

I took my chance and gave the boys the signal. Peter's action was immediate as Alice Francis hummed:

"Welcome to St. James Ballroom."

Her words were like velvet as the rhythm bounced from a slow trumpet to a quick techno. I clapped my hands excitedly, "I love this song! Vash dance with me!"

His eyes widened, "what?!"

"Yes!" Victoria called out excitedly and shoved him forward, "take him! Take him!"

I dragged him to the dance floor as he tried unsuccessfully to pull away but my grip was too strong. I twirled him in a circle and drew him close but he stepped back, "Please, America, I don't dance."

"Oh, come on, it's easy!" I insisted as I crossed my feet and swayed my hips to the beat. "Da-da-daaa-da-d-d-daa-da-da-daaa," I sang along to the music.

Vash turned away and I snatched his hand, "just follow my lead." I brought him back and started counting as I showed him the steps, "one-and-two-and-one-and-two."

He sighed and reluctantly followed, "you don't think I don't know what you're doing."

"Oh, dear Vash, what could you possibly mean?" I bat my eyes innocently.

"Do not play coy with me," he deadpanned. Then he slid his eyes back to the girls as Peter and Raivis moved in. "I know Latvia likes my sister."

I dropped the act, "Okay, yeah, but can you blame us?"

He raised brow skeptically, "what do you mean?"

"Hello? Trigger-happy Swiss. That's like the first thing I think about when I picture you," I stated.

"I'm not like your people," he remarked.

"Says the guy that brought a gun to a party," I countered.

"It was useful," he reminded me.

"Okay, true," I gave him that then added, "but I wasn't gonna take the chance of you not pulling out a gun on Raivis."

"What makes you think that?" he exclaimed.

"Trigger-happy Swiss," I repeated.

"I have control, unlike some people."

It was jab at me and I muttered, "I see why you don't have any friends."

He heard me, "I have friends."
"Your sister doesn't count," I smirked.

He grumbled in German, something that roughly translated to 'annoying woman'.

I grinned even wider, "I'll take that as a compliment."

"I'm leaving," he turned to walk away but I whirled him back to the dance floor.

"No, you're not. You are gonna keep dancing with me, whether you like it or not."

"I would prefer to keep my distance from you," he remarked.

That threw me off, "why?"

"I don't want to get between you and your suitors," Vash nodded his chin towards Lovino; who was glaring at Vash from across the room.

I groaned, "oh god." Then I reassured, "he's not gonna do anything."

"He can try, he won't get far," he stated casually.

I gave him a narrowed look and warned, "Hurt him and I'll break you."

Vash smirked, "well, it seems Italy is in the lead to your bed."

I glared and bared my teeth, "He's not part of the bet you pig."

"Oh of course, but I'm sure you would like to know who is and who started it," he offered.

I raised a brow cautiously, "why would you tell me?"

"Because I want you to go away," he proclaimed, "and if it was my sister I would prefer to know who to be wary of and kill the man who started this disgusting game."

I crossed my arms, "So I'm guessing you're not part of it."

He huffed, "no offense America but you're not worth the trouble."

"Good to know that you'll always keep me humble Swiss," I remarked coldly. "But I'm not going anywhere."

He sighed, "I won't hurt Latvia."

I glanced back to the group; Peter and Raivis were chatting with Erika and Camille but Victoria was gone. I did a quick scan around the room but she was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't think much on it as I turned back to Vash, "How do I know you'll keep your word?"

"I may not like the boy but Erika does," he admitted.

I perked up, "so you'll let them date?"

He laughed, "Don't get too carried away. I'll let them talk as I supervise."

"But you will give them space," I persuaded.

He gave me, you-must-be-kidding look and I sighed, "Then I guess you're stuck with me."
"Turkey," he announced.

I blinked, "What?"

"Turkey, he's the one that started the bet," he proclaimed. "Take this as a sign of my good faith."

I clutched my fists to my sides, "thanks," and headed straight for Sadik.

He stood beside a table, causally lounging with Gupta, Heracles and Ibrahim. He seemed so relaxed, at ease with the thought of using me for his own personal amusement and pleasure.

I strut forward, a million thoughts running through my mind as each step brought me closer to Sadik. Some called for me to slap him the moment I was in front of him; others, to punch him or kick him or both but that would disrupt Francis' party. He put so much work into this, I didn't want to ruin the night for him. The thought of luring Sadik to the terrace, away from everyone else and shoving him over it was tempting but then we would have to peel him off the pavement before anyone saw him.

I was so caught up in my murderous fantasies, I didn't realize Sadik was before me till he greeted, "Ms. America!"

I jumped at the sound of his voice but I was able to cover my surprise with a smile, "Turkey."

"By what form of miracle has taken place to allow us to be graced with your presence?" he bowed.

Gupta rolled his eyes, "layering it on thick, aren't you?"

"It can't be helped, I am in the company of a beautiful woman," he grabbed my hand and kissed my fingers.

Instantly, a cold shiver ran down my spine as the sensation of Abigail's lips brushed along mine. A new rage consumed me as I grabbed his hand, snapped his arm behind his back and threw him against the table.

Sadik was taken by surprise but he wasn't at all worried, instead he chuckled, "Now Ms. America I do enjoy it rough but we have an audience."

I didn't care about that, all I wanted was him to suffer, for him to fear me. My eyes slid to the fondue fork that was stirring in the cheese pot. Immediately, I grabbed the fork and stabbed his spare hand, pinning it to the table.

He howled and I leaned into his ear, "listen to me you vile, disgusting pig. I would rather fuck goddamn cactus before I let you or anyone part of your bet near me." I twisted the fork, ripping the flesh, "Call. It. Off."

I didn't bother to hear his response. I pushed myself off, leaving the fork in his hand and spun to meet with a stunned Heracles and Ibrahim but an unfazed Gupta.

I squared my shoulders, "excuse me."

As I walked away I caught Ibrahim say, "you're right, I do like her."

"Told you," said Heracles.

"Thanks for the help," Sadik hissed as he yanked the fork out.

"You deserved it and you know it," Gupta remarked.
Peter blinked, taking in the scene as Amy struts for the hall, exiting the room with an uncanny grace. A part of him couldn't help but be awestruck. Raivis and Erika were speechless, Camille seemed amused and Vash was unsympathetic.

Peter glanced to the blond, "what did you two talk about?"

"Oh, I just passed along some information," he simply shrugged.

Peter connected the dots, "Turkey started it."

"You catch on quick for a micro," he said, almost impressed.

"Vash," Erika shushed him but Peter caught the insult.

"W-we," Raivis stuttered at first but leveled his voice, "we should check on her."

"Are you sure?" Peter shifted his eyes between him and Erika, "I can go."

"No, no," his eyes glanced to Vash before settling on Peter.

He got the message and lead Raivis out of the room, giving a wave as they left the party.

"You know, you have to stand up to him one day," Peter added.

"That's easy for you to say," he mumbled.

"Oh, come on, what's the worse he can do?"

"He can shoot me in the head."

Peter was stumped till he said, "at least it will be quick."

Raivis narrowed his eyes, "not funny."

Peter smirked and scanned the hall, "which one was her room again?"

What Peter didn't realize was that he switched Amy's door with the parlor room next to it. It wasn't locked as he twisted the knob and swung it open to find Matthew and Victoria tangled together on the couch. Victoria was on Matthew's lap, his hands resting on her waist while her arms were draped around his neck. Their lips only inches from making contact before they jumped apart.

Both were flustered and blinking wildly as Peter responded with a dropped jaw and wide eyes. He was frozen in place; completely shocked and couldn't seem to understand how his legs worked again.

Luckily, he had Raivis; the brunet reacted quickly, reaching over him and calling out "excuse us," as he slammed the door shut. He then dragged Peter into a half-bath across the hall and locked themselves inside.

Peter's mind raced, displaying every exchange between the two. The memories now being examined in a new, critical light. At first it was small, fleeting touches here and there; it looked almost innocent to the naked eye but now Peter knew it was just the beginning. Those slight brushes of skin began to linger. Their polite chats became threads of messages and inside jokes.

Then, when Alfred died, it destroyed Arthur and both Francis and Matthew had to pick up the
pieces. Sooner or later it had took its toll on the Frenchman and Matthew had to become the backbone for them both. No one was fazed by the outcome, Matthew was always the stronger one of the trio. Yet Peter noticed that he began to withdraw into himself, nothing big at first. He would avoid his friends and family with lame excuses till he escaped to a cabin in the north of Canada. He would spend weekends away but those weekends became weeks and soon months.

It wasn't till a year passed that the others began to notice, Germany then had to track him down and threaten him to come back to work. Matthew returned as a former shell of himself and neither Francis nor Arthur could reach him. Matthew had given everything to them and he was left with nothing.

Peter watched as the only person that even had a sliver of a chance was Victoria. Whatever distance he tried to make, she closed it. She launched on to him even when he pushed her away. She chased after him even when he ran. She searched for him in the dark when he refused to see the light. Victoria was a force of nature and wouldn't, couldn't give up on Matthew.

Slowly but surely, Matthew began to smile again, laugh again. At times, he seemed so genuinely happy and that was only when he had Victoria by his side.

Peter fell against a wall and slid to the floor, "I'm an idiot."

Raivis voice was soft as he reached for him, "Peter."

"I saw it Raivis, I saw it but I didn't want to believe it," he admitted, burying his head between his knees. "Why did I think she would want someone like me?" he whimpered through clutched teeth, "all I do is pull stupid pranks, pranks that get people killed."

"Peter-"

"I'm a kid, Raivis!" he shouted. "She'll never see me as anything else and why should she? Why should anyone?! I'm a kid! A stupid, stupid kid."

Raivis tried to grip his arm but Peter shrunk back, curling into himself, "I haven't changed. It doesn't matter what I've done, doesn't matter what I do. I can't… stop it."

"Please don't talk like that," Raivis begged. "It's been years, it's-you-"

"Don't." Peter snapped, "just-just go, please."

Peter didn't have to see Raivis' face to know that he hurt him. The brunet's silence was proof enough as he stood up, unlocked the door and shut it behind him.

Peter racked a hand through his hair, trying in vain to stop the tears yet they still fell. His emotions swarmed and whirled within him and he found that the already small bathroom was shrinking. Closing its walls inward, trapping him as it squeezed out every breath he could muster.

He leaped for the door and swung it open to find a drunk Gilbert.

"Seelie!" he grinned wildly and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "I saw Raivis storm off… did you two have a lover's spat?"

Peter shoved him off, "shut up!"

He didn't stay with the albino for long as he dashed for the exit, making a quick dart back for his coat before slamming the door behind him. He took the stairs two at time, nearly tripping on the last step when he hit the ground. He finally remembered how his lungs worked and took a deep breath. The
cold air knocked some control back into his system but he couldn't stand the thought of being near anyone right now.

Subconsciously, his feet began to move, leading him even further and further away from the duplex. He wanted complete solitude, both from nations and humans alike and to his luck the pont de Bir-Hakeim was deserted. He stopped at the central arch of the viaduct, where a statue of a man riding a stallion stood in the center. All he wore was a helmet and a cloth that blew out behind him, forming a wing. The horse's nose was lifted high, matching the man's crooked sword as it pointed to the sky.

Peter walked passed the statue to lean against the stone rail, watching as small party boats passed through the Seine River.

"Are you okay?"

Peter jumped in surprise and turned to meet with the concerned eyes of a small girl.

"Uh, yeah," he stuttered for a second, scanning the area for an adult. "Are you out here by yourself?"

She nodded as a part of her dark curls fell over her shoulder.

He scratched the back of his head, "listen, you really shouldn't be out by yourself. You never know who could be out here."

"I could say the same to you," she retorted with a smile.

Before Peter could respond, the girl pulled out an aged photograph from her pocket. She held it up to him, "for you."

He blinked, confused but took the photo anyway. He flipped it over and froze; the picture was taken in 1992, in front of a park in Berlin. He knew this, because he had asked a local to take the photo for him and his friends. The faces of his fellow micro-nations stared back at him, all with happy, carefree smiles. Even Caleb who dropped his tough guy act for the sake of the picture but what made Peter's skin crawl was that each face (except for his and Wendy's) was crossed out with a deep red X.

"I believe its time," Peter looked up to find the girl's ice blue irises disappear into white light. "For you to join your friends."

Lovino desired nothing more than to slit Turkey's throat.

Antonio must've sensed this, even in his tipsy state he reared Lovino away from Turkey. "Don't Lovi, he's not worth it," he advised.

"But-"

"Shh," Antonio grabbed his shoulders, forcing Lovino to look him straight in the eyes, "go to her."

Lovino's eyes darted to the hall before sighing, "I don't think she wants to see me."

"Lovi, right now she needs a friend," Antonio advised.

He grumbled, "I haven't really been a friend."

"Then it will be the perfect time to make up," Antonio smiled encouragingly as he began to push him towards the hall. "Go, go, go!"
"Okay, okay, stop shoving!" Lovino explained, smoothing out the wrinkles of his blazer.

Antonio grinned, "Good luck."

Lovino rolled his eyes but he smiled either way.

He heads for Amy's door, barely avoiding Latvia as he stepped out of the bathroom and down the hall.

"Hey! Watch where you're going," Lovino warned.

Latvia was broken out of his thoughts and whispered, "sorry."

Lovino didn't think much on the younger boy as he turned his attention back to the task at hand. He knocked on Amy's door but received no answer. He called out for her and cracked the door open to find Amy outside on the terrace nursing a bottle of wine. Even though she was slouching against the rail and her cheeks were flushed red, she still had enough sense to cover up against the cold.

"Amy?"

She spun and grinned, "Lovi! How's the party? I didn't completely ruin it did I?"

"No. No, believe me, anyone would've done the same," Lovino assured.

"Good to know that everyone else thinks he's an ass," she took another swing from her bottle.

"Maybe you should slow down," he suggested.

"Maybe you should stay in your lane," she countered.

Then she sighed as if regretting her words, "I'm sorry, I'm not much company to be around right now."

"I can see that," he muttered.

Amy heard that and restored to sticking out her tongue.

Lovino smirked, "didn't your mother ever tell you not to make faces?"

She laughed, "There's a lot of things I've done my mother told me not to do."

"Should she worry?"

"Well, it's not like I can die, so," she shrugged not at all disturbed by her words.

Lovino's heart grew tight at her nonchalant tone and all he wanted to do at that moment was to wrap her in his arms. Take her to bed, comfort her with soothing words and hot tea and tell her that everything was gonna be okay.

Instead he settled for holding her hand and whispering, "I'm sorry."

Amy blinked, genuinely confused, "for what?"

He sighed, "for saying that I would choose you over Lithuania. It was insensitive and," he sighed once more, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. "I was jealous. He's your friend and I shouldn't get mad about you having friends."
She remained silent as Lovino continued, "In all honesty if I had to choose between you or him, I would still choose you. I mean depending on the situation of course, cause I know Lithuania can handle himself."

"True," she nodded. "If you're anything like your brother I would have to choose you because most likely you'll have your ass handed to you if I don't."

"Ha, funny… Alfred had said something like that to me once," Lovino thought out loud.

"What?" Amy perked up with new interest, "When? Why?"

"When," he pondered, "it was during the 1920's, I went to go work for him."

"Wait, but Toris was working for him too. So, did all of you live in the same house?" she asked.

"Yes. Lithuania had already been there for a couple of years so he had seniority over me. He was already helping Alfred with the automobiles so I was put on house chores."

"Oh, you poor thing," she said in mock sympathy.

"Hey, how would you feel when you leave from home for exciting work in New York only to become a maid?"

"Were you given a cute uniform?" she giggled.

"No. Thank god," he muttered.

"Did you ever do anything else?"

"Alfred did give me a chance at the cars," he breathed out a long sigh. "It didn't go well."

Amy looked worried, "What happened?"

"I blew up an expensive engine and… caused Alfred's garage to catch on fire."

"Oh my god," she laughed. "Did he get mad?"

"That's the thing, when it came to Alfred, he would try and find the bright side to everything," stated Lovino. "It was incredibly annoying."

Lovino closed his eyes, recalling the night on the roof of Alfred's home.

The garage was still smoking and the air was tainted by the pungent scent of burnt rubber and oil. He was murmuring every curse he knew in Italian and English, despising his very existence.

How could I screw this up?

This was his shot to do something other than laundry and dishes. He was finally out of the house, given a chance to prove that he was more than a maid. That he could do something worthwhile but why did he expect anything different?

He was a screw up.

He's done nothing right the moment he got here. Alfred's good quality dress shirts were washed with
color and now were stained pink, no matter how much bleach he used. Then Lovino had mixed the cleansers and ruined the wood, which lead to Alfred having to replace his floors. Now, his most recent disaster was staring back at him; Alfred had lost his garage, his tools and his automobile, all because of Lovino.

*He groaned, I should've never come here.*

"There you are!" Alfred called out, almost excitedly as he wiggled out the window onto the roof.

Lovino jumped, "I'm so sorry sir! I-your garage-I'm so sorry."

"Hey, hey, it's fine," the blond reassured. "Look what's most important is that you and Toris are safe. Besides, I know a carpenter that needs work and you've given me an excuse to buy a new automobile. That thing was falling apart anyway."

"You just brought it six months ago," Lovino proclaimed.

"I hear there's one that fits four people," he happily added.

Lovino shook his head, "how can you be so calm?"

Alfred shrugged his shoulders, "Hey, you only burnt down a garage, imagine burning down a warehouse."

"What?!"

"It was back when Ford was just starting out and if you think my automobile's engine was difficult, you should've seen the porotypes." Alfred chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck, "Ford was not happy."

Lovino shook his head again but this time he carried a smile as Alfred continued.

"Look, I wasn't an expert going in. Neither was Toris, hell he blew up three engines, it's a rite of passage. No one knows what they're doing, everything is pretty much done through trial and error. We learn, that's how people grow."

Lovino sighed, "still I don't think I'm going anywhere near those things for a while."

"Okay, you got time, who knows maybe they're be easier to work with in a couple of decades," stated Alfred.

"So, is it back to cleaning duty for me?" Lovino asked sarcastically.

Alfred took a moment to think about it, "Hey, Romano, do you know how to cook Italian food?"

Lovino whipped his head around, dropping his jaw in disbelief, "The fuck kind of question is that? Asking me if I can cook Italian food? Of course, I can cook Italian food you dumbass."

*He laughed, "Perfect!"

Lovino raised a brow as Alfred stood and asked, "Romano, how do you feel about starting a restaurant?"

"Hold up, hold up," Amy interjected, smiling, "you and Alfred started a restaurant?"
Lovino nodded, "and you should've seen the place he brought, that thing was falling apart."

"Here we are boys, Romano's soon to be restaurant," Alfred declared with a beaming grin.

The building that Alfred had driven Lovino and Lithuania to was completely worn down. The stone exterior was aged and the bricks were chipping. The windows were boarded up and the roof had a gigantic, gaping hole in the middle of it.

"What the hell? This place is a rat hole," Lovino exclaimed.

Lithuania sighed, "I would have to agree with him. Mr. America this is no place for a restaurant."

"Fellas, fellas," the blond wrapped an arm around each of their shoulders and shook them. "Don't you see? This place could be something!"

"Yeah, a home for rats and cockroaches," Lovino muttered.

"Come on, I'm sure it's better inside," Alfred moved for the door and snapped the lock with a flick of his wrist.

The American forced his way through, coughing out and waving away the dust that kicked up. "So, it needs some cleaning and a new roof but picture it!"

Lovino and Lithuania followed him in, carefully stepping around discarded boxes and fallen pieces of wood. The interior was no better; the wood had early signs of termites, the pillars had water damage and mold was beginning to form along the corners of the room.

Also, as if God Himself wanted to do nothing else but screw with Lovino, a rat the size of cat darted out of the building right between his legs. He screamed, jumping back to collide with Lithuania. Luckily the nation was able to catch his footing and straighten the both of them.

"Nope. I'm done. If you need me, I'll be outside," Lovino turns for the exit but Alfred rears him back.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait," the blond begged. "Romano, just look at it. A gourmet kitchen, filled with top of the line ovens." Alfred spun him to the right, "dozens of tables spread out." He turned him back to the door, "knock out the brick and put in more windows, bring in some light."

Alfred swung Lovino to face him, "don't you see, it's going to be amazing."

"It will take a fortune to fix this place up," Lovino argued.

"I got money; besides once this place is up and running, you'll be able to pay me back in no time."

"But-"

"Lovino," Alfred squeezed his shoulders, encouragingly, "I know it will take a lot of work, but that's just how much faith I have in you. You're an incredibly cook and everyone will come from miles just to have a taste. I just know it."

Alfred's optimism was contagious, "Okay, let's do it."

"Yes!" the blond cheered. "Also, there's a basement, the perfect place for a speakeasy."

"Ah no. There will be no speakeasy in my restaurant," Lovino declared.
"Romano, come on, everyone knows that's where the money is," Alfred stated.

"They are also illegal," countered Lovino.

"That's a good thing, it can't be taxable," he winked.

"Besides Mr. Romano," Lithuania finally spoke up, "you are going to need a place to hide the wine."

"That's different," Lovino argued.

"It's only different if this place was gonna be a Catholic church, which it won't be," Alfred reminded.

Lovino brushed a hand through his hair, and sighed, "Why am I bothering? I'm talking to a pair of criminals."

"Hey, hey, we're only bootleggers. We just supply the goods," Alfred defended.


"Uh," Alfred and Lithuania shared a concerned glance, before Alfred continued, "here's the thing Romano, some of the guys like Italian food. I mean how do you think I found this place."

Lovino paled, "you borrowed money from the mob?! Are you crazy?!"

"No! This was a favor they owed me," Alfred gestured to the rot infested building.

"Some favor," he grumbled. "I still don't want them here. If they even set foot inside I'll kick them out."

Both Alfred and Lithuania tensed, "no you won't," Alfred countered. "If you have a problem with them, you get one of us. We'll take care of it."

"I can 'take care of it' myself," Lovino proclaimed, confidently.

"Romano, I don't want to find you dead on my door step one morning. I like you too much," Alfred expressed, his face unusually serious.

A man's voice calls out for Alfred outside and the blond perks up, "that must be Larry with the floor plans. Just watch fellas, this place is gonna be the bee's knees," he grins as he strolls out the door, whistling a jazzy tune.

Lovino did another scan of the building, "I still don't see it."

"It's because you and the building are alike," Lithuania confirmed.

Lovino raised a brow, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Lithuania gave a knowing smile, "when people see a building like this; they just see how empty it is, how worn out it is. They only wait and see how long it takes for it to fall apart. Then there are people like Alfred that see the potential in it, that see what it could be and maybe even make it better than it was."

"Sounds more like you than me," quipped Lovino.

Lithuania didn't respond as he turned for the door but he did add, "don't waste his faith in you Mr. Romano."
Lovino couldn't help but glare at the memory of Lithuania.

"So… you three opened up a restaurant and a speakeasy in New York City, during the jazz and gangsters days of the 1920's?" Amy laughed, "goddamn, I'd pay good money to see that."

"Well, I do have to admit, those were some good times," Lovino agreed.

"Is the place still?"

"It's still there, it's not mine anymore, cause well you know," he gestured to his youthful face. "But I did leave it in capable hands. I knew Monica wouldn't let me down."

"Monica," Amy grinned, "so there was a girl?"

"Oh, are you jealous?" Lovino teased.

She rolled her eyes, "yes, I'm so jealous over a woman that lived nearly a hundred years ago. How dare she put her hands on my Lovino," she laughed.

*My Lovino*, he couldn't deny it. He liked the sound of that.

He reached for her, caressing her cheek with his thumb. She immediately relaxed, leaning into his touch and humming in content.

"Come on, let's go to bed," Lovino suggested, taking her hand and leading her inside only to be met with a panicked Latvia.

"He's gone!"

Amy snapped to attention, "who?"

"Peter! He saw—he saw and his coat is gone and he won't answer his phone," Latvia continued.

"Wait, wait, Raivis what happened?"

"He saw Victoria with Mr. Canada."

Lovino blinked in surprise, "so those two finally got together."

"What?!" Amy screeched, "oh my god, this all my fault."

"How is this your fault?" Lovino remarked.

"I… it's," she groaned, "Raivis come on."

Amy storms out the room with Latvia behind her as Lovino sighed but followed them anyway.

"Peter!" I shouted, "Peter!"

"Do you know where he would go?" Lovino asked Raivis.

"The hotel, but I called them. Asked if anyone in his room checked back in," he answered hasty. "But no one did."

"Okay, then he has to be out here," I concluded.
"Amy, he's a capable nation. It would be different if he still looked like a child but he's a young adult," Lovino rationalized. "Maybe he just wants to be left alone."

For moment I agreed with him and the thought of returning to bed was tempting. Yet the twist in my gut warned me that something wasn't right.

"It seems a friend has gone astray. Whatever are you to do?"

I flinched at the childlike voice that seemed to come from nowhere, "please tell me ya'll heard that."

The look of complete terror on both of their faces was all I needed to assure myself that I wasn't losing my mind, yet. I spun around, frantically searching for the source till a small bird chirped; signaling itself out from a tree.

It had dark, royal blue wings with a white underbelly and piercing black, soulless eyes, "Do not fret, for he stays. Yet, he is blue."

Raivis was stunned, "Did that bird just talk?"

"Si, and it speaks in rhymes," Lovino remarked, annoyed.

I groaned, "of course it does." Then I squared my shoulders and demanded, "Do you know where Peter is?"

The bird nodded, "Hurry! For he lays. Along the Passy, and that, my friends, is adieu."

With those final words, it vanished, leaving me with more questions than answers.

"What the hell is a passy? Where's a passy even at?"

"Passy," Lovino thought for a moment, "did it mean the pont de Passy? If so, he's on the pont de Bir-Hakeim."

He pointed off to the distance and I ran with it, literally. I sprinted down the street, ignoring the ache and sting of my half heeled Lumi pumps as I turned the corner.

"Amy! Stop!" Lovino panted behind me. "Do you even know where you're going?!"

"I do!" Raivis came up on my right, holding up a phone, "we got to get on Rue Jean Rey, its right across from here."

"Are we really going to listen to a bird?" Lovino exclaimed.

"From my experience, the talking bird usually wants to help," I added.

The bridge wasn't too far from the duplex, it was practically minutes away. When we arrived it was completely empty, void of people and sound.

"This is strange. There should be people here; the pont de Bir-Hakeim is a hot spot during New Years, it has the perfect view for the fireworks," Lovino informed.

I didn't really care and shouted for Peter, walking ahead to reach the viaduct. The guys followed behind, both calling Peter's name till we rounded the statue and came face to face with Giselle.

My blood ran cold as the Immortal child lifted an unconscious Peter by the neck and hovered him over the edge.
"Think fast," she smiled and dropped him.

There was no hesitation as I raced off the bridge and dived into icy waters.

"Amy!" Lovino skidded to a stop along the rail and watched hopelessly as she dragged herself and Sealand to the surface.

Lovino racked his brain for a solution, "Amy, swim for land! Right here along the-"

He was cut off when Latvia shrieked, pointing above to a wave that was soaring towards the sky.

Lovino turned to the girl as she lifted her hand higher and taunted, "I did warn you Miss America, things are going to get a lot harder for you."

Her hand came down and the wave followed, crashing against the bridge and submerging Amy and Sealand underwater once more. Then with a snap of her fingers it froze over, the surface being completely covered by solid ice.

"No!" Lovino screamed.

He moved to jump off the bridge but the girl yanked him back by his blazer and hurled him to the statue. He collided back first against the base, his head smacking against the stone as he plummeted to the ground. He groaned, trying in vain to lift himself up.

"Sorry Mr…." the girl was stumped for a minute till she shrugged, not caring if she offended him. "Not Italy, but you don't get to play hero today."

Latvia leaped for her; his punch missing her by an inch as she ducked and stabbed him with an icicle through his mid-section. The boy choked on his own blood as he fell back, trying to put distance between them. The little witch wouldn't allow it and snatched him by the collar. In a blink of an eye, she formed another deadly spike and slit his throat.

Latvia dropped to the ground like a ragdoll and Lovino found his second wind. He closed the distance, swinging an elbow to meet with the back of her head. The girl cried out, landing on all fours but she quickly shifted to a hand stand, kicking Lovino in the face.

He cursed, rearing back as the girl shot out another icicle. The force of the spike sent him flying, piercing him through his palm and pinning him to the base of the statue. He clutched his teeth but it couldn't stop the agonizing bawl that crept out his mouth. Ignoring the pain, he reached for the spike attempting to rip it out but his spare hand was stopped by another spike. He didn't bother trying to hide his pain then, howling as blood streamed down his arms.

"Are you done?" the girl crouched down, staring blankly at him, "cause I have a message for you to deliver."

Lovino glared, "well you can take that message and shove it up your ass, you demon child."

She giggled, "I'm no child."

She coddled his face in her hands, forcing him to look her in the eye, "The era of nations is over for Iya is rising."

Then with a flick of her wrists, she snapped his neck and everything went black.
Giselle gave a tired sigh as she rose off of the country's lifeless body and shook out her dress. The blood that had spilled was already crusting away into dirt.

"Well I have to say, at least they don't ruin your clothes," she observed aloud.

Then she glanced to her watch and started the countdown, "ten, nine."

Her irises faded away as the image of Ella Chasse appeared before her mind's eye. The young blonde was hiding away in her kitchen, avoiding everyone as she drank from a champagne flute.

"Eight," Giselle continued as Rey, Edward's chimera stalks Ella from behind, his claws at the ready.

"Seven," she blinked and Ella and Rey disappeared, replaced with the nations at France's duplex.

They were gathered around the living room, raising their glasses to the clock and laughing joyfully. They swayed together with flushed cheeks as they counted, "six, five, four-

Giselle cuts the vision short to check on Abigail and Edward. Both were at the top of a deserted Eiffel Tower, sharing a bottle of wine between them. Abigail swirled the liquid by the neck of the bottle and grinned down across the city, waiting in anticipation.

Her grin grew wider, "three."

Edward stepped forward; stretching out his hands as if he was an eminent conductor, approaching the orchestra, "two."

Finally, Giselle shifts her focus on Mara, who stood in the center of the Arc de Triomphe roundabout. She observed the traffic of cars and people, smiles and lifts her foot. "One," she stomped and the earth quaked under her.

Chapter End Notes

Bulgaria: Aaren Hinova
Republic of Cyprus: Ibrahim Masalis
Czech Republic: Rae Horak
Slovakia: David Laska
Luxembourg: Gabriel Vermeulen
Portugal: Miguel Avles
Moldova: Marcel Lupei
Monaco: Camille Lambert
Australia: Jett Kirkland
New Zealand: Olivier Kirkland
Wy: Wendy Kirkland
Molossia: Caleb Shaw
Hutt River: Hunter Kirkland
Seborga: Giorgio Vargas (Nickname: Gino)
Ladonia: Liam Oxenstierna
Kugelmugel: Renate Edelstein (went with a unisex name and they pronouns cause I like the headcannon that Kugelmugel is gender fluid.)
Blake sat in his room, reading a Tumblr blog of a witch, taking notes of her tea spells.

“What-cha doing?” Blair leaped onto the foot of his bed, kicking up her legs casually.

“Reading some spells,” he remarked, his eyes never leaving the screen.

“Off of Tumblr?” she rolled her eyes, “Are they even the real deal?”

“This one’s is.”

“How can you tell?”

“A feeling,” he answered.

“The Sight can read people through tablet screens now?” his twin teased.

Blake shrugged his shoulders, “maybe. That reminds me; we should practice on your Sight.”

She groaned, “noooo… I never get it right. Besides, why should I? Isn’t it like your thing?”

“G-Ma said everyone could be taught—”

“To a degree,” she interrupted.

“You have to try,” he countered as Blair groaned even louder.

Blake gave up, “why are you here?”

“You forgot your fortune cookie,” she held up a plastic-wrapped cookie from their favorite Chinese restaurant; Chopsticks.

“I’ll have it later,” he proclaimed, still scrolling through the witch blog.

“No! Open it! I want to know what it says,” her curiosity getting the better of her.

“Then you open it,” he remarked, “I don’t like them that much anyway.”

“But it wouldn’t be your fortune, it would be mine and I already got my fortune and its bad luck to take someone’s fortune.”

Blake pulled himself away from the screen, “that’s not a thing.”
“It could be,” she proclaimed. “A thing can become a thing if you give it power.”

“Then don’t give it.”

“It’s too late,” she deadpanned. “It’s a thing.”

“It’s not a thing.”

“It is a thing.”

He gave an annoyed groan of his own, “If I open it, will you leave me alone?”

She grinned, “yes.”

He took the cookie and changed the subject, “what did yours say?”

“Good news is on the way,” she replied, her mouth falling to a frown. “I’m hoping it’s from Aunt Amy; she hasn’t messaged us much. She used to message me every night.”

“She’s busy,” he stated, “You’re busy.”

“Yeah, but it’s the holidays and she’s barely talked to us,” she pouted.

Blake grew silent, an uncomfortable twist in his gut had been plaguing him for days. He has been reading and playing puzzle apps in hopes of ignoring it. Yet he can’t help but look to his Skype, waiting for a message or call from Amy.

He sighed and followed the blog before returning to his main dashboard, where the app decided to refresh on its own.

“Ugh. Really? This stupid app,” he muttered under his breath.

“Does Mom even know you’re on this site?” Blair gave him a look that said, ‘Mom will kill you if you’re talking to people you’re not supposed to’ look.

“I only use it for research,” he proclaimed as the first post on his dash screamed at him with bold black text:

PARIS IS BURNING!!

Blake’s heart dropped.

Blair read over his shoulder, “what’s wrong?”

“Paris had an earthquake, a big one,” he answered, reading as fast as he can. “Something about gas pipes bursting due to the quake and causing explosions.”

“What?! No way!”

“It’s got thousands of notes,” he exited the app and opened Google.

A CNN video was the first to appear after he had pressed search. He tapped on the video and Anderson Cooper loaded on screen.

“Breaking news: half an hour ago Paris was hit with a category 7.4 earthquake. Reports say the quake had damaged inner-city pipes causing massive explosions. First responders are on the scene
but fires are spreading. Authorities are trying their best to contain the fires, but they're scattered. Most are focusing on evacuating.”

Blake paused the video and turned to Blair, “Is Amy still in Sweden?”

“I think so, but I-”

He scrambled out of his room, calling for his parents.

He found them on the couch, watching a movie, “Mom where’s Aunt Amy right now?”

They shared a look as Sanjay answered, “Sweden, right?”

“Dad said she was in Scotland,” Melissa remarked.

Blake’s gut churned, “are you sure?”

“Sweetie, what’s wrong?” Melissa asked, worried.

He showed them his tablet, “Paris was hit by a quake and fires have started due to it.”

“Honey, I’m sure Amy’s fine. I’ll call her, okay?” Melissa pulled out her phone and dialed a number.

“But what about Uncle Francis?” Blair popped up from a top of the staircase. “Will he be okay? Amy was in some major pain when we were hit.”

“He’s with Amy, right? They got to be somewhere safe right?” Blake’s voice rose an octave, becoming scared.

Sanjay gently placed his hands on Blake’s shoulders, soothing him with calm words. “I’m sure they’re fine-”

“How do you know?!” Blake snapped.

“Blake-”

“Dad, have you been able to reach her?”

Melissa’s concerned tone gathered the attention of Blake and his family.

“Your mother has been calling, but it keeps going to voicemail,” Blake could hear his grandfather on the other end. “I tried to call Arthur, but he’s not picking up.”

“She’s still in Scotland though, right,” Melissa was trying to keep her composure but she couldn’t hide from Blake. He saw the wrinkle of fear in her pink glow. It was a shade of pale orange, ironically orange was also the color of courage but only when it’s bold in hue.

“That’s what she told me,” John answered.

“Then why isn’t she answering?” Melissa argued.

John sighed, defeated, “I don’t know.”

Melissa gritted her teeth, “Keep calling Arthur. I’ll call Matthew.”

“I tried him too, he’s not picking up either.”
“Francis?”

“Nothing.”

Melissa rubbed her eyes, attempting to hide her frustrated tears, “just keep calling. You have Sweden’s number, right? Try him too.”

John agreed and hanged up.

Blake noticed Melissa taking a deep breath, trying to steady herself. Her aura projecting a comforting green but again, she couldn’t hide the dreadful orange and the growing worry of dark gray.

She turned, ready to reassure her family but stopped; no doubt finding Blake’s violet eyes unsettling.

She uttered his name as Sanjay flinched. Blake gripped his tablet and ran back to his room, slamming the door behind him.

An hour passed before Blair dared to enter, finding Blake in bed, curled into a ball. He felt the floorboards squeak as she crawled in under the covers.

“You okay?”

“No,” he muttered.

She was quiet for a moment till he heard the sounds of plastic, “hey, I’m gonna have your fortune cookie, okay.”

Blake snorted, flipping himself over to face her, “didn’t you say that was bad luck?”

“You gotta live a little,” she grinned, carefully removing the cookie from its packaging.

They both stared at that golden cookie longer than necessary as Blair's eyes grew distant and her blue began to fade into gray. Blair was always the cheerful twin, almost coming off carefree to others, but that wasn’t true. She was an anchor, as his great-grandmother said, Blair’s earth nature keeps him tethered.

How exhausting must that be?

Blake blinked the colors away and reached for his sister. He hugged her tight, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay… we’re all messed up about it. It’s not all about you,” she smirked.

Blake gave a short laugh, “whatever.”

She pulled away, staring up at the ceiling, “she’s okay… right?”

Blake looked away, taking his cookie back and cracked it open. He then read his fortune out loud, “If your cookie is in two pieces, the answer is yes.”

The cookie had broken into three.

Paris, France
Paris shook with such malice and vigor. One would believe that the very earth itself would split open. Arthur immediately covered his head and attempted to keep his balance against a wall but with no such luck. He fell to the floor, watching as other nations dove for tables and shielded each other from the fallen wreckage.

Arthur heard fireworks as they rocketed and burst in the sky. Vehicles came to shrieking halts as some swerved or crashed into obstacles. Old churches and structures rattled as pieces plummeted to the ground while others most certainly had been reduced to nothing but rumble.

Distant screams of the people resounded, but none were as deafening as Francis’.

His cry was bloodcurdling, filled with tremendous pain and agony. He clutched his sides as if holding himself together. His body trembled, unable to stand as he dropped like a ragdoll.

For one split second, the world had stopped. For one dreadful second, everything was silent aside from the sickening crack that was met when Francis’ head made contact with the hardwood floors. Arthur felt numb as if his entire body was submerged in an ice bath and his limbs were made of lead.

Antonio was the first to reach Francis, coddling the blond in his arms as Francis shook violently. Arthur then forced himself up and stumbled for the pair. He drops beside them; shielding Francis from scattered debris and broken glass. All the while gripping his hand as Francis continued to scream.

This whole ordeal lasted mere seconds but to Arthur, it could’ve been an eternity.

Earthquakes, on a larger scale, can cause extreme pain to the point a nation could feel like they’re being ripped apart. Some have described it as being struck by lightning from the inside and the bolt is desperate to get out. Their body no longer under their control as if experiencing a violent seizure. Even when a quake had passed, the after-effects could last months. Bones become brittle and weak. Blood vessels could burst, causing internal bleeding while organs could stop functioning altogether.

The vibrations had stopped, and Francis was no longer crying but now he was gasping.

“What’s wrong?” Antonio asked frantically.

Arthur checked Francis torso, filling the rib cage and finding one broken. “Fuck,” he cursed. “A rib broke; it must have punctured a lung.”

Before Arthur could come up with a rational plan of action, a series of explosions went off.

Abigail clapped her hands with glee as a long stretch of fire cuts through the city. The main road that started at the Catacombs of Paris, ran over a bridge across the River Seine and ended at the Sacré-Cœur.

Her eyes gleamed with excitement, “Do it again! Do it again!”
Edward grinned, “your wish is my command, my lady.”

He gave a bow, then looked to the direction of the Arc de Triomphe, and pointed a finger, “bang.”

A blue flame erupted with a massive burst, taking on the normal hue of red once it started to spread. The fire swept forward, all the way to a cemetery near the 20th arrondissement.

Edward laughed, taking a moment to dance to the beat of Left Boy’s song ‘Dangerous’ playing in his right ear.

“Hey DJ, spin that tune,” he sang, “If you don’t fuck with us then mother-fuck you!”

Pointed a thumb behind him and another wave of fire slices through the 16th arrondissement.

“Major Label, that’s the crew, nobody does it like we do!” He threw his hands forward and a road near the Pantheon gushed with fire. The flame quickly grew as it reached the 14th arrondissement.

Then for added measure, he snapped his fingers and Grenelle was split with flame.

Edward exhaled as if finished a satisfied workout and leaned beside Abigail. “So, what do we think?” he asked, leaning against the rail of the Eiffel Tower.

Abigail scanned the city; the fire had begun consuming buildings, taking businesses and homes alike. People were screaming and crying for help. Most roads were un-drivable, due to crashed cars and Edward’s flame causing the delay of fire-fighters and first responders alike. And during all this, the firework show played on, creating an amusing contrast of beauty and chaos.

“It’s glorious,” she smiled.

Immediately Francis responded with a breathless cry as blood spilled from his nostrils, eyes, and mouth.


Aaren moved for the terrace, leaning over the edge, “It looks like fires have broken out in the city.”

“Could it have been the gas lines?” Ludwig questioned.

“No,” Vladimir walked to Aaren’s side, observing the area. “This was too well planned and that earthquake?!” He spins back to face Ludwig, “An earthquake?! In Paris?! This is magick at work.”

Ludwig blinked and then groaned, “Oh Lord… magick? Don’t be ridiculous. This must be a cause of Climate Change.”

“Climate Change?!” Vladimir shook his head, “if it looks like magick, smells like magick—it’s magick.”

Arthur ignored them, keeping his attention on Francis.

“Magick isn’t real,” Ludwig proclaimed.

“Then please, enlighten me on what actually happened at Austria’s house Mr. Germany,” Vladimir remarked sarcastically.
“A practical joke,” he stated.

“Oh, you’re still believing that load of horse shit,” Vladimir dismissed him with a wave. “Come back to me when you last a thousand years boy.”

Ludwig glared, his nostrils flaring, “I am not a boy.”

“Compared to us that have been around long enough to recognize magick, you are,” Vladimir countered.

“Enough!” Elizabeta shouted, commanding for the nations’ attention. “It doesn’t matter how it happened, it happened and there are people out there that need our help!

“We were not trained in medical care on the battlefield? Are we not certified first-responders? Have we not dealt with burning cities and devastating earthquakes?!”

She was met with a sobered audience and she took that as her sign to exclaim, “Then what the hell are we standing around for?! Aaren what are we dealing with?”

“Uh,” the brunet stuttered for a moment before turning back to the scene. “From what I can see, there are fires in Grenelle and in the 16th arrondissement. Anywhere else are miles away and most roads are either destroyed or blocked by crashed cars.”

“Shit,” she hissed, “Where are the closest hospitals?”

Victoria answered, “Necker and Georges-Pompidou.”

“How far?”

“Necker is thirty minutes away while Georges-Pompidou is nearly forty, by foot.”

Elizabeta nodded, the wheels in her head turning. “First we have to clear the roads. We’ll start in Grenelle and the 16th put out fires and help anyone that needs it.”

“There’s a first aid kit in the bathroom,” Irunya proclaimed, sprinting for the room.

David sighed, “That won’t be enough for Grenelle let alone for both arrondissements.”

“Treat minor wounds with it,” said Elizabeta. “That way the hospitals won’t be so crowded.”

Arthur half-heartedly listened, coddling Francis’ head into his lap as he brushed back Francis’ sweat-soaked hair.

“It’s alright love, you’re going be alright,” Arthur soothed but his voice cracked with uncertainty. What Vladimir had said terrified him. Had the Immortals done this? Once that thought crossed his mind, he cursed to himself, of course they’ve done this you pompous ass.

An earthquake in Paris.

Fires that consume everything in its path.

The evidence was clear and Arthur had completely underestimated them. Due to his pride and wounded ego, he ignored their skills and their ruthlessness. They attacked the Grand Council what would stop them from striking Paris. Even with the impending might of Parisian witches and the Warriors from the Mosque of Paris, it did not deter them from attacking. Two questions weighed heavily on his mind; was their employer that powerful that they feared no other or did they not have
anything else to lose.

Both were equally terrifying.

A hand gripped the front of his shirt, it was weak and shook repeatedly. “Arthur-” Francis gasped, his voice barely above a whisper. “Please… it hurts.”

Arthur froze, becoming hyperaware of his hands as they curled away from Francis.

Francis’ grip tightens, his eyes shining with tears and blood, “please… please…”

Arthur squeezed his eyes shut, forcing his own tears back. Funny, they have killed each other a dozen times yet, why was this so hard? Has it been so long that he can’t even bear the thought of killing Francis out of mercy? *When was the last time…* he thought, *during the time of Napoleon, I think…*

“Arthur please,” Francis choked out a shout.

“What does he want?” asked Antonio.

Arthur blinked, he had forgotten that Antonio was there. He swallowed the lump in his throat and placed his hands over Francis’ cheeks, “okay.”

Francis immediately relaxed, and Arthur gritted his teeth. He gripped the base of Francis’ head and with a sharp flick of his wrist he felt the sickening snap of Francis’ spine.

A final breath fell from his bloodied lips as the light in his beautiful eyes faded.

He looked up, finding the others silent as they acknowledged his action with hesitant approval. Matthew walked forward, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Victoria followed, kneeling beside him, “I'll stay with him.”

“So will we,” Vash proclaimed, gesturing to himself and Erika.

“No Switzerland, you would be better suited in aiding Paris,” Roderich stated calmly.

Vash gave him a side-eyed glare, “No one asked for your opinion.”

“But he’s right,” Erika spoke up, “Brother you can do more out there.”

“I'll take your place here,” Roderich added.

“It sounds to me he’s just trying to get out of hard labor,” Sadik remarked.

“Quiet.” Elizabeta glared, “Or I’ll finish what Amy had started.”

Arthur snapped to attention, instantly scanning the room, “where’s Amy?!”

“I think she left with Lovino and Raivis,” Gilbert proclaimed.

“Do you think Peter’s with them?” Tino asked anxiously.

“We can search for them as we clear roads. Switzerland, we need you. Roderich can watch over Francis along with Erika,” Elizabeta assured.

The Swiss sighed, “Fine. Turkey, Cyprus, Greece, Egypt, you’re with me.”
Sadik scoffed, “who made you the leader?”

“He’s more capable than you are,” said Gupta.

Heracles and Ibrahim made no complaint as they followed Vash and Gupta. While Sadik muttered in Turkish and tailed them. The others arranged themselves into teams, deciding on different routes that will spread them out. Once that was done, each team slipped on their coats and marched out the door.

The whole ordeal lasted no more than a few minutes.

They were quick and efficient just as they were trained to be.

When the duplex was nearly empty, Elizabeta began a search. She started in the parlor room, checking the bottom cabinets for weapons.

“What are you doing?” Gilbert asked.

She didn’t have to look up to know he was smirking, “it’s none of your business. You should be with your team.”

“So should you,” he countered playfully.

“I got something more pressing to deal with,” Elizabeta grunted as she found nothing and moved on to the next cabinet.

Gilbert proclaimed, “you won’t find them there.”

Elizabeta raised a brow, “where?”

“That depends,” his tone became serious, “what’s going on Liz?”

She sighed, “I can’t explain it all right now, but all you need to know is that Romania was right. This isn’t natural, and I know who’s behind it.”

He was quiet for a moment and gestured for her to follow him. She was led to Francis’ room and watched as Gilbert reached under the bed and pulled out a small crate. He made quick work of the combination lock and threw the lid up to reveal two cavalry swords. Both had handles embodied with gold and aging leather. The scabbards had lost their luster, but one still contained its golden hue. That one would have been given to a Horse Grenadier, a member of Napoleon’s Imperial Guard. The other was curved, showing it to be a saber also used by the Horse Artillery of the same guard.

“I told him these could come in handy,” said Gilbert.

He picked up the cavalry and unsheathed it. The blade glimmered as he pressed his thumb against the edge. He bled, proving that it was just as deadly as it was beautiful.

“Here,” he handed the sword to Elizabeta, and she tested the feel of the blade.

It was lighter than what she was used to, and the handle was far too decorative for her to have complete movement but it will do.

“I know you prefer claymores, but it’s all we got,” Gilbert rose, strapping the saber to his pants.
“You’re not coming,” she proclaimed.

He smirked, “who said you can have all the fun?”

“Gilbert, I’m serious.”

“So am I,” he caressed her cheek, “You can’t get rid of me that easily Liz.”

“And in all honesty, you are going to need all the help you can get. Even if it is Prussia.”

They jumped as their attention landed on Natalia, who was leaning on the doorframe twirling a rather large kitchen knife in her hand.

“How long have you been there?” Gilbert exclaimed.

She shrugged, “long enough.”

Elizabeta massaged the ache away in her temple, “I suppose you wish to join.”

“After what happened in Germany,” she and Elizabeta shared a knowing glance as she added. “You’re going to need me.”

“And your kitchen knife?” Gilbert mocked.

Natalia was unfazed as she pulled her dress up, revealing daggers strapped to her thighs. “I am always prepared.”

“Not gonna lie, that’s kinda hot,” he remarked.

Natalia responded by throwing the kitchen knife, aiming directly for his head.

Elizabeta snatched the handle, a mere inch away from making contact. “Don’t waste your knives on him.”

Gilbert blinked, realizing how close he was to death and apologized, “yeah that was uncalled for.”

“You think?” Elizabeta shook her head and tossed the knife back to Natalia.

She caught it flawlessly, “where are we going?”

Elizabeta sighed but she would be lying if their presence didn’t give some sort of comfort to her. “The Eiffel Tower, it would have the perfect view for her.”

She struts down the corridor with Gilbert and Natalia at her sides. Before either of them could ask any other questions. They were met with Roderich, Erika, and Victoria standing next to the front door.

Roderich glanced to her hand, eyeing the sword before he sighed and gave a Gilbert a sharp look, “look out for her.”

Gilbert quirked an eyebrow, “Austria, you know damn well she can handle herself.”

Erika hands over a pistol, “good luck.”

Gilbert gave out a boisterous laugh, “Swiss definitely rubbed off on you huh?”

Elizabeta takes the gun with a quick thank you and hands it off to Natalia, “you have the best aim.”
“With knives,” she stated but took the gun anyway.

They slipped on their coats as Victoria grinned, “kick their ass.”

Gilbert gave a salute, “well do.”

They hit the street and Elizabeta scanned the skies. She was well known for her keen eyes and even through the darkness and the smoke, she had spotted a figure circling the Eiffel Tower.

“Is that a person?” Gilbert asked.

“Well it isn’t a bird nor a plane,” Natalia said nonchalantly.

“Gil, we’re dealing with an immortal witch.” Elizabeta continued, “She can fly, control the very wind and shoot out fire from the palm of her hands. And that was over 200 hundred years ago. Who knows what other tricks she has up her sleeve.”

“Well the plumbing is shot,” Victoria sighed, walking back from the bathroom.

“TMI,” Wendy retorted as she scrolled through her phone.

She ignored that comment and added, “the power’s out too.”

“There is a reason why I’m using my phone besides the television for the news,” Wendy added sarcastically.

“What are they saying?” Victoria asked.

“The fires are spreading, roads are in chaos and a hospital in the 18th arrondissement has lightened up like a firework display on New Year’s. Ironic isn’t it?”

“You are disturbingly nonchalant about all this,” said Roderich.

“There’s not a lot of info on this ok. This just fucking happened,” Wendy proclaimed.

“A lady shouldn’t use such language,” he lectured.

Wendy rolled her eyes, “last I checked it was the 21st century.” She moved away to hand Erika a water bottle. “Nerd,” she muttered.

Victoria glanced to Francis on the couch, “How is he?” she asked Erika.

“Still…” the blonde hesitated, “dead.” Then she poured water on a cloth and wiped away the blood on Francis’ face. “The blood hasn’t turned. This is bad. He could be out for days.”

“Weeks even,” Wendy added.

Victoria sighed once more and dropped into an armchair, “how did this happen?”

“Climate Change,” Wendy repeated dryly.

She narrowed her eyes, “really, you believe that?”

“Nah Shelia, this is too weird.”
“I agree,” Erika added, “I think it’s magick.”

“Miss Liechtenstein, there’s no such thing,” Roderich proclaimed.

All three girls leveled him a look, “Are you serious? After what happened at your house?” Victoria reminded.

“We were all drunk—”

“Denial,” Wendy sang.

“Look, Austria, you have to admit this is not normal. It doesn’t feel right,” said Victoria.

“Well earthquakes don’t necessarily feel nice,” he stated.

Wendy gestured outside, “ya think.”

“Mr. Austria, you’ve existed for a long time. Are you really going to stand there and tell us there’s no such thing as magick?” Erika asked calmly.

Roderick blinked, taken back but he recovered, “magick was used to explain what we didn’t understand. Weather, seasons, sickness and the very stars; we know better now. Seasons happen due to the axis of our planet as it travels around the sun. Sickness happens because of bacteria and when we don’t keep areas clean and the stars are massive amounts of gas. Not because of fairies or gods or mythical beasts; that is what science has proven.”

“Austria, if beings like us can exist, why not magick?” Victoria questioned.

“Our scientists have tested us,” Erika added, “and they still have no idea what makes us… us.”

“Also, scientists said an earthquake in Paris was very unlikely, yet it happened. Where’s your science now?” Wendy challenged.

Roderick sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose, “this is not the time—”

“In other words, he don’t know,” answered Wendy.

“Have you always been this… outspoken?” he asked.

She crossed her arms, “oh no, this is what happens to me when I counter bullshit.”

He sighed again and walked to the kitchen, muttering for a drink.

Wendy rolled her eyes, “how was he ever a powerhouse?”

“Hungary,” Victoria stated.

Erika nodded and tried to spare a smile, “Mr. Austria is not much of a fighter.”

Her smile failed as her eyes drifted back to the terrace, her expression growing worried.

Victoria picked up on it, “Hey, you ok?”

She sighed, “I’m just worried about Raivis. Why would he go out there in the first place?”

“What else? He was chasing after Peter like always,” Wendy proclaimed, her eyes never leaving her phone.
“But why? What was wrong with Sealand?”

“He looked like he was about to cry, so,” Wendy gave a pointed look at Victoria. “You guys couldn’t get a hotel room?”

Victoria’s shoulders tensed, “you knew?”

“That you and Canada would eye-fuck each other from across the room any chance you got? Yeah, you ain’t slick.”

Erika gasped, “wait, Victoria, you and Mr. Canada are together?”

“Well, yes,” she sighed, “we wanted to wait, especially with finding America’s successor and all.”

“Or maybe, you just didn’t want Peter to know,” Wendy remarked.

Victoria gritted her teeth, trying to control her irritation, “what are you implying?”

“I have a few theories, one: you actually like how he dotes on you and follows you around like a love-sick puppy but I highly doubt you’re that cruel. Two: you really have no idea that he has feelings for you, but you’re not that stupid. Three: you didn’t want to break his heart; unfortunately, this was your downfall. Because you chose not to sit him down and talk to him like a reasonable person—he found out in the worst, most graphic way.”

“What do you think he walked in on?”

Wendy shrugged, “these male nations are into some weird shit. Does he have a foot fetish? He seems like the kind of guy that’s into feet.”

“No,” Victoria exclaimed, rubbing her face in annoyance. “Besides I tried to let Peter down easy, I always hinted that he was like a brother to me.”

“Ha,” Wendy shook her head, “that boy can’t catch a clue even if you sang ‘Take a Hint’ by Victoria Justice.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Cause before I was replaced by the current America, he used to gush to me all about you. ‘Victoria is so witty.’ ‘Victoria is such a good singer.’ ‘Victoria is such a great dancer.’ UGH. It was beyond annoying. I would’ve torn my own hair out if I didn’t tell him to fuck off.”

Erika raised a brow, “it sounds like you’re jealous.”

Victoria’s jaw dropped, so she wasn’t the only one that picked up on that.

Wendy, only proving their theory, spluttered, “J-jealous of what? That some micro-nation couldn’t get the attention of a real nation?” Her next words were filled with venom, “his so-called love was nothing but a last-ditch attempt to get nation status.”

Victoria was taken back, “What do you mean?”

“What do you think?” Wendy spats. “The former America isn’t the only one to disappear. Caleb. Hunter. Gino. Liam. Renate. Remember them? They all went missing, but none of you noticed or cared. Why do you think Jett and Oliver were so desperate to get me nation status? Why do you think Peter wants to be recognized? It’s because he’s scared!”
Wendy sighed; her anger cooling, “but you don’t understand, and you never will.”

Victoria fell silent; any come back she had dissolved into the tension-filled air. Only breaking when a thump came from the kitchen.

The girls jumped and Victoria moved forward, “Mr. Austria? Are you ok?”

“Maybe he cut himself with a butter knife,” added Wendy.

“Maybe you should shut up,” Victoria was a hundred and ten percent done with Wendy’s attitude.

She walked into the kitchen, leaning over the counter to find Roderich on the floor. Victoria called out for him one more time and pulled out her phone for the flashlight. Before she could ask if he was alright, the beam of light caught blood on his torso.

She flinched and with a trembling hand, slid her phone up to find a pool of blood forming around Roderich’s decapitated body.

A shriek vibrated off the walls but it wasn’t from Victoria.

She spun around to find Erika shrinking back, her hands clapped over her mouth as Wendy pointed at the hallway.

“We saw someone; it was a flash, but someone was-”

Then an object came rolling down the hall, it was lumpy and lopsided. It clearly wasn’t circular. As the momentum slowed, Victoria was able to catch the trail of blood that followed.

Roderich’s head landed on its side, staring at them with bloody, gorged out eye-sockets.

Wendy released a terrified scream.

Erika called out, “We need to arm ourselves!”

Victoria jumped for the knives but a tree branch spouted from the terrace and pinned her to a wall. With rapid speed, the branch grew, covering Victoria till only her head was shown.

Erika attempted to free her but was dragged back by another branch. It circled around the blonde’s ankle and slammed her against the floor, causing her to daze. The branches pounced; wrapping themselves around Erika and Wendy, twisting their arms behind their backs as their legs were pressed together, enclosing them in a tight embrace.

They struggled and were punished with a bone-crushing squeeze. Both girls cried out and Victoria gritted her teeth and clawed for freedom but was met with resistance.

She howled in agony as tree roots split through her palms. They continued their attack, forcing themselves to spread up Victoria’s arms. She felt them dig through her insides, following the path of her veins as they implanted themselves within her bloodstream. They shook, threatening to break skin and Victoria cried out, for help or for a quick death-she didn’t care which.

“Stop! Please! You’re killing her!”

Victoria blinked through her tears, tearing the focus away from the pain to Erika as she pleaded with a dark-haired woman to spare her.

The woman answered with a bored wave of her hand. A branch reacted, wrapping itself around
Erika’s mouth to keep her silent.

“What the hell are you?!” Wendy demanded and was met with the same wooden muzzle.

The woman pulled Wendy forward and sneered, “I don’t answer to you.”

Victoria forced herself to speak, “leave her alone…”

Her words came out broken and slurred and the woman wasn’t a bit fazed.

The woman roughly pushed back Wendy’s hair and observed, “brown eyes. You either have a tiger’s eye, some kind of jasper or an opal, or maybe a chocolate diamond. One can only hope.”

The image of Roderich’s head flashed before Victoria’s eyes, “no…. Don’t touch her…”

The woman paid no attention to Victoria’s weak plea, placed her fingers carefully around Wendy’s eye and dug.

Wendy released a muffled wail, and Victoria looked away.

West of the 16th Arrondissement

As the earth shook, Ella immediately spun away from the windows covering her face. Rey came into view and she shouted, “get back!”

He ignored her and raised his hand, the talons at the ready.

Ella froze. Out of shock, fear or the fact that the ground was literally shaking; she stumbled over her own feet and fell back. Rey stepped closer, unfazed by the earthquake and Ella crawled back till the windows behind her shattered. She screamed and curled away from the broken glass, bracing herself for a blow that never came.

She peeked an eye open and a tall, blond haired man stood between her and Rey.

“Tell me, does becoming a chimera make you forget your manners or were you a dick before this?”

The man pulled Rey’s arm down and landed a punch square in the jaw. Rey fell, groaning as the man grabbed Ella and pushed her through the broken door.

“Out. Get out now-”

He was cut off by an explosion.

Ella was able to catch the flames from a distance through the skyline of trees just behind her house. With that knowledge, she concluded that the blast was most likely located in Bois de Boulogne, a public park. The fire would soon spread and begin consuming the luxury mansions and quaint homes around the area. Car alarms were blaring, people were screaming and above them, the sky was illuminated by fireworks, which only added to the chaos.

She rubbed her temple, trying to piece together the cause, “w-was that an earthquake?” She had dealt with minor ones in Summerland, and they terrified her but Amy always said they were never that bad compared to the 2014 Quake. The very earthquake that caused underground pipes to burst, businesses and homes to crumble and fires to consume everything that was left.
“But in Paris?!” the last thought was outspoken.

“Ella, we need to go,” the man moved to grab her but she snatched her arm back.

“Who are you?! And how do you know my name?!”

“For a girl that has a chimera gunning for her head, you sure ask a lot of questions,” he quipped.

“C-chimera? Like-like Fullmetal Alchemist?”

“Sort of-” he was cut off once more by a roar.

It was primitive, almost as if multiple animals were screeching in sync.

Rey emerged, and Ella felt her stomach drop.

It was only a glimpse, but as the man pulled Ella around the corner she saw Rey shift. His shape vibrated as his skin, hair, hands, and feet were replaced with horns, feathers, fur, talons, hooves and pair of gigantic wings.

“Tha-that was-Rey… W-w-wha-” the English language had left her but, in all fairness, she couldn’t form a coherent sentence in French even if she tried.

A hand clamped over her mouth, “shhhh, it’s ok. He didn’t see us. I’m gonna lead it away, you just need to stay here.”

Ella pushed his hand aside, “how?” she whispered harshly. “I thought you said it was after me.”

The man winked and grinned, “I got some tricks up my sleeve. Just stay here,” he repeated.

“Wait!” she yanked him back, “who are you?”

He was silent for a moment, his blue eyes casting downward till he sighed and gave her a reassuring smile.

“A friend,” as he spoke, his voice rose an octave along with taking on a Parisian accent. His features soften, the square of his jaw rounded and his eyes darken, becoming a rich brown. His hair grew out into chestnut curls, cascading down his back. His height began to shrink, no longer was he wide and towering but small and curvy.

When he smiled once more Ella stared wide-eyed to the fact that it was her face smiling back at her.

He had taken on her form to near perfection, down to the cross-strapped lavender dress and gold high heels.

Was it because her city was burning, that a former server had become a demonic beast trying to kill her or that a beautiful stranger had instantly become her?

All were valid reasons to faint.

Alfred noticed Ella’s eyes rolling back inside her head and clutched her by the waist. Gently, he leaned her back against the brick of her house and lowered her down to the ground.
“Sorry,” he apologized.

He grew out one fingernail into a sharp point and slit his palm. Silver stardust poured from the wound as he made a quick protective circle around Ella. Promptly after, he jumped out of his hiding spot, hurling one of his high heels at the back of the chimera’s head.

It landed with a violent smack and immediately the chimera turned with a glare.

Alfred readied his other heel, morphing it into a blade, “you want me? Come and get me.”

The chimera flew forward, and Alfred stood his ground, taking the beast head-on. Once he got close, Alfred dived, slashing his knife down the mid-section.

He was met with tiny screaming, almost like millions of voices were screeching at once. Rotting worms fell to the ground but some clung to his skin, digging in like leeches.

He slapped them off, “Ugh! What are these things?!”

He surveyed the ground as the scarlet worms crumbled to dust. He looked up, finding the worms fusing back together, covering the chimera’s real flesh.

At that moment Alfred realized, “blood armor, great. You can shift. You have armor. What’s next?”

With a wave of his hand, the chimera let loose a blast of wind. The unstoppable force launched Alfred upwards and collided into a tree.

With a groan, he peeled himself off the bark, “I just had to say something.”

Before he could gather his wits, the tree trembled and he immediately grabbed the trunk. The chimera pulled as his wings flapped, each movement released a gust of wind that cut through the roots. Once the tree was loose, the chimera flew up and hurled it across the garden.

Alfred maneuvered quickly, using the tree as a cushion as it slid onto a busy street; blocking an ambulance.

“What the hell?” one of the paramedics exclaimed as he slammed on the brakes.

Alfred jumped off and warned in French, “Leave! Turn back!”

The paramedic in the passenger seat immediately looked concern, “Miss? Are you okay?”

“Get out of here!” Alfred smacked the hood of the vehicle. “Turn back! Now!”

Before the paramedic behind the wheel could question him further, he glanced up and his jaw dropped. “My God!”

Alfred spun around as the chimera moved in for the kill.

He took the force of the hit, skidding back as he was pinned against the hood. Alfred held the chimera by his wrists, pushing him back with each step.

Alfred spares a final glance at the paramedics, “Drive!”

He didn’t bother seeing if they listened and placed his focus on the chimera. Alfred yanked the creature forward and headbutted him. Once dazed, Alfred grabbed the chimera by the arm and swung him into the fallen tree.
Alfred glanced back and released a sigh of relief when he found the ambulance speeding down the street in the opposite direction.

In the 7th Arrondissement

Katherina Báthory-Nádasdy gazed out her window, wiping her eyes of stray tears as fire consumed Valise’s final resting place. A series of bangs echoed in the room, some man was yelling, asking if there was anyone inside. She didn’t answer.

Katherina pulled out her locket and snapped it open, there pinned inside was a portrait of her and Abigail. It was their very first when Abigail’s cheeks were still round and her eyes carried a mischievous glint. All in good humor of course but when did it change, she thought. When did that playful fun become so twisted?

As Abigail got older, the more she expressed her desire for freedom. Katherina would admit to being smothering, but she never had a loving mother and only wished to provide that for Abigail. But she knew if she held too tightly, Abigail would grow farther away.

For a time, Abigail would visit but each visit became shorter than the last and the gaps of separation between grew larger with each passing year. Through rumors and gossip, Katherina discovered Abigail’s adventures; of her self-clam as The Salem Witch, stirring up trouble where ever she went. Being a rouge in war, never choosing a side, preferring to watch as if all was a game. Summoning gigantic twisters just to test her power, but destroying a year’s harvest in one night. Burning countless churches out of sheer boredom and killing off entire families of witch hunters.

With each cruel rumor, Katherina countered it with heroic truths or desperate excuses:

There will always be death in war… does it really matter who wins? It won’t affect us in the slightest.

She’s young, she’ll grow out of it.

Abigail is a fierce woman, and men are only scared.

Why do we care about witch hunters? She’s doing us, and witches all over the world a favor.

She’s a good girl. Her measures are extreme I grant you, but people don’t achieve freedom by being nice.

There was good in her daughter. Katherina has seen it, knows it merely sleeps. At this very moment, Abigail needs her mother more than ever. Katherina made the mistake of letting her go back in 1965; she will not do that again.

She moves for her coat but was halted by the constant ringing of her mobile phone. She checks the screen, doesn’t recognize the number and pressed the decline icon.

A text by the same number appeared right after:

Answer the phone. -Spider
The caller popped up once more and Katherina answered with a frustrated grunt, “what do you want?”

“Don’t do it,” the caller proclaimed. “Stay where you are and don’t even think of going after Abigail.”

“This has got nothing to do with you!” Katherina snapped.

Spider remained irritatingly calm as they added, “she is lost, Katherina. There is no hope for her.”

“You know nothing!” Katherina was about to toss her phone aside till Spider exclaimed:

“If you go, you will die.”

She froze, blinking rapidly as she hissed back into the phone, “are you saying my own daughter will kill me?”

“I didn’t say that. But she will be the reason.”

“You are not the Oracle of Delphi, so stop speaking in riddles.”

“I see countless futures-”

“Exactly,” Katherina interrupts, “how do you know this future will be my end?”

Spider sighed, “It keeps repeating.”

“I don’t care. My daughter needs me.”

“We need you more. Katherina please, the fate of our world is on the line.”

“My daughter’s very soul is on the line. I won’t be sorry for choosing her over the world.”

“And this is why she doesn’t deserve you.”

Katherina snarled, “shut your dirty whore mouth.”

“I believe that’s the pot calling the kettle black honey.”

“It doesn’t matter what you say, I’m going.”

Spider gave a long sigh; they took on the tone of sadness rather than of disappointment. “Very well, but I need you to do me one favor. You owe me that.”

It was Katherina’s turn to sigh, her patience growing short. “Fine, fine, what do you want?”

“Write a letter to Ms. America, also known as Amy Hawkfeather.”

Katherina blinked, completely dumbfounded, “what? Why her?”

“She will need to know where to find Russia’s heart.”

“And you think I know where it is?” Katherina scoffed. “There’s a reason it’s been missing for over a century.”

“That’s why I need you to lead her to Stefan.”
“Stefan?” She hasn’t thought of him in years, “he knows about Russia’s heart?”

Spider mocked her with a surprised gasp, “you mean he never told you?”

Katherina returned the backhanded comment with one of her own. “That must go for both of us. We know how much he values his privacy.”

“Yes,” Spider agreed, not at all fazed by Katherina’s pettiness. “But he needs to come out of hiding, sooner rather than later.”

She sighed, growing tired of this whole ideal. “Look, we’re not together-”

“But you do have a vial of his blood just in case you want to make a booty call.” Katherina could practically hear the smirk in Spider’s voice.

“Have I ever told you how much I loathe you.”

Spider laughed, “get in line.”

Katherina groaned and forced herself to sit at her writing desk, “in English I assume?”

“No. It has to be in Code, one that Abigail is not familiar with.”

“You do realize I taught her every Witch Code there is.”

“And you know that smart witches don’t pick just one Code to write in.”

Katherina massaged her temple, mixed Stefan’s blood with her ink and hastily wrote out a quick, one paged letter.

A smart Immortal keeps taps on other Immortals being human or nation.

Katherina expected the nation of France to live near the most iconic structure, in the most luxurious neighborhood. He’s a flashy one. But what she didn’t expect was the trees that were once tiny, have now tripled in size as they twisted themselves inside the highest level of the duplex.

“What happened?” she urged one of the on-lookers.

“It was completely bizarre!” reported a woman.

“The trees just grew!” declared a man.

“Here, I recorded it,” a young woman approached Katherina with a phone in hand.

The recording started with the same woman following a crowd that was evacuating from the building. The camera shook as voices shouted:

“Is that another earthquake?”

“No, no, an aftershock.”

“Why is it only shaking the building?”

“Oh my God?!”
The woman had reached outside at this point and spun around to find the trees growing. Skyrocketing towards the highest level as they bent like rubber and smashed through the windows.

“Is anyone inside?” Katherina asked.

“There was a party on that level,” proclaimed a member of the crowd.

“I think everyone left as soon as the earthquakes were over,” remarked another.

Katherina scaled up the stairs, ignoring the crowd as they yelled after her. She kicked down the door and walks in, “Lizzie? Are you in here?”

She suddenly cuts herself short when she uncovers the decapitated head of Austria.

“Oh my God,” she crutched down and turned the head around. The skin was beginning to crumble and patches of hair were falling, but what made her flinch back was the empty eye-sockets.

Remembering Lizzie’s vengeful wrath, Katherina winced, “I do not envy the person who did this.”

When she looked up to examine the rest of the room, her jaw dropped.

A tree stood in the middle of the living room, its branches reaching to the ceiling while its roots took hold of the wooden floors. The branches had spread, enveloping the entire living room and nearly half of the kitchen. While the roots pulsed through the floors and plastered walls, most likely seeking out the earth below. A branch with gigantic width and thickness had pinned an older girl to a wall. While two others were tangled within its roots in the living room.

Katherina sprinted for the girls, calling out to them but they didn’t respond. She checks on the girl against the wall first, she was cold to the touch and her head flopped to the side as if she was a broken doll. Katherina pushed back her braids and found both her eyes were missing.

“Oh God, who would do this?” she clutched her teeth and moved on to the remaining girls.

Both were wrapped in think roots and appeared pale and lifeless. The only difference was the blonde had both her eyes stolen while the brunette was missing only one.

Checking a theory, Katherina rubbed her thumb inside the brunette’s eye-socket and sniffed her fingers.

She was met with the scent of wet mud, “they’re nations,” she said out loud.

“So they’re not really dead, just incapacitated. Like taking a nap,” her guide, a Nightingale she named Herbert proclaimed.

“They still died,” Katherina emphasized. “And it was a cruel way to go.”

Growing agitated, she called Spider, “what the hell happened here?”

“Poor girls… they weren’t ready for Mara nor was Austria,” Spider almost sounded genuine.

Katherina’s blood ran cold, “didn’t that girl just pick a fight with the Grand Council?! Now she’s coming for the nations?!”

“Not yet. This is just for fun.”

“Fun?!”
“By the way, I need you to confirm something.”

“What?” she snapped, annoyed with their nonchalant behavior.

“Is France there?”

Katherina blinked, inspecting the room and counted only four nations, “no.”

“Is there a tree in the middle of the room?”

“…Yes…”

“Ah, say hello to the country of France for me.”

She nearly dropped her phone, “wait-wait-he was turned into a tree?!”

“These youngsters, coming up with the weirdest spells, am I right?”

“So…” the knowledge of this was settling in, “he’s gone?! Completely?!!”

“No. Do you think destroying the whole body is enough? All Mara really did was buy herself and her Mistress time.”

“How long will it take for him to come back?”

“That depends, is there any leftovers?”

“Leftovers?”

“You know like a hand? A foot? A liver?”

Katherina searched the floor, “no.”

Spider groaned, “aren’t we in quite a pickle.”

“How long?”

“From the records I found, if a nation can’t regenerate from their discarded body parts. They usually pop up in a field or a forest, hundreds of miles away. Sometimes digging themselves out of a shallow grave.”

“Oh my God.”

“Yeah, aren’t nations fascinating?”

“How long?!?” Katherina repeated in frustration.

“I was getting there, give it about…” Spider paused, “three to six months.”

“Three to six months?!”

“Did I stutter?”

She shook her head in disbelief, subconsciously touching the letter through her coat pocket. “Why Amy? We should inform an older nation.”

“America is sort of old-”
“Cut the bullshit. We both know she’s young! You can see it in her eyes. What doesn’t make any sense is that I’ve been around to see the very nation make a name for itself.”

“Did Hungary tell you nothing? What was the point of having one of their kind close if you weren’t going to ask questions?” Spider sighed, “she’s a successor. It happens sometimes. A nation would die-well, die for real and a new nation pops into existence to take on the title. Thus, the nation you met yesterday is technically only eighteen-years-old.”

“Eighteen?! She’s just a child,” Katherina stressed. “And you want her to find Russia’s heart?!”

“It has to be her.”

“Why?”

“Because her predecessor started this and now it falls to her to end it.”

Katherina fell silent, recalling the girl’s frustration and anxiety. She was starting to feel sorry for the unfortunate girl, having a broken legacy thrust upon weighs heavy on one’s shoulders.

“You can still turn back,” Spider took her pause as their chance to bring her back to the fold. “We need you.”

She didn’t hesitant; “Abigail needs me.”

Spider sighed and Katherina allowed herself to smile, “I have one question.”

“Shoot.”

“What are you planning?”

Spider’s tone became deadly serious, “I’m planning to save the world and someone around here has to make the hard choices.”

Elizabeta avoids Avenue Joseph Bouvard, where cars were abandoned in bumper to bumper traffic.

“This is gonna be a bitch for the fire department,” comments Gilbert.

“Paris has nearly twenty of them. Two are across the Seine river and another is in Grenelle. The city will be fine,” Natalia informed.

“That makes sense; I mean it isn’t the first time Paris was on fire,” he chuckled darkly.

“Poor taste Gil,” Elizabeta remarked.

“I’m just trying to lighten the mood,” he defends.

“We are about to fight an immortal witch, and you want to make jokes?” Natalia rolled her eyes in annoyance.

They take Avenue du Dr Brouardel, sprinting through with minimal chatter. Natalia takes the lead, entering the park to scope the area. She signals for Elizabeta and Gilbert to follow. Collectively, they stepped into the second half of the Champ de Mars, where the Eiffel Tower stood less than a kilometer from them.
Abigail sits on the rail, enjoying the view and sipping a glass of champagne. “The French may have their flaws but damn, can they make a mean Chardonnay.”

Edward empties his glass, “yeah, but I still prefer margaritas.”

“This,” Abigail grabs the champagne bottle from his hand, “is wasted on you.”

“Bitch, don’t be taking stuff out of people’s hands. Rude.”

Abigail sticks her tongue out, “I do what I want,” and chugs from her bottle.

“It’s hard to believe you were part of the French Court,” he remarked.

“Oh, but I was. I was even friends with Marie Antoinette,” she grinned at the memory, “now that girl knew how to party.”

“You think she would like this?”

Abigail snorted, “I bet she’s cheering us on. These French fuckers hated her no matter what she did.” She takes another swing from the bottle, her expression becoming sad, “she was one of my closest friends.”

“Why didn’t you make her immortal?” he asked.

“I offered! But the stupid bitch wouldn’t take it!”

“You took ‘no’ for an answer,” Edward was genuinely surprised.

“Shut up you,” she empties the champagne bottle, “now get me another.”

Edward groaned but a sharp bark from Coyote grabbed Abigail’s attention. She blinked, her eyes linking with the sight of her guide and tugged Edward back to the rail, “they’re here.”

He followed her finger with a telescope and grinned, “About time. Who are they?”

“The one with white hair is the nation of Prussia, the one in that outdated dress is Belarus and the one with the resting bitch face is Hungary.”

Edward nodded, flipping up his hood and placed a black surgical mask over his face. He pulled out his pocketbook, “any requests?”

Abigail grinned, “surprise me.”

He skimmed through his pages, pulling three at random, “If you would.”

Abigail summons a gust of air, playfully twirling the pages down to the center of the snow-covered field. They leaned over the rail, waiting in anticipation.

The page in the middle ripples as a large pair of feline paws leaped off the page. The chimera was as large as a tiger, but it was solid black, his stripes barely seen.


Edward scoffed, “Look closer.”
She squinted, focusing her coyote’s vision as the tiger turned his head back. Abigail was taken aback, the tiger had two sets of eyes. They were black and soulless like a spider’s. One pair sat in the front while the second set was placed at the sides. The creature still had the features of a tiger, with fearsome fangs to match. Yet, at the corners of his mouth wielded two large pincers that shook with excitement. His tail was curved up, the tip nearly towered over his head. With closer inspection, Abigail realized it was a scorpion’s tail.

“I take back what I said.”

Edward grinned, “damn straight.”

From the far-left page, the head of a snake the size of a small wrecking ball slithers out. The gray-scaled snake sported white fur down its belly, causing Abigail’s eyebrow to raise until she realized it was merely the beast’s neck. The creature had the body of a leopard, with the legs of a mountain goat and a matching tail for its snake half.

Abigail’s jaw dropped, “is that-”

“The Blatant Beast? Well, it’s my interpretation of the monster,” he admitted. “What do you think?”

“I love it! You need to make more!”

“Do you realize how expensive leopards are,” he countered.

She ignored him, waiting to see the last chimera. Two massive lobster claws ripped through the page as the creature pulled itself up with uncanny strength. The chimera was covered in a hard, pale-yellow shell. Each claw matched the width of a motor scooter and its back and tail resembled that of yellowed shrimp. It stood on four legs with beady, black eyes and pink, paralytic tentacles spouting from its mouth.

“That thing looks familiar,” Abigail raked her brain for a clue to the origin of this beast.

“Remember when I got you guys to play D&D with me,” even through the mask, she could tell he was smiling.

Abigail’s eyes widened, “you actually brought one of those creatures to life from that dreadfully dull game?!”

“It’s not boring if you use your imagination!”

“Boy, I can summon fire from my hands and fly through the sky. What do I need of imagination?”

Edward rolled his eyes and mumbled, “you just don’t get it.” He then explained in a clearer tone, “it took me a few years, but wasn’t much of a challenge,” he remarked smugly.

“Have I ever told you how amazing you are?”

“No. And I would like to hear more.”

“Are they marked?” she asked.

“Always,” he pulled his sleeve down to show three tattoos. All were of the same design: a dark-lined head of a jackal. The ink glowed in a blue light as Edward brought his mouth close and ordered, “find the nations and rip them to shreds.”
Natalia instantly tensed, her highly tuned instincts commanding her to run. She spun to her left and found three, terrifying beasts making a B-line straight for them.

“What the fuck are those things?!” Gilbert exclaimed.

“Chimeras,” Elizabeta answered, wielding her cavalry sword at the ready.

“Ugly chimeras,” Natalia added as she held a dagger in each hand. “The snake is mine.”

“I’ll get the tiger,” Elizabeta proclaimed.

“I guess I’ll have the weird lobster thing. Good thing I like seafood,” Gilbert smirked.

Natalia ignored his distasteful joke and charged for the snake-headed creature. The chimera ran on goat legs as it leaped with speed and grace. Once at a closer range, the head launched forward, baring its fangs for the kill. Natalia dropped to her knees, using her momentum and the snow to glide under the beast.

She could feel her tights rip and her skin sting due to the cold and ice. She ignored the pain and leveled her blade to reach the chimera’s heart. The terrible thing was clever and jumped back on its rear legs. Natalia rolled to the side, missing the stomp of its hooves by a centimeter. She reeled back and sliced a cut along its back thigh. It hissed out in pain and circled its tail around her ankle. It jerked it up into the air and flung her aside like a ragdoll.

She braced herself for impact, but unfortunately, France did not possess the massive amount of snow that she hoped would cushion her fall. She skidded along the thin powder and ice, rolling to a stop. She shook off the ache in her shoulders and back and threw a dagger. The chimera dodged, curving around her for another strike.

Natalia ducked and the chimera maneuvered its head to strike below. No time to dodge, she blocked the assault with the kitchen knife. The blade laid flat against the chimera’s two massive fangs as she struggled to hold it back.

Against her better judgment, she spared a glance to the others. Liz made continuous strikes for the tiger, but the beast would either jump back or block with one of its pincers. Then its tail launched, the stinger ready. Liz backed up, but it left her open for the chimera’s pincers and fangs. Liz was quick to react, throwing herself aside, barely missing the pincer.

Prussia was more vocal, “what the fuck is this thing made of?!”

He slashed at the hard-shelled creature, but it was ineffective. The abomination swept a claw at him, and he ducked, swinging for a leg. The blade clashed against its skin and he cursed. The chimera wasn’t made for speed, which gave Prussia the advantage. Yet, what it lacked in speed, it made up for in strength. The chimera back-handed him, sending Prussia half-way across the field.

Natalia cursed, she’s on her own.

Her chimera inched closer, snapping at her face. She struggled to hold it back and made the desperate move of kicking the creature. The attack itself was minimal, but the chimera winced, shutting its eyes. Natalia used that brief opening to pull the knife from the mouth and plunge it into its neck.

The chimera reeled back, screeching in agony. Natalia sat up and ended the vile creature with a
single dagger through its eye. It whimpered as it dropped to the ground, laying in a pool of blood.

Natalia spun for Liz, throwing two daggers at the tiger chimera. Both landed on its side and it roared in protest, shifting its focus on Natalia. The chimera maneuvered its tail for her and Natalia smirked.

Before it could make contact, Liz sliced clean through its tail. Blood poured like a faucet, showering them as the beast swished its disfigured tail in panic. Using this moment, Natalia made the killing blow by stabbing the tiger in the head. The beast wobbled, fighting against death as it fell, growing still.

“Thanks,” Liz panted, trying to catch her breath.

She nodded and looked over, “do I have to save him too?”

Liz followed her gaze to Prussia on the ground, with his blade blocking a claw and the creature looming over him. Its pink tentacles reaching out for him.

“Nope, not into tentacles… Not into tentacles!” Prussia exclaimed.

Liz surveyed the area, arching a brow at the snake/leopard hybrid, “how long is the tail?”

“It’s retractable. Why?” Natalia asked.

Gilbert kicked at the vile creature with little success. His mind running through hundreds of different scenarios, to find the best outcome that doesn’t involve him dying or being eaten.

He didn’t have many options.

Then the chimera raised its other claw, preparing to slam it down.

Ah, fuck.

He braced for impact but before it could make contact, a snake tail was lassoed around the claw and dragged back.

He could hear Liz exclaim, “Nat! Now!”

Then in a blur of silver and purple, Natalia plunges the cavalry sword clean through its mouth. The blade tore through to the back of its head. Screeching, the chimera tried in vain to reach for the handle.

“Gil! The saber!” shouted Liz.

Gilbert threw his sword as Liz dropped the tail and ran up the back of the chimera. In one move, she catches the sword by the handle and aims for the open wound. She slices through the neck; blood gushed as its head dangled from a piece of stubborn flesh.

The chimera was dead when it hit the ground, its blood soaking the snow and Gilbert’s good pants. But he didn’t care. He stared down at this strange creature, processing the thought of magickal created beasts being real and nearly killing him. The adrenaline was still coursing through his body, and a part of him was, dare he say, excited.

He began to laugh.
“What’s so funny?” Liz asked as she pulled both blades from the chimera’s head.

“I haven’t had this much fun in years,” he proclaimed truthfully.

“You are an absolute fool,” said Natalia.

“I hear that’s your type,” Gilbert muttered under his breath, but she heard.

He knew this, for a dagger came flying for his head. He weaved, and she prepared to throw another.

“Hey!” Liz stepped between them. “Stop trying to kill him,” she gave a pointed look at Natalia. “And you,” she directed her next warning at Gilbert, “stop provoking her.”

“Aw, they all died,” Abigail proclaimed nonchalantly and drank more champagne.

Edward clutched the rail, nearly snapping the metal in two. “Lexi!” he called for his guide and commanded, “kill them.”

“Where did those things even come from?” Gilbert asked.

“Does this Abigail create chimeras?” Natalia added.

Elizabeta shook her head, “the making of chimeras with this sort sophistication; had to be made by a skillful alchemist.”

“Alchemist? There’re alchemists now? Are they like from the anime?” Gilbert questioned.

Liz sighed, “yes, but think of them more as mad scientists.”

“Weren’t they all?” Natalia remarked.

Before Elizabeta could comment a gust of hot, humid air swirled around them.

“Ah fuck, where did that come from?” Gilbert squirmed in his jacket.

Elizabeta scanned the area, frustrated when she was met with an empty field. She cursed, “get to the tower! She’s up there!”

They sprint for the structure but were blocked by a gigantic dog, that seemed to appear out of thin air. It stood at nearly thirty feet in length, with a long snout and pointed ears. But, strangely, the beast was completely blue. Blue in every shade and hue and his eyes had no irises or pupils. He was simply a giant blue dog.

Elizabeta was more than a little confused.

“Is this a chimera?” Gil asked.

“I don’t think so.”

Impulsively, Natalia throws a dagger, but it merely flies through the animal.
Natalia’s jaw dropped, Elizabeta’s eyes widened and Gilbert announced, “hold up; are we fighting a ghost dog?!”

“I’m a jackal,” the beast corrected in a feminine voice and shot a roll of blue flame from her mouth.

The nations ran for cover, using the body of the lobster chimera as a shield.

“Ok.” Gilbert took a moment to think. “It talks, breathes fire and weapons go right through it. Any ideas?”

“Run,” Natalia stated calmly.

“We are not running,” Elizabeta proclaimed.

“Liz. We don’t have guides; we don’t have magick and none of us here have been trained to be exorcists.”

“I could call Kiku,” Gilbert offered.

“Unless he can throw holy water through his phone, I don’t think he’ll be much help,” Natalia countered.

Another wave of flame hits the chimera, the fire nearly melting through the flesh. The nations lower themselves but Elizabeta knew they didn’t have much time.

“Ireland is in the 16th, we can go to her for help,” Natalia advised.

“I second that,” Gil agreed.

“Fine,” Elizabeta exclaimed. “But we all can’t go. Someone has to stay and distract it. You two bring back Fiona.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Gilbert proclaimed. “Besides, I would only slow Nat down.”

Natalia nodded, “he’s not wrong.”

“Okay,” Elizabeta took a moment to strategize. “Nat, wait here once we have her full attention. The fire has stopped, for now. It seems to have a timestamp of two minutes before each breath-”

“Liz, he’s gone,” she interrupted.

“Huh?” Elizabeta spun, finding Gilbert running out in open field.

“Hey! Over here you overgrown bitch!”

The jackal leaped after him, shooting out massive fireballs. Gilbert dodged both, but what caught Elizabeta’s attention was that each ball was concentrated. It took longer for the jackal to make the attack and the rest time seemed to increase.

“Alright, I think I know how to distract it, you go…” her words faded once she realized Natalia was already sprinting across the field.

The jackal’s ears twitched, and she snapped her head around.

“No! Hey! Over here! Over here! Come and get me you stupid bitch!” Gilbert taunted.
She ignored him and chased after Natalia.

Elizabeta reacted on instinct throwing her sword. The blade soared through the body and landed in the snow.

“Fasz!” she cursed in her native tongue.

The jackal soared over Natalia, blocking her escape. She opened her mouth and fire sputtered to life. Then as the flame launched forward, an enormous bird that illuminated in a bright green light tackled the jackal to the ground.

Natalia didn’t bother looking back till she was at Elizabeta side, “now what is that?”

“It…” Elizabeta whispered to herself, “it's a nightingale.”

The jackal jumped back, with her fangs aiming for the bird’s neck. The bird flew back, its eyes gleaming as it blasted huge gusts of wind. Vines spouted from the ground, wrapping themselves around the jackal. She shot out more flame, but with each vine she burned a new one would take its place. She then bit at her restraints but it wasn’t long till a muzzle was tied around her snout. Then the jackal was yanked to the ground, the vines keeping her pinned.

“Settle down pup, no need for violence,” said the nightingale.

Once the bird spoke, Elizabeta instantly knew who he was. She turned for the Eiffel Tower with one thought in mind, Katherina was here.

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**East of the 16th Arrondissement**

Tino and Berwald had found themselves near the Palais de Tokyo, an art museum that was holding a special exhibit for the holiday. People scrambled for the streets, screaming the names of loved ones as others desperately tried to evacuate from the burning museum.

A middle-aged man seemed to be the last to escape. He collapsed to his knees, shaking from harsh coughing fits.

Berwald stepped forward, “are you alright?” he asked in broken French.

“Yes,” he answered, “but there was a woman. Trapped under a pillar.”

As he forced himself to speak, the windows blew out. Glass shards flew as the flames grew higher and higher.

Berwald instantly ran for the entrance and Tino followed. Both shouted in French and English, straining their ears for an answer.

“Do you think the smoke got to her?” Tino questioned.

Berwald didn’t answer, distracted by a sound, “did you hear that?”

Tino closed his eyes, focusing on a desperate cry for help, “there!”
He led them down a corridor, entering a room with white pillars that crisscrossed each other. In the center, the pillars were painted brown as they twisted into one another, presenting the appearance of tree branches. The fire was consuming the room, causing the structure to weaken. One pillar had subsided, trapping the mid-section of a dark-haired woman.

“There she is!” Tino sprinted for her, bending down for a pulse.

The woman groaned and Tino sighed in relief, “she’s alive. Berwald, help me.”

He nodded, advancing to lift the pillar. Tino gripped the other side and on the count of three, they heaved it up and tossed it forward.

Tino panted and rubbed his already sore arms, “I need to hit the gym more often.”

“You know I love you just the way you are,” Berwald stated.

“I appreciate that, but that was not what I meant.”

The woman groans once more and Tino kneels beside her, asking in French, “can you walk?”

She coughed, nodding weakly.

Tino still helps her to her feet as Berwald secured her right arm around his neck. The woman expressed her gratitude, thanking them repeatedly.

Tino gave a reassuring smile, “you can thank us once we’re out of here.”

She was silent for a moment and when she spoke her French was replaced with flawless English.

“I’m afraid neither of you are leaving.”

Before Tino could process her words, his lungs had stopped working as if forgetting function. He struggled for air, reaching for his chest, and found to his dismay that his body and clothes had turned to stone. Tino jerked his head right, meeting Berwald’s eyes, he too was turning into stone.

The woman had peeled herself off them, straightening her limbs like she had awoken from a nap. “And here I thought you two would be more of a challenge,” her tone conveyed pride, but she couldn’t hide her disappointment.

Tino took in her features, noticing her lean figure and copper skin. He recalled Lukas’ descriptions of the Immortals, and this woman fit the profile. He tried to confirm his hunch, but his voice wouldn’t work. All he could do was pour every ounce of hate, anger and the promise of vengeance into his eyes. There was no doubt that Berwald was glaring at her just as menacingly.

She was unimpressed, “if this is any consolation, your son put up quite the fight.”

Tino’s glare vanished, replaced with fear and anxiety for Peter. The image of his son being hurt was Tino’s final thought as his face lost feeling and his vision went black.

Once the spell had taken full effect, Mara stepped forward and dug her thumb into the corner of Finland’s left eye. The jewel was released with a satisfying pop.

“A smoky quartz,” she analyzed, “it will do.”
Mara made quick work in gathering their eyes and slipping the jewels into her fanny pack. She spares a moment, taking in their tormented expressions. Their hollow sockets gave them an eerie and disturbing presence. Mara showed little sympathy as she gives a single push. Sending both statues crashing to the floor; shattering them into pieces.

**West of the 16th Arrondissement**

Mikkel and Erik had split from Tino and Berwald, taking to the suburbs of the 16th arrondissement. Evacuating people from the spreading wildfire that was currently engulfing the nearby park.

“It’s getting closer,” Erik remarked, looking up as black smoke covered the sky.

“Hey, have more faith in your big brother,” Mikkel smiled, in hopes of lightening the mood.

Erik turned to him, annoyed but concerned, “this has to be magick right? I mean, an earthquake, a wildfire, all we’re missing is a tornado and a tsunami.”

“Maybe the witches should save themselves the trouble and combine the last two elements: make a sharknado,” Mikkel snickered at his own joke.

Erik didn’t care for it, “and while they’re at it, they can make you two working brain cells.”

“Sick burn bro, did you get that off your Tumblr?”

“Fuck you.”

They made their way down a road, watching as people scattered. Mikkel climbed on top of a car and shouts out instructions in French, informing the public to keep going west to avoid the fires.

*Please make your way on foot, leave roads open for emergency vehicles,*” he finished.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd as they headed west, leaving behind expensive cars.

Mikkel jumps off the car and whistles; admiring a 1962, classic red Alfa Romeo, “we in the fancy neighborhood.”

“It doesn’t look like anything special,” Erik deadpanned.

“It’s vintage,” Mikkel explained, “the older something gets, the more valuable it becomes.”

“So, unlike you,” Erik smirked.

Mikkel arched a brow, “look who decided to have a personality today.”

*Ella!* Their playful banter was interrupted by a woman crying out a name.

*Ella! Where are you?! Answer me?!”* The woman was tall and slim, wearing a tight-fitting cocktail dress and stylish heels.

A man stood beside her, calling out for an Ella as well.
“Ma’am, who are you looking for?” asked Mikkel.

“My daughter, we were having a party and we were in the house when the earthquake,” she let out an exhausted sigh. “An earthquake in Paris, how is this-”

The fire had struck a neighbor’s fuse box, causing the device to explode, and the flames consumed the mansion.

Mikkel cursed in Danish before exclaiming in French, “Ma’am, take your husband and evacuate. We’ll stay and look for your daughter.”

“But-but you don’t know what she looks like,” she argued.

“All I have to do is look for a slightly younger version of the most beautiful woman I have met tonight,” Mikkel reassured her with a smile.

Erik rolled his eyes.

The couple shared a worried glance, but they followed Mikkel’s advice. Before they turned to leave, the woman had pointed to the mansion farther down the street. From the direction the pair of nations came through mere moments ago. Mikkel and Erik sprinted back, neither taking notice of the rooted-out tree. They entered the grounds, calling out for Ella as the heat grew closer.

“Maybe she evacuated,” proclaimed Erik.

“Then why would her mother be running around looking for her?” Mikkel examines the area, finally taken notice of the gaping hole where the tree once stood. He raised a brow, glanced to the tree on the road and back; *huh, that’s weird.*

He stepped closer and found a pair of hoof prints.

*Very weird.*

“Erik, check this out,” Mikkel gestured for him.

Erik made a face, “are those hoof prints?”

“Yeah.”

“But there’s only two.”

“Yeah.”

Erik looked at Mikkel with wide, frightened eyes, “then what’s out here?”

“Telling by the size, it’s a chimera and the fact it stands on two legs, means it was mixed with human,” stated Mikkel.

Erik fell silent, and Mikkel worried about how he was holding up. “Hey, you okay?”

Erik scoffed, brushing off Mikkel’s concern with a firm expression, “don’t treat me like I’m a kid.” He turns around walking towards the mansion, “come on; after we find the girl, we still gotta find Peter.”

Mikkel sighed, *stubborn as always.*
Mikkel moves for the garden while Erik checks the front door. Erik avoids the broken glass, shouting for Ella or anyone that could be in the house.

Mikkel yanks apart two bushes along the stone path, discovering a teenaged girl leaning against the house.

He instantly perked up, “Erik! I think I found her!”

He kneeled beside the girl, pushing back her hair as he checked her pulse. Mikkel sighed in relief when he felt a steady heartbeat and found no fatal injuries.

“Oh, okay sweetie. Let’s get you to your parents,” he moves to carry her but stopped when he heard a blood-curdling scream.

Mikkel flings his head around to discover Erik on his knees, clutching his face.

“Erik! What happened? What happened?!”

“I-I-I can’t-oh god I can’t-,” he whimpered as blood streaked down his cheeks and dripped onto the snow.

“Let me see,” Mikkel repeated the phrase till the younger nation tilted his head up.

Mikkel was greeted with a gruesome sight. Blood continued to flow, mixing with tears and bits of flesh. Both optic nerves dangled as blood splattered and Erik’s nose twitched. He cried out in frustration and panic, forcing himself to blink, but he no longer had eyelids. All the two gaping holes had, were a pair of deep cuts along the corners.

That’s when Mikkel realized, Erik’s eyes had been crawled out.

Mikkel hasty wrapped his scarf around Erik’s head, instructing him to keep pressure on the wound.

“Mikkel,” Erik cried, “Mikkel, I don’t-I don’t know-”

“Erik, I need you to calm down. Slow your heartbeat. I’m gonna get you to a hospital ok. Ok?”

Mikkel moves for the girl as Erik continued to mutter, “it was-it was fingers-fingers, I felt fingers before-before-”

“Fingers?” Mikkel questioned.

“He means me.”

Mikkel shifted his attention on a young, dark-haired woman. She gave a small smirk as she held out a gem in each hand. The stones caught the light of the flame, displaying fragments of purple and blue in their hue.

He immediately knew where those jewels came from.

Mikkel charged for the woman, throwing a fist. The woman dipped back and swept a leg. Mikkel seized the opening to stomp on her ankle. He heard bone snap under the pressure and the woman growled in pain. She retaliates with a root shooting out of the ground. Mikkel reeled back and she summoned more, all thick in width and sharp at the tip.

He maneuvered, relying on his experiences and quick reflexes to keep him alive.
“What’s happening?!” Erik shouted.

“Just stay back!” Mikkel made the mistake of looking away, for another root had nicked him just above his left eye.

He cursed, ignoring the pain. He charged once more; jumping from side to side, predicting where the roots would be with uncanny accuracy. Once he was close, he leaped for the witch; clutching her coat and held up his right fist for a satisfying blow.

But he couldn’t move his arm.

He blinked in confusion and glanced to his raised hand. Tumors had formed throughout his palm and fingers, growing at a remarkable rate. They twitched and squirmed, nearly breaking free from his skin and gloves.

“I was wondering how long it would take to make an effect,” noted the woman.

She pried his fingers off her coat and tore off his clothes, stripping him bare from the waist up. She observed these tumors, taking note of their rapid progress. They had spread throughout his shoulders, including his arms and cascaded down his back and chest. They pulsed angrily, consuming every inch of flesh as they expanded in length and width. Mikkel tried to move his legs, but they too were overcome by swelling tumors.

“I’m surprised you didn’t feel them till now,” the woman casually added.

At that moment, Mikkel felt the splitting headache. The throbbing coursed a path through his skull, sending waves of pain to his entire body. He let out an agonizing cry as the tumors in his legs ripped through his skin and clothes. This was when he realized; these tumors were roots.

“Mikkel?!” Erik cried, “Mikkel! What’s happening?!”

“It’s o-kay Erik, it’s okay,” he reassured.

The woman arched a brow, seeing through his lie. “Is it though?”

Her statement was directly followed by an excruciating tear of skin. Roots had ripped apart flesh and bone alike, reaching for the ground beneath Mikkel. He cried out once more and tried desperately to yank his legs free.

“W-hy?” he panted, “why are you doing this?”

The woman’s casually demeanor had transformed, becoming fiercely wrathful and rancorous.

“You ask why?” she remarked. “Did you foolishly believe you could outlive your enemies?” She gave a harsh chuckle and shook her head, “you all really think you could outrun your demons?”

The roots jerked Mikkel’s arms to his sides as they spilt opened each finger. He ground his teeth, refusing to scream.

She stepped closer, whispering in his ear, “Consider this our declaration of war.”

With a triumphant smirk, she sinks into the earth.
“Mikkel? Mikkel, what’s happening?! Mikkel!”

The shouting stirred Ella awake. At first, she was in a daze; blinking until her vision cleared, and to her horror, stumbled upon a living nightmare.

A young blond man stood before her as enlarged tree roots slithered out of his body. They slit through his skin like paper and ripped through flesh and bone like wet mud. His body was an absolute mess of blood and chopped apart organs. His shoulders, neck, and face were still intact as his heart continued to beat. Whatever was happening to him, he felt every moment of it.

Ella’s jaw hung open, completely stunned.

A teenaged boy, probably closer to Ella’s age, kept shouting: “Mikkel… Mikkel, I smell blood! What’s happening?! Why won’t you answer me?!?”

That’s when Ella noticed the boy had a bloody scarf tied around his eyes. She swallowed, preparing to speak but was stopped by a wet gurgle. Ella turns back to the man as a root began tearing its way up his throat. Blood dripped him his mouth, nose, ears, and eyes. The root expanded, spreading out limbs thick enough to see under his skin.

Ella covered her mouth, holding back a sobbing scream.

The man’s head jerked in her direction, his crystal blue eyes were filled with blood and tears. He tried to speak, instead choked on a silent scream. The root had broken through his mouth, breaking his jaw apart with a sickening crack. His skin darkened and his hair fell in chunks. His body began to fuse with the root as the tree took form. Branches stretched for the sky; expanding in width as thick, luscious leaves spouted on each limb.

The tree presented an unearthly beauty; at any other time, it would have been a sign of spring. Its vivid green leaves were a stark contrast with the snow, and the bark was a healthy shade of brown. The aroma of fresh grass and dirt overwhelmed Ella, jolting her out her shock.

“Mikkel!” the boy shouted, “Mikkel!”

Ella watched as the boy crawled through blood and flesh to reach the tree. Once he found a root, he clawed his nails into the bark and forced himself to stand, but failed. He slipped on his friend’s blood, hitting his head on the trunk with a loud thud.

He cursed and cursed, yelling in a language Ella didn’t understand. He slammed a fist against the tree, screaming out in frustration and anger.

Ella curls into herself; not sure on what do or what to say. The boy’s shouting quickly dissolves into bawling. The only word Ella could make out was ‘Mikkel’.

She finds her nerve and prepares to speak, to give comfort, to do anything. Then she notices the blood, the scarlet becoming a dark brown against the snow. The pieces of flesh, bone, and organs that had been scattered were crumbling into piles of dirt.

Ella realized; she was hallucinating, she had to be. People turning into trees as their bodies crumbled into dust. Humanoid chimeras. Shapeshifters. Even that crying boy. It was all in her head. She shuts herself off mentally and closed her eyes. She covered her ears, ignoring the boy’s cries. Eventually, he falls silent, and Ella sinks deeper within herself, afraid to open her eyes.
In Bois de Boulogne of the 16th Arrondissement

Lukas had followed Fiona and Dylan into Bois de Boulogne. A public park that was currently being engulfed in flame. Dylan worked on suffocating the fire, taking away its air. Fiona breathed in the flames, absorbing the heat. Lukas provides his talent for water magick, locating the pond nearby and commanding the water to rise.

“Are there any people?” he asked.

“Not sure,” Fiona answered.

“Now why did we let Alistair and Killian go off with Swiss? We could have used their help,” stated Dylan.

“They would only be in the way. Dylan help Lukas make rain. I’ll keep the fire at bay.”

Lukas looks to Dylan, “are you ready?”

Dylan nodded and whispered under his breath, “Lleu Llaw Gyffes give me guidance.”

Lukas wrote out the Laguz rune over his palm and channeled the pond water. The water then raced for the sky as Dylan outstretched his hands and chanted in old Welsh:

“Come forth the eastern wind, bring forth the wrath Lleu and quench this flame!”

The water and clouds churned, spiraling together as thunder shook the sky. Lukas and Dylan shared a glance and moved in sync, commanding the storm to expand. The rain poured, drenching them in a violent shower. The fire hissed and sizzled, reducing to smoke in mere minutes.

“Excellent!” Fiona grinned. “Any way for this storm to cover the city?”

“We can try,” Dylan held out his hands to Lukas.

Before Lukas could take his hands, a blur of yellow leaped out of the bushes. In a blink of an eye, it sped across the clearing and back into the forest, taking Dylan’s head with it.

Dylan’s decapitated body dropped and Lukas surrounded himself with deadly sharp icicles. Fiona tried to light fire from her hands, but the rain snuffed out any chance of heat.

“Dammit! Lukas, stop the storm-”

Vines spouted from the ground, entangling her within their grasp. Fiona struggled against her bondage as the vines began to submerge her into the earth.

Lukas grabbed an icicle and hurriedly cuts at the vines. They retaliated by seizing him by his coat and hurling him against a neighboring tree.

He landed with a bruising smack and dropped into a bush. He heard Fiona spit out insults and curses, the woman refused to be taken without a decent fight.

I see why Mikkel is fond of her, he thought offhandedly.

Lukas threw two shards, slicing the vines that bound Fiona’s hands. She instantly gripped them and began to tear at the vines, freeing herself. They met back to back, wilding their ice daggers at the
ready.

“It’s her isn’t it,” Fiona sneered.

“The jaguar witch, I think Amy said her name was Mara,” added Lukas.

Fiona flicked her fingers and cursed when her spell failed. “Can you stop the rain?!” she demanded Lukas.

He shook his head, “no. But I can do this. Make a shield.”

Fiona conjured a force field as Lukas blew out a blast of freezing air, turning each raindrop into a shard of ice. Then with a snap of his fingers, the shards showered over the park. He sent out a second wave, enlarging the icicles to the size of horses. They were capable enough to pierce through the ground, able to reach six meters below the surface. By the third wave, the rain had stopped and Lukas’ spell wore off.

Fiona brought her shield down and analyzed the damage, “well so much for trying to save the park.”

“But I am flattered,” a voice echoed.

Both nations jumped to attention, finding Mara sitting in a nearby tree.

“All this effort,” she gestured to the area, “for nothing.”

Lukas and Fiona extended their hands; he would secure her to that tree while Fiona torch it like a bonfire. They had their plan, but their magick had forsaken them.

Both he and Fiona struggled to perform a single spell.

“What is happening?” Fiona whispered, watching in horror as tumors covered the back of her hand.

“Hm, the seeds can neutralize your magick,” Mara realized. “Good to know.”

Then a branch split apart her palm, stretching towards the sky. She screamed, allowing another branch to crawl out her mouth.

Lukas moved for Fiona, but roots had ripped through his calf muscles. They continued to slice through his legs, digging themselves within the earth. He felt his lungs tightened, his airways being blocked by branches. His arms were split apart for the branches, and his legs were fused into the trunk. He then felt the roots surround his heart, squeezing it till it stopped beating.

In the center of the 16th Arrondissement

Alfred weaved around abandoned cars, slightly amazed that most of the citizens of Paris had evacuated from the 16th arrondissement so quickly. The chimera soared above and made quick dives for Alfred. He dodged each assault with ease, picking up the pace with each attempt.

Okay, think Jones. He wants to kill Ella; but why?

The chimera summons a gust of wind, knocking Alfred off his feet. He maneuvers, rolling back into
a sprint and ducking into an aisle. He took that moment to rest, breathing air through his nose and raking his brain for solutions.

“Ugh! I don’t have time to figure out a motive,” he rubbed his face, scrambling for a plan. “Ok, ok, if that thing wants her dead. It can have her.”

He jumped out into the open, waving his arms in the air, “Hey bird-brain! Over here!”

The chimera spun around and dove, hooves first. Alfred jumped out of the way and sprinted farther down the road. Calling out insults and jabs along the way. He dodges the creature’s attacks a few more times. Can’t make it too easy now, he smirked and purposely slowed his pace.

On cue, the beast swept in and snatched Alfred up. The chimera pushed on, taking an air current for a cruise. Alfred overexaggerated his struggle; squirming in the chimera’s grasp.

*Don’t use too much strength, remember you’re an eighteen-year-old girl.*

“What?” he whimpered, his eyes tearing up. “You don’t want to do this… Ah…” *Shit! What did Ella call him?* After a painfully long minute, it came to him, “Rey... Rey, please… please let me go…”

For a moment, the chimera’s eyes softened and his voice was surprisingly sweet, “I can’t.”

Then without hesitation, Rey dropped Alfred into a thirty-foot free fall. He released a bone-chilling scream as he flapped his limbs, trying to fight gravity.

*Ok, keep screaming… Fray around for a bit and remember to land face first.*

As the pavement grew closer, Alfred prepared an illusion, ready to deceive Rey with a gruesome scene. He closed his eyes, relaxing his muscles for the impending collision.

But it never came.

He opened his eyes to find he was mere inches from the ground. He was floating in mid-air thanks to telekinesis. Alfred scoured the area and found a young witch woman with olive skin and wild, dark curls.

“Dammit! No!” he exclaimed.

The witch blinked, taken by surprise.

Rey hissed and dived for the finishing blow. He sank his talons into Alfred’s back and ripped through flesh with an effortless swipe.

Instead of blood, Rey was greeted with a claw covered in stardust.

“I guess the cat’s out of the bag,” Alfred shook off the pain and grasped Rey’s arm.

Alfred threw Rey over his back, pinning a wing down with his foot. He morphed a bowie knife out of thin air and aimed for the throat. Quickly, Rey snatched his arm and shoved him off. Rey then took for the sky, flying back to where he came.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Alfred clapped his hands together and formed a rope, a lasso at the ready.

He swung the lasso high and hooked Rey by the hoof, “where do you think you’re going, handsome? Your fight is with me.”
Rey tried to cut the rope, but his talons had no effect. Alfred grinned and began to tow him in. Rey flapped his wings, gathering height. Alfred was yanked forward, but he gained his footing and conjured another rope. He sent the second lasso for Rey’s right wing and Rey shot out a massive gust of wind.

The force of this wind was able to overturn cars and uproot young trees. Alfred made himself heavy, maintaining his balance but the witch had no such luck.

Alfred heard the witch scream, holding on to a lamppost for dear life but her fingers were slipping. Alfred instantly dropped the rope and rushed for her. He launched on to the lamppost, gripping the witch by the wrist.

“Hang on!” he shouted over the winds and pulled her forward. He tucked her into his chest, protecting her from debris. It was slightly awkward, due to the fact that Ella’s body was shorter than the witch’s but he made it work.

When the wind had finally died down, they collapsed, hitting the pavement with a resounding smack.

The witch panted, pushing back her curls off her face, “did that—did that chimera just do magick?!”

“Yeah, it did,” Alfred sighed.

Rey spun for his escape and Alfred cursed, sprinting for the first rope.

“Nope, nope, nope,” he tugged Rey back, “we’re not done here!”

Rey sneered and flapped his wings, preparing for another blast. Alfred stood his ground, and the witch joined him, holding her piece of rope behind him.

“Get out of here witch; this doesn’t involve you.”

“My name is Juliet,” she emphasized. “And I won’t let this thing wreak havoc on my city.”

Alfred smiled, “I could respect that. A piece of advice; hang on to me not the rope.”

Juliet wrapped her arms around Alfred’s waist, and he glared at Rey, “hit us with your best shot!”

Rey released an ear-piercing screech, causing both Alfred and Juliet to cover their ears. Rey didn’t lighten up, his voice resounded, reaching a ten-mile radius. Windows shattered, car alarms blared and animals and people alike howled in pain.

Alfred shut off his eardrums, taking a moment to enjoy the silence. He then picked up the rope, heaved Rey into a twirl and demolished him face first into a building.

Alfred turned back to Juliet, “are you okay?”

He noticed her once chocolate eyes had changed to a vibrant pink. Her hands were glowing in the same color as they massaged her temples. She spoke, but Alfred didn’t hear her voice.

Oh right, he turned his hearing on, “sorry, could you repeat that?”

Juliet’s eyes widened with concern, “oh no, did you go deaf?”

She moved to examine his ears, but he gently pushed her back, “you could say that. But I’m good, really.”
Rey came crashing out of the building, declaring, “Enough!”

“Oooh, you mad bro?” Alfred couldn’t help but laugh.

“How are you not scared?” Juliet asked.

“Who said I wasn’t?” he cracked his knuckles, “come on Rey, care for round three? Or four? I forgot, how many times have I kicked your ass tonight?”

Rey opened his mouth to screech, but a chunk of ice lounged itself inside his throat.

“None of that now,” a young Asian man spoke up.

Alfred watched in amazement as this man chopped a water hydrant in half using a long-bladed katana. Water rocketed to the sky, charging directly for Rey. The water swirled and churned, incasing Rey in a prison of ice. He plummeted to the ground, but the prison proved to be indestructible. Rey desperately flapped his wings and clawed at his cage; all were done in vain.

“I’ve been around the world, and I’ve seen my fair share of magick, but this,” the man gestured to Rey, “as Americans would say, takes the cake.”

“You got no idea,” stated Alfred.

Juliet sighed in relief, “you must be a Warrior from the Shinto shrine not too far from here. Thank you, sir.”

The man snorted, “I’m not a Warrior. Just a dashing, devil-may-care Freelancer, saving a pair of lovely ladies.”

“Ladies?” Alfred quirked a brow, confused till he remembered, right, I still look like Ella.

Juliet’s relief turned sour, “a Freelancer?! Are you expecting us to pay you for saving our lives?”

“Oh, chérie no, telling by your clothes you can’t even afford dinner, let alone afford me,” the man simply stated as if fact.

Alfred took a step back, the last thing I need is to be in the middle of a fight between witches.

“I can afford food, sir,” Juliet proclaimed, annoyed.

“Yes, I hear McDonald’s has a wide range of burgers nowadays,” he brushed her aside and turned to Alfred. “Miss Ella Chasse, a pleasure,” he lifted Alfred’s hand and kissed it. “My name is Takehiko Besson, skilled swordsman and exorcist at your service. I’m certain a young lady of your standing, would offer a modest fortune to anyone that could safety escort you home. And, as if by fate, here I am.”

Alfred caught Juliet rolling her eyes and muttering something in French. Probably calling him a pompous ass, he concluded.

“Um,” Alfred rubbed the back of his neck, “I’m not Ella Chasse.”

He then dropped Ella’s form and returned to his tall, wide-build structure.

Takehiko and Juliet gaped at him, completely shocked.

Alfred glanced back to his hand, still in Takehiko’s, “you gonna ask me out on a date or what?”
Takehiko lets go, “how-how?”

“Don’t ignore me!” Rey screamed, summoning a blast of wind and shattering his prison from the inside.

“Get down!” Alfred covered Juliet and Takehiko from the ice shards, blocking them from the worst of it.

Rey dived for them and Takehiko sliced his blade through his wing. Rey howled in pain, crushing to the pavement. The rag-tag group rose and watched in horror as the blood worms carried Rey’s detached wing back to him. They worked quickly, fusing his wing back in place as if new.

Alfred groaned, well fuck me.

Takehiko yelped, shaking off his coat and discovered blood worms digging into his skin. Juliet jumped to action; her hands blazed with a rosy-hued flame and burns the worms off.

“What is this?!” Takehiko demanded.


“What’s it doing on a chimera?!’ questioned Juliet.

*We would all like to know that,* Alfred sighed.

Rey charged for them and Alfred takes him head on. He hooked Rey into a headlock, wrestling him to the ground. Rey elbowed Alfred in the gut, causing him to lose his grip. Rey then grabbed Alfred by his hair and rammed him into the ground. Completely blinded by bloodlust, Rey continued to slam Alfred against the pavement.

In a split second, Alfred caught Takehiko conjuring ice spikes and chucked them at Rey.

Rey dropped him and took to the sky. Alfred shook off the daze and Takehiko turned to Juliet.

“Shoot it with fire!”

Juliet froze, wringing her hands together nervously, “I-I can’t.”

“What?!” Takehiko and Alfred both exclaimed.

“I don’t do fire magick,” explained Juliet.

“You just did it a second ago!” Takehiko recalled.

“That was different,” she reasoned.

“How was that different?!” he shouted.

“I’m not used to fighting,” she admitted.

“Oh, that explains everything! You damned pink pacifist!”

Juliet’s fear turned into anger, “at least I’m not a pale, selfish jerk!”

“Hey!” Alfred yelled, “this is not the time!”

*It seems I’m the mature one here, which is definitely a bad sign.* Alfred manifested another lasso and
aimed it for Rey.

Rey caught the lasso by the wrist and swung Alfred to collide with the bickering witches.

_Yup, really bad._

“Ugh, how much do you weigh?” Takehiko groaned from beneath Alfred.

“You know it’s rude to ask someone’s weight,” stated Alfred.

“I think it’s a fair question to ask when you’re crushing us,” Juliet added.

Rey stood over them, “We’re done here.”

He launched himself into the air and began to spin. Gaining speed to the point it began to pull wind towards him.

Alfred knew what was coming, “Taki, stab your sword into the ground!”

“What did you just call me?”

“Shut up and listen to me!” Alfred shook him. “Stab your sword into the ground, good and deep and hang on tight.”

The winds howled as the clouds above swirled to connect to Rey. Massive clouds and smoke were pulled into his twister, causing cars and buildings to shake.

Takehiko didn’t question Alfred any further. He plunged the katana into a soft patch of dirt and gripped the long handle. Alfred held Juliet close and secured an arm around Takehiko’s waist.

The twister came into formation as it lifted cars, roofs, and lampposts into its vortex. It ripped into the pavement, digging up large chunks of cement to add to its size. It grew closer as our rag-tag group of heroes clung for dear life.

_____________________

_I felt warm._

_Sunlight was breaking through the clouds, and I breathe it in, enjoying its heat._

_Two little arms wrap themselves around my neck, yanking me up. “Aunt Amy play with us! Come on!” pleaded Blair._

“Leave your aunt alone,” said Melissa, “she’s had a long plane ride. Let her rest.”

“But.”

“Blair if you could make me a chilly dog with a side of Doritos, I’m all yours,” I assured her.

“Really?”

“Yes, now go get me my chilly dog!”

“Okay!”

She runs for Dad and Sanjay, who were cooking burgers and hot dogs on the grill.
Melissa shook her head, “you traveled all over the world; probably had fancy, cultured meals and here you are, bargaining with nine-year-old for a chilly dog.”

“I'm a girl of humble origins, if I want a chilly dog, I'm gonna get that freaking chilly dog,” I stuck my tongue out at her.

“What were you expecting Mel?” Johnny called out to her, “That our wild Amy would come back to us all proper and ladylike?”

He then began to strut around with a raised nose and held out his hand to his side. Pretending he was holding up a long skirt, “Oh Lord Father and Lady Mother, it is I, Amy. I have returned from Europe, ready to take the hand of Sir Richard in holy matrimony.”

I laughed, “who's Sir Richard?”

He continued his act, “My future husband of course, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho.”

I laughed harder, “are you trying to laugh like Francis?”

“Yes, how is it? I've been working on my accent.”

“It's actually pretty good.”

Celine sighed, “this is the father of my child.”

Melissa placed a hand on her shoulder, “don’t worry, you have us.”

I giggled as Mom wrapped me in a bear-hug. She squeezed me tight, “oh baby girl, I’ve missed you so much.”

I relaxed, tucking my head into the nook of her neck and breathed in her scent. “I missed you too. I promise I’ll never be gone from home that long ever again.”

“Oh sweetie, don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

High tide crashed against the shore, reaching to my mid-section. My family was unfazed as they stared at me with emotionless expressions. The sea water was strangely cold. Almost painful, to the point that my body locked up, refusing to move.

Then a hand gripped my ankle and pulled me under.

Water filled my lungs as I kicked the hand away, fighting for the surface. I broke through, coughing up murky water as I found myself trapped under a layer of ice.

Peter floats beside me and it all came back to me.

Before I could formulate a plan, two hands dragged me back under. I clamp my lips together, keeping in air and looked down.

I was met with a pair of black pitched eyes. They belonged to a woman with long, silky dark hair and a slim physique. She was covered in fins and had a thick, scaly fish tail.

She bared her sharp, white fangs and lunged at me.

Chapter End Notes
I wish to devote this chapter to my uncle, who was practically a father to me. He encouraged me to read and write, encouraged my imagination, and believed in my writing. He was difficult man at times, but I love him, truly.

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