Half Found

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Summary

The Battle of Białowieża effectively destroyed the Alliance. The only way to turn the tables is to find new, unlikely allies from the past, and to finally unite White and Black Witches - a feat in and of itself. Nathan, after devouring his father's heart and acquiring his Gifts, is apparently going mad. As he struggles to hold on and take the helping hands he's offered, he'll discover something hidden between those Gifts, a cause no one would have expected from Marcus - and he'll have to decide which will be his own cause.

Half Lost AU.

Notes

I actually had notes planned but I'm so tired, I can't remember them right now. Beware for excessive quoting from Fenris' lines in Dragon Age 2? What can I say, he's quotable. Also: there is no reason in this entire universe that can convince me to re-read these godforsaken books, so if you find any inconsistencies or inaccuracies, well... you can point them out if you like, and we'll laugh about them together sipping tea.

Note: HAPPY ENDING. I'll hit you with a metric ton of feels and wring you like a rag, but you'll be happy in the end.
The screams echoed throughout camp all through that first, awful, desperate night. When they subsided, most people thought it was over. When Ellen asked Arran – bleary-eyed, worry lines tugging down the corner of his lips – he told her, “He simply passed out.” She offered her assistance, knowing that was nothing more than a token offer. Arran smiled at her, and thanked her, and vanished for the day and the following night. The screams resumed before evening, more feeble, and for that, so much more heart-wrenching.

For her, at least.

People talked. Most of the survivors were Whites – inevitably; there had been always more of them than any other group – and they never really... accepted his presence. Now the Alliance was barely holding on, so many witches slaughtered, and so much grieving had yet to be done. The Whites had always been keen on finding a scapegoat. Van, Celia and Greatorex did their best to be visible, to appear in control and keeping everyone occupied, but it wasn't enough. Ellen had no sympathy for the Whites as they whispered behind them as soon as they were out of earshot.

“Is he going to die?”

“Are those Gifts too many?”

“His father had them and he didn't die for it”

“Yes, but all together... like that...”

A shudder passed through them at those words. Not one day after the defeat, when most of the corpses were still warm, already the tale was spreading. Ellen thought people who were running for their lives from merciless Hunters would have less time to gossip.

“Why is he even allowed here? He's dangerous. For us. Wasn't this camp set-up when they couldn't move him anymore?”

“I saw it. If he wasn't before, he's raving mad now.”

Ellen paused in the shadows of a cluster of tents, and fought against the fire chocking her, and felt like hitting them.

“He came back from the battlefield covered in blood. His own father's blood – not that we don't know how little that means to Blacks. It was all around his mouth, on his face, and I swear to you, he was laughing.”

“He's a monster. I mean, he cut open his own father and ate his heart!”

“Serves Marcus right, to die like his victims.”

“Maybe the Council was right in locking him up.”

Silence fell at those words. Ellen remembered, then, a grey, misty afternoon like a thousand others in London, watching a boy watching Bob's alley. A thin, frightened, lonely boy, who followed her in a café to drink chocolate filled with marshmallows. A fierce boy who knew she was his ally, the same
way he knew the exact phase of the moon on any given day. She remembered the warm hug he was so quick to give her when they saw each other again in Spain.

Her hurting friend, Ivan.

It was hard to reconcile the boy who had to walk out after listening to his older brother's message, and the Black Witch who had eaten his father's heart and took his Gifts. Ellen hadn't been there when he had returned.

She's not sure she wishes she had.

But if Nathan really had eaten his father's heart, what would that mean for Ivan? Was Ivan a ruse, a facade to hide a desire for power? Or just plain madness? Was he just like his father after all? She had thought Nathan different. Marcus wasn't as unpredictable and crazy as the stories told, but he was still a violent Black Witch who thought nothing of hurting and killing people. That, she had seen first-hand.

She could not reconcile what she had seen of Nathan, and what he had done. Supposedly. The higher-ups were still silent on the matter. She walked towards the edges of the camp – now called camp one – where his tent sat under a majestic pine. She held the bundle of cloth Van had given her tight against her chest. The night whispered around her. Every twitch in a branch, every animal call in the dark froze her nerves. Hunters were searching for them, and there were so few left to patrol; most of them, not even warriors. More than half of the fighters had died – and they hadn't been many to begin with. With the burden of so many civilians, with so many witches dead, with Nathan, tension was skyrocketing. Ellen was trying hard to remain calm and keep the peace where she could, but hardly anyone respected a half-White whet scout. Most of the time, if she said something she'd get dismissed, or sneered at.

She reached the tent and crouched near the entrance flap. A few embers glowed in the campfire. It was late summer, but the nights were bitterly cold this far north.

“Arran?” she called, softly.

She heard a rustle inside, then a strangled heave, more animal than human, and she stiffened, waiting. Low murmurs inside. Silence. When Arran peered out, she could see he was even more exhausted than before. She could easily picture him tending to his brother and not sleeping at all. Her heart lurched in worry in her chest, then rabbited with terror. If somebody had told her before it was possible to be terrified of someone, and at the same time loving them fiercely, she wouldn't have believed them.

Arran smiled faintly at her, and they sat close to the fire. He tried to rekindle the flame to make a little more light and warmth, but the chill Ellen felt ran deeper than her skin. She gave him the bundle.

He opened it and rummaged through the vials and satchels. “Why didn't Van come herself? I could use her help.”

“Lots of other things to do, I suppose. She doesn't really tell me anything,” Ellen said.

Arran sighed. “Sorry. Of course it's not your fault.”

He always had a knack for making her feel unworthy. His brother, the only family he had left – other than a murderous Hunter sister – was lying in this tent, delirious and in pain, and Arran worried about her feelings. Despite herself, her lips twitched at a corner. She had never known such different brothers, who cared so deeply for one another.
She looked into the dying embers as she asked, “Is he getting better? He's not been... screaming... so much today.”

He kept poking the fire with a stick, adding kindle. “I'm not sure. I'm not even sure what Van puts into those things. Maybe it's just the sedatives that keep him like this.” He scrubbed a hand on his face, and added, “It's not like he's sick, exactly. My healing is useless because there's nothing wrong with him.”

Ellen let out a brittle chuckle. “Didn't sound like that to me.”

He looked at her then, and she saw him tuning to her pain and powerlessness. He put a hand on her shoulder and said, “He just needs time to adjust to the Gifts, I think.”

She covered his hand with hers and gave him a hard stare. “It's not me you should hold up, Arran. Don't worry about me. Worry about yourself. Have you slept at all?”

He smiled tiredly at her and went back to tending the fire.

She turned to the tent as she asked, “What about Gabriel? How is he holding up?”

Arran stayed silent for a long time. Then he said, “He went to camp for the first time today, to get something to eat. I insisted. He heard...talking.”

She cringed.

“They weren't even trying to be subtle, Ellen. Are they really saying we should leave? For their security?”

“I'm sorry. They are. But don't worry, the higher-ups won't ever send Nathan away. He's too valuable to them. They like him, even,” she added.

“It's not them I'm worried about. Gabriel was furious, Ellen. The last thing we need now is infighting.”

She almost joked about it, before she saw how worried he was. She tried to imagine sweet, charming Gabriel furious.

Arran noticed her doubt and shook his head slowly. “Don't underestimate him. There's a reason why he likes Nathan so much.”

At that, she did joke. “Must be his sunny disposition. Or maybe the blinding smile? Oh no wait, I know. His killer body.”

He snorted. “Does that mean you looked at his killer body?”

“I had to pass the time somehow as they trained.”

They fell silent then, heavy with the memory of so many dead, and left behind for Hunters and animals to pick.

He said, “I understand how he feels. Everything, everyone is just so...” He remained silent for a long moment, and when he spoke again, it was in barely more than a whisper. “Unfair.”

Ellen said, “I wish I could---”

The sound of footsteps approaching cut her off. She jumped to her feet, heart hammering and feeling
foolish already. Of course it wasn't Hunters. Hunters don't make noise. It was a group of witches from camp – a dozen or so.

“Is there something you need?” Arran asked. Ellen admired the steadiness of his voice. She was hyperaware of the tension emanating from them, and dizzy with adrenaline already. She felt the weight of her gun, in the holster under her jacket.

“You know what this is about, Arran,” one of them said. “He needs to leave.”

The others talked over each other in frantic whispers.

“The Hunters are searching for him. We should move on! Instead we're stuck here. All because of him.”

“And his cries will only lead them here faster. If he's dying, just---”

“He's not dying!” Arran said, his voice loud like a gunshot in the stillness of camp. He stood up.

“We're part of the Alliance too. Van won't make us just leave, and neither will Celia or Greatorex...”

“They're the ones who put us in this situation! They're the ones who organized the raid of Białowieża. If it weren't for them---”

“If it weren't for them, we'd have all died during the retreat,” Gabriel said from the entrance of the tent. Ellen had never thought of him as dangerous before, but watching him now – letting the flap close, and resting his hand casually on the holster at his side – she saw in him something: the perfect stillness of the predator just a second before attack. Something she had seen in Nathan so many times before.

“Shut up, Black. Nobody asked you.”

Gabriel took a step forward, and some of them shifted back. Not nearly enough – but Ellen still felt better for it. The low flames danced on his face, the light barely enough to make it out. He didn't look angry; he looked deadly.

Arran said, “If you send him away, I'll go too. I'm your only healer left.”

A woman snorted. “Fat lot of good that makes! You're not tending to the wounded. You spend all your time here with that.”


“What are you going to do,” Gabriel asked with absolute calm, “drag him away?”

One of the witches was stupid enough to answer, “If we have to.”

He pulled out his gun.

It was a stupid, stupid idea. Ellen pulled out her gun too. Belatedly, she wondered what kind of Gifts these guys had.

“Think about it. You were there when he got back. I was there too. I saw him. Look me in the eyes and tell me he wasn't completely out of his mind!”

Gabriel's voice was laden with heartbreak when he said, “He was in shock. You think he wanted to do it? Marcus told him to.”
"If you think we believe that---"

"I don't," he cut the witch off. "I know you don't care. I know you don't even see him as human."

"I know what I saw," the witch hissed.

Gabriel knew what he had seen too. He knew far too well; it was branded, burning, into his mind; forever. Nathan staggering towards him, hands and forearms dripping blood on the grass; fingers spasming when he gripped Gabriel's shirt. His black eyes – usually so focused, so intense – wide and unseeing, looking right through him, no matter how many times Gabriel called. He had tried to anchor him back by holding Nathan's face, by burying his hands in his hair; blood had smeared from Nathan's cheek to his temple. Nathan had quaked with a full-body shudder.

Then there had been the desperate retreat, friends and allies falling, Nathan staying behind... the absolute terror that had strangled Gabriel when he had seen him running away, lost in the forest. When he had looked at his back, seen him disappear, he had remembered. In another continent, in another lifetime, he had seen Michèle's back as she ran towards his car. He had remembered the glint of the keys as she twirled them under the Florida sun. It was the last memory he had of his sister alive.

He had been sure it was the last time he would see him.

He had run after him, unheeding of the others screaming at him to come back.

When he had seen him again, it was in a beautiful clearing, lush with green and with wild flowers, and littered with corpses. They were all civilian refugees from the camp, unarmed; shot in the back, all of them. Nathan had been kneeling at the centre of it, dry-heaving and already delirious. In that moment, as Gabriel had taken him in his arms, he had made a promise.

He was going to stay at Nathan's side, always.

He was going to protect him; from those who would see him as nothing more than a weapon, now more than ever; and from those who wouldn't see him as anything but a monster.

His place was here. Between the tent and these witches, who were going to die.


He couldn't breathe. He was suffocating. Fire in the centre of his chest. Pulsing. Spreading. He couldn't speak, couldn't scream, couldn't cry for help.

Darkness tore his mind apart. It wasn't empty, it was so not empty, it was filled to the brim with things that didn't talk with a voice, they talked with claws and bones and decay.

There was something... something weighting him down... chaining him, not letting him escape.

Was it chains? Was he in the cage again? Where was he?

Blood. Flesh slick and hot and revolting under his teeth, the horror of ribs under his fingers as he pried them apart. Chocking and gagging and fighting to swallow. Clenching the Fairborn, its cruel desire to cut, buried under his ribs like he had suggested. Was it the Fairborn to cut him open? Was it
him? Where was the line?

The Fairborn cutting him open with savage delight, throat to groin, his insides spilling out like he deserved, he had to, he had to, _Marcus told him to and that fucking prophecy, what had been the fucking point?_

The tumblings in _his_ eyes, blacker than black, moving one last time. He felt the last, slow contraction of _his_ lungs. His fingers were buried between them and the bleeding, bitten heart.

He tried to scream again. He heard a distant, chocked-off wheeze.

Voices.

The sound shot through him; Hunters?

His eyelids were as heavy as lead, his limbs even heavier. His arm hit something. Rattling. Sloshing. Something wet falling on his hand. The sensation was familiar, it stirred a memory just out of reach.

More voices. Louder. Just outside. Fighting...?

“Shut up Arran! You're nothing more than a disgusting traitor!”

Nathan's eyes flew open, and stared at the cramped space above. Empty. When it wasn't supposed to be. For days... had it been days? Hours? Weeks? It had never been empty. He turned to the bowl of water he had just hit. The rag was half into it.

The warm memory of it was a drop of water in a scorching desert.

He got up on one elbow, painfully slow, gritting his teeth against the strain in every muscle.

The weight of _his_ Gifts was a star devouring itself, a collapse into a black hole in his chest that was swallowing him whole.

He took a shuddering breath. He remembered agony. He remembered the fresh soothing of Arran's healing. He remembered...

“What's the point of this, Gabriel?”

The tenderness of Gabriel's hands, his worried expression always hovering above Nathan, in the shredded moments of waking.

Beacons in a void crawling with nightmares.

“You're Black. He's Black too, and even if he wasn't a monster, you'll end up killing each other like Blacks do, fag.”

Nathan's eyes flew open. His body screamed in outrage and pain, and he was rising. Outside. The moon was waning, a thin sickle just above the line of the trees.

The dozen or so witches took a hurried step back. Some cursed.

Not Hunters.

Nathan hunched and squeezed his arms around his middle, a vain attempt at easing the pain. Arran was instantly at his side. When he put his hands on Nathan's shoulders and back, Nathan could feel his Gift easing the fire boiling his blood; but it was weak, tired.
Gabriel did not turn. He kept his gun trained on the witches. Ellen had to stop herself from turning, desperate as she was to see for herself what had become of him; but she wasn't going to be an amateur. At first, she could only hear Nathan's ragged breaths, see the fear slowly leave the witches in front of them at his vulnerable state – bastards, she thought.

Then, she felt it.

An icy shiver caressed her spine. Goosebumps raised on her arms, and she clutched her gun tighter. The pines loomed over them, dark and whispering, and the woods watched them. She had to. She turned, and watched him. For a moment, he was just the same lost boy she remembered, hunched over in his brother's arms. Then he met her eyes, and she saw a promise of unfettered violence in them that made her flinch.

“I should ask you the same,” Gabriel said. “You don't have the courage to lay a single finger on him.”

“We just want him to leave,” one of the witches said.

“We can't just leave,” Arran choked out, equal parts frightened and frustrated. “The Hunters are looking for what remains of the Alliance. They found a camp already, just this morning! We can't escape them on our own!”

A witch said, softly, “You don't have to leave with them, Arran.”

And Arran felt the familiar crumbling underneath his feet. It was always, always like this, ever since he could remember.

And he would keep choosing his brother, again and again and again, because Nathan needed him, and because Arran needed him, and couldn't lose him again. Not after Gran. Not after Debs. Not after Jessica, lost to him so many years before, to hatred and loss.

Arran clutched his brother's shoulders tighter, and said, “I'm not leaving him.”

He felt Nathan slowly sinking to his knees, and helped him down. Arran was too tired to do more than barely soothe his fever. He cradled Nathan's cheek, and that closeness was the only reason why he heard his brother whispering, “So selfish. Just like her.”

Arran felt the breath knocked out of him, and then himself gasping. His hands clawed the grass as screams and mayhem erupted, Ellen's cry of “Nathan, no!” the only one he could make out. When he turned, he was hit by a blast of heat. Flames arched in the air, dissolving as soon as they had appeared. He saw two witches fleeing in the dark; the others, scattered on the ground. Some of them were cowering; some were not. Nathan found the most combative one, already half to her feet, and crushed her down with a kick at the chest. She gasped and grabbed his leg to dislodge it, but stopped when she found a blade to her throat. Nathan crouched above her, taking care of crushing her sternum with his knee. He looked at the fire reflecting on Gabriel's knife, then at her eyes, filled with fear and loathing and righteousness. Thinking about how unpredictable and wild he was, what a danger to White witch society he was, no doubt – like he ever planned mass murder, unlike the Council. Soul was the one doing unspeakable things to Blacks and Whites alike, but it was Nathan who was looked at like he was a monster. Chaotic memories churned in the tempest of his mind. Celia using her Gift on him, until his ears bled and his throat was raw with screaming, the Council watching him writhe on the floor. Gran squeezing his hand in a white-knuckled grip. Kieran carving his back with a knife, Connor and Niall holding him down, Connor and Niall coming at him with a brick, Kieran holding him down on the car's floor, Kieran whipping him with the chains and kicking him, “What's the difference between cutting an onion and a Black witch? The onion makes you cry”.
Tormented and hurt over and over again, and yet she had looked at him like killing Connor was the act of an unforgivable monster.

He licked the roof of his own mouth, the trigger of the fire Gift, and thought about burning her face off. A savage, mad grin spread on his face. How good it felt to be that monster, without the chains and with a knife in his hand.

*Kill them. Kill them all*, he had said.

*Kill all these selfish, revolting fuckers*, Nathan was tempted to paraphrase.

But that wasn't what his father had meant, and he knew that.

He slanted a look around. The Witches were scattered around him, most of them nursing shallow burns and watching him in terror-fuelled fury. Arran was talking behind him. His words were static in Nathan's ears, making no sense, but the voice alone was comforting. He saw a girl standing in his peripheral vision, and he startled when he realized she had a gun out. He turned on her, ready to attack, but her gun pointed at the ground, and it was just Ellen. She had survived, then. He saw her lips moving, but nothing reached him. She looked miserable.

He turned at the witch in his power again, saw the hatred in her eyes, and helplessness washed over him. There was nothing he could do to make it stop. He could've broken his back bending for the Whites, and still he'd be exactly where he was now. He shoved himself upright, taking care to put all his weight on the White's chest as he did so.

“Nathan,” Gabriel said, and it knifed through him, a blade catching the light and shining in the dark.

Nathan didn't turn to him, but he looked over his shoulder. Gabriel returned his look, his expression both soft and hard.

Nathan run to the forest.

“Nathan, wait!” both Arran and Ellen yelled, but it was too late.

When Gabriel started to follow him, Arran grabbed his shoulder to stop him. “You can't catch him, you'll just get lost in the forest!”

Gabriel levelled a hard stare at him, determined and unmoved. “No, I won't. I'll stay by his side.”

“I can call Nesbitt,” Ellen interjected. “He can help.”

Gabriel said, “You do that,” and ran after Nathan.

“Gabriel, no! It's too dangerous to go alone!” Arran cried after him, but it was useless. He and Ellen exchanged a desperate look.

She said, “I'm calling Nesbitt,” and ran to the camp.

Arran looked around himself, at the abandoned campsite and at the witches still lingering, and exhaled through clenched teeth. That's how it was; that's how it always was. Being left behind to tend to the wounds of people who would not be thankful. Worrying about Nathan until he couldn't breathe. Arran smothered his growing resentment with memories from just a few hours before – of Nathan delirious and hurting, calling desperately for him, Gabriel, Marcus, Gran, Debs, cursing himself and Annalise with equal hatred. Arran reached the nearest witch, and set to work.
Ellen found Nesbitt halfway down the path to the camp. He was already awake, running towards the place where fire had blazed in the night.

“Was that Nathan?” he asked. “What happened?”

“Some witches came and demanded that Nathan and Gabriel leave! Nathan ran away, we have to follow him before we lose him!”

Nesbitt cursed. “What about the witches? Did he kill them?”

*Who cares about them?* Ellen wanted to yell, but she said instead, “They're fine. Arran is with them. Come on, let's go!”

Nesbitt looked at her with uncertainty. “Ellen, maybe it's best if you stay here.”


“It's just...” he looked about, mindful of the people woken by the light and commotion. Nesbitt stood closer to her and whispered, “He might be dangerous, Ellen. Let me and Van handle it.”

Ellen felt rage flare, cold and bright and sudden. She motioned with the gun still in her hand, showing it to him. “You see this, Nesbitt?” she hissed. “I'm only fourteen but that didn't prevent the Alliance from giving this to me. It didn't prevent me from becoming a scout, or from taking part to the battle of Bia Łowież, and you know what? I chose this. I made my decision and I decided not to abandon Nathan, you understand?” She shoved him with the gun, knowing full well it was just for show. She wasn't a fighter, and if he really wanted to make her stay, he'd find a way. But Nesbitt just looked at her, in a sombre way that was as out of character as it was unnerving.

“He's my friend,” she said, fighting hard against the trembling in her voice. “I have to stay by his side. Who else is going to if I don't? These people hate him.”

“I'm not sure he thinks the same about you. I'm not sure he even has that in him. It's not his fault, you know, but maybe he's just---”

“He does,” she interrupted him. “He does,” she said more forcefully in the face of his sad expression. “Now can we bloody move it?”

Nesbitt sighed. Then he started for the forest, and Ellen followed.

Nathan had just a handful of minutes on them, yet it felt like days. He was just that fast. It didn't matter that Nesbitt kept muttering how Nathan left a trail a mile wide. They were slowed down by the forest becoming thicker and thicker, to the point where Ellen wasn't even sure they had his trail at all. How could he pass through so quickly, when they had to fight with brambles and branches that hugged the ground, she didn't know. When she asked Nesbitt, he showed her a paw print, half-hidden under the ferns.

They thought they would catch up to Gabriel sooner or later, but after a few hours of trudging in the
dark, they had yet to find him. The still light of pre-dawn painted the forest in greys and blues when Nesbitt said, “Here they are.” They hid between a cluster of oaks. Nesbitt stood silent, watching intently something that Ellen could not yet see. She stood still herself. Waited.

Nathan emerged from behind an ancient oak. His rough fingers touched equally rough bark as he passed. He was too far away, and it was still too dark for Ellen to make out clearly, but Nesbitt gasped quietly when he saw him. She looked at him, not daring to speak, but he didn't return her stare. Instead he whispered, “Did he wound someone back at camp?”

“No. Why?” she whispered back, eyes glued to Nathan.

Nesbitt saw it well; the red staining Nathan's front and mouth. It had always been easier for him to turn into an animal and run, than dealing. “Well, I guess he went hunting then. For some reason I doubt the prey was an animal.”

Nathan turned suddenly in their direction, and Nesbitt ducked. Then he mocked himself. It was just Nathan. The kid might be a little troubled, but he never attacked unless threatened. Ellen stepped out of the shadows, and called out to him, softly. Nathan didn't respond. Instead he turned into his preferred form – that wolf way too big, black and sleek like obsidian – and slipped away.

“Damn it,” Ellen said, dejected. She started after him, but stopped when she noticed Nesbitt not moving. “What's wrong?” she asked. Then she thought, and where is Gabriel?

Nesbitt led her in the opposite direction, from where Nathan had appeared. “We circled back a few times, following him,” he said as they struggled through the undergrowth. “I can't help but think...”

He left the words hang in the air. They found what he was looking for not too far from where they had been hiding. A witch, dressed in black from head to toe, her throat a mangled, red mess. A Hunter.

“Damn,” Nesbitt whispered. “I have to give the kid credit. I didn't hear a thing.”

Ellen told herself not to react; it wasn't the first corpse she had seen.

The frightening part was, a part of her didn't.

Anymore?

Or ever?

“She was following us, probably. Who knows for how long,” Nesbitt said, and he shot a troubled look at Ellen. “I was distracted. You really should go back to camp.”

“Isn't it better if I stay with you though? Who knows how many Hunters are roaming the forest. It's better if there's two of us. On my own...”

She looked around. She was a good scout, and Nesbitt was the best they had, yet this Hunter had managed to tail them without either of them noticing. She thought of Greateorex, encouraging her those first months, when Ellen had started to spy on Council members, staff, sometimes even witches suspected of rebellion. She thought of Celia, so critical when Ellen had first arrived on the mainland. You're used to the city, it's not the same. We're hunting recruits, not expert Hunters. You wouldn't stand a chance against them. Maybe she hadn't been wrong.

“I've heard of a few Hunters – all from the same family – who can literally turn into smoke. Very effective for tailing.”
Ellen was sceptical. “How did Nathan find her, then?”

Nesbitt laughed without humour. “Dear girl, I have no idea how Nathan does eighty percent of what I see him doing with my own two eyes.”

She grinned despite herself, despite the tremors in her clenched hands. “Is the other twenty percent for the things he does when you cannot see him?”

“Precisely.”

He searched the Hunter's body. He found her cellphone, and unsheathed his knife to take it apart and be sure its GPS would never connect to a satellite again.

Ellen looked away from that shredded throat, the wide-open mouth and eyes. “Shouldn't we follow him? And I wonder where Gabriel is.”

“Hah! Where he always is: no more than two steps behind Nathan. Perfect place from where he can admire his arse.”

She cringed. “That's crass, Nesbitt.”

“Hey, it's a great arse! I definitely approve.”

“Just so you know, you're making me uncomfortable.”

He laughed, but it was weak. He stood up, but didn't move.

After a little while, Ellen asked, “Aren't we going to follow him?”

He scratched the back of his head. “Last call to go back to camp now, Ellen.”

She stared at him. “Duly noted and dismissed.”

He sighed. Then he led the way.

Nathan stopped running at twilight. He killed four Hunters on the way. Running eased the fire roiling in his veins. The single-minded focus required in killing stilled his thoughts until only survival remained. Every kill made him crave for the next one, for that moment of clarity between his twisting thoughts.

Kill them, Nathan.

He was my brother.

Kill them all.

You promised!

“Shut the fuck up!” Nathan screamed. A few birds flew away, startled by the noise. An unreal
silence fell. A pang of fear cut through him, and he stilled as he listened for Hunters approaching. The forest was crawling with them, he just knew it. Would they know where she had gone? She had disappeared after shooting his father. How very convenient, that she showed him her Gift only when she needed it to escape. He felt an ugly sneer twist his mouth. Wasn't it hilarious? Wasn't it ironic? All his life had been decided by a prophecy, all the beatings and cruelties of training were inflicted to make him the weapon of that prophecy, and instead Marcus died at the hands of an untrained, trembling, crying girl.

What a liar she had been. Telling him she loved him? Kieran deserved to die! Kieran, and Niall, and Connor too were the ones to carve his back and torture him when he was just a kid! What was he supposed to do, forgive them? They all deserved to die, and she would've thought so too if she had really loved him!

He whipped around. “Are you satisfied now?” he said, fighting to keep his voice even. Hate and resentment clogged his throat, as black and dense as tar. “Now that it’s clear she was a spy all along?”

Gabriel made his way through the shadows of the oaks, and kept his distance. He circled Nathan, slowly, silently. Nathan – blood roiling with the sick flame of too many Gifts – the word itself mocking and tasting like ashes – muscles trembling after the adrenaline shot of fear – looked at Gabriel’s calm, and hated him. “Are you?” he hissed, as loud as he dared.

Gabriel stayed silent for a long moment, filled with the surreal stillness of the forest. Then he said, with painstaking care, “You know I’m not.”

Nathan believed him. He believed in Gabriel’s strong, calloused hands supporting him and bringing him to camp when he was delirious with nightmares and grief, believed it hadn’t been a dream. He believed in Arran’s murmured words of comfort, his infinite gentleness and care a harbour Nathan had thought lost, forever.

Nathan remembered every kind touch, and his skin crawled.

“Go away,” he growled, teeth bared and thinking of his animal.

“No,” Gabriel said, standing firm like the ancient oaks painting the forest green. Then he took a step forward.

“Go the fuck away!” Nathan screamed. His vision swam with unshed tears, and he hated himself even more than he hated Gabriel’s infinite understanding.

Gabriel crossed the distance between them, arms outstretched. “I’m not leaving you.”

Nathan tried to hit him with a badly-aimed punch. Gabriel grabbed his hand, and pulled. When Nathan grasped the back of his shirt, and nestled in his arms, shivering, Gabriel thought of wounded, exhausted animals with no more room to escape.

Ellen stared at a patch of moss, at the tiny white flowers sprouting out of it and offering their delicate calyx to the sun.

Nesbitt didn’t laugh – either at her embarrassment or at the scene unfolding in front of them – but it was a near thing. “Let’s go back,” he said. “Gabriel will know to come back to camp and report.”
She nodded, and stood up to follow him. As he made the way, Ellen lingered, and turned; and when she looked back, the forest seemed to curl above the pair, its deep greens a soothing and vibrant presence.

In the following days, Ellen found two more Hunters dead in the forest, at just one day's walking distance from camp. Nesbitt found four more, farther out.

Gabriel indeed came to camp. It was raining when he arrived, the water singing on the leaves above, but only a fine mist reached the tents under the canopy. Ellen was waiting by Celia's tent, as she always did when she wasn't scouting. She was sitting under a raised flap that did very little to keep her dry, scrolling through her friends' snapchat stories and not opening one.

“'I'm surprised that even works out here,” Gabriel said, in a voice that tried for kind, but fell too close to exhausted.

Ellen looked up, and decided to humour him instead of asking questions she already half-knew the answer for. She shrugged as she said, “Van did one of her tricks on it. I try to maintain old habits, but...” She stared at the phone's screen, and it went dark. “It's hard to even remember why I had Fain friends in the first place. Everything is...” She gestured, waving her phone around. “There is only war now, isn't it? Everything has been swallowed by it.”

She was so young, so lively, and Gabriel thought of the Florida sun, of driving to Tampa just for the hell of it – and then of the discovery, of where the borders lied, enforced and coveted on both sides. He had gone back, of course, disguised as a Fain, feeling powerful, feeling smart.

Michèle had gone back also, and alone, too.

“Everything was already swallowed by it. You just didn't know it.”

She looked up then. “I never heard why you joined, Gabriel. Is it really only for Nathan's sake?”

He smiled faintly at her, and didn't answer. Michèle was gone and the half-blood who had betrayed her was dead; Gabriel was done with revenge. On this side of the ocean, almost no one knew, and those who knew wouldn't tell. Even when his sister's death had been a fresh, bleeding wound, he hadn't burned with the desire to kill; his grief had been a cold and merciless thing, fuelled by the notion of its own futility.

Seeing Nathan burning with the same murderous desire Gabriel had lacked, even as he blew up the traitor's face until it was an unrecognisable bloody mess, was a disquieting thing.

He combed his cold fingers through his damp hair, wishing the unease away. Ellen got up and said, “I'll find you a change of clothes. Arran has your things.”

After thanking her, he took a steeling breath. When he entered the tent, the first thing that registered was how cramped it was. The one they had had before Białowieża was spacious enough to hold a proper war meeting in. This one had been set up in a hurry, and with much less illusions about the Alliance's endeavour. Celia's towering form made the small space look even more cramped. Just by looking at her, Gabriel could tell what awaited him wasn't going to be pleasant.

He looked about. Van and Nesbitt were also present – they had left camp two without its resident leader to be here. Greatorex had remained at camp three.
“Should I call Arran?” he asked coolly.

Celia frowned. “Why would you?”

“This conversation is going to be about what you want to do with Nathan, yes? As his brother and legal guardian, shouldn't Arran be here?” Gabriel said, staring at her, challenging her to argue.

Celia's frown deepened. Gabriel had always been politely cold towards her, keeping his distance as much as possible without openly antagonizing her. His focus always being Nathan, he had let him adjust to her presence as Nathan had seen fit, without expressing any opinion on her.

Which, if someone had deigned to ask, was of utter disgust.

If he had had a say in the matter, he'd have a Witch equivalent of a restraining order on her – he thought an acid collar that would activate if she ever stepped closer than ten meters to Nathan would have been apt. But that wasn't possible, so Gabriel had to settle for veiled reminders of what she never was – no matter how deeply Nathan's Stockholm Syndrome ran.

“Nathan isn't a minor,” Celia noted.

“Yes, he is. He's only seventeen.”

“Which makes him a full-fledged Witch. And by his actions, he's an adult, perfectly fine Black Witch, I'd say.”

Gabriel stared at her, and thought about leaving this damned tent and twice-damned ruthless exploiters. He could do it. He could leave just as dramatically as Nathan would, and keep his knowledge to himself. He should talk to Arran, not to these people who never cared for Nathan's well-being. They might even welcome his frail mental state – see it as manipulable.

Finally he said, “Nathan should walk away from this. I can convince him, maybe.”

Before Celia could start to argue, Van interjected with, “What is his mental state?”

Gabriel debated whether it was a good idea to tell her – a healer, but also just as ruthless as her White Witch counterparts, maybe more so.

Sensing his reserve, Nesbitt spoke up. “I imagine not so great with all the bodies he's leaving behind. He's always been violent, not reckless like this. He's attracting the Hunters' attention to both camp one and yours.”

“He's looking for someone,” Gabriel said.

Celia cocked an eyebrow. “Annalise?”

“He wouldn't say, but I think so. He doesn't speak much, actually.”


*He used to talk to me*, Gabriel thought. Van, at least, took it seriously. “I think it's a good sign he let you stay with him. I was afraid he'd go feral, just transform and run away. He stays human, right?”

“When he gets back. But he's gone most of the day, so I don't really know.”

Nesbitt said, “Half of the Hunters me and Ellen found were killed with a knife. Maybe it depends on his mood?”
Celia glared at his attempt at humour. “Either way, he's bound to get noticed, and he's putting all of us in danger.”

“I'm assuming he has adjusted to his Gifts?” Van asked.

“I think? He looks stronger, and the fever is gone. I want to bring Arran with me to camp and see what he thinks.”

Celia looked unimpressed. “I doubt he'll let Arran near him.”

“Why in the world wouldn't he? Nathan adores him,” Gabriel said.

“Arran is part of a life that is over for Nathan. He has moved on.”

Gabriel felt ice grip his skin. “Oh, you would know everything about it, wouldn't you?” he asked, voice low and threatening.

“Yes, I would. I never hid what I did, Gabriel; I had orders to break him and rebuild him as a weapon, and I did. Nathan isn't thinking about Arran, or about the people he's endangering, or about you for that matter; he's thinking about how he can fix his problem through killing.”

He felt fury stabbing his chest and rising inside him, and he dug his fingers in the meat of his crossed arms. He looked at this woman, who thought admitting was enough to make it right, and wished he could just take Nathan and run. Run away as fast as they could, as fast as they had when dreaming together of Wales.

Just then, the flap entrance flew open, letting a fretting Ellen in. “Oh here you are! I've been looking everywhere for you,” she exclaimed, and dumped a bundle of clothes in Gabriel's arms. She grabbed him then, and she told loudly to no one in particular that “Arran has to talk to you right now we gotta go!”, and just like that they were strolling out under the misty rain.

Gabriel let her drag him, giving himself time to calm down. Then he asked, somewhat weakly, “Does Arran really want to talk to me?”

Ellen looked at him like he were mad. “Of course he does. He's been dying with worry you know. The only reason why he stopped asking me to bring him to your camp is because I convinced him that I don't actually know how to reach it on my own, I'd just get the both of us lost. Come think of it, that's probably why he started harassing Nesbitt instead,” she mused.

“I meant---”

“Oh I know what you meant,” she said, and slipped her grip to his hand, threading their fingers. “I can't believe she'd say something like that so... like it's just so normal, and we just have to move on with our lives.”

They stopped in front of the tent Nathan had fled. She faced him then. “And I was worried too. How is he? And how are you?”

“Don't worry about me. He's... still in shock, I think. He needs time, possibly away from all of this, but it's not like the Alliance is going to just let him go.”

Ellen's expression turned hard. “And where would you go where the Council won't find you?”

He fixed her with a glare of his own. “They're not omnipotent. We could escape them.”
“We're all fighting for our lives here. Nathan can make a big difference, and by the way, he knows it, and that's why he fights.”

“So what, he should just be forced to fight? By that logic, you should force all civilians to fight, since it concerns all of us.”

“You know what I call those civilians? Cowards,” she hissed, furious. “They were quick to flee England when they felt directly threatened, but what did they do before? What did they do for Whites who were targeted before them? And what about the Blacks? They should be forced to fight, since they didn't before. But that would make us bad, wouldn't it? What I think is that forcing them to fight would be pointless, because they'd be useless on the battlefield then. We should all fight against the atrocities of the Council, but they'd rather have other people die to protect them. Fine by me. Let them be cowards and die cowering then. But Nathan is not like that.”

He looked away. “You think he's brave.”

“Isn't he?”

“I just... I don't think fighting... killing people... is doing him any good. He used to hate it, to feel guilty about it, about what he had been forced to become. Look at him now,” he said, meeting her eyes again. The sadness and worry in his gaze was like a stab in her heart. “Do you really think it's bravery, what drives him? I'm not sure he was ever brave. He would be, no doubt, if he thought someone he loves was threatened; he's loyal to the core. But all his fighting until now was driven by survival. His instinctive reaction is fight, and it was twisted into 'attack before the enemy can'. He knows he can never expect mercy, that he will be always hunted. I know that too, I'm not naïve. Still, I'd try to find a quiet place where he could live in peace.”

“But in the end,” Arran said, emerging from the tent, “the choice is his.”

Gabriel sighed. “You too, Arran? I thought you were worried.”

“I am sick with worry. But, if you allow me to be selfish... I wish he could just live peacefully here. Where I can be with him.” Arran waited for another response; when it didn't come, he said, “You look gaunt. Have you been eating?”

“I brought food!” Ellen piped up, eager to break the tension. She sat down near the fire, sheltered from the rain by the thick canopy of the pines, and pulled an assortment of foods from a sack she had slung on her shoulder: bread and cheese, canned soup, dried strips of meat, peaches. She and Arran set up the pot over the fire to warm the soup, as Gabriel tore into a sandwich, then another one. Ellen quickly seized one of her own before they were all gone.

Arran frowned at him. “Seriously, have you been eating?”

Gabriel munched more slowly, trying to delay the inevitable, awkward topic. “I tried to fend off for myself, but I'm afraid I don't have much experience in that department.”

“Hold on,” Ellen said, incredulous, “isn't Nathan supposed to be the most amazing hunter ever?”

He just kept chewing.

“That little prick,” she hissed. “Ooh, he's gonna hear me about this.”

“Ellen,” Arran said, appalled at her choice of words.

Gabriel was amused at her outrage. “Nothing to say against him killing people, but if he doesn't feed
“Food,” she said, waving a strip of dried meat under his nose, “is important. I didn't feed his sorry arse for him not to learn his lesson and give back to the community.”

Gabriel tried to defend him with, “He tries to set up traps and capture something, but... I think it just slips his mind.”

Arran looked at him intently. “Does he have trouble remember to do things?”

He nodded. “It's like he listens, and then forgets. He keeps preparing the snares and then forgetting to bring them with him. He still doesn't talk. He'd ask me to tell him stories, only to leave in the middle of it, like he's annoyed or he can't take it anymore.”

“It's okay,” Arran said, soothing if secretly worried himself. “Eat up. Once you're fed, you'll show me the way to your camp.”

Gabriel ended up eating almost all the dried meat and two mugs of soup. By the end of dinner, Ellen was fuming. “That's it,” she said. “I'm going with you to your camp, bring a ton of food, and kick him. And make him cook for you.”

Arran found that line of reasoning questionable. “Ellen, food is rationed...”

“And a lot of it I stole at great personal risk, so I think I deserve the leeway,” she said, biting into a peach.

“You stole it from Fains, they're not a threat to you.”

As they bickered, Gabriel thought. He wasn't sure it was a good idea. Nathan's moods had been volatile, to say the least; not violent, not towards Gabriel, anyway, but... “I don't know. I'm not sure he'd welcome you. I'm not even sure he wants to see me, actually.”

“Don't be ridiculous. Of course he does. He wants to see you, and Arran, and me, because I'm his friend.”

Gabriel raised a playful eyebrow at her. “What, and I'm not?”

“Pff. Please, Gabriel, I have eyes.”

Arran blinked. “Uh?” he said – admittedly, not one of his most eloquent moments. Gabriel felt a pang of something that wasn't exactly shame, but was very close to being self-conscious to the point of discomfort – which was quite a rare thing for him. He met Arran's eyes, and fought hard not to blush or look away.

Ellen covered her mouth. “Oops,” she whispered.

“Oh,” Arran said. “Oh I see. Uhm. Should I... ask?”

Gabriel's weak “Please don’t” was covered by Ellen's outraged “Arran, they were the talk of camp for weeks.”

“No we weren’t,” Gabriel protested.

“Well, I'll concede we didn't really talk, just saw you two glued at the hip and looked meaningfully at each other.”
“By 'we' you actually mean only you and Adele, don't you.”

“Whatever,” she dismissed him, before focusing on more important matters. “Arran, seriously? I thought you knew. Didn't you joke about Gabriel liking him?”

He looked embarrassed when he said, “I really was just joking. I'm not really... attuned... to these matters. Nathan didn't tell me anything, and... there was Annalise. I feel like I unintentionally burned that bridge when I first begged him not to see her again when he was twelve.”

Gabriel could feel the weight of his unasked question. “We're just friends, Arran. Nathan wasn't cheating on her with me.”

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly.

“Well, Annalise isn't there anymore, right Gabriel?”

He grimaced. “Too soon, Ellen.”

She giggled. “I'm going to fetch that food. Do you need anything else?”

“You could rest a bit before we go,” Arran suggested.

“No,” he said. “I want to be back as soon as possible.”

In the end, neither Ellen nor Arran saw Nathan. When they got to camp, he was nowhere to be found, and he didn't show up at twilight, or when the sun rose up again. Arran had brought tents in the hope of staying, so at least they were relatively comfortable, but Gabriel grew more and more restless, until he decided to venture into the forest alone. When he returned, he looked just as sad as he had when Ellen had seen him coming back to camp one.

“He doesn't want to see you,” he said. “He wants you both to leave.”

Ellen felt the rejection like a slap in the face, but Arran was absolutely heartbroken. He left some sleeping potion and a pack of cigarettes Van had given him outside of the tent he refused to fold away, and then off they were.

Gabriel lead the way, but this time, Ellen made sure to memorize as many landmarks as she could.

After two weeks, Ellen decided it was time to pay Nathan a visit. After a few days of calm, the griping and whispering had started anew; this time, because it was becoming increasingly common knowledge that Nathan was killing Hunters in the area, and drawing attention to them. Celia's decision to move camp to a new location didn't help matters.

Arran was still heartbroken, missing his brother, and worried sick for him. He passed all his time either caring for the wounded or with Van, and moved between camps to keep himself exhausted enough. Ellen was sick of it.

Nathan was going to get an earful.
She took her backpack, re-appropriated some food, and left. (Nesbitt was going to throw a fit. He had been keeping an eye on her exactly to avoid this, but luckily for her he had other duties and hadn't acquired the power of ubiquity yet.)

She trudged carefully through the forest, trying her best not to make any noise. Nathan had killed who knew how many, yet he still found more Hunters to kill. There weren't supposed to be any in this part of the forest, but the fear was ever-present, and paranoia is just another name for survival anyway. She had explored the area carefully in the days before setting off, to find the trail again from the new camp's location. Yet she was still scared of getting lost, and then being found by Hunters – she felt a lot like a lone traveller, easy prey for monsters in a fairytale.

The ancient forest around her was a silent, placidly indifferent force around her. Not for the first time, she was acutely aware of being a city witch. Nathan made it look so easy, like there was nothing more natural than always finding your way in the wild. Ellen wondered if it was a Black Witch thing – Nesbitt and Gabriel didn't have any trouble in that department either.

Ellen, instead, was growing more and more restless. It had been hours; she was being too slow. A clearing suddenly open in front of her. A good part of it was covered in shallow water; fallen trees, blanketed by moss, emerged from it. What wasn't submerged in water and green was covered in yellow marsh-marigolds. She looked at the tiny flowers, glittering in the filtered sunlight like pebbles. For a moment, time felt frozen, like the world was holding its breath, and every colour was so vivid and vibrant, sharp-edged and cutting.

“You'll get lost.”

Ellen flinched so hard it was a wonder she didn't fall into the marsh. She whipped around, and there he was.

Nathan.

Impassive and unimpressed with her stunt.

Heart still hammering, she said, “No I won't.”

He just stared at her.

“Well... you'll come rescue me, then. Great way to socialize.”

He stared at her silently – again. Then he asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Coming to visit you. I thought you could use the company of a friend.”

“I don't. Go back to camp one.”

She slung her backpack in front of her. “I brought food. Are you feeding Gabriel properly?”

Nathan glared at the ground. Gabriel was getting thinner and thinner. Everyday he would ask Nathan to hunt something, and everyday Nathan would swear to do it. But then he set out to find Hunters, to find Annalise, and his thoughts would get tangled, and next thing he knew he had blood on his hands – human blood – and no snares to set.

“I'm going to kick your arse,” Ellen said, hands on her hips, and looking not at all menacing. “I didn't save you from starvation for you to be like this.”

Nathan thought of Hunters screaming in terror and pain, of curses, of blood staining the grass.
Annalise was crying and mocking him, her lovely voice like honey masking the revolting taste of poison. He felt Marcus' stare crushing him, black and endless, endless like the line of Hunters to kill in his nightmares. And amidst it all, Ellen stood, in front of him, so incongruous, and she didn't make sense. What was she doing here, anyway?

“Did you bring him food?” he asked.

Ellen felt dread and worry, mixed in equal parts. “I... I just told you I did.”

“Oh,” he said, after a long pause. Neither his voice nor his expression changed.

She took a step towards him, and he recoiled at once. “Nathan, are you okay?”

He laughed, and it was a brittle, half-mad sound. “When have I ever been okay?”

“Please, I want to help you. Just tell me how---”

“Can you bring me Annalise so I can kill her in the slowest, most painful way I can think of?” he said, and expected her to condemn him, to judge him. She was of the Alliance, but in his mind she was soft and too young to really know better.

“No. I can bring you presents though.”

“...Presents?”

“Yes.” She strode decisively to him, getting in his space in her demanding, boisterous way. She opened her backpack and rummaged inside it. “I brought food for Gabriel, as I told you, since you're a terrible potential boyfriend...”

“I'm not his boyfriend,” he said vehemently, cheeks reddening.

Ellen was secretly relieved to see him look so lively, if only for a moment. “I said 'potential', didn't I? Anyway, I brought some tea Arran made for you, and a letter from him too, and marshmallows, those are from me of course.”

Nathan hadn't heard that many words together in days, since the last time Gabriel had tried to tell him a story. “Letter? Marshmallows?”

She nodded. “Adele also sends food. I told her that was lame, but she couldn't think of anything else, because, and I quote, you already have two knives and that's the only interest you have in common.”

Nathan could barely force himself to remember who that was; the face of a Black Witch recruit glimmered for a second – her skin hardened into metal, her Gift – and then was lost, just as quickly. “What's the letter about?”

“I have no idea. Let's find out.”

He glared at her.

“If you don't bring me to your camp, I'm going to head back on my own, get lost, and die, and you'll never forgive yourself.”

He stood silent for some more agonizing moments, arms crossed. Then he turned, and led the way. “Why the marshmallows?” he asked, curious despite himself.

“To celebrate our friendship, Ivan.”
“Ellen.”

“Yes, Nathan?”

“These aren't marshmallows.”

“We're in Poland, do you think they sell marshmallows here? This is the closest thing I found. Now eat up and let's hear what Arran says.”

When Ellen got back to camp one, Celia was furious. She sent her to camp three, the farthest from Nathan and Gabriel's tent. It took her some time to find the trail again, but when she did, off she went. She even had another letter from Arran, since he insisted on killing himself with work in all three camps.

Nathan, the ungrateful brat, didn't look happy to see her. “When Hunters find you, I'm not going to run to your rescue.”

“Why, are there still Hunters around, with how many you kill? You're going to make Celia move camp again. What will I do then? I can barely find my way here as it is.”

“Then I'll be sure to kill more, so she does just that and you stop being stupid.”

“You're being stupid, why are you even killing them? It's not like they're likely to know anything about Annalise.”

He smirked. “Killing is therapeutic.”

She levelled an unimpressed look at him. “You just love to act scary, do you.”

His smirk widening was the only response she got.

“Just so you know, I don't believe you for a second. Now then,” she said, and thought of the second letter she was carrying. “Have you been trying what Arran suggested?”

Nathan's half-amused, half-feral smirk vanished. Ellen could see his walls go up and spikes poking out from his skin. “It doesn't work,” he said.

“You have to keep at it,” she said gently. “It may be hard at first, but you have to try.”

His conflict was plain to see: the trust in his brother, pitted against his refusal to admit he had a problem – a real, medical problem, a mental illness that no one around was qualified to diagnose, but there nonetheless.

“Have you tried asking Gabriel for help?”

He snorted. “Helping me to breathe?” he asked, mocking.

She put her hands on her hips.
He crossed his arms on his chest.

Finally she said, “Just do as Arran says.”

“Arran says... Arran wrote... something,” Nathan said that night, as they tended to the fire. Gabriel stirred the flames with a stick, and waited. Nathan wanted to just say it – it was such a stupid, little thing, it was just breathing for fuck's sake – but he found himself floundering. “He wrote a message – Ellen gave it to me – and... well...”

He gazed at Gabriel's open and patient expression, knowing it wasn't supposed to be such a big deal, and yet as embarrassed as he had never felt before. “Well, Ellen read it to me, and...”

Completely at a loss, he just fished out the scrap of paper and gave it to Gabriel. He looked thoughtful as he read it.

“I can see why he'd suggest breathing exercises to help you focus,” he said, “but I'm not sure this approach would work for you. Have you tried it?”

Nathan glared at the fire.

Gabriel chuckled. “I see.”

When you feel like you need to focus back on the present, put a hand over your heart and listen to yourself breathing. Don't think about breathing, just feel it. Try to associate one simple thing you need to remember – something to do, for example – to this exercise, had said the letter. But every time Nathan put a hand over his heart, and felt it beating, his mind would spiral down into the same waking nightmares that tormented him.

He hovered a hand over his heart, then hesitated. “I can't do it like that, Arran,” he said, and put it on the side of his neck instead. He could feel his pulse there, but it wasn't better. The memory of the collar, of the cottage, of the cage, still chocked him, and it was there, intangible and lingering. But the warmth... a memory flickered, and he tried to grasp it. He glanced at Gabriel. Watching the thin, worried line of his lips, he realized he had said that aloud.

“I mean,” Nathan said, flustered, “Arran said to put a hand over the heart, but... And Ellen said to ask for your help.”

“How can I help you?” Gabriel asked, and the light dancing in his eyes wasn't only from the glow of the fire. He looked more animated than he had in weeks.

Nathan rubbed his neck slowly. “I... I'm not sure.” There was no part of his body that was safe; his skin was a map of cruelties, where the landmarks were mostly scars, and very few good memories. A wrist was covered in acid burns; a palm held the small, circular scar of the stake that had connected him to Gabriel in the trance. On a cheek was the sign of Jessica hitting him with a frame when he was only three; behind an ear rested the memory of Debs tucking his hair behind it.

He healed, but the scars lingered, and every little scrap of happiness was tainted. He didn't have the privilege to say, No harm done.

Gabriel moved slowly. He put a hand over Nathan's, and guided it to his own neck. Nathan felt Gabriel's steady pulse, and curled his fingers on his nape.
“What do you want to focus on?” Gabriel asked, quietly.

Nathan looked at his gaunt cheeks, at how thin he had become to stubbornly stay by his side.

Gabriel let go of his hand. He dragged his fingers gently up Nathan's arm, then the shoulder, and then on the neck. His thumb traced the small patch of skin right behind the ear, and the memory whispered. The ghost of Debs' touch, vivacious and quick; Arran's, lingering and loving; and now this, delicate and unsure.

Nathan committed it to memory.

Nathan was still adapting to his Gifts. The one that came easier and faster was the fire-breathing Gift (was it the one coming from Arran's and Deborah's father? He shut that idle musing down). He only had to think about becoming an animal for his Gift to work; but for the others, he had learned there was one specific trigger to it. For fire-breathing it was licking the roof of his mouth; for shooting lightning, clapping his hands; for becoming invisible, breathing a certain way. He liked them, but his favourite one yet was making plants grow. He was stalking a Hunter when he found that Gift. He thought about sneaking up on him – it was a rare male Hunter – and cut his throat, but then the Hunter stopped and put his back to a tree, and waited. For what, Nathan didn't know. Nathan remained hidden for a long time, still and invisible, watching him. Then, for some reason, Nathan's attention was drawn to a sapling, its young green leaves brilliant in the sunlight peeking through the branches. It was right in front of the Hunter. Nathan felt drawn to the soil, and put a hand on it, finding it warm and dry. He felt the strength of the sapling, its vitality and potential to grow. He tapped into it, and power rose through the plant like a roaring wave. It enveloped the Hunter in an instant, twining around his limbs. He struggled, then cried for help, calling a name. His partner's. But she was already dead. Nathan rose and strode towards him, not hearing his curses. The Fairborn's bloodthirst screamed always louder. He plunged the blade into his stomach, and cut him open to the throat. Guts and blood spilled out, and the Hunter's scream became a hysterical wail. It took some time for him to die.

Nathan felt the warmth of some drops on his face. He tried to remember how long he had been in the forest, how long he had left Gabriel on his own, how long it had been from Ellen's last visit, but he couldn't. The blood was stark red on the green of the forest, pooling in an ever-growing black sea that was out to swallow him. He panicked.

A hand was on his neck. His own hand. He felt his pulse rabbiting underneath the skin. He closed his eyes, and focused on his breathing. He was supposed to remember something. What was it?

Gabriel's gaunt cheeks.

Nathan opened his eyes. He had to hunt.

Celia threatened Ellen to put her under a binding spell if she tried again to leave camp three against orders. Ellen waited six days, until Greatorex and Celia had one of their long, boring war councils, and then she set off.

(Really, the patrols around camp had to get better. Then again, she had insider information, so maybe
When she arrived at Nathan and Gabriel's camp she expected at least a little applause for having found the way all on her own. What she found instead was Nathan skinning and quartering a deer. The stench of blood almost made her gag, but she forgot all about it when he turned to her.

“Hey Nikita,” he said, and he looked friendly.

“Hey Ivan,” she stammered. She was elated at the sight, already thinking about how happy Arran would be when she told him.

He cut at the juncture between a hind leg and the hipbone, and cursed. It was much harder to skin a deer than a rabbit, and he was growing frustrated. “I'm surprised it took you so long to come back.”

“Oh you know, Celia told me not to, so I did.”

“Don't take her lightly. What if she decides to punish you for insubordination? Her Gift is fucking painful, you know.”

She snorted. “She can't torture a kid and hope to keep her reputation in the Alliance.”

Nathan stared at her.

She covered her mouth. “Oh shit. I'm so sorry.”

Every trace of friendliness vanished from his face, leaving emptiness. He got up without sparing her a glance, and went to the tent to rummage inside it.

“Nathan, I'm sorry, please...”

Just then, Gabriel emerged from the forest. He startled at the sight of the bloody carcass of the deer next to the fire. He moved next to Ellen. “Hi Ellen. What's wrong?”

“Do we have a plastic bag somewhere?” Nathan asked from inside the tent. “Or any sheets to spare?”

“Uhm... I don't think so?”

Nathan sighed. “Fucking fine.”

Ellen and Gabriel heard the sound of tearing fabric. When Nathan emerged, he was holding a scrap cut from his own sheets. He used it to wrap around one of the deer's leg, under the puzzled eyes of the two witches. Then he turned to Ellen, and dumped the whole thing in her hands. She floundered with it, not expecting to be handed it.

“Is it too heavy?” Nathan asked.

“W-what?” she stammered.

“Is it too heavy? Do I have to cut a smaller piece?”

“Heavy for what? What do you want me to do with it?” she asked, bewildered.

Nathan looked at her like she was immensely stupid. “Eat it. With Arran, don't be greedy.”

She felt his words blooming in her chest like sun-kissed flowers. She turned to Gabriel just in time to
see a small smile light his face.

Finally, she turned to Nathan, and felt her voice almost crack when she said, “Okay.”

Celia stared down at the maps and reports spread out on the table, hands at either side of it and head hung. “We are defeated.”

“We should start to think of a safe passage for the civilians. At least they should make it out of this alive,” Greatorex said, slowly.

“I still think Van should go through with her plan.”

Greatorex felt the familiar struggle between outrage and weakness inside her. “It won't work. Even if she manages to drug him and make him pliable as she said, one witch isn't enough to win a war.”

Celia stood. “We did this wrong from the start. We bent to the Blacks' idea of war, head-on and with no organized warfare. We should've done this as guerrilla units, independent and fast.”

“We never had enough experienced leaders for that. Besides, as long as the Blacks refuse to use cellphones or even radios---”

A sliver of hot summer wind ruffled the papers on the table. A bird flew inside the tent, and landed over one of the maps.

Greatorex gasped. “This is---!”

The bird was strangely angular, like its edges and feathers were cut with a knife, and was white as snow, from beak to legs. A closer inspection revealed it was made of paper. The creature waited until Greatorex moved closer, and then it pecked the map a few times, until little indentations were visible. Then it folded open, and only a sheet of paper remained, with the lines of a hundred little folds remaining.

The message said,

**Preparations for the seize of the Councils at the meeting are green. All Hunters from battalion 3 through 9 are to report to Bratislava for the operation by 08/27.**

Reminder: the members of the following Councils aren't to be killed unless absolutely necessary:

- Council of the Bundesländer
- Council of the Baltic Sea
- Council of the Fenlands
All other members are subjected to proscription by The Council.
Desperate gamble

Chapter Notes

A little note from yours truly, and sorry if it stinks of self-pity... I’m in kind of a bad place right now (the transition between uni and actually finding a job is stressing me out), so i’d really appreciate it if you left me a comment if you read... it would lift my spirits :’)

The woman had long tawny hair, whipping and tangling in the screaming wind. Nathan saw her standing, a sea of running clouds churning fast beyond. She staggered, and her clothes were flags in a tempest. She looked about to fall.

"Are you going to kill them for me?" she asked.

Nathan fought to reach her, trying to shield his eyes from the biting wind, and felt something wet on his face. He looked at his hands, and they were dripping red. The weight of all those he had killed erupted from the soil, hands gripping his ankles, pulling at his boots and jeans.

Kill them. Kill them all.

He struggled, almost reached her, a hand stretching out.

"I don't want you to! Please... please don't..." she sobbed, crumpling on herself, and Nathan's heart broke at the sound of pain in her voice.

He grabbed her shoulder.

"Debs...?" he asked, but his voice was scattered away in the screams.

She inhaled sharply at his touch, and he wrenched her back.

Jessica turned to him and sank her claws into his neck.

"Look at yourself," she snarled, satisfaction a vicious glint in her green eyes, "you're the monster I always knew you were!"

Nathan screamed, and felt the dead pulling viciously, their hands desperate and angry. He unsheathed the Fairborn and at once it came alive with bloodthirst. It stabbed her in ravenous joy. She looked down at it, at the blade sunk into her stomach, at the blood slowly seeping through the clothes. She looked up, and locked eyes with Nathan.

"What will Arran think...?" she asked in a whisper, and then smiled savagely, lips and teeth stained with red. "He won't love you anymore, you know."

"Shut up," he said, twisting the Fairborn.

She laughed. "Does he love you now, I wonder? I bet he wishes he had stayed in Britain. At least he’d have a chance at surviving this war."
Nathan let go of the knife and tried to step back, but he was rooted into place, Jessica's claws in his neck and the dead's in his legs, climbing higher and higher.

He staggered back, but she held fast and snarled into his ear, “You should've stayed in that cage. Marcus would still be alive. Arran would still be safe in Cambridge. Gabriel would be safe. How many people would still be alive? How many joined because they heard about you and Marcus joining in the first place? Annalise would've never betrayed the Alliance, never shot Marcus, Białowieża would've never happened.”

Cold seeped from the earth and the dead's fingers and hands and bones became vines, became thorns, became roots wrapping around his legs, and ice crept into him, as slow and sure as a glacier.

“You're all dead, monster,” she hissed.

Nathan gasped for breath and felt, for a second, like his lungs were filled with ice, and like his diaphragm was frozen and unmoving. His heart hammered in his chest, and cold sweat drenched his shirt. He turned, and he saw a terrace half-hidden behind wrought-iron trellis, the tops of grey-blue roofs slanting down. The metal tiles glinted faintly under the curved sliver of the crescent moon.

He had no idea where he was. He felt panic surging from the pit of his stomach and strangling him – had he lost some days again? It had happened before, waking up over a bloody mess or a plunging cliff and not remembering how...

Nathan tried to breathe through the growing sense of dread. He couldn't remember how he got there or why or when, but he knew one thing for sure. He looked up. The sky was clear and cloudless. He listened to himself breathe.

Gunshots.

Close.

He turned to the left, waiting.

Gabriel appeared on the ledge of a higher roof. When he looked at him, relief washed over his face. He jumped down to Nathan's level and strode to him, almost running. Nathan put his hand on his neck, fingers finding their way to the short hairs at the back.

Gabriel smiled, a soft and minute curve of the lips.

Then he let out an agonized breath through clenched teeth. When he looked down, he saw something that didn't make sense.

A small blade, sunk in to the hilt in his side.

Nathan's hand gripping the knife.

Gabriel grasped his hand, but didn't try to wrench it away. He closed his fingers it, and saw his own blood slowly covering the scar left by the stake on Nathan's skin.

Nathan gasped for breath and felt, for hours or maybe seconds, like his body was dead weight, a betraying cold stone that was sentencing him to death. His heart hammered in his chest and cold
sweat clung to his skin and clothes and yet he couldn't move, wanting to bolt up but unable to even open his eyes.

A hand cupped the side of his face.

Nathan wheezed in terror only once before finding the Fairborn.

He scrambled away, the relief of finally moving short-lived when he realized he was quaking too much to even get up. He sat up against a pine's trunk and faced his enemy, the Fairborn held in front of him. A gallon of adrenaline pumped through his veins and his grip trembled uncontrollably, and that didn't change even when dread froze him.

Gabriel stared at him, guilt and worry twisting his expression. A thick line of blood oozed down his hand and wrist, seeping under his other hand's grasp, trying to stop the bleeding to no avail.

Nathan stared at him, uncomprehending, attempting to form words that wouldn't come out. He looked at the Fairborn, and saw its edge red.

Gabriel made to move towards him. “Nathan...” he said, infinitely gentle.

Nathan felt drawn to him like a moth to a flame, but then remembered a blade, and annihilating horror. He recoiled, and instead of dropping the Fairborn like a part of him was screaming to do, he gripped it tighter.

“Nathan, I'm sorry, I... I thought there was something wrong with you, you had stopped breathing...” Gabriel pleaded.

He looked so sorry, so worried, so loving, so perfect, and Nathan felt chilled to the bone. He tried to scoot away more, but his legs were a quivering, useless dead weight and he couldn't run, and he wasn't getting better, and his mind screamed run run run and instead he didn't even have the breath to speak.

He fought to breathe in deep enough to talk, and wheezed and struggled until he managed to croak out, “Am I awake?”

Gabriel wanted so badly to go to him, to embrace him and ground him with the contact that made Nathan thrive. But the cut on his hand was deep, stinging hot, and bleeding. Nathan's reaction to being touched had been lightning-fast, and Gabriel had only felt the Fairborn – not seen it, not at all – and fear knifing him in the throat for a blinding moment.

He had told himself this wouldn't happen. He had told everyone who told him otherwise it wouldn't happen. Nathan would never attack him.

Now he had to convince everyone it was his own fault he had a slashed-open hand.

Nathan searched his face for a sign, any sign, that it was real, that it wasn't dream, but panic had sent his mind spiralling out of control, and he couldn't focus. “Is this real?” he asked, and choked on the words. “How do I know you're real?”

“I don't know,” Gabriel whispered.

He leaned forward, ever so slightly, and Nathan cried out, “Stay away!”

The words were so much more painful than the simple cut of a knife; they were that same knife buried deep and twisting.
“What did you dream?” Gabriel forced out. “You were having a nightmare, but then you just... stopped moving. You weren't breathing,” he repeated.

“It wasn't a dream... it was but then it wasn't, it was real, it felt real, I could feel it, you...” It was a confused sensation, but Nathan was starting to remember a different texture, a different quality in his nightmares. The details were slipping away, but a sensation remained; of images frozen, of things suspended in time, until one single detail stood out, stark and vivid.

The breath punched out of Gabriel in an agonized wheeze.

*Why would I do it - why would I kill you? What monster should I become to try and kill you?*

“I would never hurt you,” Gabriel said. “You know that, don't you?”

Nathan remained silent a long time at that, unblinking. Finally, he stopped quivering. What he said next froze Gabriel to the bone.

“What if I was the one to hurt you?”

It took a great effort to relax his frozen fingers from their grip around the Fairborn, and let it fall on the pine needles-covered soil.

Then he transformed into his animal, and he ran.

Gabriel watched him vanish in the shadows of the forest, and pushed down a frustrated scream. It was useless to call him back, he knew. It was useless to feel betrayed too. Nathan had trusted someone before and he had been betrayed, he knew.

It was easier to hate Annalise.

It was easier than feeling unappreciated and unworthy.

Nathan let his animal take over, let it run and just followed. It was easier than thinking, easier than wondering, than replaying Gabriel's wounded expression over and over and over and *over*...

It was easier than thinking about how he could never make things right, not even for the people who tried so hard to love him.

They smelt a trail, faint enough for the Hunter to be hours, if not days, away. They didn't hesitate; they gave chase.

Killing was the easiest thing.

Gabriel didn't need medical help for the cut; his healing wasn't as strong as Nathan's, but it was still enough. But he felt frayed at the edges, and couldn't stomach more who knew how many days sitting in front of their tent, waiting and wondering in vague terror if Nathan was ever coming back. So he went to camp one, hoping to intercept Arran in his rounds.

He didn't leave a note, or some sort of message that could make sense for Nathan. He half-hoped Nathan came back and felt just a fraction of the panic Gabriel felt every day. He also half-berated
himself for being childish and petty. It was no way to solve anything, and it didn't make him feel any better.

When he found him, Arran could sense his distress at once. He surprised him, however, by not asking about Nathan, but gently inquiring about how Gabriel himself was faring.

“You should come back to camp more often,” Arran told him. “Me and Adele are gathering a small library, but Ellen isn't much help with it. The last time I asked her to snatch a book she came back with Joyce's *Ulysses*. A fine book, but not what I had in mind to relax.”

Gabriel played along and said, “Are you encouraging her to steal? The things you'd do for a book, Arran.”

A girl came up to them, her dark curly hair a storm cloud haloing her light brown face. “I think she did her best, considering it must be hard to find books in English around here,” Adele said. “I'm still not touching that with a ten-foot pole, mind you.”

“How else can you find them, though?” Gabriel asked. “It's not like there's an airport or something like that nearby.”

Arran cringed a little. “Most of what we have... well, it used to belong to Alliance members we lost. We gathered what people had in their packs when they fled. It's not much, but it's something. We have two copies of *Wuthering Heights*, for some reason.”

Gabriel smiled despite himself. “Hey, I like *Wuthering Heights*.”

“I heard Greatorex talking about Celia's books,” Adele said. “Maybe we could ask her---”

“No.”

She blinked at Arran, slowly. Gabriel had startled at his sudden sharp tone, but she was unfazed.

Arran looked away. “I'm sorry.”

“No need,” she said, with perfect calm. Then she turned to Gabriel. “I think the Alliance will be on the move soon. It's best if you know.”

The fear crawling up Gabriel's spine was back again in a moment. “Where to?”

“Don't know yet. But something big happened. Greatorex has been energized like I haven't seen since BB.” Adele was Greatorex's favourite student, and she acted like her right arm and unofficial secretary despite her inexperience, but most importantly, despite being a Black. She was also one of the few Blacks left. Most of them had been fighters because of their superior Gifts – and a lot of them had been at the frontlines when the Battle of Białowieża ended in disastrous defeat.

Gabriel had less than an hour of respite – if it could be called that. He kept thinking of Nathan, and then berating himself for worrying about Nathan, and then for resenting him, until his thoughts were spinning in never-ending circles. He was almost glad when Nesbitt came to them and told him and Adele to follow him. Gabriel and Arran exchanged a look. When Arran wordlessly got up and entered his tent, they left.

Celia, Greatorex and Van Dal waited for them. The atmosphere was more than energized, as Adele would've called it – it was charged. Gabriel could smell their desperation like the gunpowder he had become so accustomed to. He looked around. The Alliance's core was reduced to a handful of grim Witches who hoped to rely on one seventeen-year-old mentally unstable boy to turn the tide of a war
they had no way to win.

“We received a message,” Greatorex said, “that could change everything, if we do this right.”

A paper bird and a notice for some Hunters battalions; that was all it took for the three leaders of the Alliance to go back to the war table.

“But who sent that message? Is it reliable?” Gabriel asked. It was highly suspiscious that such vital information arrived just when the Alliance was on the verge of collapse.

Greatorex turned to Celia, in a silent request of permission. At her nod, Greatorex said, “It was something Deborah Byrn had been working on. Do you know what her Gift was?”

Gabriel shook his head. Not even Nathan knew; when he had been taken away she was still struggling to find it. He claimed it was because she was too logical about it, too methodical.

“She could give life to written paper. It worked by giving shape to specific words. She only had to write what she wanted it to be if the word was missing – a bird, for example. She worked as an archivist for the Council, so she sent us a lot of valuable information thanks to her Gift... but she was only a low-level clerk, and it was very risky. When she was captured she was working on something that, quite frankly, nobody thought could work. She wanted to create a computer program to hide inside the Council's archives. It was supposed to activate when certain keywords were used in a document, and simply make the computer print it. Deborah thought she could infuse her Gift directly into the program, so that once printed, the paper would take life and bring us the message.”

“Theoretically,” Van interjected, “it's not that different from what I do when enchanting objects such as an electronic car key. But coding her Gift, even a simple command, in something virtual and intangible... well, I've never heard of anything like that.”

“If she did it, it would be revolutionary,” Adele said, a troubled look in her eyes.

It would have also been another step away from Blacks.

“Can I see the message?” Gabriel asked. Celia gave it to him, and he was reminded of another place and time when Deborah had been a ghost between them. He remembered Nathan's face the moment he realized he was going to hear about one of his sibling's death.

Gabriel looked over the message. At the very bottom, in the right corner, was a small lone word.

bird

He contemplated the terrible irony of this last piece of Nathan's beloved sister being something written, something he'd hate. He wondered if Nathan would even want to see it; mementoes can be as consoling as much as poisonous, and maybe it was too early. Still, Nathan had a right to know. Arran, too... Gabriel looked at the witches around him, ready to make one final move, the move that would seal the Alliance's fate for good.

He felt sick to the stomach. He should've tried to convince Nathan to leave sooner. Was there still a way...?
He read the message again, so clinical and detached as it put to death who knew how many White witches, their only crime not bowing to the demands of the Council of England. He looked at that tiny word, lonely and stark in a sea of ivory. Deborah had lost everything to give them that message. Her courage could save the Alliance even from beyond the grave. She was the brave one, truly.

“The 27th is still more than two weeks ahead,” Van Dal said. “We have time to send scouts to Bratislava and understand what exactly is going on. All contact with our spies have been severed since Białowieża so we don't know exactly what this meeting of Councils is about, although we can guess.”

“We had warned them Soul was going to extend his influence all over Europe. It's unsurprising he'd resort to violence to do so,” Celia added grimly. “For now we have to focus on two things. The first is to learn everything we can about this meeting and the Hunters' forces. And then...”

She turned to Gabriel, her expression inscrutable. “There's the matter of Nathan.”

Gabriel knew it was useless to argue. “You want him to fight. Even in his state.”

Van lighted a cigarette with deliberate slowness. “I can devise a potion that will clear his mind.”

“Arran has been trying that but it didn't work much,” he said.

Van exhaled a plume of thick whitish smoke; for a suspended moment she almost vanished, and only her bright blue eyes were visible, flashing like a nocturnal animal's in the filtered light.

“Arran, as is his fashion, was trying to be gentle and help him. That is not what I would do,” she finally said.

“What do you expect me to do? Whatever you have in mind, I'm not forcing him to do anything.”

“I think he might welcome the chance to feel better like this, Gabriel.”

“That doesn't matter. He doesn't know what is best for himself right now. That's why you're asking me, right? Arran would never agree.”

“Indeed, he wouldn't,” Van said, with a calm that made Gabriel more and more worried.

The witches in the tent looked at each other. A grim shadow passed on Greatorex's face, but she didn't speak. Celia turned to Gabriel, and said, “Nathan has been searching for Annalise all this time.”

Gabriel's eyebrows furrowed. “Yes.”

“She's at camp three, away from the Black Witches.”

He stayed silent for a long moment, stunned. Then realization hit him, and he had to fight hard not to attack her here and there.

“She has always been there, hasn't she,” he nearly hissed, voice low.

“Surely you understand what Nathan would do if we told him. But yes, she's been in our custody since Białowieża,” Celia confirmed.

He saw very well what they were doing. He had been had. If they were to tell Nathan the truth, he would think Gabriel had kept it from him. At the same time, Gabriel couldn't get out of the situation
by simply telling him. There was no doubt what Nathan would do. He'd storm camp 3 and kill her, gruesomely and with savage delight, and what would that entail? Nathan was considered a Black - regardless of the inaccuracy of it - and if he killed Annalise, a White, beautiful girl... Gabriel could well imagine how other Whites would consider her a hero. An avenger. Who cared that she had killed Marcus out of sheer dumb luck? She still avenged the tens of witches he had killed. Surely she had gained some sympathy for that.

If Nathan caught wind of this...

No, Gabriel would not tell him. He couldn't.

How ironic the situation was. Nathan now thought Annalise had been a spy all along, that Gabriel had been right... but Gabriel himself wasn't so sure. In Switzerland he had wanted her to be a spy. He could justify himself by saying he hadn't realized how deep her betrayal would cut Nathan, but that would be a lie. He had known. He had always known very well the consequences of betrayal. He had known what it did to people who had loved each other before. Yet he had wanted Annalise to be a spy.

Now though... now that he could look at the facts, he didn't know what to think of her.

He met Van's eyes, and he was sure she could see the darkness swirling in his thoughts.

“We just need you to give a potion to him, Gabriel. Not poison,” Celia said.

“I won't ask you to trust us, because trust if for Fains, and we are Black witches,” Van told him, ignoring Celia's words. “Trust this: the Alliance needs Nathan healthy and able. My potion will achieve exactly this. Nothing more, nothing less. I've always helped him, and you, up until now. You have given me no reason to change that... to the contrary. Nesbitt has everything with him. He will accompany you to your camp later.”

“And what am I supposed to tell Nathan about everything else?” Gabriel asked, voice laced with defeat.

“About what?” Celia asked.

Gabriel didn't want to grace her with a response. Yet he answered, “About Deborah's Gift, and about Bratislava.” He hesitated then. He wanted to ask for that message, to show it to Nathan... but what if that only hurt him? He felt like he had lost his understanding of Nathan somewhat. He had always had a talent for understanding people; reading them came to him as natural, as easy as breathing. He had thought Nathan was no exception. Yet he couldn't anticipate his wild swings of emotions anymore. Maybe because that's all they were - wild swings. They were still a part of Nathan, but they were also hiding him under layers of stormy reactions and unpredictable lashing outs.

He asked all the same. Arran, at least, would cherish it.

Greatorex shrugged. “We already know everything we could possibly know from it. You can have it.”

Celia found his devotion naïve and misplaced. It coloured her words when she asked sarcastically, “Will you show it to Nathan?”

Gabriel didn't acknowledge her tone. He took the scrap of paper from Greatorex. “I guess you'll call me again when the preparations are ready?”

At their nods, he left.
Nesbitt followed him out. Gabriel eyed his rucksack with resentment. If only Annalise had never existed. Too much trouble in one naive, inconsequential little girl.

When they arrived at camp, it was sunset, and Nathan was there. He jumped up from the fire he was tending to at the sight of Gabriel, but scowled at Nesbitt. He looked at Gabriel, expectant.

Gabriel felt guilt gnawing at him already.

“News from camp?” Nathan asked, ignoring Nesbitt's exaggerated wave.

“Some, yes.”

If Nathan noticed Gabriel's distress, he didn't show it.

Gabriel had to decide, he knew. Should he tell him now, when Nathan was still himself - however sick and not quite right in his mind? Or administer the drugs, and let them take off the edge of talking about Deborah again? Gabriel was at a loss.

He thought back of Nathan when he first met him, when he met a fierce and unflinching boy. A fighter, no matter how frightened.

Gabriel took out Deborah's message.

“The Alliance received this. I'm going to read it to you. Let's sit down,” he said.

Nathan sat, scowling in that way Gabriel found so endearing.

“I'm not going to beat around the bush. It's from Deborah.”

Nathan went very still. He didn't look up from the flames dancing.

Gabriel watched him in silence, waiting for a reaction that didn't come. He tentatively started to read him the letter. As he read, he glanced at him several times. The lack of reactions was maybe more worrying than Nathan running away to kill some Hunters to deal.

When he was done, Nathan stayed silent a long time. Then he said, “I dreamt of Debs last night.”

“Oh,” Gabriel said, lamely. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Nathan turned to look at him, silent again. Nesbitt was uncharacteristically quiet as he watched the exchange, wary of what Nathan might do before Van's drugs calmed him down. He hadn't been in Nathan's close proximity in almost a month, and he preferred it that way.

Gabriel shot him a meaningful look. Nesbitt threw his hands in the air and said jovially, “All right, All right. You two lovebirds talk it out.”

He went to the treeline, just far enough to be out of earshot, but not of eyesight. Gabriel returned Nathan's stare, expectant.

“She was on a cliff,” he finally said. “It's... I don't remember too well. You know, dreams. And then when you... when I woke up, I only thought I was waking up, instead I was inside another... something like a dream. But not really a dream. It was different.”

Nathan had hinted at it once, the Gift of prophecy Marcus had stolen. It was the one Gift that had
ruined their relationship forever, maybe the one that had doomed it in the end. Who knew how prophecies influenced the very same events they predicted, once they were out in the world and tainting the minds and actions of the people who tried to escape them?

“Was it a prophecy?” Gabriel asked.

Nathan scowled fiercely at that. “I hope not.”

“Why not? What did you see?”

“It could still not be a prophecy. Maybe it was just a dream within a dream. They happen, right?”

“Yes, they do.”

Nathan was stalling, that much was obvious to the both of them. Gabriel, however, would not push him. Another thing they both knew.

Finally, Nathan said, very quietly, “In that thing, whatever it was... I stabbed you.”

Gabriel's eyes went wide. This time it was his turn to stay silent for a long time. Then he asked, “Can you tell me some details?”

“I don’t remember much. It's just... foggy. I remember seeing rooftops. I think it was night. And then only...” Nathan let his voice vanish like smoke in the air. He suddenly itched for a cigarette, something to hold and distract himself with. Even better, one of Van's cigarettes, their smoke thick and sweet and going to his head.

“If it's really a prophecy... it will happen,” Nathan said, growing agitated by the second. “In a way that you don't expect, maybe, or... I don't know. Marcus stopped fighting it in the end and look what happened. Barely one month he knew me, really knew me, and he was dead.”

“Maybe it's not me. It could be someone who can shapeshift.”

“I know. I thought of it.”

Yet. Nathan had also thought of Gabriel not eating enough to stay close to him, of Gabriel reprimanding him whenever he came back to camp with hands dripping blood, of Gabriel looking wary and scared when he had a particularly bad day - which was, honestly, every day. What if Gabriel was right in being scared? What if Nathan started to be a danger?

He was a danger. He was.

He knew.

Wasn't that the point? He felt like there had been a point at a certain moment in time. A reason why he wanted to look like a monster. A reason that was slipping away from him, like water through his fingers.

“Nathan...”

“So are we going to attack these Hunters in Bratislava?”

It was a crude attempt at changing the subject, but there wasn't much to add either.

Now, however, came the difficult part.
Gabriel fidgeted. Nesbitt had given him Van's drugs - “Better if you just give them to him, aye?” - and they felt heavy as guilt in his pocket. Nathan seemed to finally sense something was wrong. “What is it?” he asked. “Don't tell me they don't want me to come. They're dead without me.”

You're all dead, monster!

Nathan heard it ring in his brain and felt it resonate inside his skull like sound echoing inside a bell. Without him they were dead. If they failed the Alliance was done for. If the Alliance was done for, what would happen to Arran? To Gabriel? To Ellen? If he didn't go Gabriel or Ellen or both might die during the battle, he had to go, he had to protect them or they'd all die, they'd all be dead and what would he do then?

He shook his head and covered his eyes with a hand, trying hard not to mutter aloud. He didn't need Jessica too inside his mind.

Gabriel saw his struggling and found his courage through the self-loathing. “Van gave me something for you.”

Nathan didn't look at him as he said through gritted teeth, “What is it?”

Gabriel wanted to explain. He wanted to tell him what it was, make him understand what these drugs would do, tell him what the Alliance wanted of him. But he couldn't decide whether it was better or worse; to tell him, or to just give them to him. “Van said, well...She said they would help you.”

“Help me with what?”

“Calm you... down, I think.”

At that, Nathan had a rare moment of clarity. He couldn't make order in his thoughts for more than a few minutes at a time. He hadn't been able for weeks. Of course, that wasn't helpful in the case of battle. He had fended off for himself until then, and he knew he could take more than one Hunter on his own. He had tested it. But this was going to be an operation like the ones before Białowieża. A true Alliance operation. Concerted. Reasoned. Strategical.

He stretched a hand out.

Gabriel hesitated. He took out the square of paper containing the drug. He reached out with it, but only slightly. “Nathan, I'm not...”

Nathan deliberately took the paper and opened it. “Am I supposed to just take this or should I pour it in water or something?”

Gabriel knew he had one last chance to stop him. One last chance to be honest. He reached out to him in an aborted, last attempt to maybe, just maybe stop him.

Nathan shrugged, and upended the powder in his mouth.

“That wasn't so bad, was it?” Nesbitt said, appearing next to the fire. “How are you feeling kid?”

Nathan stared at him in vaguely disgusted disinterest. He felt... calm. Or something that felt like calm. It was strange, maybe because he hadn't felt calm in way more than a few weeks - he hadn't felt this
calm since...

Since before the cottage, probably.

Nathan asked, “So what do we know about this Council meeting?”

“No much for now,” Nesbitt said. “What we can gleam from the message itself is pretty telling though. We knew Soul had been trying to reach out to the other European Councils, trying to make them either join his crusade against Blacks or hand command over through veiled threats. Apparently the time for pleasantries is over. Before fighting broke out during the summer, two of the Councils mentioned in the message were the more vocal in opposing his methods and general objectives. Some Councils had actually been working in the opposite direction for several years, trying to build bridges with the Black community instead... But we have no idea what happened to that relationship after Białowieża. Guess Soul is planning a coup.”

Nathan scowled.

Nesbitt sniggered when he realized Nathan didn't know the word. Before he could say anything to test Nathan's newfound calm, Gabriel said, “He's planning to take over the Councils who oppose him. By force, of course. The message said the Councils are subjected to proscription.”

“Funny they'd use that word,” Nesbitt said, laughing. “Reminds me of Roman politicians stabbing each other.”

“It means...” Gabriel said, “that their members can be killed on sight with no consequences. Their deaths are desirable.”

Nathan looked at the scrap of paper in his hands. He held it gently, like it could crumble any moment. He was thinking of Debs that day, when she had fearlessly said she was trying to get information from Niall. How Arran had been upset at her deception. If only she had never thought of being so brave, Nathan thought. If only he'd been better at not being himself.

Not that that was possible.

Not that that was fair.

He held out the paper to Gabriel.

“You don't want it?” Gabriel asked, softly.

“Arran can have it. At least he can read it.”

Gabriel took it without a word. Nathan noticed how uncharacteristically quiet he was, how short his answers were. Usually, he'd be much more forthcoming, with opinions and thoughts and wits.

“Don't worry about it,” Nathan said.

When Gabriel looked at him in puzzlement, Nathan elaborated, “If I end up stabbing you, you can shoot me. You have to shoot me.”

Gabriel felt the knife of guilt twist in his chest.

Nesbitt gaped between them. “Wait, what? What's this about Gabriel shooting you? You can't be serious.”

“We should come up with some passwords,” Gabriel said.
“Like what?”

“I don't know. It could be things to say when we meet after we lost sight of each other. So we know the other is really him.”

Nathan frowned. “And what would that password be?”

“I don't know. I'll think of something.”

Nathan snorted in amusement. “Right. You do that. Try to keep it simple for me.”

Gabriel felt the knife twist again at the easy way Nathan was joking. Like before. Like he never got lost inside himself and his nightmares. Gabriel hated and loved it with the same intensity. He hoped Arran would never catch wind of this... but of course he would. He was going to notice the change as soon as he saw Nathan.

Nathan got up, and stared at the fire. The calm washing over his face was chilling. Out of place.

“Guess Celia will stop whining about how I kill Hunters and start ordering me to. Can't she make up her fucking mind?” he said, and his teeth glinted white and sharp.

Three scouts never came back from their mission. There was no time to mourn them - there hadn't been time to mourn anyone since Białowieża. The information they needed was simple, and the Alliance was ready to do anything to get it. And they did.

Seven Councils from all other Europe were meeting in the heart of the medieval part of Bratislava, near Michael's Gate, on August 27th. The Hunters were already gathered in an old residence right in the vicinity, well-guarded against Fains and witches alike. The details of their plan were, however, not so clear, and it had been impossible to infiltrate their ranks to know more. To attack during the Hunters' raid would be suicide; too many experienced warriors against too few Alliance fighters. Ellen, however, had found out a most interesting fact: where the captured councillors - the surviving ones, that is - would be jailed, pending whatever decision the Council of England would take about their fate.

It was decided, then, to infiltrate this second location and free as many councillors as possible. The objective was to avoid direct confrontation until the very last moment.

Nathan didn't see the point of him even taking part in the operation if what they were going for was stealth.

“If I'm not killing Hunters, what's the point?” he asked to the Alliance generals when they all gathered in camp 1.

The drugs had dulled his more confused states and made him much more prone to talk instead of running away or grabbing a knife; but there was a detached quality to his thoughts. His only focus remained to kill as many Hunters as possible.

“The plan isn't foolproof. In case fighting breaks out, you're our best chance at getting the councillors out. Your priority must be to save them, and delay any Hunters attacking us during the retreat,” Celia told him.

“What about Gabriel? What's his role?”
“First infiltration.”

Nathan went silent at that. A small thought darted in the sluggish waters of his mind, but it was no more than the black shadow of a carp in a dark pond, vanished in an instant. “That's dangerous.”

“The most dangerous. But he's the one with the best chances at pulling it off. He'll have to pass for a Hunter and let us in.”

“I can do that. I can get invisible, get inside the---”

“Getting invisible wouldn't be enough. Gabriel will have to find the passwords for the wards, since we couldn't figure them out. The best way to do so is to pass for a Hunter and mingle, make them to reveal the word or simply use it for him. That's not something you could do.”

But Gabriel could. If there was someone charming enough, skilled enough... it was him. It felt wrong to Nathan, somehow. Not only because it was insanely dangerous... It felt too close to deception, to something Jessica would do. Gabriel wasn't like that. Gabriel liked people, he watched them and understood them, he empathized with them. He didn't impersonate them. His Gift was to live like they lived, see the world through their eyes. This, instead...

Nathan turned to Gabriel, standing at his side, reliable as always. “Do you want to do it?”

He met his gaze calmly. “I want to help the Alliance.”

What went unsaid was, I want to help you.

The day had been hot and humid in Bratislava. Even when night fell, the air seemed to stick on clothes and skin alike, heavy with fear and terror.

The Hunters had stormed the Councils' meeting place less than 6 hours before.

It was now early morning, that sluggish, slow moment just an hour before sunrise. The coldest part of the night, the most still.

Gabriel watched the Hunter appear around the corner, walking down the narrow, medieval street. Nathan lunged. He grabbed her from behind, covered her mouth, and cut her throat. Neat and precise. He lowered the convulsing body to the ground, avoiding to get blood on the wall were it was eye-level and too visible. Then he let it fall. Gabriel rolled her over, took a good look at her face. He tried to distance himself from her, to be clinical about it. But transforming into someone dead was always unpleasant; it brought the shiver of final terror, of screaming unfairness of the last moments, and it always felt wrong somehow. Like what there was to learn, to feel, was both there and out of reach.

Gabriel took her appearance. Nathan fished out the pouch Van had given him and threw the powder on the body, on the blood pooling underneath it. The blood disappeared. They exchanged a glance, but no words. Gabriel thought faintly of passwords, of words left unsaid. He turned to the mouth of the street, and walked towards the jail. Nathan put his hands under the Hunter's armpits and dragged her away.

Gabriel wished for a second he had had the same drugs Nathan had. His heart was hammering so fast he was amazed it wasn't drumming out loud for everyone to hear. To calm himself down, he checked his uniform again. Hunters didn't have a uniform in the strict sense of the word, they just had a dress code. He was dressed in black from head to toe, his gun in a belt holster in just the right
spot to be visible if his jacket moved the right way. He had taken the Hunter's cellphone from her pocket. He didn't have to check it to know she was called Hannah. He rounded the corner and saw it. The jail. From the outside it looked like a quaint mansion, surrounded by a well-tended garden. It was in a residential neighbourhood in the outskirts of the city, close to the Danube. The buildings were mostly isolated villas, close to each other but with high walls and private denizens.

He crossed the street and reached the two Hunters staking the side entrance, both hidden under the shadows of an ancient maple. Its red leaves hanged over the perimeter wall; the branches, almost reaching the garden's floor, formed a thick canopy. From the outside, behind an iron-barred small gate, the Hunters were effectively invisible.

When they saw him they both tensed, but waited.

Before they could ask him for the passwords, he reached them and whispered, “Don't show anything and be calm. I think a Black is following me.”

The two guards exchanged looks; one was relatively calm, whereas the other had a savage smile plastered on her face at once.

“One of you follow me at a distance. The other wait here 60 seconds, then go on the other side. We can catch him. We'll attack him together.”

“Can't wait,” the savage one said, and she opened the gate to follow him.

Good, Gabriel thought. Best to take out the sadistic ones first.

He also noticed how she didn't use any password.

At least the exit was going to be easy... if they even reached that point.

He walked down the street, and she went invisible. He didn't show his surprise; he wondered if she was born with the Gift, or if the Council - Wallend - had really found a way to give that particular Gift to every Hunter. He counted to 30 in his head. The other Hunter would take 30 more seconds to reach the other mouth of the narrow street in order to ambush the supposed Black witch.

28...29...30.

He stopped. He couldn't see the invisible Hunter, but he could feel the weight of her presence, made of terror and hate.

Nathan emerged from the shadows.

The Hunter lunged forward, still invisible, but her running, her shoes hitting the pavement, told Gabriel were she was.

He stabbed her in the neck with a long wicked stiletto Van had given him. She turned visible and crashed to the ground, twitching silently. They moved her quickly away, as she was still convulsing - not for very long.

Gabriel took the stiletto out, and cleaned it on the side of his jacket. He ran back to the side entrance as he kept counting; 49...50...51...

He reached the other Hunter at the 57 mark. He feigned a limp, clutching his side where he had smeared it with blood. When he got close enough, the Hunter grabbed him by the shoulders and asked, “Are you okay? You're back so soon. Where's Demeter?” She tried to look at his injuries,
concerned. Gabriel squirmed away, but hid it with a grateful pat on her shoulder. He smiled as he said, “We did it. He attacked us before the mark, but I'm fine. Go help Demeter out, I'll...”

He staggered, and she caught him. “Woah, easy there. I'll bring you in first, Demeter can look after herself.”

She turned to the entrance, an opening to the dark shadows of the still garden. She said, “Glory to this day,” and Gabriel saw the wards shimmer and give way. He gently moved away from her helping arms. “Really, I'm fine. I'll just have this looked at. Go help her.”

Her eyes softened at that; reminded of the sacred bond between Hunting partners, she said, “Of course.”

She ran into the dark.

That's really too bad, Gabriel thought. She doesn't look that bad at all. Then again...

He turned to the garden, to the villa hiding behind it. Who knows what they're doing in the place she was protecting.

He thought back of what he never knew, of the signs of torture Michelle's body certainly had, and nobody had proof of. She thought of her, a girl barely 17, hanged and swinging in the wind. He suppressed of shiver, and strode inside.

The first room he crossed was the kitchen. It was deserted, but a coffee pot had been left to brew. He listened to the sounds in the mansion. He didn't hear any steps, or words, or screams for that matter. He had expected screams, but he logically knew that couldn't be. There was no way the Hunters would let that alarm the Fains in the surrounding buildings. He searched for two mugs and filled them with coffee. He threw his blood-stained jacket in the cabinet under the sink.

He called to mind the half-baked floor plan the Alliance scouts evinced from nearby mansions and a quick break-and-enter into the town offices. The villa was only two storeys high, but it had also one semi-interred level and a wide cellar. That was probably were the prisoners were held. Gabriel didn't want to think what he would do if they weren't.

He followed his instincts to find the entrance to the cellar; the instincts of a Black witch smelling danger like a predator smells the sick smell of debilitated prey. He found it soon enough; a wide arch made of bricks. Three Hunters stood guard. As he walked, he sensed another ward as he crossed it.

The screams hit him like thunder. He almost stumbled, and caught himself just in time. He forced himself to smile as he reached the Hunters and gave two of them the mugs.

“What, nothing for me?” the one left out said in a jovial tone.

“I only have two hands,” Gabriel joked. “There's more in the kitchen if you like.”

The Hunter sauntered off, leaving with a “Don't have too much fun without me.”

Gabriel's stomach roiled as he was thanked by the other two.

“Ack, it's too hot,” one said, sticking her tongue out.

The screams turned into subdued sobs.

They chatted pleasantly until the other Hunter returned with her coffee. Gabriel wished them
goodbye.

He wanted to run, he so wanted to run.

He walked calmly to the side entrance.

He checked carefully the garden for signs of other Hunters. The side entrance had been unmanned for no more than 10 minutes, but it was still a gigantic risk. Everything was quiet. He strode silently to the door, opened it, and waited.

“Where have you been all this time?” he whispered in the night air.

Nathan turned visible to his right, far enough not to startle him. “Waiting for you to find me,” he whispered. “These passwords are stupid, by the way.”

Gabriel smiled through the sickness he felt. “I like them.”

Nathan's face remained impassible. Then he asked, “Are they there?”

He nodded. “In the cellar.”

“Good.” Nathan made a gesture towards the alley. Celia, Adele, and Greatorex emerged from it. The other teams in sight rolled out, relaying the signal to the ones more far out. It was all or nothing now; every fighter was staked in the surrounding streets, and they were going to attack the Hunters from within.

“Lead the way,” Nathan said, and his smile was full of bloodlust.

They had to be quick, efficient, and without hesitation. The odds stacked against them made Gabriel dizzy, so he tried his best not to think about them. He took the appearance of the other Hunter - Demeter - and went in again. Nathan followed him, invisible, Celia, Greatorex and Adele not far behind, hiding in the shadows of the trees as they followed. The kitchen was still empty when Gabriel re-entered.

One stroke of luck.

He walked calmly down the corridor, listening for footsteps. He heard some coming from his left, and turned right, to the cellar. No one saw him. Celia and Greatorex waited behind a corner; the two yawning Hunters who came down the corridor - bickering about who was going to have the last chocolate granola bar - were disposed of without a sound.

Two strokes of luck.

He kept walking, down the steps and the brick archway, to the guards and their empty cups of coffee, and over the wards.

He heard someone screaming, cursing in a terrified, animal screech, "Go to hell you White scum!"

And then just screaming. Animal, incoherent screaming.

He felt, more than heard, Nathan moving. He had the Fairborn out in an instant, their desire for blood matching. He slashed the first guard's throat, still invisible. The other guards were frozen for a second, their minds not registering the lack of a visible threat paired with one of their own with a slashed-open throat, blood spurting out in between breathy wheezes. The Hunter fell, but before her
body even touched the ground, Nathan was moving again. He aimed for the throat again, but the Hunter ducked, and went invisible.

_Fuck!_ he thought, and licked the roof of his mouth. The flames caught her as she was rolling away, and Nathan belatedly hoped no one noticed the orange glow blooming for a few seconds down in the cellar. Scorched and visible again, the Hunter opened her mouth to scream for help. Celia got her from behind and broke her neck with the ease of a plough cutting a poppy in the field. Adele had gotten to the other guard and had put her garrotte to good use.

Gabriel looked back, listening for any stirring in the mansion. Nothing came.

Three strokes of luck.

The screaming from inside the cellar continued.

Gabriel reached for Nathan's elbow, touching it lightly, but he didn't even turn. His eyes were glued to the entrance of the makeshift prison. He didn't even notice Celia's accusing glare in his direction, or Adele's worried whispering, cut short by a gesture of Greatorex's. Gabriel wanted to get closer, to be sure he was fine, but waited instead. Nathan remained frozen. The screams were of a woman's. “White scum”, she had said.

He turned to Gabriel. This was it, Nathan thought. This was the bad death Gabriel had been talking about, over the graves they had dug outside of Mercury's bunker. This was the slow, painful death that most certainly awaited him, awaited Gabriel too, only because he loved him enough to follow him.

But the face that looked back at him, a worried, caring face, wasn't Gabriel's. It was a sobering flash, a reminder of the great danger they were all in. Nathan turned to the entrance of the cellar, and saw Celia gesturing at them to follow her, impatient and uncaring. Adele and Greatorex remained behind, to stake their only exit point.

They entered. The cellar was vast, with numerous low galleries opening on both sides of a wider corridor. There was no wine to be found; every niche had been transformed into a cell. Most of the ones at the front were empty. The Hunters hadn't spared a lot of Council members. Towards the back, however, the cells begun to fill. Mostly one or two prisoners in each, huddling in corners, some of them in bad shape and bloody clothes. Some of them not moving at all. They ignored them for the time being, focusing on taking out whoever was at the back.

Nathan went invisible again, as Celia hid just out of sight from the last cells.

A prisoner - a male witch with a balding crown of white hair - followed their movements, but stayed blessedly silent, like the rest of the prisoners. Gabriel silently let out a breath of relief.

Too many strokes of luck.

A Hunter stood watching the torture unfolding, somewhat distant from the others. Her back was to the entrance. Nathan took position, as close to her as he dared. Gabriel walked to her, hoping the presence of “Demeter” wasn't incongruous.

Nathan watched him approach her, strike a conversation with easy familiarity. Then he noticed a pair of pale eyes following Gabriel from the shadows of a cell. He saw a woman of about forty, with bronze skin with wrinkles around her calculating eyes. Wrinkles of a person not used to smile, but to judge sternly. Her hair was long, of a fair colour hard to pinpoint in the low light, and matted with blood and soil.
Gabriel chatted the Hunter up, letting her vent about “Black bastards who didn't know when to die already”, and quietly panicked. There were three more Hunters in the room, and he couldn't see very well what they were doing, but when Nathan saw it there was no knowing what he would do, drugs or no drugs. And there were only three of them.

At least one Hunter would manage to call for help this time.

Nathan saw the fair-haired witch grab the bars of her cell, a fire burning in her eyes and a ferocious expression twisting her features. She looked hungry for death. He dashed towards her cell and whispered, a phantom made of air and bloodthirst: “Will you kill them?”

She was surprised for no more than a second. “Oh yes,” she whispered back.

Nathan took a pin out of his pocket, with a skull on top; Rose's pin. He twisted it inside the lock, and opened the door.

Gabriel and the Hunter turned. The Hunter reached for her gun as fast as lightning, yelling “How the fuck did you get out?”. Before Gabriel could grab her hand and stop her, the fair-haired witch made a gesture with her hand. Free of the confining wards inside the cells, she could unleash her Gift. The Hunter choked and wheezed, air leaving her throat and lungs at once. She doubled over. Her gun clattered to the ground, forgotten, as she clutched at her neck. The Hunters inside the room turned at the commotion. Gabriel sank to his knees, his back to them. The witch stood ramrod straight and looked at them with queenly disgust as they pointed their guns at her.

“Councillor Iskandra,” one them said, “this won't help you or your Council. You were granted amnesty; don't throw it away.” They moved slowly forward, inching towards them.

Nathan sneaked over the Hunter's body giving a last twitch, sneaked past the Hunters and their guns. He didn't look at the woman lying on the floor. He couldn't focus on that, lose himself again.

The Councillor said, with a raspy voice, “Leave the child alone, you monsters.” She threw her hand out again, and one Hunter wheezed and twitched forward violently. Nathan grabbed one and slashed his throat. The Fairborn sang as it tasted blood again. Gabriel turned and stabbed another one as she moved to protect him, thinking of protecting a friend. But she dashed back just in time, and he only managed to graze her shoulder.

She only had time to yell “Intruders!” before Celia hit her with a violent uppercut to the sternum, knocking the breath out of her. Nathan finished her.

Out of luck.

Iskandra dashed to the woman lying on the ground. She turned her delicately, and cradled her face as she said words in a language no one understood. Nathan chanced a look at the woman, and saw she was really a girl - her face young and streaked with tears and pain.

He also saw the knife marks crossing her arms and face, black from the powder that burned more than the cuts. When it had been used on him, he had thought it was going to kill him, the pain was so unbearable.

The girl was shivering in Iskandra's arms, delirious and unseeing even when her eyes were staring right in the woman's face.

Nathan thought of Arran finding him on that hill. He didn't remember very well what happened after the first letter was carved into his back, before he came to on the kitchen table. Maybe it was best he didn't.
Deep down, in some forgotten corner of his mind, there was something stirring that he'd rather not rouse. He let the drug-induced detachment take him.

“Gabriel, watch for more Hunters,” Celia said, earning a glare from him. When she saw him looking at Nathan she snapped, “I gave you an order! Leave if for later!”

He complied.

Celia turned to the Councillor. She towered over her as she said, “What Council are you a member of?”

Iskandra looked up as she rocked the girl gently - a gesture so at odds with the iron in her eyes when she said, “Council of the Baltic Seas. I'm----”

“A traitor and a snake! Don't listen to her!” the man with a balding head yelled from his cell. “She brought this on all of us. She undermined the negotiations with the Council of England, and that's why we're imprisoned here.”

Celia watched her with renewed interest. “What did you do?”

“Me? I didn't do anything. Ask him what he did.”

It didn't matter anyway. Soul had plans to kill everyone who hadn't already submitted to his authority. The Alliance knew that much already. But they had come here in search of allies as desperate as them; maybe one of these two Witches would do.

Celia turned to the man. “It doesn't matter to me what happened or not. What matters is that the Council of England had already decided to slay everyone who wouldn't submit. The Alliance is your only chance at freedom... or not getting murdered because you sneezed in a way Soul O'Brien didn't like.”

“The Alliance?” the man asked, sceptical. “I'm surprised you even managed to get this far.”

“Yet we did. What other chance do you have to get out of here, really?”

The man threw an accusing glance at Iskandra. “I'm the head of the Council of the Baltic Seas. It is my duty to think of what is best for my people, even taking into account Soul's questionable methods. If we are here, imprisoned, and not a negotiating table, it's because she openly defied him.”

Celia shot him a stony stare. “'Questionable'? He'd kill his own brother to remain in power. He had hundreds of fellow White witches imprisoned, or worse than killed. My own sister and niece died like that, and they were respectable Whites. There was no trial, no formal accusation. Just Hunters - my comrades-in-arms - taking them from their home and making them disappear into the night. I don't know what you think is going to happen to your people under Soul's rule, but believe me - it won't be any different.”

“And yet a lot of Whites support him, even in my own Country. They think his aim is true and honourable. And who am I to deny the truth of the matter? Anyone who associates with Blacks...” and he glared at Iskandra and the girl “...is no better than them.”

“Your Country?” Iskandra said quietly. “You think just like a Fain. Witches have no Countries. Witches shouldn't even have Councils, paperwork, bureaucracy. We've been too close to Fains for too long. That's why you tried to strike a deal with Soul. You tried for diplomacy, for cowardice.”

“I will not have a traitor tell me what being a true White is! You took that Black witch in. You had
her sit right next to you during the meeting with Soul's envoys! You're not worthy of even being a Councillor."

Nathan only half-listened to them bickering. As they discussed what was the worse offence - if being too much of a Fain or too much of a Black - he kneeled next to the Black girl. He slowly took one of her hands in his own. She was shaking so badly he almost didn't catch it. She fixed her empty eyes on him and tried to say something through the chattering of her teeth, through the moans of pain.

“I'll get you out of here,” he whispered.

Iskandra watched him in silence, letting the head councillor drone on. Her voice was razor-sharp when it cut the air. “Are you Celia of the Alliance?”

“I am.”

“Your fame precedes you. Let me offer you a deal.”

“I am listening.”

She kept her eyes on the girl in her arms, but she didn't look stricken with grief or rage when she said, “Kill that man and I will put the Council of the Baltic Seas under my command, and offer it to you. I will give you a fortress in Latvia as your new base of operations, and help you destroy Soul.”

The man was speechless for only a few seconds before he started to protest. “An alliance with the Blacks will only hurt us on the long run! The other Whites of Europe, of our own Council won't understand, and we'll be isolated. The Alliance already is, and that is the reason why!”

Nathan turned to Celia, but she didn't look at him.

Adele's voice sounded from the entrance. “They're coming!”

Not much time left. Celia took out her gun and strode towards the cell. The man scrambled back on his hands, but he didn't have anywhere to go, and he was defenceless.

“There's nowhere to run,” Celia said as she aimed. “Now you truly understand what it feels like.”

She pulled the trigger.

Nathan said to Iskandra, “You will have to take her. Can you do it?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “I'm no weak, watered-down half blood. I can carry her.”

He frowned at her comment, but let it slide for the time being. He took Rose's pin to the other cells.

“Wait,” she said. The girl safely held to her chest, she told him, “Not the woman in the cell next to the entrance, and neither the two right in front.”

“Curse you Iskandra!” someone yelled from the front of the cellar. “You Black-fucking traitor! I hope you die like all the Blacks you love so much!”

She smirked at him, her lips full of self-satisfaction. “Certainly you don't want someone like that in the Alliance, do you,” she said.

Nathan stared down at the White in the cell. He held up the pin and let it catch the light from the weak halogen lights above. “Too fucking bad, you racist piece of shit.”
“Nathan, move it” Celia seethed in exasperation. “I swear I'm going to kill Van.”

“What for?” he asked as they moved towards the front of the cellar, councillors in tow.

Celia didn't respond, but thought, *For giving you drugs not strong enough to wipe your undisciplined mind.*

They heard running, hurried steps and shouted orders.

Gabriel dashed forward. Nathan's heart gave a painful lurch, like it was ripped out of his chest. “*Gabriel!*” he hissed, as he became invisible again and ran after him.

A first wave of Hunters saw them, and raised their guns. Gabriel, still wearing Demeter's face, yelled, “Don't shoot!”

They hesitated for just one moment; it was enough. Nathan clapped his hands, and Gabriel dove to the side. A blinding flash tore the shadows of the mansion, and lightning crackled in a deafening explosion in the enclosed space. The tang of ozone and burnt flesh wafted in the air as the Hunters crashed to the floor.

“No reason to be quiet now,” Gabriel said as he got up again. “Your favourite kind of combat.”

“Fuck you,” Nathan said with no bite, “I'm good at stealth.”

Another group of Hunters thundered down a set of stairs. Bullets rained down on them. Nathan kicked down a door to their side and they hid behind the jamb. Celia, Greatorex and Adele upended a wardrobe in the corridor and used it as barricade. As the others unloaded their guns on the Hunters, Adele yelled, “Where is the distraction?”

“I'll go check,” Nathan said, thinking of going invisible again and see what had happened to the group who was supposed to attack the front entrance, dividing the Hunters' forces. Gabriel grabbed his waist, pulling him inside the room. “No you're not,” he said fiercely.

“We're sitting ducks here!” Nathan protested. “I'll just go invisible!”

“We're in close quarters, even if they don't see you you're guaranteed to be hit by a stray bullet!” Gabriel argued.

Just then, more gunfire sounded on the other side of the villa.

“Finally,” Adele said. Celia and Greatorex didn't comment, but they were relieved.

“All right, let's move to the point of exit,” Celia said. She turned to the newly-freed Council members, hiding just behind the entrance of the cellar. She locked eyes with Iskandra, who was carrying the Black girl on her back. They both understood that the chances they all lived through the retreat - unarmed and weak as they were - were very slim. But the iron in the Councillor's eyes never dimmed. “Follow us as we clear the way,” Celia told them.

An explosion reverberated through the ground. Gus, blowing up a hole in the external wall with his Gift. If only it had been a stronger Gift, he could've been one of the most important assets of the Alliance. Instead, small holes were the best he could do, and the Gift worked only on inanimate matter.

Plus, he was an antagonistic dick.
An engine revved in the distance, then got closer and closer, fast.

A second explosion.

The ram team had just drove a van stolen for the occasion into the wall. They had to meet it outside in less than a minute.

“Let's go!” Celia yelled, and they advanced.

They had to go the back of the mansion, where the garden faced narrower and denser streets that could cover their retreat; but their advance was too slow. The Hunters had re-grouped and were organizing their defence quickly and efficiently, and their back-up was soon to arrive through a cut, no doubt. The Alliance was out of time.

A group of Hunters waited for them at the back, right between them and the ram team. Greatorex ducked just in time to avoid a bullet to the head. Gabriel crouched behind her, but he didn't dare to answer to the gunfire. It was a sheer miracle no one between them had been killed yet; he wasn't going to push his luck. The Hunters didn't care as much as he to stay alive apparently; they were standing in line, side by side, right in front of them, like an execution squad - intimidating, but also so very easy to hit. Anyone daring to, though, would be killed by the other ones standing.

Celia and Nathan ended up behind the same corner. She put an arm in front of his chest and said, “Don't do anything until I tell you so”. The only thing she earned was a mocking look. She wanted to wait out on the ram team, which was supposed to help them escape.

More explosions.

Then the glass-pane doors at the back of the room shattered in a shower of flying glass and wood and brick. The back of a bank's armoured van stuck out through the mess. As the dust settled, some Hunters stood up - too many of them - and unloaded their guns on the vehicle. The engine revved again, and the van lurched forward, leaving a gaping hole into the wall.

Crude and Fain-like, but effective.

The van's doors opened and the remaining fighters of the Alliance joined the fray, some of them with Gifts, some with guns. Even scouts were fighting, in the absence of enough fighters. The Hunters in the room, caught between two enemy lines, fell back into the adjoining room. They set up barricades to protect themselves.

Celia turned to the prisoners and yelled, “Now! Enter the van!”

Adele turned her skin into metal and threw her arms around the two closest witches, protecting their exposed side as best as she could. She wasn't enough for everyone, though. She couldn't be. When the first Councillor fell, the ones remaining lost their courage, and refused to move again.

“There are too many Hunters left! We can't cover them!” Greatorex yelled.

Nathan clapped his hands again and sent lightning flying towards the Hunters, but the room was spacious and electricity was impossible to direct with precision. He managed to only make them duck this time. He was thinking about going invisible and making Gabriel very, very worried, when he heard it. The long, slow sound of something intangible ripping.

Behind the Hunters, a cut was opening.

Hands appeared from thin air through it, widening it, tearing the fabric of space-time open just
enough for the Hunter to pass through. She had curly tawny hair tied in a tight ponytail, and the
smile of a killer.

Jessica.

Her eyes found Nathan's at once, like she had always known where he was going to be.

She preceded a squadron of other Hunters, armed to the teeth and efficiently taking position.

Nathan knew at once this wasn't going to be like that time in Białowieża, running away from one
disaster to another one. There was no running, period. They had hit a wall they couldn't get around.

Nathan was keenly aware of the councillors hiding behind them; of a Black girl delirious with pain in
a White's arms - something he'd never thought he'd see with his own eyes, something precious,
something so rare it might as well been a star galaxies away, unreachable and distant, and yet there it
was.

And he couldn't protect it.

He was even more aware of Gabriel shooting at his side, a thin trail of blood darkening his left sleeve
where a bullet had grazed him.

He looked into Jessica's cruel pale eyes, and thought of Debs and Arran.

There was no space in Nathan's head for anything else - not the Alliance, not the war, not Marcus's
order. There was only the clarity of certain death.

He looked at Gabriel, and saw he was looking at him, too. His face was determined. Nathan knew
what he meant without having to ask. The thought of Gabriel dying was unbearable, but what was
the alternative? Capture would be a thousand times worse than death. If there was even one
minuscule possibility of Gabriel being subjected to Retribution, Nathan would not take it. And he
remembered. He remembered Gabriel telling him how he'd find his body, and hold it until he starved.

He was not going to take his choice away from him.

There was only one thing he could do, only two people he could save.

He turned to Iskandra. “I'll cover you,” he said loudly over the deafening noise of gunfire. “Run for
the van and tell the team to floor it.”

Iskandra didn't hesitate. She adjusted her grip on the girl's legs and stood up. She was ready.

Gabriel shuffled closer to him. He wordlessly, slowly put a hand on Nathan's neck, and held it there
until Nathan felt like it was scorching his skin. The moment lasted no more than a second or two.

Then Nathan faced Jessica.

He searched for the vitality of the garden, for roots and seeds sleeping beneath the villa. He
summoned the Gift, and they shot out from under the floor, in curling spires and cutting branches. He
dove forward, counting on Iskandra being smart enough to choose the best moment to go. He didn't
hear Celia ordering him to stop, nor he saw Adele's horrified expression. He clapped his hands and
shot lightning towards his half-sister. She ducked, and the bolt struck the side of an archway. Rubble
and stone dust showered the Hunters. The more experienced ones focused on Nathan at once. He
wasn't invisible; the point was exactly for them to see him. As they exposed themselves to shoot him,
Gabriel tried to shoot them down. Celia, cursing in frustration, helped with her Gift. It was
impossible to say whether the other Alliance fighters were trying to help them in the mayhem, or if they even noticed what was going on.

Nathan ran towards Jessica, jumping over rubble and contorted branches, counting on his speed to not let him die too soon.

Close. Five strides from her.

A Hunter aimed at him, fell. Gabriel had always had great aim.

Closer. Three strides.

A Hunter appeared out of nowhere at his right, becoming visible again. He barely had the time to see her look of triumph before the world disappeared in roiling, chaotic white. He could only see a blinding nothingness; nothingness pressed on his eardrums until they popped. His senses shook and clattered against each other like marbles in a glass jar. It was only for a few seconds, he was aware of it, of his body crumpling but not hitting the ground, not yet—she was close. She wasn't reaching for her gun, but for a truncheon she had at the hip. When she unsheathed it, he heard the hiss of electricity running through it.

He could well imagine every other Hunter Jessica had brought having the same capture tool.

The Hunter swung at him, aiming for the chest. He grabbed her wrist, twisted it away from her body, put his other arm behind the juncture of her elbow. He snapped her arm, and she screamed. He kicked her hard in the lower stomach, but as she doubled over, she hit him again with her Gift.

He only half-heard Gabriel screaming his name, and he only saw blurs coming towards him before they disappeared into the white, but he didn't need to see to know that one of them was Jessica.

She was on him in an instant. Nathan had to fight against the Fairborn's scream for blood, mindless and maddening; if he clashed it against a truncheon, he'd get electrocuted. The Fairborn, of course, didn't care. Jessica lunged at him, a quick succession of strikes he dodged one after the other. Gunfire almost completely ceased around them, both because no one wanted to hit their own ally, and to watch with baited breath. Jessica didn't draw her gun, and that was enough to make Nathan's stomach churn.

She was there to capture him, not kill him.

He had no reason to hold back, however.

He licked the roof of his mouth, and fire erupted in flaming tongues right in her face. She rolled to the side, and he lunged after her. He saw her flick a wrist, reach something hidden underneath her sleeve. He ducked to the side just in time to avoid a short, wicked knife that would've caught him dead-centre in the chest.

Of course she'd count on him healing.

“Squad one!” she yelled. “Focus on the Half Code!”

The other Hunters that had came with her stopped aiming at the Alliance and charged him, truncheons raised. He managed to pierce two by giving more life to a branch right by his side, but he barely avoided the other two charging him, and more were right behind them.

“Nathan!” Celia screamed as she used her Gift on one of them. “Get out of the way!”
He did. The Alliance fighters fired on them with everything they had. Adele and Greatorex jumped over the rubble that had been their barricade and joined Nathan in the melee, covering his flanks. Adele had barely the time to disarm one Hunter. Then another one appeared from thin air behind her.

Her scream of pain jolted Nathan. His hands were clapped together before he had even fully turned. He caught only a glimpse of the Hunter - her knife buried into Adele's shoulder - before lightning blinded them all. The noise was deafening, and equally disorienting for everyone too close.

Nathan healed his ringing ear-drums and eased the dizziness, and right next to him, Jessica did the same.

He only had the time to register the fact with an aborted thought of, I never knew she had such good healing, before his muscles spasmed with fire and pain. He couldn't scream; his jaw was clenched shut. He could only fall.

He heard Gabriel screaming his name, and knew he was going to abandon cover and come to him. He desperately summoned his healing, saw more Hunters appear and knew it would not be enough. When Jessica knelted and grabbed him by the throat, truncheon raised to strike again, he shot out with the viciousness of a viper. His punch landed right in her solar plexus, and the sick wheeze she let out was like music. She healed again, fast, and blocked his next kick. Another shock of electricity, barely avoided; but it still grazed him, and made his entire left side freeze and twitch uncontrollably.

He was overwhelmed.

He dared a glance at the van, right in his line of vision, behind the Hunters. He caught a glimpse of a witch jumping inside.

At least something had worked, he thought.

Then the world erupted into chaos.

The wall to the side, where the van was, crumbled, bricks, mortar and rubble flying into the air, up into the sky. The crash of it all was deafening, like the sky itself was tearing open. The tiles and broken pieces of floor that had been cracked by plants flew to the sky, too, in an upside-down shower. Dust made it impossible to see what was going on. Then even the dust itself was sucked towards the sky. Nathan was the only one close enough to see, and not only hear, as the Hunters were slung to the sky together with the rubble. It was lightning-fast; one moment they were flying through the air; the next one they were crashing down. All the while, screaming. Exhilaration flooded Nathan's veins until he noticed he was just outside the apparent circle of effect of the spell - because what else could it be? - where dust was still settled on the floor instead of falling into the sky. He felt a sudden tug at his feet, the strangest, most horrifying and unexplainable sensation - of the world turning upside-down, of his body being on the wrong side of the world, and correcting that mistake - fast and painfully.

It passed in a moment, his feet crashing down to the ground again, and he lost balance.

“My bad,” somebody said from the other side of the destroyed room. “Precision has never been my forte.”

A woman walked leisurely over the rubble and groaning - or not moving - bodies. As she passed, she noticed a Hunter making a feeble attempt to squeeze his shaking fingers around his truncheon. She kicked him square in the chest, sending him flying. “Don't be pathetic,” she said. She had an accent – something heavy on the d's and t's, airy on the vowels. She turned to the stunned witches in front of her. “If you want to get it out of here alive, I suggest we move it.”
Celia was the first one to shake out of her stupor. She barked orders in quick succession. The hollowed-out mansion was quickly collapsing, an entire side missing, strewn all over the garden now. Fains would arrive quicker than you could say “photographs everywhere”.

And there were more Hunters coming from the other side of the plot.

The extraction squad was waiting for them with more vans. They pulled up by the external wall, where the explosion had opened a sizeable hole. The first van sped through it, councillors, Greatorex and a wounded Adele safe inside. The others stayed behind to cover the retreat.

Nathan was supposed to be the last one leaving. He didn't run towards safety like everybody else, and neither did Gabriel. They stood in the garden, hiding behind the trees that hadn't been uprooted. The newcomer stood next to Nathan as they faced the first wave of fresh Hunters.

“Does the Alliance usually leave children to hold the most dangerous line?” she asked him.

He shot her a glare. “I'm not a child.”

She didn't remove her eyes from the battlefield as she said, “I really don't see why you wouldn't want to be.”

“Not my choice. Who the fuck are you?”

She turned to him, lips slightly parted in an expression of surprise. When she answered, though, she didn't address his rudeness. “I see,” she said, subdued. Then she put a hand on his chest, and gently pushed him behind her.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he asked.

“I'm being a responsible adult,” she said. She made a sharp gesture, one arm extending upwards. The entire garden shook and shot to the sky. Trees, soil, stones, everything was sucked in an skywards whirlpool. The Hunters had no chance. A few were far enough to remain outside her Gift's reach, and everything they could do was to take cover and hope she wouldn't come closer.

A bullet grazed the trunk of their hiding spot, startling both Nathan and Gabriel into turning.

Jessica was pointing her gun at them. She had an ugly-looking gash on her temple, a steady stream of blood hiding the scar on her face. The eye on that side was closed shut. The hand gripping the weapon was shaking badly.

She gripped it with both hands, trying to steady her aim. “You won't get away from justice this time, monster!”

She had never called him by name unless she was posing as someone else.

The witch looked at her with an impassible expression. “You must be Jessica,” she said.

“And you must be the latest Black freak the Alliance picked up from the trash,” she snarled.

A small smirk curled her lips. “So fierce. You definitely took after your mother.”

For once in their antagonistic lives, Nathan and Jessica were in accordance; they were both speechless.

“Who are you?” Jessica whispered, and Nathan wanted to know the exact same thing. The last and
only person who had ever told him about his mother had been Mary.

And Jessica herself, in her abusive, violent way.

The witch turned to face her fully, leaving the protection of their cover. Jessica waited for her response with baited breath.

The witch smiled at her. Then she shot her arm out.

Jessica was yanked back by her Gift – this time in a horizontal trajectory, until she was away from them. It was a maddening Gift, but one thing was becoming clear - it had a specific area of effect.

Jessica became invisible.

Nathan cursed. Of course she'd be the first one to get Wallend's new invention. He looked around, searching for the telltale glimmer in the air.

The witch stood still. Gabriel looked at her like he couldn't believe what he was seeing, then yelled, “Take cover!”

Jessica appeared at her side, a wickedly long knife in hand.

The sound of steel clashing reverberated through the air. Jessica stumbled back, incredulous. The witch had not been armed, she had been empty-handed, her simple long-sleeved shirt unable to hide a blade.

The witch moved her arm again, and steel appeared. The arc of it was deadly gracious. Jessica screamed as the blade cut her from stomach to shoulder.

The witch turned to Nathan and Gabriel. “I got this,” she said. “Precede me.”

“Precede you? What the fuck are you talking about?” Nathan yelled at her. “I’m not going anywhere until everyone is through the fucking cut!”

Gabriel got his attention by saying, “The other team is retreating, we have to cover them!”

Indeed, the Alliance witches who had engaged the Hunters at the front entrance were falling back - and quite disorderly at that, exposing themselves to retaliation. Nathan cursed their stupidity. Wasn’t there anyone able to hold a fucking line in the entire Alliance? One graze from a bullet and they all started to run.

Jessica seemed down for the moment, clutching at her wound as she sunk to the ground; but Nathan knew her single-minded hatred too well to delude himself into thinking she'd stay there for long. He left her to the witch, and darted through the ruined pieces of the garden towards the main entrance. On the other side, the first two vans sped down the road, to the meeting point where the witch with the Gift of the cut was waiting.

The team at the front was much smaller than it used to be half an hour before; they had been decimated, and they were panicking. The best and most experienced fighters had all been under Celia's and Greatorex's direct command; the ones left were too many scouts, too many inexperienced recruits. Nathan understood the strategy, but he still felt like killing something. He lunged towards a Hunter. She didn't even realize what happened until her side was cut open and half her intestines spilled out. All the Hunters turned to her, and saw him, and horror and terror blossomed on their faces. A savage grin bloomed on Nathan's face.
It was nice to see them as afraid as he was for once. They should be.

The fear they felt was his weapon, the shield that made them too scared to react, too frozen to be lethal.

He attacked.

The Alliance witches fell back with a little more order after that. Nathan and Gabriel covered them, until they were out of the garden's perimeter. Sirens sounded in the distance. They didn't have much time until the place was crawling with Fains. The Alliance witches ran down the escape route - a complicated trail through alleys and back-gardens - and Nathan shot a glance to Gabriel, who nodded. After he, too, shot down the road, Nathan followed him. Gabriel was running as fast as he could, but it was still almost a leisurely pace for Nathan. He almost turned into his animal, so strong the desire to run, run away, run to safety was, but he couldn't leave Gabriel behind.

He wondered where that witch arrived out of nowhere was.

He heard more gunfire coming from an alley on their left side; screams. When he stopped and turned to check - they could not leave a Hunter find their cut and follow them to camp, absolutely not - he saw three Hunters surrounding a black-skinned witch; two more jumping down from the roofs above.

He cursed. He knew her; it was Brenda, the witch of the cuts.

He didn't stop to think why she was there, what she was doing. “Gabriel!” he yelled, and reached for the chestnut standing right above them. Its branches grew and shot down, curling around their feet and lashing at them. He couldn't control their movements, exactly - but the momentum of fast, strong growth was enough to be used as a weapon.

Brenda wasn't alone; she was just the one Nathan had focused on at once, their only true way out of the battlefield. Nobody else was left who could do what she could; that's why she was supposed to be at the sidelines, on the very last line of defence actually - at the retreat meeting point. Other witches were with her - it was hard to see how many in the melee that had ensued.

Nathan entered the fray with the Fairborn unsheathed and Gabriel at his side. “Get her out of here!” he told at the other witches; but only one was left who could actually heed the command.

“Wait!” Brenda yelled, the surviving witch holding her up regardless of her own bad wounds. “The meeting point was breached, we can't go back!”

Gabriel shoved them to the side, through the archway entrance of a residence and into an adjoining garden. He used Rose's pin to open the gate, and they ran inside. They hid behind a stone fountain, half-covered by plants growing into the pond underneath.

“If it was breached then why are you here? How are the others going to escape?” Gabriel asked as Nathan kept the Hunters occupied. He wished he still had a crossbow with him; they were waging war in the streets of a Fain city like it was nobody's business. Hopefully they would just think it was a gang war or something of the like.

“The Councillors and most of the fighters have passed through, it was only a few of us who got left behind.”

Gabriel asked in shock, “Are both Celia and Greatorex through?”

Brenda misinterpreted his expression. “Yes, yes they're safe.”
Safe was not the word Gabriel would have used.

They were trapped unless they managed to miraculously get all the remaining Hunters off their backs, make Brenda live through it and find a place away from the Fains where she could open a cut.

Nathan, completely uncaring about how Fains would feel about plants magically growing overnight, had barricaded the entrance to the courtyard with his Gift.

He ran to them. “We have maybe 10 seconds before they start hacking through it with their knives, open a cut!”

“I can't do it here!” Brenda hissed.

Nathan cursed. “What is it that is wrong with this place now? We don't have time!”

“It's not my fault, it's just how it works! Here won't do!”

Gabriel hushed them both and calmly said, “If here doesn't work then it's best if we leave right now. Come on.”

They crossed the courtyard, and found a service entrance to break through. They didn't stop to hear the profanities the concierge, roused by the fight, threw at them in rapid-fire Czech.

The Hunters were right at their heels, barking into their phones, calling for reinforcements. The static was a fuzzy, screeching noise in his brain, but Nathan for once really wanted a cellphone, something to make a last call to that back-stabbing, heartless bitch of a woman and yell at her before the Hunters took him.

They almost fell into a wide street, disoriented and stumbling. Too wide. They had to find cover.

Then Brenda inhaled sharply and said under her breath, “This way.”

“Fucking finally,” Nathan grunted as he followed her. He kept an eye behind them, another one to the roofs, his ears open. The Hunters were approaching, he knew they were, but whatever orders they had they were following them silently now, and invisible to boot.

They were so fucking out of time.

Brenda ran towards a spot that looked exactly the same to every body else; but her Gift compelled her, and she was the only one who could feel the difference in the texture of space, the shimmering of a possibility. She started to slowly, methodically feel the air on her fingertips, searching for that one spot her sense would tell her to push; and space would open at her slightest pressure, like an apricot does at the push of a fingernail, when it's just perfectly ripe.

Nathan was the last one to reach the street, still on the lookout for Hunters. He had just started to run across it, when a SUV appeared from behind the corner, skidding on the pavement with its own momentum. It didn't slow down. The Hunter at the wheel, uncaring of how they were most certainly going to topple the car and crash into a wall, sped up.

Nathan didn't have time to react.

He threw his arms up - like it would do him any good - and then he heard the Hunters scream. When he opened his eyes again, the SUV was gliding almost gracefully into the air, vertically. Then it lurched to the side and crashed into the side of a nearby building. The metal screeched as it crumpled like a tin can.
The witch appeared at his side, as calm as though she was having a pleasant stroll. For the first time, he had a chance to really look at what was in her hand, at the weapon she had produced out of thin air against Jessica. It was a fucking sword. He would've laughed at the preposterous idea of using a fucking sword against Hunters armed with guns, but after seeing what he had, maybe he wouldn't after all.

Maybe this woman was also invulnerable to bullets, other than able to make swords appear from nothing and things fly.

“Well now,” she told him, “don't just stand there. We have a ride to catch, no?”

Then they saw it. Another SUV, perfectly audible in the stillness of very early morning. Nathan recognized Jessica as she climbed out of the passenger seat's window, and pointed a rifle at them. He barely had the time to think, What fucking stunt is she trying to pull?, before the witch sighed, like she was bored, like she had so many better things to do. She gestured, an almost languid movement of her hand from the chest outward.

The SUV lurched upwards too, inexorably, just enough to give gravity all the time in the world to then crash it down with a vengeance. The car crashed on the pavement after a ten metres fall.

Nathan thought with savage relief, She must be dead. The he thought of telling Arran, which made him pause. He was startled by Gabriel pulling gently at his wrist. He hadn't realized he was staring at the spot where the car had crashed. Gabriel guided him to the cut, finally open. They all passed through, mysterious witch included, into the black void that always left him with no air in his lungs.

Nathan held his breath, and in a dizzying handful of seconds, his feet touched the ground again. He shot out an arm, still disoriented, until he found Gabriel at his side. He looked at him, searching for injuries. He found none; yet he still waited until he turned up his head and met his eyes. When he did, he looked exhausted and drained, but otherwise fine. He even smiled weakly at him. Nathan didn't expect it when Gabriel slowly lowered himself to the ground. He kneeled down next to him, and asked, “Are you okay?”

“I can't believe we're alive,” he breathed out, relief barely contained, ringing in the tremble of his voice.

Nathan rubbed his arm slowly. “We are. We're fine,” he said, and turned to where the two vans were parked. The one used to bring the Councillors to safety was open, the witches inside pouring out. The ruthless one - Iskandra - was kneeling next to the Black witch, watching over her. The clearing was pretty chaotic, witches of the Alliance running up and down, relying orders, checking on each other, helping the wounded to settle, finding more supplies to tend to the wounded. Nathan searched the crowd for Arran, and found Van instead. She had been posted to wait for their return, since she was their best healer.

She was staring right at him, her face a mask of disbelief that transformed into something else he had never seen on her usually calm, perfectly poised expression.

She looked murderous.

Her voice was laced with the threat of sudden, unforgiving violence when she said, “How can you be still alive?”

“Victoria,” the mysterious witch said.

Nathan turned to watch her. She had been right behind him when they had passed through the cut,
and she hadn't moved since. In facts, she was very, very still as she smiled thinly and said, “So nice to see you again, murderer.”
Most of them, I've dealt with

Silence fell on the clearing, so thick it could be cut with a knife. Van and the witch stared at each other, as everyone else looked on in concern or confusion. Nesbitt was at Van's side, hand on his gun.

"Who's this, Van?" he asked, his eyes trained on the one who was clearly an enemy for the both of them.

"A witch I thought had died almost 20 years ago," Van said.

"Died? Is that how you spell 'I poisoned her and her entire family' now? My, how fast language evolves these days," the witch said.

Everyone was staring by then. Someone gasped, but not many. Van was an expert in potions, a Black witch, and old; it was unsurprising to know she had poisoned someone. It wasn't a kind of information many would've thought twice about before accepting it as true.

Celia and Greatorex shouldered past the crowd that had started to gather around the three.

"Who are you, and why did you follow us?" Celia barked, pointing her gun at her.

The Witch didn't even look at her as she said, "I am Viviana Di Dunarea. Do you even remember what that means? Or did the White Council of the British Islands manage to wipe every memory of the past?"

She looked down then, to Nathan, who was still supporting Gabriel. She searched their faces and found only vague curiosity. She sounded disappointed when she said, "They never told you anything, didn't they? Unsurprising." Then, darkly, she added, looking at Van again, "Irritating."

Nesbitt pointed his gun at her.

Greatorex tried to calm both him and Celia down. "You helped the team we lost to come back, didn't you?" she asked her.

"I did. I couldn't well leave them to the Hunters, could I?"

Greatorex turned to Brenda, silently asking for her input.

"It's true. She covered us as I opened the cut. The Hunters had us, we wouldn't be here without her," Brenda said.

Van's eyes were burning, but she remained silent. This seemed to amuse Viviana. Her tone was mocking when she said, "Oh please, Victoria, do tell us what you're thinking. Is it, 'she's only here to kill me'? or something more like 'she's only here to bring back her medieval ideas about Witch Clans and Black and White witches'? I'm sure a lot of people here would love to hear that story."

"Enough. I won't allow anyone on the Alliance's premises unless I am completely convinced they're not a threat. If I think you're even slightly untrustworthy I'll kill you on the spot," Celia said.

Viviana finally looked at her. "Who are you?" she asked, dismissive and clearly not feeling threatened in the least.

Nathan liked her more and more.
"Celia, founder and protector of this Alliance" she answered, her voice curt.

"Ah, I see. The former Hunter mysteriously turned champion of freedom. I'm really curious to know how you convinced anyone to trust you, really. At least I can say, and it is the honest truth, that I've been killing Hunters and fighting genocidal Councils for decades."

"Who the fuck is this woman?" Nathan whispered to Gabriel.

"I have no clue. I've never heard that name before," he answered.

Viviana, still held at gunpoint, stared down the barrel of Celia's gun, unfazed.

Maybe she really is bulletproof, Nathan thought.

"Don't you have wounded people to tend to? They should be more important than me," Viviana said.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't just shoot you and make this so much easier," Celia threatened.

Viviana's smile grew wider, and more challenging by the minute.

Greatorex turned to Van. She didn't need to say anything. The two witches - ancient enemies - stared each other down for a long, tense moment.

Then Van said, "She's not a threat for the Alliance. She wants Soul dead as much as anyone else here, correct?"

"No doubt about that," Viviana said. "If you need help with the wounded..."

"No. Nesbitt, keep an eye on her. If she tries to move from that spot, shoot her. Nathan, Gabriel. Come here."

Nathan didn't understand what threat Viviana posed exactly, but it was surprisingly entertaining to see someone keeping Van on her toes. Then again, anyone able to make her so cautious was probably very, very dangerous. Nathan helped Gabriel up, and spared a final glance at her. She smiled and cocked her head slightly in a playful farewell.

Just like your mother, she had said.

Nathan didn't know much about her, never met anyone willing to talk about her - not someone who had really known her, who could share memories and impressions, or even words she had spoken. Gran had never wanted to talk about her; the pain was too much, and she was scared Nathan would get curious, start asking questions about her to other people. The lie about her pregnancy was as thin as ice under the spring sun; and who knew what the Council would have done if Nathan knew the truth, or started to spread doubt by asking questions?

Arran had been too young to remember, and Debs too - both had been more worried about their family's safety than asking questions.

Nathan knew so little of Marcus, the few weeks they had passed together never enough to have more than a few glimpses of who he had been. They were just crumbles, pebbles barely reflecting the moonlight in a shadowy path.

It was still more than what Nathan had about his mother, which was only this: her Gift had been strong - healing; she had loved Marcus; she had killed herself as the Council had wanted, to have her
family spared.

Nathan promised himself he would ask Viviana about it later. For now, he would focus on finding Arran and settle Gabriel somewhere.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked, as they walked slowly towards a calmer spot, where they sat down. The clearing was buzzing with activity again, with tents being put up over the wounded in order to avoid moving them. The rest of camp three's tents were not far, half-hidden by the forest. Witches were already working to remove the protection and trapping spells that had been set up in case Hunters managed to pass through the cut.

Nathan froze for a moment as he remembered Jessica appearing through the cut, and Jessica into that SUV, its metal screeching and contorting at impact. Just then, he spotted Arran through the crowd. The look of relief that washed over him when he saw Nathan made him feel horribly unworthy.

Was he supposed to tell him? Was he even sure she was dead, really? What if she wasn't? What if she was, and Arran couldn't forgive him after all?

When Arran reached them, he noticed his distress at once. "Are you okay?" he asked, putting a gentle hand on his arm, searching with his Gift for any injury.

"Yes, I'm not wounded," he answered weakly. His other arm was wound around Gabriel's shoulders; Gabriel reached for his hand and gently squeezed it. He had seen the SUV crashing too; he knew what troubled him.

"Gabriel was wounded though," Nathan rushed to say.

"It's nearly healed already, it's nothing."

Arran ignored this and checked him with his Gift. The wound was, indeed, only superficial, and well on its way to disappear.

"I was told there's a witch who's badly wounded, I'm going to check on her," Arran said.

"Is it the Black?" Nathan asked grimly. She was more than just wounded.

"A Black?" Arran was surprised. "I don't know. How did you pick up a Black?"

"That's what I'm wondering too," Gabriel said. "What was a Black witch doing imprisoned with a bunch of White political prisoners? And why would a White councillor care so much about her?"

Arran scowled. "I'm White and I would care."

Gabriel wasn't fazed. "I know, but you're an exception."

"You should have heard that councillor, Arran," Nathan said, remembering how ruthlessly she had asked for another councillor's life. How cold and calculating her bargain, how she had fed even more councillors to the wolves without missing a beat. "She's ruthless. And she's a councillor. I don't trust her."

Arran shook his head. "It doesn't matter to me now. Let's find this Black witch and see if I can help her."

"I'm coming with," Nathan said as he stood up. He looked at Gabriel, and said, "Will you wait here?"
Gabriel nodded tiredly, and they left.

They looked for the Black girl. When they were close to her tent, Nathan suddenly remembered.

Arran's heavy breathing as he ran, Nathan limp and barely conscious in his arms.

Arran holding his hand as Nathan lay on the kitchen table.

Arran keeping vigil by his bed, always there whenever Nathan emerged from his delirium.

But the memories were fuzzy, dull-edged; they were detached and floating, not the usual hammer crushing his chest and making his animal itch and whine to be free.

When they entered the tent - little more than a large sheet held up by makeshift beams - the first thing Nathan noticed were the black gashes covering the girl's skin. They looked even worse in the light streaming from the camping lamps scattered about.

The second thing he noticed was how Arran inhaled sharply and then stopped breathing. Nathan turned to watch him, and saw him frozen, staring at the girl.

Iskandra was there, and she stared at him too until she snapped, "What's the matter, boy? She needs help!"

Arran didn't move. A flash of clarity appeared in his mind - why didn't I think of this how could I not see this coming what are these drugs doing to me? - but it was gone an instant later. He slowly put both his hands on Arran's shoulders and said, "Arran. It's fine. I'm here."

Arran's eyes snapped to him, and Nathan saw them fill with pain and unshed tears, and still he didn't feel anything. Only a sort of detached understanding. Arran curled his own hands on top of his.

A thought occurred to Nathan: would the drugs' effect wear off? That's what they've been calling them - drugs - but really, it was a potion. A potion devised by an old and knowledgeable witch, with a strong Gift and decades of experience. It occurred to him that he had accepted to take that potion without even asking what the effect would be. He remembered Gabriel being so uncharacteristically reluctant in offering his advice and his words, when he had offered the drugs. Had he suspected? Or had he known?

Nathan understood, but didn't worry. The awareness of what was going on was completely severed by any deep emotional reaction.

He saw Arran glance at the wounded girl, a witch who clearly needed his help, a witch he wanted to help, and yet he was struggling. He was the lost one for once, brought under by too many painful, unbearable memories. A glimmer of affection sparked somewhere in the dark that had become his chest, and Nathan seized upon it. He took Arran's face between his hands, more gentle than he remembered being in a long time. Rarely had Nathan felt the need or the desire to be gentle. "It's okay if you can't," he said. "We have other healers. I can call Van."

Arran looked at him, and then at the girl, indecision warring with his innate desire to help, until he said, "Can you... stay with me?"

"Sure."

Arran took a deep breath, and crouched by the girl. He fought down a new wave of panic as he took in her injuries. It was like being hurled into a nightmare. The slashes on her skin looked as ghastly as Nathan's had, black and raw, the skin around them an angry red. The girl was breathing shallowly.
He put a hand on her forehead to check her temperature and listen to her heartbeat with his Gift. If Iskandra noticed his hands tremble, she didn't say anything.

"What's the girl's name?" he asked.

"Skaidrite," the Councillor answered.

"Is she still a Whet?"

"No. She's twenty."

Arran directed Nathan to fetch the supplies he needed as he kept asking his questions; the routine of it helped to calm the storm in his mind, at least a little. "Is her healing still strong?"

"I don't know. She wasn't injured in the time I've known her."

Nathan fetched a bucket full of steaming water from the fire in front of the tent. He put in the satchel of herbs Arran had told him to use. As he waited for the water to be ready, Arran tried to talk to the girl, as gently as he could. "Skaidrite, we're going to clean your wounds now. I'm sorry, but it's going to be painful. You'll feel better afterwards."

The girl muttered something incomprehensible. Iskandra said, "She wants to know where the other Black witch is."

"The other?" Arran asked. He turned to Nathan with a quizzical look. "Gabriel?"

"I think she means me," Nathan said. He knelt next to her.

He didn't say anything; he waited to see what she would do. She was delirious and in pain, he really didn't expect her to even recognize a person she had seen for maybe a minute, in the dark cellar where she had been tortured for who knew how long. Those prisoners hadn't been in the villa for long...

Come think of it, Nathan and her had probably been tortured with the same method, for the same amount of time.

Arran observed her for a few seconds, concerned and itching to start the procedure. He hoped having his Gift would make the difference for her - when Nathan had needed it, Arran had been still a Whet. Not for the first time, Arran wished intensely he had a Gift as strong as his mother's. When the girl still didn't give sign to recognize Nathan, Arran whispered to her, "Skaidrite, we'll have to remove your shirt to clean the wounds. Is that okay?"

Her eyes flew open, just as the same time her hands shot out. She gripped Nathan's hand in a vicious grip. He let her. Her eyes were fixed on his face, but they were unfocused and too still. She was still trapped in that cellar. She gasped out a string of rapid-fire words, growing more and more frantic.

"What is she saying?" Nathan asked, calmly.

Iskandra shook her head. "Insults. Pleas. Nothing coherent. Just heal her, there's no reason to wait."

"Very well," Arran said. She was wearing a simple shirt, Iskandra's. She had draped it around her when they had escaped, since Skaidrite's own had been in tatters and barely covering her. Iskandra herself was left in just a chemise, but she didn't look bothered in the least. Arran removed the shirt.

He took a moment to contemplate how much worse her wounds were than Nathan's. They were
extensive, like the Hunters had been trying to bleed her to death. "Please Nathan, hold her down," he said. Nathan nodded and put his hands on her forearms.

"How about you hold her legs, Councillor?" Nathan told Iskandra. She raised an eyebrow at him, and then looked at Arran.

He nodded. "If you don't I'll have to straddle her. I'd rather not."

"I see," she said, and moved to grab her legs.

Arran reached for the water and the cloth waiting inside it. He picked it up and hesitated for a second. He focused on his Gift, on the feeling of life coursing through himself, and pulsing, chaotic and misaligned, into Skaidrite. He pulled on that flow, pulled it to the surface, as he put the cloth to her wounds. The healing water burned her and she struggled and moaned, too tired to really scream; but the Gift closed the wounds right after the terrible sting of the cloth. It was quick, way quicker than what Nathan had had. The healing left the skin intact, but the black remained under her skin. It would've taken something more complex to combat the Hunters' own potions, something Arran didn't have and didn't care to have. If she wanted, she could go to Van later. His priority was to stop her pain.

Skaidrite thrashed weakly throughout the whole process, crying and pleading. Arran had to steel his heart not to get overwhelmed. She reminded him too much of Nathan, of how defenceless he had looked, how fragile, how unbearably young. He had cried too, and begged Arran to not let go of his hand. Debs had helped to keep him down. She had been crying too, clinging to his legs with her eyes squeezed, trying not to sob. Even Gran - solid, unshakable Gran - had looked overwhelmed, and she had hesitated so many times as she cleaned the wounds and Nathan begged them to stop.

A lot of things had been difficult before, but in Arran's mind that was the day everything changed.

When he was almost finished, Arran was already exhausted. Her fever had gone up. When he cupped one of her cheeks with his hand to try and dampen it, she opened her eyes and shot a broken smile in Nathan's direction.

Her voice shook uncontrollably when she said in heavily accented English, "You know what it's like."

Nathan never stopped to grip her hand. "I'm not talking about it."

"I can tell. You know." She seemed to notice Arran then, and her face contorted in fear as she asked, "Are you White?"

"He's my brother," Nathan said, scowling. "And he's healed you so don't even."

"Are you White?" she asked then, confused.

"Are you White?" she asked then, confused.

Nathan's face darkened. "Not really."

Iskandra looked at him with interest. "You're the half-and-half."

He glowered at her, a surge of self-defensiveness sparking. "Never heard it called like that before."

"I would say, that's very significant for a lot of people around here. I've heard a lot about the son of Marcus fighting alongside the Alliance."

"I don't care. I don't like it when people look at me and wonder what I am, like I'm some animal in a
Iskandra accepted his words graciously, inclining her head and speaking no more. Arran focused on finishing the healing as quickly and efficiently as he could. By the end of it he was feeling sick. Skaidrite was still in pain - there wasn't much more to be done about the toxicity of the Hunters' powder than just leave it alone and let it run its course - but it was much more bearable, and she had stopped struggling. Arrane exhaled a tired breath, and then got up without a word. He stopped at the entrance flap, his hand opening it, but frozen in place. Nathan watched him in puzzlement. Arran had left everything - the bowl, the cloth, the pouches and herbs - in disarray. It was pretty uncharacteristic. And he had stumbled as he walked.

"Are you ok?" Nathan asked.

Arran put a hand to his own forehead. He didn't want to burden him with his bad thoughts, with what ifs and things that could have gone better in horrible, unbearable situations. What good would've done if Arran had had his Gift then? Nathan would've still been tortured and then left alone and in pain on top of a hill for hours. Arran wished he didn't remember how it felt to run up to the top and saw his little brother laying on the sand, thinking he was dead and feeling like dying, and then discovering he was alive, and then trying to move him and hearing him scream.

"I'm curious to know how a White councillor ended up protecting a Black girl," Arran asked instead. His hands were shaking. He tried to hide it by crossing his arms.

Iskandra draped a sheet over the feverish girl. "It was by chance, really. Or maybe fate, if you believe that. But it's a story I'll leave to her to tell, if she likes."

"But why are you protecting her? Why do you even talk to her, really?" Nathan asked. "The other councillors must hate you for it."

"The ones who hated me are dead now. Councils in the rest of Europe aren't as single-minded in their hate for Blacks as you might think. Most councillors I personally know are actually appalled by Soul's methods and rhetoric... but they're also scared of him. And there's always the problem of the relationship with other Councils."

Nathan stayed silent. Councillors who didn't want every and all Black dead? He could hardly imagine it. "It's not only the councillors who are the problem. Whites hate Blacks, they all do."

"Not everywhere. In Europe, what you say is mostly true. White and Black territories are well-divided and any trespassing has serious consequences. But it wasn't always like that. And in some places, the divide is still very young. Witches remember a time in which Whites and Blacks shared the same space. Keeping a respectful distance, mind."

"Is that how your Council thinks?" Arran asked, turning to face her. "That Blacks and Whites can live side by side, but keeping a respectful distance?"

Iskandra watched him. "Is that not what you want?"

Arran met her piercing gaze. "I'd like to be free to do what I want, without the threat of death if I don't hate Blacks."

"I'm surprised you don't have grievances against Blacks. Forgive my asking, but the story of your family is quite well-known. Didn't your parents both die at the hands of Blacks, in a way?"

Nathan scowled at her. Did every fucking witch on the planet gossip about them?
"I..." Arran began. He was keenly aware of Nathan being right beside him. "I know that one Black witch killed my father, but I was too young. I can't deny that Marcus changed my family forever though. Jessica never forgave him, and she has hated Blacks ever since. She believes the Council's official version, that our mother killed herself because..."

Nathan wanted to say something, but he wasn't sure how much Arran knew. Would it be fair of him to just tell him that their mother had killed herself to spare them? Was it better if he thought that she had killed herself because Marcus had raped her?

He wondered what Arran had thought of that version for all these years, if he ever knew the truth. That Cora had loved Marcus, had invited him in their home who knows how many times.

Personally, he thought that was loads better.

Arran looked at him, and he understood. "You know. Who told you?"

"Told me what?" Nathan asked, glancing at Iskandra. Even after all that time, keeping up the Council's pretence was instinctual.

Arran understood. He gathered the supplies and told Iskandra, "See to it that she gets some rest and check her temperature from time to time. Find me if anything changes."

Iskandra thanked him. He watched them both with keen eyes as they walked away.

Arran walked briskly among the improvised tents. He knew he was supposed to check on the wounded, to find more people who certainly needed his help. But he felt... unhinged. One of the hinges – one of the lies – his life had always revolved around had burst and clattered to the ground. He wanted to speak with Nathan. He wanted to know, and to let him know, finally, finally...

A gentle touch on his arm. Nathan told him, softly, "You're working yourself up again. I'm the one supposed to be unable to deal with his own feelings like a reasonable person."

Arran looked at him, like he always did ever since they had found each other again; with a keen sense of how new this freedom to see each other was, how open they were allowed to be among so many Whites.

Arran looked at him. He was a little taller than his brother; this close, as Nathan searched his face, he looked so young. It reminded Arran too much of a younger, happier face - clutching his sleeve and looking up at him with big black eyes.

The surge of protectiveness was exactly the same, even in the face of clear evidence of the fact that Nathan could defend himself really, really well, and that actually Arran was the defenceless one.

But from a certain point of view, he wasn't.

"Do you want to make the rounds?" Nathan asked.

Arran sighed shakily. "It's my duty to."

"Yes, but do you want to?"

The truth was simple; he couldn't forgive himself if he didn't help someone when he could've, when he had the chance to. But he wasn't even sure he could help, not unless he calmed down. But he wasn't sure the Alliance would have appreciated it if he suddenly refused to be their healer. There were very few skilled healers as it was. And how would it feel, if he just walked away and someone
died because he didn't help, when he could've helped them, saved them?

"I'm going to make the rounds," Arran said.

Nathan didn't look happy about it, but didn't comment. He only said, "I'm finding Gabriel and setting camp. Away from here. Can we talk later?"

"Of course. Don't make camp too far."

Nathan sniggered and left. Arran allowed himself a few seconds to get his bearings. He allowed himself one minute to remember the gruesome scars on Skaidrite's skins, to let the old horror of the top of that hill engulf him completely. Then he took a deep, steadying breath, and shoved those thoughts down.

As soon as Arran was finished - as soon as he could leave behind the wails of the dying and the moans of the maybe-alive and the thanks of the alive - three dead, four who probably won't make it, four who might or might not, two out of danger, his mind dutifully supplied - with his strength sapped for the moment and unable to do more, he had been dismissed by Van. It was early afternoon. The sun shone with the cheerful brightness of the hottest hours of the day in a way that Arran felt incongruous.

He had no idea where Nathan had set up camp. In his search, he passed near the place where Nathan and Gabriel had come through the cut, together with the mysterious witch who had helped them - Viviana, he had heard her called.

She was still there, poised with the ease of someone who has just been waiting a few minutes for a friend, rather than standing for hours in the camp of someone she had called 'murderer'.

He thought about going to her, about asking her if she was okay after standing for all those hours.

He hesitated long enough for her to notice. She turned to him slowly, with a sort of easy curiosity, and stared at him calmly. She reminded him of a predator, one too big and powerful to be threatened by anyone looking at her.

He left.

He asked around to the witches he encountered if they knew where Nathan's tent was. Like always, nobody knew. One even had the bad grace to ask him, "Why do you ruin yourself by associating yourself to him? You can do better than this, Arran."

The endless, unwinnable fight to just be with his brother, as Debs would have said.

He found them more because of the part of camp the witches were clearly avoiding, than any real direction. This time, at least, it wasn't so far; just a little deeper into the forest than everybody else's tents.

When he arrived, Nathan was waiting. He got up as soon as he saw him. "We're taking a stroll for a bit. All right?"

Gabriel looked up from the gun he was re-assembling and cleaning, and smiled. "Sure."

Nathan nodded, and they left. Arran followed him into the forest. He trusted Nathan to know how to move between the trees, how to find a way back. He always had great instincts for that, ever since
those trips to Wales.

It felt like a lifetime ago. In a certain sense, it was.

Nathan stopped near a toppled oak. The trunk was enormous, covered in vibrant green moss and tens of mushrooms. The silence of the forest was absolute in those lazy, hot hours. The only sound was the whisper of the leaves moved by the wind, high above.

Nathan was painfully blunt when he said, "I always thought you believed that Marcus raped her."

Arran closed his eyes, and sighed quietly. "That was what the Council wanted everyone to believe. Of course I was suspicious."

"How did you find out?"

"I asked Gran."

"...And she just told you?"

"I wouldn't say she 'just told me'. I pestered her quite a bit. Besides, I could tell she wanted to tell me. She made me drink a potion before she relented, telling me I'd transform into a toad if I ever told anyone else about it, even you or Debs."

Nathan shook his head, bemused. "Her and her toads potions."

Silence fell again.

Nathan frowned. He hadn't thought about Gran in a long time... he hadn't thought about that day Celia told him about her death - about how he had tried to kill her again - about the day he had passed in the cage, alone and hungry and terribly homesick. He had missed home so much that day he had thought he could simply die of it then and there.

He only felt a vague discomfort now.

What was wrong with him?

He had just shot a little smile at Arran. Talking about Gran. The woman who had raised them, the woman who had most probably killed herself. Had it been out of guilt? Had it been because she couldn't take what the Council had done to her family anymore?

There was nobody left alive to answer that question.

Arran resumed, his voice strained, "So you knew about it. The affair."

"Yes. Mary told me, that time just before your Giving."

"I see," Arran said. He fidgeted for a while, gathering his courage. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before. I'm sorry we just let you think that Marcus... assaulted her."

Nathan shook his head. "My father did a lot of things that are maybe worse than that anyway."

"Yes, but...I don't know. Maybe what I mean is... I didn't know for sure they were lovers until pretty late. I never trusted the Council much, but for at least a time I mostly believed their story. But even then... I want you to know I never once blamed you."

Nathan said, "I know."
Lightness blossomed in Arran's chest at those words. Then he noticed how Nathan had gone very still. "Is something wrong?"

Nathan fought to control his breathing, inhaling shakily as he put a hand on his neck. He said, "I don't... feel anything. I should feel something... shouldn't I?"

How was it even possible? He couldn't feel sadness at Gran's death or have enough empathy for his own brother to spare him a traumatic experience, yet he could work himself into a panic. Was fear the only thing he had left?

It was the drugs, he knew. If he had had the emotional strength to, he would've screamed in frustration. Nothing ever worked right. What had Van given him? Was it even the drugs' fault? Or had he just gone numb under the surface of his chaotic mental state post-Białowieża? Did the drugs just shave off that layer of crazy enough to show that there wasn't anything underneath?

He was jolted back to the present when Arran put his hands on his shoulders and told him, very calmly, to breathe deeply. He tried. Arran helped him down, until Nathan was sitting with his back to the fallen trunk.

Where was Gabriel? He always knew how to help him ride the panic.

Arran's voice trembled with fury and outrage when he asked, "What did they give you?"

"I don't know. But I accepted to take the drugs, whatever they were. They didn't slip them in my tea or anything."

"Nathan, I say this with the utmost faith in you, but you are not fit to make that decision for yourself right now. Does Gabriel know about this?"

"...No."

Arran scowled fiercely at him. "Don't lie to me, you're a terrible liar."

"Look, he told me beforehand what they were..."

"You just told me you don't know what they were."

"He told me what they would do--"

"Did he?" Arran almost yelled. "When I find him--"

Nathan gripped the front of his shirt and told him, "Don't. He's the only one who's always stayed by my side."

"Well he was wrong. He shouldn't have even thought about giving you some unknown potion that's doing who knows what to your brain."

"Please, Arran," Nathan said, and wondered briefly how long it had been since he had last used that word. "He's my best friend. He only wants what is best for me."

Arran glared at him for a long moment. Nathan thought idly about all the people who had told him how fierce his scowl was - not least of them Gabriel. Arran's scowl wasn't threatening at all. It reminded Nathan of an enraged kitten, which was probably mean to his brother, but that was it; there was no universe in which Nathan would ever feel threatened by his brother, or look at him and feel fear instead of affection and trust.
Or that was how things were supposed to be. He tried hard to find that warmth in himself, the sense of security and trust being near Arran always inspired, and he found it... but it was barely a glimmer.

Not nearly enough to hold him up as it had before, lost and alone in the coldness of a remote corner of Scotland.

Arran finally relented, and sighed. "I still want to know what they gave you. And you're not taking more of it unless I say so. Deal?"

"I don't want more," Nathan said, but then stopped himself. He thought of his nightmares, of losing days, of the voices screaming in his head

\[ \text{kill run monster you promised what if they all die?} \]

Arran seemed to know exactly what he was thinking. He carded his fingers through Nathan's hair as he said, "I know it's hard, but you were doing better. Let me help you. Let us all help you. Gabriel and Ellen were helping, right?"

Nathan didn't answer. What could he say, what could he promise, when he wasn't even aware of what was really going on with his head?

Then a thought emerged from the sluggishness. "I have to check on Ellen. Did you see Adele?"

"Not personally, but they told me she's fine. I spoke with Ellen though. She's fine now, but she got shot."

Nathan wanted to feel shocked. He was only dully surprised. If he hadn't been under the drugs' effect, he'd be furious about the effect itself. Probably. He thought.

He hadn't thought about his reactions, instead of actually reacting - violently, explosively reacting - in... probably all his life, in all honesty.

He wondered if this was what Soul wanted when he sent him to Scotland with Celia. Jessica, Kieran, Clay - they all wanted him to suffer because they hated him. Wallend - solid number one in his to-murder list, drugs or no drugs - was only interested in his experiments; the pain was a by-product - one he didn't care to lessen. Maybe he even enjoyed it, considered it a plus in his beloved research. But Soul didn't care about any of that. Soul was calculating and practical. He saw Nathan as an asset, a tool. An object. An object doesn't have emotions; it just serves its purpose. Was the training the first step? What would have happened if the Witch Bottle had been made?

A shudder ran through Nathan's body.

Apparently bone-deep fear wasn't something even the drugs could erase.

"I want to see Ellen," Nathan mumbled.

Arran nodded. "And I want to speak with Gabriel, so let's go back."

"Arran, please..."

"I'll just talk to him. I promise."

Nathan had been tormented by that word in his nightmares, both when sleeping and when awake. Yet when it was Arran speaking it... he was calmed by it. Believing Arran was as natural as the moon rising and showing her eternally changing face.
They went back to Nathan and Gabriel's small camp. Gabriel had finished re-assembling his gun and was idly checking how much ammunition he had left.

"Gabriel," Arran said, and at his tone Nathan stopped. He raised an eyebrow at him.

Arran sighed. "I know, I know."

Gabriel put down his gun, his face darkened at once. "It's about the drugs, isn't it."

"I don't think he should take them."

Gabriel shook his head slowly. He mostly agreed. He also knew the mission in Bratislava could've been a lot different if Nathan hadn't taken them, and not in a positive sense. He hoped there wouldn't be a new mission in a while - both for their safety and to give Nathan time to recover on his own - but who was going to decide that?

The Alliance.

Celia, who had absolutely no respect for Nathan's needs, who didn't see him as a boy in need of safety and serenity, but as the son of an accomplished murderer with his same talents.

Greatorex, who although mostly a decent witch, was completely under Celia's thumb.

Van, who had apparently poisoned that witch - Viviana - who had saved them just a few hours before... and even without that, Gabriel would've been completely stupid to trust her at all.

He looked at them both. Standing close together, they looked so different. Arran, taller, with his light brown hair and green-grey eyes, his fair skin and gentle expression - even now that he was angry at Gabriel he looked more like a disappointed mother who expected so much better from him. Nathan, a little on the short side, dark in everything where Arran was fair; dark hair, darker eyes, olive skin that had become steadily bronzer as the summer progressed. His arms were loose and poised just the right way to grab a knife as fast as lightning if needed, not because he felt threatened in any way - there was no situation in which he was more relaxed than when he was with the both of them - but because that was what he had been trained to do with his instincts. Even without the training, he would've exuded the particular grace of the Black witch anyway; a poised and aggressive grace, a violence lying in waiting.

Gabriel knew he had it too; he just thought Nathan's was that much more beautiful, the closest he had ever seen to the terror and awe wild and untamed nature can inspire.

It was simply wrong to tamper with that with the drugs... but then again, it had been tampered with anyway. Nathan needed to get away from all this, he needed a place like Wales to get back himself.

Not that Gabriel had ever had a choice in the matter. He wondered if, now that Arran wanted to step in, Celia would blackmail him into giving Nathan the drugs anyway.

No matter the cheery sun and the relieved atmosphere of the camp, he shuddered.

"I guess it's obvious why I don't want him to take them anymore," Arran said.

Gabriel nodded. "You'll have to take that up with the Alliance."

"Are you implying that you'll just side with them if they want to keep that up? Gabriel."

"Relax, Arran," Nathan said. "It's not like they can force me to take them if I don't want them."
"Just..." he looked towards the main camp, hesitating. Then he continued, "I don't want to take them now, but I might change my mind when the nightmares and the voices return. I might... ask for them."

"You want us to tell you no?" Gabriel asked quietly.

"I want you to think about what is best for me, because I know I won't be able to decide that later. It seems so far away now, but just yesterday I was talking with Jessica in my head. Just yesterday I woke up and attacked you."

Arran looked at him then, surprised. He didn't say anything.

Gabriel wanted to nod. He wanted to deserve his trust.

He didn't.

Nathan, satisfied that his brother and his best friend weren't going to fight, said, "I'm going to see Ellen. You coming with?"

"Sure," Gabriel said, standing up. He dusted his clothes from grass and fallen leaves as he said, "I'd also like very much to talk to Viviana."

Nathan raised an eyebrow. "Me too, but isn't she probably dangerous and someone Van wouldn't want us to talk to?"

Gabriel grinned. "All good reasons to talk to her."

When they found her, Ellen was sitting under the shade of an oak next to Adele, complaining about how the bandages around her right arm itched with sweat and she couldn't scratch it. "Nathan, don't you have an ice-forming Gift among the bazillion ones you have?" she whined when she saw him.

"What the fuck kind of Gift would that be?"

"An awesome one!" she said animatedly. Some witches around them turned to watch, but they quickly looked away and hurried back to their business when they saw Nathan. Even if he avoided staring at them or even just meeting their eyes, there was no helping it.

"Think of the possibilities if you had an air-cooling Gift! Magical AC!" Ellen continued.

"So I'd be what, your personal slave or something? Always at the ready to cool you off?"

"I would pay you, of course."

"Oh really. With what?"

"I could snitch some of Adele's c---"

Adele clapped her hands over her mouth to shut her up. She looked thoroughly amused as she said, "Ellen, don't be embarrassing."

Ellen crossed her good arm over her chest and looked at her smugly, mouth still covered and completely unconcerned with the fact.

Nathan watched them, but he couldn't share their mirth. Instead he asked, "Why are you still
bandaged? It's been more than a few hours by now."

Ellen tried to shrug, but the movement jostled her braced arm, and she grimaced. "Half-bloods don't heal as fast."

"Not even when they're Whets?"

"Especially then, if you think about it. We only get our magic if we do the Giving. Or, in my case, if I'm allowed a Giving."

"Did you hear anything from your grandmother? The White?" Nathan asked.

She shook her head. "Not a word. I don't even know if she's still in England. I hope not. My dad isn't in any danger, I think, since he's just a Fain and he doesn't want anything to do with witches. But let's be real... my chances of getting my Gift are pretty slim."

"Why are you fighting then? If it isn't for the promise of a Gift?" Gabriel asked.

She smirked at him, recognizing the same question she had asked him, the one he had never answered. "People are dying," she said, simply.

Adele and Arran listened to her speak, and in that moment they all looked in accordance.

"Mercury had all those vials of witch blood. I know where they are. If your mother's of your grandmother's is there, I will give it to you," Nathan said.

Ellen stared at him, speechless, for a few seconds. The she said, very quietly, "Thank you."

Gabriel interrupted the silence by asking, "Is that why you're here too, Adele? Because people are dying?"

She nodded. "I know it's not standard Black behaviour, caring about the fact that innocent people are dying. But I do. In the beginning it was mostly because Blacks were being slaughtered and nobody was doing anything to prevent it... but then I started to see what was done to Whites, too. There's no difference in death. Soul must be stopped. If I'm completely honest, this whole mentality of us versus them must end, but that's a bit more tricky to achieve."

"That's a thing that always bugged me, actually," Ellen said. "Why aren't Blacks fighting back? They should have started back when the Council drove them away from England. It was a massacre. If they're really so proud, why did they accept to simply be exiled from their own Country? Why isn't there a Black Alliance or something?"

"The explanation I always heard was that Blacks are too individualistic for that," Gabriel said. "They can't even think of organizing like that, and if they did they'd end up killing each other as much as they would kill Whites."

He didn't find much fault in this theory. Faced with the reality of Ellen and Arran's motivations, with the exceptionalism of Adele's... his motivations where much more selfish. Simply put, he wouldn't be here at all if it wasn't for Nathan.

They all knew it.

"That can't be right," Nathan said. "Maybe they thought it'd blow over then, but it's been what, twenty years? The Council got worse and worse, and now there's Soul. He won't stop until he either controls all Europe or someone kills him. And he won't stop killing Blacks. They must see the
situation is getting really, really bad for them."

Adele cocked her head in that languid way she had. "'Them'? You don't consider yourself a Black, Nathan?"

Arran tensed at that.

Nathan noticed, but didn't acknowledge it. Arran was thinking back of a time when Nathan has tried to meet the impossible expectation of being a good White, which actually meant, in Nathan's case, to be a good, obedient, silent slave. No talking back, no fighting back, no having a dignity or a mind of his own.

"I don't know what the fuck I am," Nathan said, but there was no heat in his words. "I don't fit in with either side. Both sides are more than happy to tell me I don't fit in. Guess I'm stuck being neither."

"Not both?" Gabriel asked.

"I don't think I'm allowed to be both."

"It's not a matter of 'allowing' it, though, is it? It just is," Adele said. "But I can see how it can be difficult. There's nobody else to confront yourself with."

"Speaking of confronting..." Ellen said, and she turned to the entrance of camp.

Viviana was still standing there. She was too far from them - from the tents in general - to be more than a distant blur.

"...Are you going to talk to her?" Ellen finished. She was eager to do so herself, but after hearing what the witch supposedly was able to do - flinging things, people, entire buildings in the sky like it was nobody's business - she was a little cautious.

"Is she Black?" Adele asked. "I heard her Gift is strong."

"I don't know, but she apparently knows Van, which probably means she is," Gabriel said. "And about the Gift..."

He turned to Nathan, who nodded. "She has more than one," Nathan said. "At least two. I think one is making things fall backwards. That's what it felt like when it hit me for a second; like I was falling into the sky."

"You mean, like controlling gravity?" Adele asked.

Nathan shot her a blank stare.

"...Forget I asked."

"What about the other one?" Ellen asked.

"I didn't really see it, it was very fast. But it looked like she made two weapons appear out of nowhere. Two swords."

"That is so cool," Ellen whispered, at the same time Gabriel asked, "Out of nowhere? Are you sure?"

Nathan thought about it, tried to recall exactly what had happened when Viviana fought Jessica. "I'm
sure she didn't have them on her. But I think... I think actually both time they appeared in her hand, like she had unsheathed them from her palm."

"I never heard of a Gift like that," Adele said.

"I think the most important question is how she got two Gifts. \textit{If} she has only two," Arran said.

"We all know how a witch can get new Gifts besides her own," Nathan said, quietly.

They watched her in silence for a while. She just stood there, waiting, her arms loosely crossed behind her back.

Nathan thought of his father, of the sure way he had carried himself those few, precious days he had known him.

Was self-assurance a trait in common between heart-eaters? Or was it just the same brand of sociopathy that made them not care about others around them?

And what did that say about him?

Something stirred inside him, the ghost of a voice, ringing distant like the echo bouncing from mountain to mountain. He felt a spike of unease, and his skin itched with the desire to turn into his animal and run.

"I think the drugs are wearing off," he said.

Ellen and Adele looked at each other, puzzled, then at him again.

"You okay?" Gabriel asked, concerned.

"Let's go talk to her before they wear off completely," Nathan said, and he strode towards the edge of the camp. Everyone else scrambled to follow.

Viviana saw them approaching almost immediately. She followed their advance in complete stillness and utter silence. Only when they were face-to-face, did she relax her stony pose. She unlocked her arms from behind her back, and gave them a friendly smile.

She had the high, wide cheekbones of the people from the steppe, and her honey-brown eyes were slightly narrow. She wasn't very tall, but her simple, black clothes were tight enough to show she was a compact machine of muscles, tuned to perfection. Her dark hair was short, and knotted behind her nape.

Nathan didn't know exactly where to start, so he decided to begin with what had been turning and turning in his head ever since her confrontation with Jessica. "You knew our mother."

Arran gaped at that, and stared first at Nathan, then at her.

Her smile turned wistful as she looked at Arran. "Ah, I see. You must be Arran. You look like her a lot."

Arran was left speechless. He hadn't talked about his mother in so long; it had always been a taboo topic, brought up mostly by Jessica to hurt. He didn't know how to talk about her without falling into the tangle of barbed wire and honeyed thorns that was Cora Byrn... yet he had just talked about her with Nathan in what felt like the first time in an entire lifetime. Maybe it was exactly like that; maybe he had never talked about her honestly with Nathan at all.
"Who are you?" Nathan asked.

"I'm Viviana. I used to be your mother's mentor."

"Her mentor?" Gabriel asked, surprised. "But she was a White. Would her family give her away as a pupil to a Black?"

"It wasn't that kind of mentorship," she said. "She wasn't an orphan, first of all, and she didn't live with me as a kind of servant, as many such apprentices are. No, she came to me to study out of her own volition. She was just a Whet when she sought me out. I had a certain fame then, one that had brought her to me."

"What kind of reputation?" Arran asked, a trembling note ringing in his voice.

Her smile transformed into an almost cocky smirk. "That of a revolutionary. Would you like to hear a story?" Viviana asked.

Nathan and Arran looked at each other. They both thought of a story they heard once, together, from Gran; a story about a Black witch whose Gift was as strong as her aversion to enclosed spaces at night.

"What kind of story would that be, I wonder," Adele said. She and Ellen stood a little behind, but they were just as curious as everybody else.

"Why don't we find a better place to talk? Away from all these curious eyes," Viviana suggested.

"I don't think so," Nesbitt said, appearing out of nowhere. "Don't go into the woods with the big bad wolf, kids," he added, jokingly enough - but his voice had an edge.

"There's five of us and only one of her," Nathan said.

"Reliable sources tell me that that wouldn't not be enough against her," Nesbitt said.

Gabriel considered her. "Are you that strong?" he asked her.

She wasn't ruffled by Nesbitt's interruption, nor by the fact he was obviously skulking around, keeping an eye on her. "I wouldn't mind telling this story in the middle of camp, assistant," she said, using the word Van had used so many times to describe him. On her lips, however, it sounded faintly mocking. "I'm dying to know what the Alliance's official version will be. In facts, the sooner you decide, the better."

"Oh I'm sorry, I don't know anything about that," Nesbitt said. "I'm just an assistant after all. Kids, please follow me away from the crazy woman," he added. When they didn't immediately follow, he said, "Am I ever ordering you around? Come on, please."

Viviana's smile was frozen in place as she said, "It's a very interesting story. One that Victoria shouldn't have any interest in hiding from you, since it doesn't concern her. I must wonder about this strange embargo I'm subjected to. How long will I have to just stand here and be silent? It's terribly boring."

Nathan stared hard at her. Then he looked around, searching for a place away from the tents, but still not secluded. "If you're thinking about starting shit when my brother and my friends are here, know that I've killed people by tearing their throat out for much less." Then he started for the edge of camp, where a thicket of young, slender trees hugged one edge of camp.
"Nathan," Nesbitt hissed.

Everyone started after him, at a cautious distance from Viviana, who was right at Nathan's side. Ellen turned back just long enough to say "Sorry, Nesbitt," with an apologetic smile.

"Ugh, do you have to?" Nesbitt said, his shoulders slumped in defeat. He followed them to the thicket and hanged back a while as they settled around the woman.

"The story goes like this," she said. "And I'm sure it will have a lot of things you'll have trouble believe at first. The Council of England worked extensively to erase certain things regarding the Witch heritage, and so did the White Councils and the Black Clans of before."

She paused, gathering her thoughts for a few seconds. "Let's start with this: there was a war between witches about forty years ago. That was the time when the divide in territories between White and Black was firmly established, and enforced through extreme violence or death.

It was a different situation, of course. There was no Alliance pitted against a single, dictatorial Council, and there was no rounding up of innocent children to murder them in cold blood, but there was a lot of bloodthirst and violence, as Witches are still Witches. It was also a pretty drawn-out process. Without a clear divide between two clear-cut factions... Councils shifted their stance as Councillors died or where murdered, Clans even more so seeing as Blacks have this tendency to kill each other. What remained the same was the question everybody was forced to answer: do you think Blacks and Whites can live together, or not?"

"What's a Clan?" Nathan asked.

"Extended Black families, more or less. Remnants of ancient traditions. There were very few left even then. The Council of England wiped them out first when they enforced the genocide. There are no Clans left in Europe. All the ones I remember were either wiped out, or scattered and lost their ties, their power." She looked at Nathan then, gauging his reaction. "You were never told anything about this?"

"I'm pretty sure my grandmother would have been killed had she tried," he said. "The only thing she ever told me about Blacks is how they can't stay inside during the night. She told the story of how my other grandmother was hunted down and hid herself in a cellar at night, going mad for it."

"Saba," Viviana said.

"You know about her?"

She nodded. "That was during the peak of that war. Saba was not only a powerful Black witch in her own right - she was an important figure in one of the last powerful Clans. All Clans had been declining over the previous centuries, and few were truly cohesive, living according to the ancient traditions. I don't know why things changed... nobody knew for sure. It had started way before I, or even my mother was born. Maybe it was the Fains, expanding and conquering the world, driving the magic away with their technology. Or maybe it was the Blacks themselves, maybe they became too individualistic, too self-serving, too ready to resort to violence... Whites have managed to blend among Fains and thrive, but Blacks didn't. They say they can't, that they can't live among Fains and their technology, but I think that's partly an excuse."

Gabriel listened intently. He was thinking of how rare it was to find other Blacks living in the city; how the ones in Florida despised the Blacks living in the cities - because only the ones with weak Gifts could, according to them.
"Regardless," Viviana went on, "Saba was one of the first Clan members hunted down by the reformed and unified Council of England. She was one of the most vocal supporters of the idea that Blacks and Whites could go back to a time when they lived side by side. That's why she was killed, and why her entire Clan was one of the first to be wiped out. Hunters at the time were a newly formed force. They died like flies. And Whites opposing Saba's view spun the tale very well. They made it look like Blacks were violent, inhuman murderers, killing young and talented Whites who only wanted to protect their people. Of course, the two sides were both doing unspeakable things to each other. It wasn't hard at all to find stories - true ones, even - about Blacks viciously slaughtering an enemy and their entire family. So."

"Didn't Saba kill some Hunters before?" Arran asked.

"Of course. She was a Clan member. Clans never recognized the authority of White Hunters; they thought respectable Whites would defend themselves or avenge their loved ones on their own. Clans had long histories of feuds, after all."

"But aren't White Gifts usually weaker? That sound unfair," Ellen said, hesitantly.

Viviana smiled at her, like she was proud of her for even asking. "That was one of the reasons why Hunters were created. That, and because the number of violent and ruthless killers prone to sudden bouts of murder between Blacks is considerable, there's no denying that. Think about Mercury."

Nathan crossed his arms and didn't say anything, but an uncomfortable silence fell. His think about Marcus quip hovered in the air. Instead he said, "I still don't see how this is related to our mother."

Viviana chuckled lightly. "You're right, sorry. Old women like me get lost in their stories about the past."

Nathan stared at her. She looked no older than his father had been; graceful and powerful like he had been.

She was amused by his sceptical look. "I am older than Van, suffice to say. But what matters now is this: when this war was going on, when the segregationist side was winning, Cora had her Giving. And the day after she came to me. My Clan was based in Ireland at the time; she had heard we were having an important meeting with the opposing side near Rathcroghan. England had been a segregationist enclave for almost two generations; Cora had never seen a Black witch in her life, she had only heard of them. Yet she believed more strongly than anyone else in our cause. She knew better than anyone else how different and yet how similar Blacks and Whites are; she could see both in their awfulness and their wonder."

"How can that even be if she had never met a Black?" Adele asked.

"For one thing, she wasn't wrong," Viviana said. "And also, it had a lot to do with her Gift... or maybe her vision had a lot to do with her Gift. The two things, after all, are deeply connected. Cora had the strongest healing Gift I have ever seen. She had a deep, clear vision of the inner workings of a witch - in body, mind, and spirit. She saw the difference and the sameness, and that's what allowed her to heal anyone, and so well. She was completely open to anyone who needed her help."

Arran's voice was troubled when he said, "Is that makes a healing Gift strong? Acceptance?"

Viviana chuckled. "Now now, don't get me wrong. She could chew any witch with the ease any other person has breakfast. She was a fiery little fox, she was," she said, and her smile turned sad. "If she had been a complete pushover she would've never held her ground when dealing with Marcus, after all."
"Is that how they met?" Nathan asked.

Viviana had a faraway look in her eyes when she answered, "Yes. Cora arrived the same day as Marcus's Giving, actually. She basically crashed the ceremony," she said, chuckling. "That was 28 years ago. I remember it so well. The moon was full, as it always is for the strongest witches. So many Black witches present. It was a political event more than Marcus's Giving, and he hated that. He was never on his mother side, never shared her vision. Everyone thought that after the Giving he would take off and never be seen again."

"And he didn't?" Gabriel asked.

"No. Everyone could see he was taken with the brave White witch who had all but crashed his Giving. When Cora asked to become my student, he asked to join my Clan. I guess you can call it love at first sight."

Gabriel had to refrain himself from looking meaningfully at Nathan and say, Must be genetic.

Arran turned to Nathan and said with a bad imitation of scandalized surprise, "Runs in the family!"

Nathan punched him very lightly on the shoulder and said, "Shut the fuck up."

Viviana looked puzzled, but didn't ask. "In any case. That's how I suddenly found myself with two students instead of only one. Technically Marcus had already had all the formal training a Black of ancient blood could get, so he was just supposed to hone his Gift with more experienced witches - but of course he always hanged around the place where I instructed Cora. I took them both in and treated them like they were my own children. The fighting that year was even bloodier than before. Saba was killed just a few months later... The Hunters had honed their training and their skills for years. They reached their peak that year; they were an organized, well-oiled machine whereas our side was a scattered collection of Whites and Blacks too prone to in-fighting. The last straw that doomed us was what happened to my Clan. It was wiped out not by Hunters, but by Blacks believing that coexistence wasn't possible. After that, Hunters swept out the Clans first, and individual Blacks second. A lot of Blacks from the English Isles fled to the mainland."

"Was that what you meant when you said that Van murdered your family? Was she the one to kill your Clan?" Gariel asked.

Viviana went very still. A shadow passed over her eyes. "She didn't kill the entire Clan, that is something that happened later. I had just been appointed Clan leader. I had yet to decide who my next-in-command would be, so there was a sort of leadership void. I was called to a meeting with a group of Blacks who wanted to join the cause, after opposing for a while, because they had realized the threat the new Council posed. I invited them to my own camp, where all my family was. You must understand, we lived by ancient rules that today might look odd to witches too used to Fain customs. A 'family' inside a Clan is made of warriors and teachers, and it unites people not necessarily bonded through wedlock. My family was comprised by my husband, my ex-wife and her partner, and my partner of the time. All of us with children, also from other marriages. It was a pretty big family, with many accomplished warriors. That's why I felt so sure inviting Victoria over; I thought with so many powerful witches present, we were safe.

There were thirteen children in total," Viviana whispered, not looking at any of them. "Five of them still Whets. Not by blood, but by love they were all mine. Victoria came into our tent, ate the food we offered, spoke of peace and alliances. And poisoned us all. I barely survived. Maybe because I was older - a witch is as strong as her Gift, and Gifts become stronger the older we get. Maybe I was just lucky. Or unlucky, depending on how you look at it."
Silence fell. Then Arran said, very gently, "But Cora wasn't there. Neither Marcus?"

"No," Viviana said. "They had gone back to England some months before. Cora had received news that her mother had been threatened by the Council. Word had spread that Cora had been staying with a Black Clan. 'Conspiring against the integrity of White witches' they called it, which basically meant daring to have a relationship with a Black."

Arran's eyebrows shot up. "Everyone knew?"

"It was just a rumour. Cora had been staying with me in Ireland for almost 3 years, and the only Whites on that island were loyal to our side. It was mostly rumours about the fact that she was on our side. In facts I think the accusations over her having a relationship with a Black were just attempts at slandering her name. You know how these things get when women are involved."

"Call her a slut?" Ellen said.

"Say she's a whore?" Adele said.

"Hey," Nathan said.

"Adele, she's fourteen," Arran said.

Gabriel shook his head, amused. "So, she was accused of sleeping with a Black witch. Her mother could face serious consequences for it. Why didn't she flee the Country?"

Viviana looked incredibly sad and proud at the same time when she said, "She wanted to keep fighting, from within England. Her reasoning was that our side had all but abandoned the British Isles, so someone had to stay and help people to either flee or fight. She had always admired the bravest, most reckless revolutionaries our side had to offer. Marcus was never interested in saving anyone else, he didn't care about the war, but he tried to stop her. He threatened, he cajoled, he implored, he promised... when she remained unmoved, he broke up with her in a last attempt to convince her to stay. She left the day after."

"And he followed," Gabriel said.

"The next day. He was in love. Cora too, but she also had an iron spine. And she was so stubborn... that plan, however, went south very soon. She got stuck in England; at the time, the Council closed the borders for the first time. Nobody could leave without alerting the Hunters. And the Council was watching Cora very closely."

"Why would they do that, though? What did they care about getting her back alive, instead of just killing her like anybody else?" Nathan asked.

Viviana said, simply, "Dean."

"My father?" Arran asked.

Viviana nodded. "Dean had been appointed councillor pretty young. He had always been taken with Cora, and he had been looking for her for years. You can call it devotion or you can call it obsession... I only knew he ever existed after Cora got stuck in England, so I don't really know him. She had never talked about him as she was my student. Things for her got worse and worse in England, and for her mother too. They were both seriously scared they'd be made an example of and executed. Cora was still helping people escape. Marcus was smart and strong enough to outmanoeuvre the Hunters and move in and out of the Country, and I can imagine he tried to convince her to leave... I can also imagine her answer: 'No, people need me here. If I leave who will..."
remain to help them?. To my knowledge, he always refused to help her smuggle people, intervening only when Hunters were too close to discover her. I have no way to be completely sure, because she didn't dare to send me letters, but... I think she married Dean to gain back the Council's trust, to look like a respectable member of White society again. And, well... we all know she never stopped seeing Marcus.

I saw him rarely in those years, and it was obvious he was more and more frustrated with the situation. He was sure she would be caught helping the Blacks one day and get herself killed. Besides, he wasn't helping her out of generousness, he only wanted to keep her safe as much as he could... it was wearing him down. As I said, he never believed in our vision."

"Yet he loved a White witch, and he was loved in return. Wasn't that enough to see that the barrier could be overcome?" Gabriel asked.

Viviana smiled sadly as she said, "People often cannot see beyond their personal circumstances. Marcus could love Cora for who she was, but he didn't care about anyone else. He didn't care about the persecution against Blacks or Whites; he could defend himself and that was enough. In facts... I was very surprised to know he had joined this Alliance."

She looked at Nathan then. "I'm assuming the rumours about his death are true."

Nathan crossed his arms. The shadows lurking just beneath the surface of his conscience darted, dove down again. Closer and closer to break the thin, fast-vanishing ice of the drugs. "They are."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You were the only other person he cared about, if that's any consolation."

"It's not," Nathan cut her off. "Did Dean know about it?"

"The affair? Or Cora helping our side?"

"Both."

"I don't think he knew about the affair. Most Whites gossiped about her supposed relationships outside of England, but that was it. Few thought she would risk it. Or, that she would bear a Black touching her," she added, sneering. "And about the other thing... I truly don't know. Dean was in the Council, and I can't imagine his political career surviving if it was even suspected that his wife was a traitor. Besides, Cora knew what she was doing. After all, she wasn't caught for helping Blacks," Viviana concluded, a bitter smile on her lips. As an afterthought she added, "I'm sorry we're discussing this so openly, Arran, Nathan. I hope I didn't make you too uncomfortable."

"I've known about the affair for a long time," Arran said. "And I don't remember my father enough to miss him. It's a better story anyway, isn't it? Compared to the one the Council spread."

"That slander was the last stone the Council used to bury her true memory," Viviana said. Then she added, more softly, "But it wasn't the worst thing they did. I wish I could have done something... but technically, I was dead. My family was murdered just a few weeks before Cora and Marcus were found together. Besides, I was stuck outside of England, like almost everyone else. Even if I had been well..."

Silence fell. Nathan felt the ice thinning and thinning. He was not looking forward to what this night's dreams had in store for him.

He absently touched the tiny scar on his upper cheek. Thinking about his mother had always been an exercise in vagueness. He never had a defined idea of who she had been, what she had liked... only one photograph to look at, when Jessica wasn't around. It was impossible to think she had loved
Marcus, and yet she had. It was impossible not to love and admire Marcus, too, and yet he wasn't supposed to. Regardless of the lies of the Council... Marcus had killed countless witches, sometimes for little more than a trivial slight, sometimes as revenge.

His peak, after all, had been in the year of Cora's death.

Yet he had eaten hearts, killed Arran and Deb's father.

What had Cora seen in him? Did she close her eyes against his murders? Had she tried to convince him to stop? Had she cared?

After all, White witches could be as savage and bloodthirsty as Blacks.

Nathan was as guilty of this ambivalence too, he knew. He had been fascinated by Marcus' unbridled violence, his self-assurance. Marcus had never been plagued by doubts or questions about who and what he was like Nathan was. He had been powerful, and unafraid. He had brought death upon countless people and expected nothing less in return. When people died around him it bore little consequence to him, for does a natural disaster or a wild animal worry about what it kills? Nathan, struggling as he was with the blood on his hands, with the dirty feeling fighting other witches - Hunters, yes, but so young, so weak, before Białowieża - wanted to be the same. A true, savage Black - or at least the kind of Black he had been always told about.

Yet a part of him reeled back at the thought. Was that his White side? His decent person side? Or the side he had been forced to internalize, the side that was scared to identify with Blacks and in fear of White retaliation if he dared to be his true self?

The old, familiar anxiety spiked up and left him winded, wrung out like a dirty rag and tossed to a corner.

The drugs were definitely wearing off, and already he was feeling the weight back on his chest, the darkness clouding his eyes.

He turned, and without a word, walked away, leaving everyone else silently baffled.

"Nathan?" Gabriel called, and followed him. He was silent as they crossed camp, but when Nathan reached their temporary tent and walked even farther and into the forest, he asked, "Where are you going? We must stay inside the perimeter..."

"Too close," Nathan said, and the roughness in his voice made Gabriel pause.

"Are the drugs wearing off?" he asked.

Nathan didn't answer, but he stopped.

"We're moving camp soon, going wherever that councillor has that base she promised," Gabriel said. They were just outside the camp. A scout appeared from between the trees, watching them. Everyone was on edge, waiting for the Hunters to find them and give the Alliance the final blow. Gabriel gestured to her silently, trying to let her understand it was better she lefted them alone. Thankfully, she did, after shooting a distrustful glance at Nathan.

"It's best if we get back," Gabriel pleaded.

Nathan stayed silent a long time. His blood was churning and rising like the sea before a tempest, hitting the rocky shore of his fast-crumbling peace of mind. "I don't want to stay that close to camp during the night," he said. Then he added, even more quietly, "I don't want them to hear me."
Gabriel stepped forward and gently took Nathan's face between his own hands. The black eyes that
gazed at him where distant and empty, reflecting nothing, as though they absorbed light. It was a
chilling sight, even more so when coupled with Nathan's distressed voiced. The disconnection was
jarring.

"I'm sorry I gave you those," Gabriel choked out.

The image of a studio filled with paintings, all the paintings depicting the same woman, filled his
mind. The room had been otherwise bare and empty, white walls and no furniture, just papers, rags,
cans, brushes scattered on the floor. Bottles of wine and liquor sitting in rows and rows on the
windowsill. Gabriel knew very well how hopeless regret looked like, how guilt looked like. It looked
like a man unable to stop doing the wrong thing, blaming himself one second and his lost love the
next one, regret mixing with resentment whenever he looked at his children.

Gabriel wasn't sure he'd survive if Nathan couldn't forgive him for his betrayal.

"It's ok," Nathan said. "My chances of surviving Bratislava would have been even lower without
them..."

Then he noticed the liquid sheen brimming in Gabriel's eyes. "Gabriel, it's not your fault. It's not like
you forced me to take them."

"I shouldn't have even talked to you about them," he said, but what he wanted to say was, You're
going to hate me when they tell you, and they will tell you, they will for sure, and then I'll have to
prevent you from killing Annalise and I don't know how I'll manage that, if you'll let me at all.

"You wanted to help," Nathan said. "I know that. That's more than can be said for a lot of other
people around here. It's not your fault I'm so fucked up."

"You're not fucked up. The people around you are fucked up."

With a small smirk, Nathan said, "I don't know about that. When I think about it, I've never had so
many positive people around me, at the same time, before the Alliance."

"Oh really?" Gabriel humoured him, trying to keep the conversation light again. He never let go of
him, his hands gentle and light on the side of his face, on his neck.

"I can even run out of fingers in one hand if I count them all, it's a first."

"Who are you counting besides Arran and Ellen?"

"You, obviously. Are you seriously trying to play humble?"

Gabriel just smiled down at him, preening. He was so obviously pleased, Nathan almost felt like
blushing.

Almost.

"Arran, Ellen, me, then. Adele too?"

"Yes."

"Who's the fifth one then? Nesbitt?"

"Do you want me to hit you?"
Gabriel wasn't worried in the least. Nathan was leaning on him, and his hands were resting lightly on Gabriel's shoulder blades.

"Who are you counting then?"

"Celia."

Gabriel's smile disappeared at that. Nathan felt him going very still. "She used to be horrible, but that's in the past. I learned a lot thanks to her."

"She doesn't deserve your gratitude."

"I know. She deserved all the kicks I gave her a few weeks ago."

"She didn't teach you, Nathan, she abused you, and yet you consider her a decent person only because she's not that bad compared to Soul or Wallend..."

Gabriel bit his tongue and forced himself to stay silent, but he never let go of him.

Nathan sighed and buried his head in his shoulder. He didn't want to fight. "I could count Viviana."

Gabriel sobered at that. "Do you trust her?"

"'Trust' is a very big word. She has the positive influence of knowing things about my parents. Do you know how rare that is? Everyone who ever met them winds up dead."

"Yes," Gabriel said, remembering the stories whispered at gatherings, the morbid gossip surrounding the infamous Black witch Marcus, his certainly just-as-mad son, the woman who had gone insane bearing him until the only option out of the horror was suicide. "I think I know how rare that is."

"I'm getting hungry," Nathan said. "Let's go back."

"Okay."

"I'm still moving the tent farther away."

"I'll help."

As they walked back again, Nathan could feel it; the surge of what he had been before, the jittery energy, the restlessness. He was blinded for a second by the thought of going to Van and asking for her drugs again.

"I think... I'm going to ask for the drugs again at some point."

Gabriel stayed silent, letting the guilt gnaw at his stomach.

"Do you think you can prevent me from taking them? Or asking Van to give them to me?"

"...I don't know."

"I wish what Arran used to give me was helpful, but it fucking wasn't," Nathan said through gritted teeth. "You know what? I need a cigarette. I'll ask Ellen if she has any."

"Does she smoke?"

"No, but she knows everything that goes into the Alliance's supplies. I could ask Van, but who
knows what she would give me at this point. Maybe she'd try to poison me too."

"I'm not sure I believe Viviana's story completely. It painted her in a very positive light, don't you think?"

"Of course it did. Isn't that what everybody does?"

They reached the tent, and started to pack it. They moved it back a little, still inside the perimeter, but hidden between the trees, where the undershrub was thicker with brambles, ferns and saplings. They worked to create a comfortable nook out of it. Nathan dug his fingers into the soil to remove some of the plants, and let the rich smell of the earth calm him down. He used the Gift to make the saplings grow from under a fallen log, creating lush walls of leaves at the side of their new abode. They sat under the canopy, leaving rucksacks and packed-up gear on the forest floor.

Nathan noticed a cluster of strawberry plants growing timidly in the shade. He used the Gift again, making them grow. The small fruits grew bigger and more numerous, until the plants were heavy with them. Nathan picked them and held them in one hand, offering some. Gabriel thanked him and ate in silence, enjoying the relative silence. The soft noise of camp was close, but not enough to be really evident unless he listened to it.

Nathan thought of a dream he had had frequently when he was in the cage, a thought he had used to survive and give himself a sense of hope; a life with his mother and father, together in the woods and with a cabin of their own, living of what the earth could offer - fruits, game, fish. It was hard to imagine he had had the mental strength to even conjure that image up. Now though, sitting in the gentle summer shade of a forest lost in the heart of Poland, he tried to imagine what living in peace - not hunted, not afraid, able to simply be - would feel like. It could be good like this. The silence, the sweet and wild smell of strawberries, the red staining his fingers just juice. Gabriel sitting at his side, their shoulders touching slightly.

Thinking of peace was like clawing sand and seeing it escape through his fingers. In that moment, with the ghost of it hanging in the air, it seemed even farther away than it had in the cage; a pipe dream that would only hurt more in the end.

He didn't know what peace felt like, and the darkness was closing in.

The announcement to pack up and move camp came as the sun was setting. According to Celia, they had waited more than enough already, and they had to move as soon and as quickly as possible. Nathan and Gabriel had left the tent and their few belongings packed, so they just had to pick it all up and follow. Nathan hanged back between the oaks as most of the witches crowded the place where Brenda had opened a cut. The restlessness was back full-force and Celia's implications - Hunters could be here any minute - made him look around constantly, paranoia a constant shadow just at the edge of his vision. He kept seeing Jessica's cruel smile as she appeared through the cut in Bratislava, the scar the Fairborn had left behind a reminder of their mutual hate.

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes - Ellen had known where to find them of course - and shook it until a stick came out. He looked up as he put it between his lips. Gabriel was watching. Nathan felt the small weight of the lighter in his pocket, but decided to try something else. He picked the cigarette between two fingers and licked the roof of his mouth, puffing out a short and light breath that caught fire for just an instant. Cigarette lighted, he put it between his lips again. Gabriel smirked and looked away.

"Show-off," he said.
Nathan half-grinned around the butt, but didn't say anything. His attention was brought back to the camp when a stretcher was brought out of a tent, Arran and Iskandra at its sides. Lying on it was the Black girl the Councillor protected, immobile but awake. Bandages covered most of the wounds, but as the stretcher was pulled on the grass Skaidrite winced at every bump. Iskandra chatted briefly with Arran, who looked around. He didn't see Nathan through the thick trees, but Nesbitt did, and he pointed at them. Nathan sighed.

"Arran is going to give me a lot of grief for this."

"I think he understands the situation, Nathan."

Nathan hummed, and took a deep drag. Nesbitt and Arran came to them. Arran shot a surprised look at the cigarette Nathan was smoking lazily, but didn't say anything. "Iskandra wants you to cross the cut with her," he said.

"Why?"

"I didn't ask, but I think it has to do with Skaidrite."

"The girl is pretty taken with you Nathan!" Nesbitt said. "She keeps asking about you. You be careful, Gabby, or you'll find yourself with another rival!"

Nathan flicked the butt at Nesbitt, who startled and patted his jacket where the cigarette burned a hole in it.

Nathan walked to the two women, who were waiting by the cut as the other witches passed through.

"What," he asked.

Celia and Greatorex were watching them. Van was nowhere in sight.

If Iskandra was surprised by his sudden rudeness, she didn't show it. "I'd like you to cross with us."

"Why? Are you expecting a bunch of Hunters on the other side?" Nathan sneered. Celia glared at him, but didn't comment, knowing full well it was useless to police his manners on a good day, let alone when he was in a foul mood.

"Because Skaidrite would feel better if you were by her side. I can't ask you to do so all the time, of course, but just this once---"

"Where are we going anyway?" he asked. His words to Iskandra were cutting, but when he looked down on Skaidrite there was no anger in his eyes. She gazed back at him in silence, not understanding most of what was said. Words weren't needed. Few witches could say they had had a taste of Retribution, of what unadulterated hate felt like carving their skin, and live to tell the tale. It was something no one else in Nathan's life could really understand; not as completely as she could.

"We're going to a fortress in Latvia, in a place called Kolkasrags. It has been a property of my family for generations, but it was abandoned more than a century ago."

"Why?"

"It's sealed by a spell. I will lift it and let everyone inside."

Nathan looked at the girl again. The white bandages were a stark contrast on her bronze skin and black hair.
"All right," Nathan said.

Arran helped him to lift her, since they couldn't make her cross on the stretcher. Cuts were known to break objects into shards unless they were small and worn by someone. Nathan let Arran arrange her on his back, as comfortable as possible. When Iskandra went, he followed closely behind.

What waited on the other side was the salt-and-decay smell of the sea. Nathan had rarely been near it, but it was unmistakable. Tall pines, beeches and alders blocked his sight, but he could see the line of the sea through them. There was something strange about it, though; it didn't look blue and green like what he had seen the time he'd been to the beach in Wales, with Gran.

He saw black and grey.

The temperature was much colder too. Suddenly the heavy jacket Skaidrite was wearing made sense. This far north, it didn't matter it was late August when night was falling.

Most witches were hanging about, waiting for the rest of camp to arrive. Nathan put the girl down and left her to Iskandra's care. She didn't protest, just followed him with her blue eyes when he walked to the beach.

The sand was dark grey and black, and the sky wasn't much different. It was like being plunged into winter. The wind was almost on the side of biting, but not quite. Grey clouds lined with white raced each other over the horizon's line.

There were no seagulls in sight, but a few crows were watching him from atop a fallen tree, the wood washed white by the sea and the salty air.

There was no sight of Fains for miles; Nathan could see the beach line stretch in an arch to one side, covered in trees and sand and scattered with black cliffs plunging into the water. On other side there was a promontory. A stone-and-wood fortress sat atop it, surrounded by the thick forest on three sides and facing the sea on the last one. It looked like it had been closed for the season, more than abandoned for a hundred years; it was shuttered, but not run-down.

Gabriel reached his side and looked around, taking in the desolate grey atmosphere. "Cheery," he commented.

"I kind of like it," Nathan said.

"Of course you do," Gabriel said, and he smiled.

Iskandra came to them. "The line drawn by the curse is close," she said. "We better hurry."

Nathan went back with her and found Celia making a new stretcher with swift and practised ease. Once it was ready, Skaidrite silently refused to be helped on it when Celia made to lie her down. The Black witch hissed at her instead in fast-paced Latvian. A councillor close enough to hear her cursed at her, and in a second they were screaming at each other. Celia and Arran tried to calm them both down as the witches around them looked on. The councillor switched to English as she insulted the girl, calling her an 'abnormality' and an 'ungrateful traitor'. Nathan tolerated her words sawing in his brain for approximately five seconds before standing up.

Everyone took a step back as a collective gasp swept through the crowd.

He stared silently at the councillor, hands loosely held at his sides. She stayed silent.

Iskandra watched the scene unfold before saying, "Nathan, please bring Skaidrite."
Ignoring the seething spat of the Councillor, Nathan grabbed one handle of the stretcher as Gabriel took the other, and pulled it after the White witch. They walked for a while, most of the witches staying behind, more than happy to leave as much space as possible between them and the deranged son of Marcus. Iskandra stopped in a place that looked exactly like every other corner of forest they had around them. The pines weren't very thick, leaving the sky open above their heads.

"It's here," Iskandra said, looking at the ground. "Now if I only I could find it..." She said as she kneeled on the ground and dug in the dead leaves.

Nathan let her, more interested in looking around. Skaidrite was silent and calm again, patiently waiting in the stretcher. Gabriel was scanning their surroundings, but everything was calm.

"Can't you feel it?" Nathan asked in a whisper as to not disturb the silence.

"What?" Gabriel whispered back.

Nathan tried to focus on what was causing his unease. The silence around them was immense. "I don't know. It's like... a draft under a door. Something cold..."

"Something dead."

They turned, startled, hands flying to their respective weapons.

Viviana was standing behind them, smiling genially.

"This forest is littered with dead bones. It has always been. The trees' roots wrap all around them. I'm guessing that's what makes the curse so strong."

"Curse?" Gabriel asked, turning to Iskandra. "You said it's a spell."

"There's not much difference, is there?" Iskandra said. "It's true though," she added, watching the other woman wearily. "This forest feeds on bones, and it's very ancient. That's what makes the most powerful spells - blood and the dust of time."

She had uncovered a small circle of terrain, until the pines and soil gave way to a symbol made of little white stones underneath. "Look here," she said. "This is what my ancestors created to seal this place."

Nathan shot another glance at Viviana. She stayed poised where she was. He walked closer to Iskandra as Gabriel followed him. He knelt next to Iskandra to look closer at the symbol.

At a closer inspection, it wasn't made of white stones.

It was made of finger bones.

"Why was it sealed?" Gabriel asked.

Iskandra hovered a hand over the design. "I'm not sure. I've always known about the place, and the method to unseal it was passed down for generations, but the reason why my ancestors sealed it was lost."

Nathan stretched a hand to touch the bones, wondering if had been taken from the forest's ground or if somebody had been maimed or even killed on the spot to get them.

His hand was lurched back violently. When he turned the Fairborn was already in his hand, and it clashed violently against steel. Viviana had an iron grip on his wrist and a sword in her free hand,
smiling at him in satisfaction at his swift reaction.

"Let him go!" Gabriel yelled at her as he pointed his gun at her.

"I will do so gladly," she said, looking at Iskandra. "I'm just trying to protect him."

Nathan pushed her violently away. "What the fuck do you mean?" he hissed, keeping both women in his sights.

Viviana made her sword disappear into her hand. "Since we do need the fortress anyway, I'll lift the curse. My ancestors will curse me from their grave, no doubt."

Iskandra's eyes widened, but she didn't say anything.

Viviana knelt near the symbol. "It's bad form to lie about your own Clan's misdeeds, Councillor Iskandra," she said as she hovered her hand above it. "It's always best to flaunt them like they were heroes' deeds. Tell the tale enough times, and they will be remembered as such anyway."

Something shot out of the centre of the symbol, piercing Viviana's flesh.

It was blackened and shrivelled, but it was unmistakably a hand.

A skeletal hand that was now run with Viviana's blood.

Nathan glared at Iskandra. "Was that reserved to me?"

Viviana languidly extended her free arm, asking for silence.

"Are you ok?" Gabriel asked her.

"I have a dead body's hand piercing my own. Of course I'm not. But at least I knew it was going to happen. Now please stand back, I'm almost done."

Viviana closed her fingers, grimacing at the pain.

She slowly moved her hand up, and the skeletal hand followed, then an arm, then a forearm... Soil and leaves fell down from its blackened skin.

Nathan stepped closer. Gabriel put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it, but neither of them tore their eyes off the ghastly image.

Last, the upper part of a skull appeared, the skin too thin in some patches, peeling off to show the brown bone underneath.

Then the eyes opened.

Viviana slowly moved her free hand to remove some more earth from it, freeing its mouth. "Descendant of Rayn, speak the words," she said. She was smiling in a way that looked almost manic.

The corpse opened its mouth to show rows and rows of thin, stiletto-like teeth. And it spoke. The slow, deliberate words of the ancient earth, the one every witch hears at their Giving but no witch can repeat if they try to think of them.

Viviana let her free hand rest on the corpse's jaw, stroking it almost tenderly. When it stopped talking, there was a moment of utter silence as it seemed to almost sink back into the soil.
Then Viviana spoke. "Yes, my dear," she said. "There will be as much blood as you like."

She abruptly stood up, pulling the corpse. Tens, hundreds of shrivelled and black hands were clutching it, clutching each other, blossoming from the earth and then vanishing into black smoke. The trees around them groaned and shuddered. Most of their leaves fell, and what little remained blackened also. Yet the plants didn't seem to die; their branches grew until they were so thick as to block the sky, as to reach down to the soil. Grass and flowers bloomed at their roots and twined on their bark.

In less than a moment, it was over.

The corpse - and the countless others they had seen for only a second - had disappeared. Viviana looked at the wound in her hand without one worry in the world. It was already closing.

"What the fuck was that?" Nathan asked.

"That, child, was ancient magic. The curse on this place prevented anyone from getting inside. It drew its power from two things. A powerful witch who had the Gift of the ancient words, who was buried here... and the countless Witches who died here. Every tree here feeds on countless corpses. Tell me, Iskandra. What happened whenever someone crossed the line of the curse?"

"They started to hear voices, claiming the trees were talking to them. Then they'd be lured into the deepest part of the forest. Nobody knows what happened then, but no one ever returned."

"I'll take a wild guess," Viviana said. "They're now feeding the trees also."

Viviana stared at her stonily when she said, "There's only one kind of witch who, according to the story, can lift that curse."

"Indeed. That is why it remained sealed for so long, isn't it?" Viviana said, and her smile turned a shade darker, a threat of retaliation coming, sure and merciless. "That's why you brought Nathan here."

Nathan stared at Viviana. Gabriel, too, was stunned into silence.

"Ever since my original Clan was wiped out, there hasn't been anyone like us in generations," Viviana said. "A half-and-half. A True Witch."
The fortress, as it seemed, bore the same name as the strip of land it loomed on; Kolkasrags. It was a secluded place, shrouded in grey and black; an atmosphere of perpetual winter. The summer green still hanged to the forest surrounding it, however, mitigating the cold impression.

It was also blessedly unapproachable by Fains. So much so, in facts, that wild animals roamed its garden and woods like they had never seen a human in their entire life. Foxes scuttled through the trees, running after hares. Deer walked with their majestic leisure on the grass of the seemingly endless lawn. Wolves were heard, howling in the distance.

Nathan was as ecstatic as his condition allowed - which was still enough to bring a smile on Gabriel's lips. When they went to see the beach - walking down fearsome steps cut into the cliff from which Kolkasrags jutted to the sky - and they found seals placidly sunbathing, Nathan stared at them in awe for the longest time. He didn't try to approach them and he didn't talk; he just looked. After a while, he walked to the grey-white sand, and sat down a little away from the animals. They didn't move, if not to roll on their backs and doze some more. Nathan was content enough just staring at sea. It was a more peaceful view than he remembered; the lull of the waves was relaxing in a way that felt both foreign and magical. The sea was something new to him, untainted by bad memories. Woods and mountains and lakes and snow were all things that spoke to him, but they were also things drenched in bad memories.

The sea was pure to him.

He didn't say all this when Gabriel sat down next to him. Gabriel stayed silent, admiring the view and soaking in the sight of the seals bickering with each other, or sleeping, or diving into the sea. His silence was something precious too. He knew so well when Nathan just needed silence. Peace. Quiet. It was kind of surprising, for someone who loved words and talking and books so much. Yet Nathan knew he also had that sense for peaceful contemplation, for simply being, that nature could give. It was too often an elusive sensation for Nathan - something that was deeply a part of him, but difficult to focus on, tainted by other powerful things. But he knew they both felt it. From Wales, from the trance.

Nathan, for a change, felt well enough.

The fortress was big enough to house all the members of the Alliance, between rooms, servants' quarters, re-purposed stables, and tents scattered in the garden - or maybe the Alliance was so small it could fit in such a place.

Nathan had planned to stay well away from it, but Nesbitt wanted them to choose a room.

"There aren't that many, so it's best if you bunk up," he said. "Not a problem, right Gabby?" he added, and winked. "Or you could share with Arran. Your choice."
"Let him have the room. Gabriel can share with him if he wants," Nathan said, still staring at the sea, his back to Nesbitt.

"It's gonna get pretty cold around here soon, kid, don't you want to have a warm place for that? We have all the nightsmoke we could want."

Nathan ignored him.

"Ah come on, don't be such a spoilsport! I heard Ellen talking about how you could all have breakfast together, she was so excited!" Nesbitt joked, and grabbed Nathan's arm to haul him up.

The Fairborn was at his throat in an instant, Nathan's face barely a breath away Nesbitt's.

"Don't. Fucking. Touch me," he breathed out. "There are few things that would make my day brighter than cutting open your fat gut."

Nesbitt held his hands up in surrender, but he still sounded joking when he said, "Yeah? Well I'm sorry to say, but your anatomy knowledge is a little poor, my gut is a little lower."

Nathan growled in frustration, but stopped when Gabriel put a hand to his neck and steadied him. He only said, "Nathan," very quietly.

Nathan pushed Nesbitt away and sheathed the knife. He scowled wordlessly at Nesbitt, who shot a meaningful look at Gabriel, and then took off.

When they reached it, Kolkasrags was swarming with activity. Nathan followed Gabriel through the garden, a good chunk of its wildly growing grasses and plants flattened by tens of feet, and the other chunk soon to follow. The grooves of paths already walked and walked again criss-crossed the expanse.

Witches parted at their passage, watching them.

No, not them. Not them, of course.

Him. Nathan.

When he caught sight of three witches bending their heads together, glancing at him as they covered their mouths and whispered, he stopped dead in his tracks and stared at them. They scuttled away as quickly as possible.

He didn't even know if they were Whites or Blacks. It didn't matter.

It didn't fucking matter.

Gabriel gently put a hand on Nathan's arm, but Nathan jerked it away. Without looking at him, he asked, "Aren't you tired of being watched because of me?"

Gabriel seemed infinitely saddened by the question. "No. I don't care about them, Nathan. I care about you."

"Stop saying stupid shit like that," Nathan answered, and resumed walking at a brisk pace.

But I would love to, Gabriel thought. I would love to declaim my love for you in front of everyone if only I could, I would embarrass you with how stupid and over-the-top the poetry I'd recite would be.

They reached the gated entrance, the front door thrown wide open. Since there was a little less
people around there, a little more privacy, Gabriel said, "I want you to remember that I'm not here for the Alliance and I'm not here for these people. Sure, I don't want them all dead either, and I don't like what Soul and the Council are doing - what decent person would? But in the end, these people mean nothing to me. And you mean everything. You're the only thing I care about."

Nathan thought of all the good people left out by that 'these people mean nothing to me'; good people, people Gabriel liked, people he'd grieve if they died, at least a little. And what about his father, back in the United States? Didn't Gabriel have a life, back there? Friends? Was it all obliterated when he met Nathan? Nathan had so little - still less than the fingers in one hand; Arran, Gabriel, Ellen - and he had lost so many; and yet he still had more than him. Gabriel deserved better than to have Nathan being everything he had left.

"It's not a matter of 'deserving' or even 'wanting', Nathan. It just is," he said, and Nathan frowned. Had he said that out loud?

Gabriel spoke quietly, like he was scared of his reaction, or maybe he was just scared of simply being rejected. Again. Had Nathan rejected him? Why couldn't things ever be as simple as running, as simple as the trees growing in the forest? In an uncomplicated world, Nathan would've had time and mental peace to sort his feelings, their more-than-friends, less-than-more mess. Instead Gabriel acted like Nathan, reciprocating or nor, was the only thing that gave meaning to his life, the only thing worth protecting; but all Nathan had were voices in his head, nightmares that chased him in his waking hours, and an entire army after him. And his allies didn't look very promising either, even on a good day.

"Don't give me that. I told you before you can't fight only for me. What about you? What about---"

*What about having a life outside of fighting, what about a life after the fighting,* he wanted to ask, but the words rang hollow and hypocritical even before he uttered them. Who was he to say something like that to Gabriel? What did he have other than fighting the Council and the Hunters and Soul? He didn't have anything but killing.

So what he said instead was, "I don't want you to be like me. I want you to have more than this."

Gabriel was stunned into silence for a second. Then he said, "I wish you tried to make that true for yourself too."

During the whole exchange, Nathan didn't look at him; but at those words, he faced him. The manic gleam in his black eyes was gone for the time being. In that moment, he didn't look mad; he looked haunted.

Without another word, he went inside.

The sun had almost completely set, but he wasn't feeling sick; nightsmoke bowls were already lining the corridors, and their clean smell wafted in the corridors.

Gabriel gave a look at each room, but in the end there wasn't much difference between one or the other. Besides, he had a feeling the only reason he was allowed to pick one was more for Nathan's benefit - and his continual not-angered state - than anything. Nathan was being perfectly useless in the choice; he had found a room with a balcony only to sit on the windowsill with the glass panes open, staring out in the distance. Gabriel went to him and asked, "Is this one okay? Or would you like another one?"

Nathan pulled out a cigarette and lighted it, taking a few drags before answering. "Would you?"
"I'd like this room instead of a tent, yes. But I don't want a room if you're going to set up a tent outside."

"What did I just tell you about not doing things for my sake? You fucking want a room, pick one."

Gabriel felt frustration flare, and before he could think twice about it he said, "What I fucking want is to share the bed with you, how about that?"

Nathan stared wordlessly at him, smoke billowing in a thin strip out of the window. His lips parted slightly, like he wanted to say something, then closed again.

Gabriel felt too exposed, embarrassingly naked as fire threatened to colour his ears and cheeks. He threw his pathetically sagging rucksack in a corner and walked to the massive closet, keeping his back to Nathan. After a while, Nathan flicked the half-smoked cigarette to the floor, and threw his legs out of the windowsill. He jumped down and turned into a hawk.

They circled the wall and the turrets in an upward spiral; they flew silently, unseen, over the woods, the tents, the people dotting the garden. Nathan let the animal roam, let it burn his body's energies with the half-formed hope to forget the needle of embarrassment and guilt piercing his back. Then they dove back again to the balcony, to the room Gabriel had - more or less - chosen. Nathan wasn't sure Gabriel even wanted to see him, but the animal didn't care and didn't doubt. There was a quality to it that suggested a complete trust in Gabriel's strongest desire - to be with Nathan, in any capacity available. Nathan would have felt guilty about it, but the simple and honest thing was this: he wanted Gabriel's company, wanted his words and complete devotion. It was simple, it was true, and it was selfish.

They flew down and perched on the far side of a windowsill, just outside of reach from the balcony. When they screeched, Gabriel was slow to come out and look for them. He did so wearily. If he was surprised by the hawk form - he had never seen it before - he didn't show it. Nor he seemed to doubt for a second it was Nathan and his animal.

Gabriel found that it was much easier to not feel embarrassed when the person you love has transformed into a bird. He didn't try to get closer or touch them - he knew instinctively that the touch Nathan enjoyed so much would not be as willingly accepted by his animal. He left the door open, and went back inside. The room was as sparsely decorated as the rest of the fortress. It had a few sturdy-looking shelves, a small sofa that, incredibly enough, hadn't been eaten by moths, and a fireplace. The walls were bare and the floor made of wood. The windowpanes were grey and grimy. Cobwebs hanged in thick stripes from the corners and most of the wooden beams on the ceiling.

Gabriel catalogued all this as he tried to ignore the one detail that his impulsive, stupid side had focused on when picking this room in a fit of petty frustration.

The one king-sized bed.

He heard steps falling lightly to the floor just outside as Nathan turned back into himself. When he walked in, he gave a quick once-over to the room, without much interest. He stared at the bed no longer than it took him to raise an eyebrow at Gabriel, but he didn't say anything. Gabriel sighed.

"We don't have to take this one. In facts you can have a separate one."

"Do I have to remind you we share a tent much smaller than that bed?"

“You know what I mean,” Gabriel practically hissed.
Nathan shrugged and kept his silence. He watched as Gabriel removed the protective cloths draped over the sparse furniture, rising clouds of dust. After his first fit of coughing, Nathan got up and opened all the windows.

"I'm not sure we can use this bed anyway," Gabriel said, covering his mouth with a hand. "It's too dusty."

"Think Iskandra has another curse she can use to magically substitute all mattresses?"

That comment made Gabriel pause. Then he said, "Maybe we should ask Viviana. She's the one with a trick always ready up her sleeve."

Viviana had disappeared inside the fortress' garden before they could ask anything. The skeletal trees had seemed to bend towards her at her swift passage, like the branches wanted to touch her. Both boys could still see the Witch corpse emerging from the soil, the eyes opening and showing only black, the mummified skin peeling off the skull. Nathan hadn't seen Viviana since.

For the first time in his life, he contemplated the idea that he wasn't the only living Half Code.

*Half-and-Half,* she had said.

"Didn't Viviana say that she was from a Clan of Half Codes?" he wondered out loud.

"I think she said she was originally from such a Clan, so maybe it was before the Clan she was talking about at camp?" Gabriel mused. "You should ask her."

Nathan didn't say anything to that. He had waited all his life for answers about his father and mother... but he had never imagined he was anything but a freak accident. Certainly not something that could have existed before.

After a while, Gabriel added, "I think it makes sense. When you think about it, it's really impossible that there never were others like you in all the history of Witches. Doesn't the legend say that in the beginning, Blacks and Whites didn't exist? That the first two witches were sisters?"

Nathan scowled. "It's just a story. I want to know more about this Half Code Clan though."

"Me too. But I think it's best if we wait until the Alliance has decided what to do with Viviana before we look for her again. Nesbitt didn't look happy at all with our chat with her."

"Like I give a fuck about what the Alliance wants me to do," Nathan said.

Gabriel bunched the dusty cloths together and pushed them outside the room. He had no idea what the Alliance had organized to clean the rooms, if they had at all. For now they could just stay in the corridor, probably. The room was still full of dust, but he didn't know what to do about it. He went to the adjoining bathroom to have a look. Iskandra wasn't lying when she said the fortress had been sealed for more than a century; the taps were made of copper, and looked old enough to fit into a museum, together with the matching copper-lined bathtub. When he opened a tap, a muddy brown liquid sputtered out. He left it running, hoping it would clean out somewhat. At least there was running water. He wondered if it would heat. He had just decided to try it out, when he heard Nathan sneezing in the room. Gabriel peeked in to see him battling away uselessly at the dust billowing in clouds. Nathan had pulled out their covers from the packed tent and had thrown them on the mattress.

"This is a fucking bad idea, why did I even listen to you?" Nathan grumbled, and removed the covers to lay them on the balcony.
"I never forced you to choose a room, Nathan," Gabriel said, amused.

"Fuck you," Nathan said, "and stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

Nathan flustered. "That... thing! Adding my name at the end of every fucking sentence!"

Gabriel was infinitely amused at seeing him squirm. "Why, is it annoying?"

"No, it's just - just don't do it."

Nathan couldn't put his finger on what exactly bothered him about it, but he had a vague sense it had to do with the way Gabriel's voice - or was it the accent? - lilted on his name, like he was savouring it instead of just saying it.

Gabriel grinned in a way that told Nathan he had just given him a hundred reasons to do it even more.

Nathan stomped to the balcony and surveyed the scene. It had wood panels covering the parapet; as long as they slept on the floor, no one would be able to see them. Nathan, in any case, was already thinking about making some plants grow around the edges. He leant out and looked down in search of a suitable plant, but it was hard to distinguish anything in the wild undergrowth. Besides, doing that would give away exactly where he was staying.

"I'm having a look around, see where the others are staying," Gabriel said. "It won't take long, I hope."

Nathan hummed, and lighted another cigarette, still surveying the garden. He wanted to commit every detail of it - the layout, the position of the tents, the distance from the trees - in his memory.

"There's a bowl of nightsmoke right outside the door, remember to bring it in before the sun sets."

"Yes," Nathan said. His eyes followed Iskandra, who had just appeared from inside a tent. Ellen and another witch he didn't recognize were carrying Skaidrite's stretcher. Apparently she couldn't stand the presence of any White; he had heard she had fits of raging panic in their presence - Iskandra and, begrudgingly, Arran excluded. Nathan looked at them as they walked through the path in between the tangle of grass, ivy and bramble, entered the gate, disappeared inside. He wondered where they would be staying. He wondered how they had met each other. He wondered why Iskandra seemed to defend her. He wondered what Skaidrite thought of her, of Whites, of Blacks, of Half Codes.

Half-and-Halfs.

He had never thought of himself as half one and half the other. Only as not enough one, not enough the other.

It was a new, startling thought.

Being a Half Code meant violence.

Torture.

A cage.

Solitude.
What did being a Half-and-Half mean?

Viviana looked so sure of herself. She was an old, powerful witch; Nathan didn't know how old, but it was clear she was. She exuded power, and knowledge.

His mother had sought her out to be her student.

He had so many questions. About his mother, about what it meant to be a Half Code - Half-and-Half? Could he really call himself such? - about Witch history, even. Since when did he care about fucking *history*?

Would it change anything for him?

He felt a surge of blind rage at that thought. *He* wasn't the wrong one; what had to change was how hateful Whites were, how spiteful Blacks could be.

His mind spun in circles.

What was easier to change, himself, or the entire Witch society?

The Alliance was a very poor answer, made as it was by witches who could hardly get along, whose objective was to go their separate ways if they survived the war. Maybe even go back to merrily kill each other if their enemy crossed the wrong line.

But that wasn't important. If *he* survived, he was going to find a secluded spot in the mountains and woods of Wales and hide there. Forever. Alone. In peace.

...Well, maybe Arran could visit. Ellen too. Maybe even Adele. And Gabriel...

If they survived.

What if he survived, but they didn't?

Panic seized his chest and stole his breath at the thought. Arran *could not* die. Nathan wouldn't survive that. He refused to remain the only one left of his family other than Jessica. He refused to.

Did she care about Arran? Would she protect him if given the chance, if the Alliance failed, would she protect him even though he loved Nathan, always, and had helped him, always?

*You're all dead, monster!*

What if she didn't want to save him? What if she wanted to kill him as much as she wanted to kill Nathan?

Then Nathan thought of Ellen, of Adele, of Gabriel.

If the Alliance lost, they were dead. They could die tomorrow. They could die any moment.

Nathan made to pull out another cigarette, and found none. He shook the packet, but only the lighter rattled inside. He crumpled it and threw it against the wall. Then he turned, and made one step inside, and felt his stomach clench and his throat go dry.
He looked around, startled.

Evening coloured the sky in soft tones of blue and indigo, and the room looked sleepy in the low light.

And he couldn't enter, and the nightsmoke was on the other side of the door facing the corridor.

He could go to the other side, if he wanted. It would be uncomfortable, but he could... and he could avoid Gabriel finding out he had lost minutes - hours? - again. But maybe Gabriel would just find it funny.

Here was Nathan, acting like a child again. Not listening. Unable to take care of himself.

Maybe Gabriel wouldn't find it funny after all.

Nathan didn't feel like putting himself through it. He'd rather sink to the ground and lie on the covers, and wait for Gabriel's return. So that was what he did. He lowered himself down, nose and mouth full of the acrid taste of smoke, and waited, his eyes open and staring at the cracks time and weather had put into the wood panelling of the balcony.

Panic kept him company, a loyal companion coursing in the tremors in his hands, his blood, his heart.

He couldn't tell how much time had passed when Gabriel returned, bringing in the nightsmoke bowl. Not that much - it wasn't night quite yet - but still.

"I keep losing minutes," Nathan mumbled, feeling the weight of Gabriel's worry.

Gabriel knelt to his side and offered him a new pack of cigarettes. "From Ellen," he said. Then he noticed the other pack crumpled to the ground. "Did you finish the other already?"

Nathan wished he had the strength to tell him off. Instead he just closed his eyes, and didn't say anything. Gabriel stayed silent too. He carded a hand through Nathan's messy and unruly hair, taking in the tension in his body even when he was lying down. He looked just as he had those first nights in Geneva, curled up in a tight ball of terror and anxiety. Gabriel had come to call him to dinner, but it seemed like even talking would be too much right now, let alone get up and have dinner. He went inside only to come back seconds later with a kerosene lamp and a book.

He lighted the lamp, bathing the balcony in a low orange light. Nathan turned on his side to look at it, facing Gabriel. Then he sighed, and sat up to untie his boots. Then he burrowed under the covers again, lying on his back.

"What are you reading?" he asked after a while, eyes closed, listening to the pages turning.

"Le Petit Prince. The Little Prince."

"What is it about?"

"It's the story of a prince from a very small planet, who comes to Earth and meets a pilot stranded in the Sahara. It's a children's book, very famous. Have you ever heard of it?"

"No. Why a children's book? Did you like it as a kid?"

"Actually I've never read it. But it's a classic, so..."

Nathan stayed silent for a while. Gabriel turned the pages slowly. It was a fast read, but he wanted to
savour the words as much as he could. Then he noticed Nathan watching him, his eyes half-closed; watching the illustrations, especially.

"Do you want me to read it to you?" Gabriel asked, and his heart whispered, Say yes.

"What for? I wouldn't understand it. Shouldn't you save it for someone who does?"

"I save it for someone who deserves it."

Nathan stared at him.

"You do," Gabriel added, quietly, wishing he would believe him.

Nathan turned on his side. The glow from the lamp made his black eyes glitter with tiny lights.

"I think you might like it," Gabriel said, softly.

Nathan sighed. "Okay."

Gabriel tried not to beam too much. He was at the part where the Little Prince was wandering the tiny planets and meeting a geographer, describing his home to him. As Gabriel read about the geographer and his antics, Nathan's lips stretched in a small smile. "This guy is nuts," he said. Gabriel chuckled, and read on.

"Oh, where I live," said the little prince, "it is not very interesting. It is all so small. I have three volcanoes. Two volcanoes are active and the other is extinct. But one never knows."

"One never knows," said the geographer.

"I have also a flower."

"We do not record flowers," said the geographer.

"Why is that? The flower is the most beautiful thing on my planet!"

"We do not record them," said the geographer, "because they are ephemeral."

The flame inside the lamp flickered. Gabriel paused. He put the book down to adjust the wick. He realized belatedly that he had to bend over Nathan to reach the lamp. He almost dropped the book, held too lightly with a finger inside to mark the page. Nathan caught it, and added his own finger in between the pages. Their skin brushed, warm between cool paper. Gabriel lingered, savouring the touch and the exquisite tremors it entailed. Then he leaned back again, and slowly opened the book. He read out loud,

"But what does that mean-- 'ephemeral'?" repeated the little prince, who never in his life had let go of a question, once he had asked it.

"This Little Prince sounds like you," Nathan said.
"Oh? How so?"

"Stubborn. Never lets go of something once he says it."

"I don't think--"

"'We should run away, Nathan. The Alliance isn't your friend, Nathan.'"

Gabriel opened his mouth to say *Well, but that's true, and we should really run*, then didn't. Instead he said, "You had me there."

Nathan's smile turned smug. "Go on reading, Little Prince."

Gabriel felt warmth creep up his neck and ears; he hoped the low light hid it. He resumed reading.

"Is my flower in danger of speedy disappearance?"

"Certainly it is."

"My flower is ephemeral," the little prince said to himself, "and he has only four thorns to defend himself against the world. And I have left him on my planet, all alone!"

Gabriel paused. He didn't want to say it out loud, but he really felt like the Little Prince, seeing his beloved, unique flower alone against the world. No amount of weapons could defend him, no matter how deadly. A bloodthirsty knife and an array of Gifts weren't enough.

"Are you sure you haven't read this book before?" Nathan asked, smile sardonic.

"Why?"

"Seems a little too convenient how this Little Prince is just like you. Down to the one-track mind."

Gabriel's chuckled.

Nathan said, after a long pause, "I might have nightmares."

"I know."

"Don't let me hurt you."

"Nathan..."

"Promise me. You can defend yourself. I'll heal."

"I just don't think hurting each other will help anyone. And let's be honest, it's not like I had a chance last time. You're too fast for me."

Nathan thought about moving away, about sleeping elsewhere. Then he took in the soft glow of the lamp, the familiar covers strewn on the floor; the softness the low light gave to Gabriel's features, the glint of the golden tumblings in his eyes, the same as the gold shining softly in his hair. He saw his care.

Nathan closed his eyes.
"I don't want to hurt you."

"I know. But this is how things are now, and I'm fine with it. Go to sleep."

Nathan did.

And fall into a nightmare he did.

He tasted blood.

He was choking with it, with the blood Marcus called for, beckoned him to spill, whispered at him to let flow. It was everywhere, and he was drowning, his hands were slick with it and his boots' soles were sucked to the floor by it, sticky and coagulated and old and thick...

He tried to free his feet, to run run run, and he thrashed until he found himself dry heaving, desperately trying to get the smell and the taste of blood out of his mouth.

He shivered and retched until, over the roar in his ears and the burning in his throat and chest, he heard Gabriel's voice. "Nathan? Can you hear me?"

Still gasping and panting, Nathan looked up. Gabriel was close, but he wasn't trying to touch him. Nathan felt a rush of relief, fresh like water off a forest stream, and then dread when it hit him.

Was it real?

Nathan struggled to get up, the covers tangling around his feet. They were damp and cold with sweat. He could feel it, freezing like fear, clinging to his back. Gabriel tried to stop him, to touch him, and Nathan recoiled.

"Don't touch me," he wheezed. "Please, just... don't touch me."

He could feel Marcus’ disappointment crushing him down. He was pathetic. Marcus had never, not once in his life, doubted who he was or what he had been born to do, even Cora had been a fearless, unrelenting young woman who had crossed the sea to do what she thought was right, and what was he doing?

He threw the covers aside and didn't bother with his boots. He jumped over the parapet, landed on the cold grass, and ran.

He ran to the sea, to its lulling waves and to the abyss of the night sky above it. When he reached the sand he slowed down, then stopped. He looked around. The Milky Way was glinting in the sky, infinite and majestic. He looked down again as a shredded sigh escaped his lips. He looked at his bare feet, digging into the cold grey sand.

Then he turned to his left, and saw her.

A woman standing on a small rocky promontory, her short hair billowing in the gentle breeze. Arms crosses and solitude as a welcomed companion, she just stared at the distant horizon, at the sea cradling the world. She was little more than a dark silhouette under the faint light of the stars; the moon had already set.

Then she turned slowly to him, as not to startle him.

It was Viviana.
He held her gaze for quite some time, not moving, not talking, waiting for his heart to stop trying to punch a hole into his chest. Then he walked to her, slowly.

He kept at a distance, but he was close enough to see her better in the dark, to hear her if she wanted to talk.

She didn't. She looked at him, placidly, blinking slowly. Her eyes shone like the stars studding the sky. This far from civilization, from Fains and their electrical lights, the sky wasn't actually black; green and violet hues blended in, lighter and lighter around the glowing strip of the galaxy. Her eyes were the same; they shone like the stars, in a sea of colour that was dark, but not really black.

He didn't speak either, and chose instead to look out to the murmuring sea. He envied her steady presence with a burning longing that he hadn't felt in what seemed like years; but it had been only weeks.

Since Marcus had been alive and in his life.

Admiration is a double edged knife; it glitters and calls with its deadly beauty, but it cuts, too.

"Don't focus on yourself," she said quietly. He turned to her, but she wasn't watching him; she was staring out at the sea, too.

"Focus on what is around you. Focus on the Earth. Let it speak to you," she added, as she closed her eyes and tilted her face to the night sky.

Nathan thought he knew what she was talking about. It was something distant, something buried deep. Something whining to be let out, something that had been whining for so long, it had become background noise, something Nathan couldn't hear anymore.

A call, ancient.

He looked at his feet again, at the sand they were half-buried in. He curled his toes and felt it, the coldness of it, the coarse and silky texture, the dampness. He walked slowly to the tideline. The waves lapped his skin, shockingly cold, water soaking the edges of his torn jeans. In that moment, he felt almost ready to listen.

A long moment of silence passed, until he felt her eyes on him. He turned. Viviana watched him with a guarded expression. She didn't want to let her sadness show.

"It will come to you, in time."

Nathan didn't know what he was disappointed about, but it was caving his chest in. "I felt it once."

"Yes?" she encouraged him.

"I was in a trance state, to help Gabriel get his Gift back. He had lost it, you see."

She tilted her head to the side. "How can a witch lose her Gift?"

"He had transformed into a Fain so well, he couldn't access the Gift anymore."

"I see. Were you together in the trance?"

"Yes. We both felt it. A sense of being one with the Earth."

She nodded. "Half-and-Halfs, True Witches... those are names that have been used for us, but the
more accurate one is Whole Witch. We are the closest to what makes a witch something different from a Fain, to the one thing that gives us our Gift."

Nathan said, "I don't feel whole."

Viviana couldn't hide her sadness when she said, "Yes, I can see that."

They listened to the sea together for a long time. A few seals jumped out of the water and lounged on the ricks not too far away, calling each other in hoarse cries.

"So," Viviana finally said. "You and Gabriel."

Nathan grunted.

She laughed quietly. "All right. But you're the talk of town you know. Maybe you want to set the record straight with me?"

"I don't have anything to say about it. Think whatever the fuck you want."

She raised an eyebrow at him, half shocked and half amused. Finally she said, "I'm really curious about this Black witch who apparently is so loyal to you."

Nathan bristled. "Why?"

"He's a shapeshifter, yes? Least trustworthy bunch, those who have that Gift. Very skilled liars."

"Gabriel isn't like that."

"Are you sure?"

"Jessica is like that. I know the difference. Gabriel would never trick me."

"But he tricks others."

Nathan stomped to her until he was close enough to breathe her same air. She didn't stand back, she didn't even flinch. "You should try to know him before you talk about shit you don't understand."

Her smile was slow to bloom. "You're not afraid of me."

He sneered, and stepped back. "I have way more frightening things to worry about than a weird witch who claims to have known my parents."

"Why, you don't believe me? I should be offended."

"It doesn't matter if I believe you. They're both dead. There's nothing to be done anymore."

She considered this for a moment. Then she said, "I hope I can show you how I'm your ally, Nathan. Keep your friends close if you can, but no one is on your side in the Alliance's chain of command. You will find it's useful to have an ally between the higher-ups."

"You're not a higher-up. You will never be if Van opposes you."

Her smile turned threatening, showing a hint of glinting teeth. "We'll see what Victoria can do to oppose me."
When Nathan returned, it was time for breakfast. He landed in his hawk form on the balcony and changed back into himself. He heard water running in the bathroom. He opened the door to the corridor slowly, surveying the space for other people. He wasn't in the mood to deal with people. He had almost resorted to hunting something as a hawk and not have to come back to eat. Would they have to eat all together now? There was probably only one big kitchen in such a place, right? The thought soured his already bad mood. Maybe he should just pitch up a tent of his own after all, far away from the fortress.

But he was trying to be good. Good to Gabriel, at least. So he'd try and have breakfast together. He hoped he could eventually just use the kitchen on his own, when no one was around; like he did when they had been travelling with Van and Nesbitt.

When Gabriel emerged from the bathroom, Nathan asked him, "Do you think Nesbitt will be the fortress' cook?"

Gabriel laughed. "He's far too good of a fighter to be relegated to the role of cook."

He sauntered about, dressed only in a pair of faded jeans, towelling his wet hair. He had cleaned the clothes he had in his pack, which were now hanging from a makeshift hanging line by the window. He had more clothes than Nathan; a grand total of two changes. Nathan had lost his rucksack in the chaos after Białowieża, so he was reduced to what he was wearing.

Gabriel took down a t-shirt and put it on. "We should find a place where to buy you clothes. I wonder if there's any Fain city nearby. Or, not nearby. Too dangerous to be spotted I guess. We should ask Brenda."

"Think she would just open a cut for us to go shopping?"

Gabriel smiled. "I think I could convince her."

Nathan stared at him. Gabriel asked, "What is it?"

"Nothing," Nathan said. "Let's go have breakfast."

Gabriel just nodded, and they went.

There were few people milling about at such early hour; interestingly, most of them were the few Blacks still in the Alliance. With the sun over the horizon, they were all compelled to rise, to a certain extent. More than one witch followed Gabriel with their eyes, noticing his wet hair. Thin beads of water ran down his neck and disappeared under his collar. They found Adele near the kitchen, and as she greeted them, Nathan noticed her looking, too.

Good luck with that, he thought.

She noticed his meaningful stare, flushed, and scampered in to hide it.

The kitchen was mostly empty, with only a few witches scattered about. A few foragers were distributing a meagre pile of food, clipboards at hand. The cavernous room adjoined another, bigger room that functioned as dining hall, but for now the tables in the kitchen were enough for the few witches up.

"Guess we won't be having a grand meal," Gabriel said as they waited their turn.

"I should've hunted something," Nathan said.
"It's okay, Nathan," Gabriel said. "Besides, it's not like you can hunt croissants for me."


"I'm Swiss, not French," Gabriel pointed out.

"Sounds like the same thing to me."

Gabriel was going to retaliate, but they were interrupted by a scout coming to their table. She informed Gabriel that the Alliance generals wanted to speak to him immediately.

Gabriel exchanged a look with Nathan. "Sounds dire," he said, trying to joke about it. Even Nathan could see he was shaken up. When Gabriel stood up, Nathan grabbed his hand. "Are they giving you a hard time? I can come with if you want. I can throw the worst crazy fit ever and distract them from you."

"Please don't," Gabriel joked.

He almost wished Nathan hadn't seen his distress like he usually did. Nathan's care warred with his own guilt. It warmed him; he didn't deserve it at all. Not right now, probably even less in a matter of minutes. Just the time to talk with the generals, with Celia specifically.

There was no doubt in his mind this was about Celia.

Celia, Van and Greatorex were waiting in their makeshift strategy room. He didn't greet them; he just waited.

Celia said, "The transfer of all camps is complete. I must say, I haven't seen such a well-protected fortress since my days working in the Council building. The layers and complexity of the spells are remarkable."

"We're as safe as we could be. Apparently, though, Iskandra hadn't told us everything that entering this place would entail," Van said. She was smoking one of her pink-smoke cigarettes. Gabriel took care of staying well away.

"Is this what you want? To know what she did to lift the curse?" he asked.

Van exhaled a cloud of lazy smoke. "We already know. Viviana was more than happy to tell us how we have failed in protecting Nathan, and how she did so much more efficiently."

"She's not wrong," Gabriel said.

"I can see why you'd think that," Van said.

"And I can see how you don't care about it, so why am I here?"

Van smirked slightly. "Smart boy."

"Now that all camps are transferred," Celia intervened, "every Alliance prisoner is here too. Annalise is here."

Gabriel's eyebrows shoot up. "Where?"
"So that you can tell Nathan and help him kill her?" Celia asked.

"So that I can be sure he avoids that part of the fortress like the plague."

Celia seemed satisfied with his answer. She pulled a satchel from the internal pocket of her military jacket and pushed it towards him, across the table strewn with maps and papers that stood between them.

"What is that?" Gabriel asked.

"The second dose. I'm sure you noticed how the drugs don't actually affect his judgement or his undisciplined personality, so we can agree that they don't make him a puppet in our hands." She noticed, then, how he had gone very still, how he looked slightly ill. "What?"

"I'm not giving them to him."

"Gabriel, he was much better during the mission. I thought you would be pleased," Greatorex said.

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter what I think. Nathan doesn't want more. Arran is against it too."

Van crushed the cigarette in a nearby ashtray. "What is the problem?"

"The drugs prevented him from feeling anything, not just the bad things. He didn't like it."

"The potion dulls all emotions that don't fall into the primal category," Van clarified. "Fear and affection are all useful emotions even in war. Do you think I'd deprive him of that? A fearless automaton gets killed very quickly on the battlefield."

"It doesn't matter. He doesn't want them, and I'm not forcing him. I said this before---"

"We're going to tell him about Annalise. What will happen if you refuse to give him the potion?"

Gabriel stayed silent.

"Think about this very carefully, Gabriel," Celia added. "Because if you refuse your orders not only I will be forced to take measures, as one of the generals of this Alliance, but I will tell Nathan about how you knew about her and never told him. What would he think of you then?"

He expected it would come to this, he had always thought it would come to this, yet Gabriel still reeled at the threat. The thought of being undeserving of Nathan's trust was unbearable. Yet he knew, he knew what Nathan would do if he was told about Annalise.

"Why do you want to tell him? What are you going to do?"

"There will be a trial. Annalise has killed a precious ally and is suspected of having always been a spy for her uncle, Soul O'Brien," Celia said.

"Do you think Nathan would welcome it?" Greatorex asked.

Gabriel stayed silent again.

"Of course he wouldn't," Celia said impatiently. "He would want her dead, period. A trial is useless in his eyes."

"Can you blame him? What has White justice and White law ever done for him other than treating
"Enough!" Celia yelled. She took the satchel from the table and thrust it into Gabriel's chest, since he refused to simply take it. "You have your orders."

Gabriel glared at her, unmoving.

"If he acts out when he's told about all this, the consequences will fall on him, Gabriel, not the Alliance. Or, not only on the Alliance. Give him the drugs and allow us to talk him. The effect won't last."

Celia thrust the satchel harder into his chest.

Gabriel glared at them all some more.

Slowly, he curled his fingers around the fabric.

Nathan made his own porridge and sat down to eat it in the nearly-empty kitchen. Adele tried to make small talk, but she grew quickly uncomfortable with his lack of answers that amounted to more than a grunt. She resigned to a silent meal after a short while.

A little group of witches - exactly five, no visible weapons, walking with the easy step of not-warriors, Nathan noticed at once - entered the room, laughing. They collected bowls and spoons in a boisterous manner, arguing with the suppliers - calling one of them "Half Blood". They treated the other nicely, but tension was obvious in the way the supplier's smile was thin to the point of cracking. The group sat down to eat.

Then they noticed Nathan, who was pointedly not watching them.

He already knew they were Whites, he could tell. He could also tell it would be a better idea to just get up and eat elsewhere.

He stayed seated and kept eating his porridge.

One of the witches called the supplier they had just insulted. "Hey Half Blood, you're in luck. There's someone here with blood muddier than yours."

He turned to Nathan then, and said, "Hey Nathan, how was the hunt today? Have you killed anyone today yet?"

"It must be tiring to reach your daily quota everyday," another witch added.

"I haven't heard the Alliance complain about the fact I kill people," Nathan said. "Oh wait, that's because I was recruited to do it."

"Where you also recruited to eat hearts?"

Another one added, "Noo, that's something Blacks reserve for their most beloved relatives."

The group sniggered. Then one asked, "Can they, though? Love someone?"

Nathan stopped eating. He focused on not crushing the spoon in his hand. Adele turned to them and said in a bored tone, "Don't you have anything better to do? It's distasteful to ruin breakfast like this."
"It's distasteful I have to share my food with you, Black."

Adele stared at him, impassive, a single eyebrow raised in disgust. "If you find it so distasteful maybe you should go back to England and to Soul. See how good that works for you."

Nathan got up. He was leaving the half-eaten bowl behind, he didn't care. He could hear Marcus voice saying *kill them, kill them all* and he couldn't say anymore if he meant the Hunters, the Council, Whites, bad Whites, all Whites, Blacks who annoyed him, *everyone*...

"What, leaving already?" a witch asked. "Aren't you waiting for your personal slave?"

"I wish I had such a handsome face following me around everywhere I go, pining after me."

Nathan gripped the back of his chair.

"You want a Black fag following you around?"

He threw it at them, and it crashed on the side of the table, barely missing two of the group. They all jumped to their feet, first scared, then ready to draw blood. Nathan was more than ready to entertain them, but then Adele put herself in his line of vision, between him and the witches. She was careful not to touch him, nor come too close, as she said "Leave them. Just go."

Nathan glared at her, took a step forward.

"Doesn't Arran want you to keep out of trouble? Everyone heard them being asses. Don't put yourself in the wrong by attacking them."

Marcus's words were knifing through his brain, a chorus of

*kill them kill them kill them*

all blinding him like lightning in a storm. He took a shaky breath. Everything was confusion, he could only hear the words. Adele's lips were moving, but her words were coming through water, distorted, incomprehensible.

He had loved Marcus. How could he have not?

*How could he have---*

With a snarl, he turned and left.

He ran to the beach, the untainted, solitary beach. He followed the rumble of the waves, the call of the water foaming and sighing. When he stepped onto the sand, he felt his boots plunging into it, yielding first, then strong and gripping. The sound of it, the feel of it dusting the air behind his legs kicking as he ran was supposed to be a comfort. He wanted to hear the song of the seals.

He couldn't hear it. At first he was confused. It was hard too understand what was wrong through the chaos of *everything* wrong, of the voices in his head and his screams to drown them out. Then he froze. He blinked at the line painted by the sea on the sand, drawing near, then receding. He turned.
Where the seals had been, there were two witches. They, too, were frozen. They watched him. They were cautious, moving slowly as people do when they suddenly find themselves face to face with a wild animal.

*I am not a wild animal,* Nathan thought.

He looked at them, and the only thought ringing through the static descending was how many times he had been watched condemned judged sentenced to death with every hateful look.

*But I want to be,* another Nathan responded, and he needed to tear the world apart, see it break and spill blood until it drowned.

Nathan staggered in the witches' direction, once.

Then he unsheathed the Fairborn, and he didn't hesitate anymore.

The Fairborn was sure. It didn't doubt. It was just like his father had been.

Nathan abandoned himself to their guide.

He missed the calls of the seals. He wished he could hear it again.

The screams weren't as good. He had thought they could be, but---

He raised the Fairborn again, and its blade flashed in the grey light of the early morning. Wicked and beautiful, like Marcus, and Nathan felt something like relief.

Then something crashed into him, and he was tumbling into the sand, and then skidding into the water. No, not skidding. Falling into the air, violently, as fast as falling from a roof, and then not, and falling right. Down into the sea. The water was shallow and when he stood up it reached only his thighs. When he cleared his eyes from the saltwater stinging them, he saw the one responsible, standing a few metres away into the water.

Viviana.

She didn't utter a word. She didn't look afraid, or aghast at what he had just done, or disappointed at all.

She unsheathed her short sword, and raised it above her own head, and then brought it down in a glittering arc. A Challenge. She was waiting for him.

Nathan lunged. He was quick, quicker than any other witch in the Alliance, quicker than most Hunters. She parried all his attacks, a flurry of steel against steel. He dashed forward, straining in the effort to preempt her. She grabbed his arm, folded under him with the grace of a snapping fan, and threw him down into the sea again.

The cold was a shock, and fast on its heel was the realization of it not having registered before; another shock. Nathan's muscles cramped painfully, and he staggered when he emerged again, disoriented and painfully cold. Summer didn't matter to the waters of the Baltic Sea. Nathan gasped and sputtered, and shot a vicious look at Viviana.

"What do you want from me?" he screamed. The salt and anguish made his voice hoarse and desperate. It was pathetic. *He* was pathetic, he knew that well. He glared at the two witches behind
her, on the beach. Only one was visible, half-sitting on the sand, a wound open from her shoulder to
the side. It was bleeding profusely, tingeing the sand.

Nathan wished it was reddening the beach more. He took a step forward.

Viviana moved her free hand, and Nathan felt it again; the world tilting sideways, and him falling
into place in it. The water followed him, caught into Viviana's Gift, and then fell with him again.

When he broke the surface, he barely heard her words over the rush of his own raging blood, over
the desperation seeping into his freezing limbs.

"I want you to get it off your chest," she told him.

Nathan's confusion and anger found a new focusing point.

He was a strong swimmer; it only took a few strokes to reach the shallow water, closing in on her.
She didn't move; she didn't run. Nathan let his legs touch the sandy floor. He sank down enough to
gain momentum, slow and graceful.

Then they lunged.

The howl that erupted from their throats reverberated through the bay, a promise of terror and blood.
Viviana reacted on instinct, swinging her sword, but tried to stop mid-motion. She only grazed them,
but Nathan wasn't going to be merciful, and the animal saw only a useful opening. They sank their
teeth in her shoulder, tasting the blood, but she was fast, too. She rolled away, and they wounded her
only superficially before a violent force smashed into their chest. The animal yelped and rolled into
the water. Nathan was briefly aware of a split between them; his outrage and desire to hurt wasn't the
animal's. But she was a threat, she had attacked it now; and the animal would take care of it.

Viviana made her sword vanish with a flick of her wrist. Their delight was savage. No human had a
chance against them bare-handed. Would she summon a throwing knife? A gun? They circled her,
paws splashing in barely a few inches of water. They heard the bleeding witch calling, voices
answering. They didn't pay them any mind. They looked at her, unafraid and arrogant in her display
of confidence. They lunged again, fast as lightning.

The expected blow from a hidden weapon didn't come; their jaws found soft flesh, their teeth tasted
her blood, but it was brief, barely a graze. Another blow hit them, and this time they saw what it was:
a bone-crushing punch, landed in their ribs. They didn't care. They didn't wait to attack again, as
soon as their paws touched the ground. Viviana, stubbornly unarmed, was not using her Gift
anymore, only her bare hands.

Nathan didn't care. He wanted blood, he wanted to see the world bleed, he wanted to feel nothing
but the roar in his veins.

The animal slammed into Viviana and crushed her to the ground. This time she had no choice; she
unsheathed a blade and wedged it in between the animal's teeth. The animal snarled, a reddish foam
dripping at his snout as he tried to bite around the metal.

"Nathan, stop it! You're hurting yourself!"

The animal tried to scratch her, to tear her apart with his razor-like claws, but she kept him just out of
reach by extending her arms and locking them into place. She rolled to the side, throwing the animal
into the water again. She slammed the hilt of her sword into its side, and the animal snarled in
response. Nathan felt the healing kicking in almost instantly, the rush of adrenaline like a high. Blood
made their tongue taste like rust, blood soaked Viviana's shirt over her shoulder and arm, blood
swirled into the freezing water, crowned with pinkish foam. Nathan took it all in, letting the animal loose. He didn't try to rein it in, he didn't try to stop it from hurting himself. He relished in it. He focused on the sensation of Viviana's blows, the freezing water and the burning coals of his own wounds. Then Viviana grabbed them by the throat, and plunged them into the water. They struggled and tried to bite and to scratch, but she was using her Gift again, to press them against the sand.

They were drowning.

That was not Nathan wanted, that was not what he needed, how things were supposed to go. They struggled as violently as they could, raising a cloud of salty water and foam, but Viviana didn't let go. Nathan wriggled one last time before he turned back into himself, trapped again in his pathetic human flesh. He felt it like a blow much harder, much more terrible than the ones Viviana had dealt. The loathing, the disgust that choked him more than the water could, more freezing and deadly than the sea. The desire, the need, to not be Nathan, to be something other than himself, trapped in his scarred and mauled skin, finally crumbled his desire to fight. He was left a pile of bones, just a few strings of meat keeping them together, peeling away fast. He blindly unsheathed a knife and struck, but the blow was easy to intercept for Viviana. She knocked it out of his hand. He kept struggling, but it was pretence, a way to feel better about himself, to feel not so yielding. Viviana tried to both restrain him and get his face out of the water, worried about the way he was sputtering.

"Nathan, Nathan breathe."

Then someone slammed into her, screaming, "Get away from him!"

Viviana didn't fight it, she scrambled away with her hands held up. "I tried not to hurt him, Arran. I swear."

Nathan sat up, throat and lungs burning as he coughed up salt water. A horrible realization sank in, and he tried to talk, to tell him, but he only managed a sick wheeze. Arran was there in an instant, his arms holding Nathan up, and in that moment Nathan hated him as much as he ever loved him; he was crumbling, and Arran's embrace made him crumble even faster. He fought the wave of emotion threatening to pull him down, like a giant monster of the abyss pulling him down to his death. He struggled against Arran, screaming in frustration, but his voice was a scraped out, hollow thing. He landed a blow and his brother's wheeze of pain burned him from the inside out. Another pair of hands joined the struggle to calm him down. Adele's voice was remarkably calm when she told him to stop fighting them.

"The knife, Gabriel's knife, she made me lose it, where is it?" Nathan screamed hoarsely. "Where is it? Where is it?" he repeated, as he dug his fingers into the muddy sand.

"Nathan, it doesn't matter right now, are you hurt?" Arran asked, voice strained. "Nathan, please listen to me," he added, and took his face into his hands, forcing him to make eye contact.

Nathan realized his voice wasn't just strained; it was broken. A glass hit by something heavy developing spidery cracks, growing by the second. At breaking point.

Viviana stepped closer, so cautious and slow now. She gingerly extended a hand, Gabriel's butterfly knife held in her palm. "Do you mean this?"

Nathan's hand darted out to catch it, and in that moment he felt Arran's scared intake of breath like a final blow. He froze with his hand halfway to the sheath, listening to Arran wrestling his breath under control again; but Nathan could feel his heart rabbiting underneath the skin.

Nathan stared, unseeing, finally still, listening.
"Nathan?" Viviana asked. He realized, then, that he had been staring at her face. He could see it now, her expression. She was worried for him.

He stifled the urge to laugh hysterically. He could feel the blood still pooling in his mouth. He spat it out, summoning his healing again. Arran asked him to open his mouth, to let him check for wounds, but Nathan wrenched his face away. He gripped Gabriel's knife harder, until his knuckles were white, keeping it close to his chest.

"Better now?" Viviana asked.

Nathan looked towards the beach, not so far away now. The witch who had been bleeding was still there, the red-stained sand a stark contrast to the bleak grey of the sand. She was surrounded by other people; the other witch, the one who had been on the beach before, was crying next to them. Then Celia emerged from the woods. Gabriel wasn't far behind.

Nathan would've liked to have a pretty story to tell; of how he had gone as still and unbending as steel at her sight. Instead he flinched harder than he used to do when Jessica had just started to hit him, back when being hit was still a novelty - another thing to loathe about himself. Arran turned at that, and saw her.

"I need you to tell me now," he whispered frantically, "why did you attack those two witches? What did they do to you?"

Nathan felt like he was old, way too old and tired of his life and everything else for a seventeen-year old. He felt the last sparks of fight leech out of him, like fluids from a snail that cruel kids buried with salt.

"I don't know," he answered, very quietly.

Arran stared at him, uncomprehending. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

"They didn't do anything. I felt like it."

Arran's silence was heavy and absolute. But when he saw Celia stepping onto the sand, when he heard her calling, "Nathan!" in her imperious voice, he steeled himself. He helped Nathan up, whispering gentle, trembling encouragements. Adele stayed right at their side, close enough to help if needed. Nathan felt close to unconsciousness with exhaustion, but also wired with enough energy to explode like lightning if Celia even thought of using her Gift on him. Or if she talked to him. If anyone looked at him, really.

Viviana preceded them, sword drawn again.

Celia glowered at them and said, "What the bloody hell d---"

Fast as a viper's strike, Viviana's sword was pointed at her throat. "Not now," she said. The witch who had been crying before scrambled to her feet and lunged at them, screaming insults. Gabriel managed to intercept her before she could reach Nathan, but he was having a hard time restraining her without hurting her. She scratched at him as she dissolved into hysterical tears again, sobbing, "Why are you defending him? Why did he do it? Why?"

The witch who had been wounded was sitting now, helped by one of the Alliance's healers. Looking at her, Nathan realized for the first time how young they both were. They were whets. The healer was furious when he saw Arran helping his brother, arms embracing and sustaining him. "Arran, she needs your help!" he said.
Arran didn't hesitate when he said, "He needs me more."

Before the healer could voice his outrage, Celia intervened. "What he needs is not to be coddled. You must realize he's a danger to everyone. He's not your little brother anymore, a little boy in need of a hug."

Arran didn't grace her with a response.

Nathan gripped Gabriel's knife even harder, until he felt the hilt digging into his sternum. He looked up only once, to meet Gabriel's eyes. Gabriel was pulled in instantly, like a falling star into a planet's atmosphere. He stood in front of him, shielding him from everyone else. He gently took the hand that was holding the knife into his, and guided it to the sheath.

They started for the fortress. When Celia called after them, Viviana wordlessly pressed the tip of her sword harder into her neck.

When they were closer to the Alliance's grounds, it became obvious that news of the incident had spread like fire into dessicated grass. The whole building was buzzing with curiosity, worry, hate. It would be impossible to pass through when it was obvious they were helping Nathan, and not, say, dragging him in chains.

Dread filled Arran when he asked, "Where should we go now?"

"Let me handle it," Gabriel said, and he turned into Celia.

By mere virtue of her stone-faced authority, no one questioned them when they entered the fortress. Gabriel simply strode inside, and as they followed, everyone assumed Nathan was going to be taken care of. No one even whispered at their passage – much. For good measure, Adele made sure to glower around while holding her gun loosely against her side. They ascended set after set of stairs, until they reached a corner of a floor strangely empty, considering the desperate need for space of the Alliance's civilians. All the windows and doors were shut; dust motes and veils of thick cobwebs fluttered in the air.

Arran murmured to Gabriel, "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

Gabriel shrugged, turning into himself again. "I'm pretty sure she tolerates only three people, and Nathan is one of them."

Arran looked still dubious, but he followed him to the door at the end of the short corridor anyway. Adele almost asked who they were talking about, but she didn't want to disturb the eerie silence. To fight the unease growing in her, she thought of Ellen. She would throw a fit when Adele told her everything that had happened in her absence; she'd bemoan missing an 'adventure', as she would call it.

Gabriel knocked gently.

A long silence followed.

Then, a rustling, as of heavy fabric dragging on the floor.

Silence again. Finally, the noise of a latch slowly opening, rusty with distrust and hesitation. Through the sliver of an opening, a dark brown eye peered at them. Nathan saw emerald tumblings into it.

"Skайдrite," Gabriel said, "can we please get in?"
She kept her eye trained on Nathan and didn't speak. Gabriel tried again, tried to explain to her the situation. She didn't seem to listen at all; she said something incomprehensible but definitely rude, making a cutting gesture.

She closed the door again. The clanking of numerous latches coming undone echoed in the empty corridor. The door opened. Skaidrite, uncaring of the summer warmth, was wrapped into a long dress of heavy wool, a shawl and a headscarf; a dark braid snaked down her shoulder. She looked at them all with the utmost contempt, like they were very unwelcome guests she couldn't turn away. She left the door open and motioned for them to come in.

The room was actually a small library. Several rows of antique-looking books lined the walls, most of them either falling apart or eaten by moths; in front of them, numerous tables were covered in trinkets of all kinds: a phonograph, an orrery, an antique radio, a celestial sphere with slowly revolving rings, and more things besides. The brass shone and glinted, polished to perfection. Every other surface, from the floor to the armchairs arranged in front of an empty fireplace, was covered in dust.

Gabriel attempted to explain again, to at least thank her, but she kept ignoring him. Her eyes were trained on Nathan. He still remembered her as the trembling, traumatized girl, delirious with pain. She looked anything but trembling now, but she walked with care, her back hunched.

She said something in Latvian and pointed at the dusty chaise longue with torn upholstery. Arran guided his brother to it and sat him down. Nathan didn't want to talk, he didn't even want to think. He sat down, and watched the floor. He was so tired, everything came at him as though he was at the bottom of the sea, everything muffled by water.

Skaidrite grabbed a pillow from an armchair and gave it to Arran, who said, "I think it's okay if you give it to him yours--- yes well, you don't understand me."

She arched an eyebrow at him. Then she went to her trinkets. She touched the phonograph, and it started to play. The notes of *Night On Bare Mountain* resonated softly through the grainy underscore typical of the old technology. She brushed the celestial sphere with a finger, and the circles started to spin slowly. The astronomical enumerations carved into the brass glowed with a low light after her touch.

"I think it's best if I talk to Greatorex before this really blows out of proportion," Adele said.

*What is there to blow out of proportion?* Gabriel bit down. *Everything went exactly as Celia and Van thought. The only thing missing is Annalise with her throat slashed open.*

Nobody answered. Adele nodded at Arran, and left.

A heavy silence fell. It weighted on Nathan; he heard acutely the absence of Gabriel's words, usually so freely given, bubbling up in a crystal-clear spill. He watched him out of the corner of an eye; saw him exchange a long look with Arran. He felt the familiar stir of unthinking instincts, glowing like dying embers under layers and layers of ashes. He was beyond exhaustion, and yet the thought of someone finding a secluded corner to talk about *what to do with him* was enough to send his mind spinning. He closed his eyes and wound his arms tighter around himself. If only he could stop thinking.

"Nathan."

Skaidrite called him, careful not to startle him. She draped her shawl on him. It was long enough to
wrap most of his upper body. He buried his hands and face in it, and waited.

Gabriel exhaled a shuddering breath. It punched Nathan like the sound of gunfire.

"Nathan?" Gabriel asked.

"Yes?"

"Can we talk?"

"...Where."

Gabriel met Skaidrite's heavy gaze. She held it, unashamed of being caught staring. Then she carefully made her way to a tiny door to the side of the library, and disappeared.

"Could you leave us alone, Arran?"

"Gabriel, I don't think---" Arran started to protest.

Gabriel interrupted him with, "Please."

Arran looked at his brother. Nathan kept staring at the floor. Lifting his head would have been too much effort, even for Arran.

"I'm going to wait in the corridor," Arran finally said, and left.

The sound of a door closing. From the adjoining room, the quiet clanking of a tea kettle put on a stove, cups clinking, a jar popping open.

"Why did you attack those whets?"

So they really were whets, Nathan thought. "No reason," he answered, voice barely audible.

"I don't believe you. I don't want to believe you. Tell me the---"

Tell me the truth, Gabriel tried to say, but the words died in his throat.

Nathan tried to shrug; found he couldn't. "I was mad. I wasn't thinking."

Gabriel made a shuddering, disbelieving sound. Nathan looked up then. What he saw was the dread in his face; and then, the distance he was keeping.

"Why are you that far?" Nathan asked lowly. "Are you afraid of me?"

Gabriel stayed silent for a long moment. Then he said, "Yes, Nathan. I'm afraid of you, and I'm scared for you. I'm scared you won't get better, and that the Alliance will make it worse. They will make it worse," he added, getting more frantic with every word. The panic that had seized him since his talk with the generals had settled into his bones, flaring to suffocation point when he had been told, Nathan tried to kill a child. "Do you even regret what you did? Do you see now how staying with the Alliance is the wrong choice? I told you before, leaving is---"

"I don't remember it very well," Nathan interrupted him. "What happened. It's blurry... confused."

"That," Gabriel said, "does not make it better."

"What do you want me to say? That I'm sorry? It won't help that girl to heal faster."
"What are you trying to prove? That you can be the same as Marcus?"

Nathan went, if possible, more still than before.

"Why? You're not your father, Nathan, it's good you're not!"

My father was free, Nathan thought, And I am not.

"Nathan, please..."

The kettle whistled. In the silence, they heard the sound of water being poured, of the cups and spoons arranged on a tray. Then they heard them rattle. Gabriel went to the room. He needed a break. He found Skaidrite half hunched on a small counter, her trembling hands gripping the tray's handles.

"It's okay, I have this," Gabriel said, taking it from her. He noticed another door, slightly open, and a bedroom beyond it. "Could you please leave us?" he asked, glancing to the room and hoping it was enough to make her understand. She scowled and muttered, but went all the same.

Gabriel put the tray on one of the tables, on a tiny space not covered by trinkets. The phonograph stopped playing as he brought a cup to Nathan. Gabriel procrastinated by moving an armchair closer to the chaise longue and sitting down, then blowing on his tea. Nathan was in no rush to start talking again. He sipped his tea.

"Do you still want to stay?" Gabriel asked, carefully controlling his voice.

"I have to."

The tea was bitter without sugar, but fetching it felt like too much effort. Gabriel saw him grimace when he took another sip, and brought him the sugar dispenser. Nathan dumped some in. His hands had started to tremble, and half of it fell on the floor. He gripped the cup with both hands to hide it, and took a big gulp of tea. It was scalding.

Gabriel sighed at his predictable, stubborn answer. He raked a hand through his own hair. "Will you please tell me why you attacked those whets now?"

"I wanted the beach to be empty. Or to find Viviana there, I don't know. I did before. Last night. I was there, and it was... calm. Peaceful." The words were coming in fits and starts. Nathan drank again. "Instead I found those two whets, and I was... mad. I was already mad. I remembered..."

"Yes?" Gabriel prompted him.

"Toro. Wolfgang's friend. Remember?"

"The one Marcus killed only because he was annoying him?"

Nathan hesitated a long time before saying, "My father could kill anyone, easy. He didn't have anyone to fear. He wouldn't be sick as I am. The war would be as good as won if he were alive."

"That's not true."

"That's it? Nothing to say about me wanting to be a sociopathic serial killer?"

"I think you know, deep down, that you don't have it in you to be one. That's why you're sick."

Nathan stared at the bottom of his cup, half empty by then. "I have to do what my father said when
he gave me his Gifts. He died for me. I have to kill Soul, and his Hunters. But when I think about it, I see this never-ending line of Hunters to kill, and I feel sick. But then I think of Annalise and I want to kill again..." he trailed off. The thought of Annalise was like black tar coating his soul; it never failed to make his mind spiral down into the abyss.

Yet he felt nothing uttering her name. He tried to conjure her fair face, the blond hair and perfect skin, the beauty that never failed to disgust him. The image was there; the disgust wasn't.

Nathan put his cup down to the floor. "What did you give me?" he asked.

Gabriel steeled himself. "Van's drugs."

Nathan tried to find his outrage, and came up blank. "I had asked you not to give them to me."

"You told me not to give them to you if you asked," Gabriel pointed out.

_He's a shapeshifter, yes? Least trustworthy bunch, those who have that Gift. Very skilled liars._

Nathan really, really wanted to remember that line. Later. When he could let it burn him through and through with fury.

"I will be very mad when they wear off."

Gabriel let out a small, bitter laugh. "What else is new? You're mad all the time anyway."

"I'll be mad at you, specifically."

"Again, what else is new? I know you're tired, but I'm tired too. I'm tired of being backed into a corner and I'm tired of you running away from this."

"What are you talking about?"

Gabriel put down his cup, almost untouched. If he tried to drink even a sip more he'd vomit. "There will be a trial. You're expected to participate as a witness. I hope you won't be tried yourself, but... Well. At the very least someone will ask for it."

"A trial? Of who?"

Gabriel held his gaze as he said, "Annalise. She's been a prisoner of the Alliance all along."
Hi! I'm making a note here about the chapter. I was actually thinking of NOT publishing this chapter because I'm not sure about how the last 2 parts turned out. But then I thought 1) WHAT THE HELL I made my readers wait enough, 2) WHAT THE HELL it's fanfiction. Who cares. So: I think there is an issue with how action is paced in the last two parts. If you drop by and tell me what you think about it, I'd appreciate it. Don't worry about my delicate feelings (I don't have any).

A trial.

Gabriel gazed at him, grim and determined.

"Annalise."

Annalise.

Nathan mouthed the name, blood as thick as molasses stuffing his mouth.

"She's been a prisoner of the Alliance all along."

All along.

Nathan had killed tens of Hunters in search of her.

"I know. They were more scared of what you'd do to her than you making a mistake and being captured, or worse." A pause. "I told you they don't care."

Nathan scowled. He had voiced his thoughts out loud again. The disconnect between reality and his emotions was back. He couldn't react to this. He couldn't understand this. The word trial rang and echoed, like the ghost of sound ricocheting in the belly of a church bell, ominous and distant.

"A trial. A public trial?" he asked.

"I... think so?"

"A trial. Public. With Whites and Blacks attending, and judging. You can't want me to go through that."

Nathan couldn't find his loathing for Annalise nor his hatred, but fear was always his trusted companion.

Gabriel's brows furrowed in worry, but the set of his jaw was sure. "It's unavoidable."

The Alliance had to bring together Whites and Blacks. What little cooperation there had been was in tatters after Białowieża, after what Nathan and Annalise did. Blacks considered her a traitor, called for her gruesome, exemplary death as a sign that the Whites of the Alliance were truly committed to the cause. But Blacks were few, their demands drowned out by Whites seeing Annalise as a tragic...
symbol of their own divided loyalties and families; and they saw Nathan as the typical Black savage. But Blacks were also more powerful, and more and more eager to make a stand. A violent one, as is typical Black fashion after all. A fair, public trial could defuse the situation. In fact it was the only solution left that didn't involve the purging of one side or the other.

Gabriel understood all this. He also did not care.

Maybe now Nathan could understand. It was Gabriel's last chance – a treacherous one, laden with the prickly thorns of guilt, but his last chance all the same.

“If the trial becomes about you, if they accuse you of something – hell, if they don't condemn Annalise, even – we'll just go. Go away and not look back.”

Nathan stared at him for a long moment. His eyes were devoid of the usual mad rage, but Gabriel felt a cold shiver snaking down his spine, because they weren't empty at all. They were filled to the brim with terror.

“Did you forget?” Nathan asked quietly. He rubbed his right wrist, feeling the ruined skin rising in uneven, acid-born ridges. “Did you forget what they did to me? The cage, the shackles... the collar?”

“Nathan...”

“Never.”

“You have to give it a chance. Maybe they won't try you at all. And they won't imprison you either.”

“Maybe' isn't enough.”

Gabriel stepped closer and grabbed his arms. “You told me you want to stay in the Alliance. I sure don't see why you should put yourself in danger for these people, but if that's what you want, if you want to keep fighting... This is the only way.”

“They don't get to judge me after everything they---”

“What about Arran?”

Nathan's words died in his throat, his mouth hanging open and useless.

“You know he's going to stay with the Alliance,” Gabriel pressed on. “He can do good here, heal people. He won't leave, even if it means you leave him behind.”

Nathan heard the familiar whisper of Jessica's threats, but they were a lurking shadow, down in the well of his muddled mind.

When he had watched that video on Ellen's phone, when he had left England, he had been ready to never see his brother and sister again. It had been the most painful decision of his life, his heart shredding in a way that could never really heal, worse than any acid burn or needle carving the skin.

Then he got back Arran in the same breath he lost Debs forever.

He could not do that again. If he left the Alliance...

And the only way to stay was through the trial.

Nathan took a step back, shoving Gabriel's hands aside. “Are these their conditions?”
“What do you mean?” Gabriel asked, and Nathan didn't miss the stiffness of his words.

“Is this what they told you to say? Did they also tell you to drug me?” Nathan asked, completely calm. He didn't wait for his answer. He ran for the door, throwing it open. The solid wood banged and rattled on the stone wall, startling Skaidrite and Arran into emerging from their respective corners. Nathan heard her chattering in Latvian, Arran's worried jumbles of words. He ignored them. He tried to summon his healing, to make the drugs go away, but he couldn't reach it, couldn't grasp it – like fish swimming right under transparent shallow waters, darting away in a flash, his fingers barely touching cold scales.

Gabriel watched him go, watched his retreating back.

Again.

Time and time again.

He flung himself after him, gripped the frame of the open door, fingers digging into the wood until his nails hurt.

He didn't call.

He stared into the dark corridor for a long moment, Nathan's form vanishing into the gloom like a ghost, and just as evanescent. The wave of rage mixed with guilt was furious enough to level mountains and shred Gabriel into pieces.

He was startled to the present when he heard a faint scratching behind him. Skaidrite stared at him, impassible, propped up with one hand on the table. The phonograph on the other side played the first notes of Verdi's *Dies Irae*. Only then did Gabriel notice Arran angrily demanding explanations right in front of him.

Gabriel shoved him away, closing Skaidrite's door behind himself. The song died.

“Gabriel, answer me,” Arran said.

“I don't want to talk about it,” Gabriel said, as low as he could manage, to hide the tremor in his voice.

“You can't just---”

“I'm tired Arran! Okay?” he yelled. “I'm tired of trying to fix this mess!”

Arran stared at him in silence. It felt good to yell at *someone*, to not try so hard to do the right, perfect, conscientious thing. Gabriel buried that thought as deep as he could, and exhaled a shuddering breath.

“Don't worry, I'm sure Nathan will tell you everything you want to know soon enough. And since he'll scream it all at me in a few hours, you'll have to excuse me.”

It was all he could do not to run to his room. Arran didn't utter a word.

Gabriel paced their room. He was consumed with dread at the thought of Nathan coming back, and of Nathan not being back yet, out there doing who knew what to work through the rage. Was he running? Hunting? Searching for Hunters to kill? What if this time, what if *this time* was the time he
got killed, or worse, captured? Gabriel would not forgive himself if it happened. When he had
thought Nathan was dead, Gabriel had not planned on surviving him – and he had done everything
in his power to save Nathan, however little that had been. Nathan dying after this was... unthinkable.

When Nathan did come back, Gabriel was still waiting in their room. It was both too soon and so
unbearably late, a relief wrapped in barbed wire.

Nathan was livid.

Gabriel read it in the tense line of his back and shoulders, in the way he was gripping the door's
handle, in the frozen stiffness of his entire body, standing in the doorway. He remembered, briefly, of
another time in Geneva, when they were still strangers and Nathan had lashed out on him. And
Gabriel had let him.

He did not expect the defeat in Nathan's tone when he said, “I had asked you not to give me those
drugs.”

Gabriel straightened. “You need them. You're not yourself.”

“I trusted you!” Nathan exploded. He was shaking as he added, “How could you do this to me? You
let Celia control me again, Gabriel! Celia!”

“What am I supposed to do? Watch as you kill yourself?” Gabriel said, his voice rising higher and
higher as his long-simmering panic seeped through. “I'm sick of watching your back as you run
away to do something suicidally dangerous! I can't take it anymore!”

“And so you go to Celia and Van and serve me on a silver platter? What the fuck Gabriel? You
made me sick with telling me not to trust them! Was it so you could go to them?”

“I did not choose to do this, can't you see? They forced me to!”

“Fuck that! You wanted to!” Nathan said, jabbing his finger into Gabriel's chest. “Did you like it,
Gabriel? Did you feel so fucking smart when I just drank the tea like the idiot I am?”

The shame burned worse than the betrayal when Nathan remembered that moment – Gabriel slipping
out of sight, taking the tray from Skaidrite, bringing it to the coffee table. How fucking stupid Nathan
had been, drinking it like the fucking idiot he had always been! What did Gabriel think when he just
took the cup without thinking twice about it? Did he gloat? Did he think Fuck, I can't believe he's
really this stupid?

Gabriel grabbed his hand and shoved it away. “No, I did not like it, and no I don't like them and
being used like this, but at a certain point someone has to keep you alive, because you sure as fuck
are not doing it! You need help, don't you see it?”

Nathan grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket and shoved him into the wall. “I need help?” he
hissed. Then he grinned savagely and snarled, “Damn right I need help!”

Gabriel scowled fiercely at him. “Don't play the monster with me. I don't believe your act for a sec--
--”

“Whose fault is it I am like this?” Nathan asked, voice shaved raw and brimming with the tears he
wouldn't let well up in his eyes. “Do you think it's my fault? Do you think I was born like this too,
do you---”

“No! No, Nathan, it's not---”
“Then why did you help them?” Nathan finally screamed in his face.

Gabriel's answer was as loud, “I'm trying to help you!”

“Help me? You lied to me! I've spent days looking for her” - Nathan's expression twisted with hate and loathing as he spat out that word - “looking for Hunters who could tell me where she was, and you let me! When she had been here all along, right under my nose! Did you and Celia and Van laugh about it, about how stupid and blind I was?”

Gabriel grabbed his shoulders. He knew it was useless to explain how he had known about Annalise only for a few days, so he said, “I tried to stop you, I tried everything I could think of, but you don't listen! You can't! You can't stop the nightmares, you can't stop the terrors, you can't stop looking for people to kill, in some – some sick attempt to prove you don't feel anything like that sociopath of your father! You tried to kill two children, Nathan!”

Nathan had thought Clay's blows had been the most cruel, most violent he had ever been dealt.

He had been wrong.

He reeled with the sheer intensity of the feeling, of the injustice... He had been a child. He had.

Nobody had cared.

Nobody had said, But he's just child. Nobody had seen anything but an animal, something barely looking like a person, in him.

And now here he was, gripping between his hands someone who'd rather help them over him.

Nathan spat in Gabriel's face.

Gabriel froze, eyes pinched shut instinctively. When he opened them, slowly, he pinned Nathan with an icy stare. Nathan let his hands drop from Gabriel's lapels, the fury still burning hot, but ice forming in his stomach.

“I don't---” he tried to say, but his hoarse voice failed him. “I don't kill children,” he tried again.

But his mind was already supplying all those images of Hunters he had ripped to shreds, stabbed in the back, slashed open until the entrails had spilled on the ground. Some had been seasoned warriors. But most of them had been young, inexperienced; recruits the Alliance was cutting down before they could become a threat...

Recruits he had cut down.

He shoved himself away from Gabriel.

Gabriel was still staring at him, unblinking. The spit seemed congealed on his skin. Then, it started to roll down his cheek, a thin trail as slow as molasses. He furiously wiped it away, the movement lightning-fast. It startled Nathan like a slap, like the clapping of the hunter's rifle spooking the birds into flight.

He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to do. His fury froze under Gabriel's barely-contained outrage; then it growled and roared at being put down so easily, so unjustly.

So Nathan did the only thing they both knew he was good for.

He turned and ran.
Ellen was patrolling the farthest reaches of Kolkasrags, along the border of the cursed trees. Viviana walked with her, an amused smile ghosting her lips. Ellen had been a fountain of questions ever since she had asked for 'protection from the murder trees'.

“Do you know why the forest is cursed?” Ellen asked, all enthusiasm and eagerness.

Viviana enjoyed it immensely. “Oh, Ellen, I really don't know if I should tell you... It's a secret of Iskandra's clan...”

“Iskandra is from a Clan? But she's White! Please tell me everything?” Ellen begged, just as readily as Viviana wanted.

“Well, if you insist. I told you how clans used to be pretty large covenants of Witches, right?”

The girl nodded. Her eyes shone with curiosity.

“Clans were not based on blood ties, for the most part. What mattered the most was allegiance, loyalty to a way of life and a way of exercising magic. A big part of that was preserving Gifts.”

“Preserving? What does that mean?”

“As you know, Gifts are only partially genetic. Not every Whet inherits a parent's Gift, and even then, it's not always the strongest one that gets passed down. Nobody ever figured out a fool-proof way to pass down a Gift through blood. Yet, clans were based on the assumption that their own leaders were not only wise and knowledgeable in the Clan's traditions and stories, but also the ones to pass down the Clan's defining Gifts. Every Clan had those; talents that were studied and cultivated for centuries.”

Viviana paused, and raised an eyebrow at her. “Can you figure out how they did that?”

Ellen felt a chill run down her spine. “Did they eat their relatives' hearts?”

“No. They would feel spooked, even terrified, and strongly compelled to leave. A witch, on the other
hand, might get attacked by the curse.”

“Really? Just like that? A witch could be talking a stroll here by complete chance and be attacked?”

“I can’t rule that possibility out. I lifted one layer of the spell here, but I can’t really control it. I just became its new focus. The curse will now attack any witch the original curse-maker might deem a threat. As for what constitutes a threat, however…” Viviana said, staring into Ellen's eyes as she lowered her voice, “Who can really say how the dead think?”

Ellen giggled. “You really like telling stories, don't you?”

“That I do. I am a creature of little more than memories, after all.”

Ellen fidgeted, not knowing what to say. “Uhm... Well---”

Viviana grabbed her shoulder and shoved the girl behind herself. Ellen mouthed, What?, eyes already scanning their surroundings. Viviana stared into the trees, silent and motionless.

A shadow stumbled through the trees, half-running, half-tripping towards them. Ellen heard it, before she saw it clearly. Her fingers twitched on the grip of her gun, but she paused when Viviana remained still. The shadow was close. Closer now, so close Ellen could have shot it down with ease, why wasn't Viviana doing anything? Did she know who it was...?

The woman emerged from the woods. She was breathing heavily, so much so she sounded sick. Covered in sweat, she startled like all the Council's Hunters were looking at her when she finally saw them. She paused, her mouth hung open, as though waking from a nightmare, as though witnessing a miracle. She stumbled towards them once. Then she tried to scream, but her throat was so raw and hoarse with fatigue and thirst, her words were little more than hisses. Still she ran to them, and Ellen could make out her pleas, her desperate “You have to help them, please my children, my children!”

The curse surged.

Inhuman wails slashed the air as the trees ripped through her. Her final scream was just as hoarse as before, almost inaudible. When the branches retracted, when the trees stood upright again, she fell to the leaves-strewn ground. Ellen ran to her, every thought about her own gun forgotten.

"What children? Who are you talking about?” she asked. Her hands stilled even before she could try to help, to stop the bleeding. The woman's chest and abdomen were a red, shredded mass. Ellen knew that she was going to hear her voiceless, gurgling sobs of pain in her nightmares for years to come.

Viviana knelt to the woman's other side. She put a hand on her forehead and calmly asked her, "What's your name?"

The woman's sobs quieted, the pain removed for a fleeting moment of peace before the inevitable darkness. "Isolde. Please, please you're with the Alliance, aren't you? You help those the Council wants to kill, don't you?" The woman renewed her sobs, but for an entirely different reason. "Please... please don't leave my children to them, you have to--- you have to---"

The woman grabbed at her bleeding abdomen, and screamed. Ellen fought hard her nausea, and gripped one of her hands.

"What happened to your children?” Viviana asked.

"The Hunters captured them! You can't let them, you want to help them, right? Do you know what
they do to Black children? Do you?" the woman screamed, higher and higher, until her hysterical, hoarse voice reached a fever pitch. "Do you know what they will do to them please, oh please!"

A shadow fell on Ellen, and she almost jumped out of her skin when Nathan appeared right beside her.

"Where," he said, and his voice sent a chill down Ellen's spine. It was dark, twisted. It was so unlike the Nathan she knew.

"Before I escaped, I heard them talking... they were going to Danzig..."

Ellen noticed the knife in Nathan's hand only when he slipped it into the woman's ribcage. Silently. Deftly. He didn't even have to watch what he was doing. Ellen's breath stopped. Viviana slowly took the woman's hands, and crossed them on her mangled chest.

Nathan stood, wiped the knife on his already soot-stained jeans. It was silent, gravely so, for a second or a hundred. Ellen sat, and hung her head, breathing heavily. Viviana stood, too. She and Nathan stared at each other.

A silent understanding passed between them. Satisfied that no words were necessary, Nathan looked to Ellen. Her hands, stained with blood, were hanging above her knees, carefully not touching the rest of her body.

"Ellen," he said, "go back to Kolkasrags. Let the patrols find the body, don't tell anyone."

"What?" she asked, dazed.

"You heard me," he cut her off.

Ellen looked into his face, then Viviana's, as calm as though a woman had not just been torn to shreds in front of their eyes. "Wait. Wait a second."

Nathan ignored her and asked Viviana if she knew where Danzig was, how long it would take to reach it.

Ellen bristled. "Hold the fuck up."

They both turned to her, staring her down. Their combined, cold gaze was so uncanny, Ellen was almost tempted to shut up. "A cursed forest just ripped a woman to shreds, aren't we going to discuss this?"

Nathan sheathed his knife, and didn't speak.

"Viviana," Ellen pushed on, "isn't this curse supposed to protect us? If it attacked her, doesn't this mean she's a threat? What if it's a trap?"

"As I told you, it's hard to say how the dead reason. It's entirely possible that her information is a trap, but it's also possible that the cursed witch saw her as a threat. Maybe because of whatever her Gift was, maybe because she was asking to do something dangerous... The possibilities are many," Viviana mused. "But we know one thing," she said, and let it hang in the air, heavy and binding like irons and chains.

"I'm going," Nathan said. "I don't care if it's a trap. More Hunters dead if it is, so either way I---" he hesitated, then said with a teeth-filled grin, "I'll have my fun."
Ellen took a deep, trembling breath. Then she stood up. "I'm coming with."

The grin fell from his face. "What? No. Go back."

"Why did you tell me to keep mum on this?" Ellen countered, dread battling with excitement in the churning sea of her ever-changing eyes.

Nathan glared at her.

"You don't want the Alliance to send an entire squadron after you, because you know. They would focus on dragging you back kicking and screaming, not on saving lives."

Viviana sighed. "The Alliance is pathetically lacking in that department."

"But well, see, Nathan," Ellen continued, "I should report. Like, really report. I could get into serious trouble if I didn't report this. But... I can't report anything if you bring me along."

In spite of himself – of how close he was to snap – Nathan smirked. "That makes no fucking sense, Ellen."

Ellen breathed deeply through her mouth – a useless effort; the stench of blood had seeped through her pores, sticking under her skin. The image of the woman being torn to shreds was seared on the inside of her eyelids. Better to do, to keep her body moving, to look after Nathan, than to let her mind stay idle, prey of too many piled horrors.

Ellen stood up. "So, what's the plan?"

Nathan sneered. "We find the children, I rip the Hunters to fucking bloody pieces, we get back."

"Wow okay, edgelord, calm down," Ellen said. "What's gotten into you?"

"What's gotten into me is that we're bloody wasting time when we could be fucking moving!"

Nathan snapped. "I'm tired of just waiting around for the Council to kill us all, for the Hunters to round us all like cattle!"

Viviana put a calming hand on his shoulder. That was when Nathan noticed he had stepped closer and closer to Ellen, teeth bared and violence singing in his blood. Ellen, however, didn't look afraid; she was glaring him down like Debs used to when he acted out and got into trouble at school. The juxtaposed images brought him to a screeching halt. For a moment it was like she was standing right in front of him. He could see her so well; braid falling down one shoulder, hand at her hips, unafraid, unbroken. Figuring him out, figuring out how to make the pieces fall into place.


When his eyes focused on her, she repeated herself. "We don't know what we're dealing with. We don't know how many these children are, why they were taken, how many Hunters we'll be facing. First step is to find out that. If they were taken to a heavily-manned base, we have no hope of helping."

"Speak for yourself," Nathan said.

Ellen scoffed. "Do you even have any idea where to start? How are you going to find this Danzig?"

Nathan scowled. "With a map."

"What map?"
Nathan's scowl deepened. “I can ask for one. Buy one.”

“We're in Latvia.”

“So?”

“Why would people in Latvia speak English?”

“Okay, then what would you do, smart-arse?”

Ellen whipped out her smartphone faster than Nathan could unsheathe the Fairborn.

“Google maps,” she said.

Nathan glared. “You were just waiting to do that, weren't you.”

“I think,” Viviana interrupted them, “that for that thing to work, we'd need coverage. No?”

“Uhm,” Ellen said, ineffectively trying to launch the app. “Yes, that would be... best.”

Nathan sniggered.

Nathan pulled his hoodie down, his eyes darting around from under the hem, skittering rabbits in the dark. It was a rainy night after a hot day; the drops fell and then rose again from the asphalt as mist. It had taken them long enough to reach Danzig – three trains, two stops waiting for a train, one hitch-hike, and then more hours to arrange this meeting. Ellen had assured him she had been as fast as possible, considering. Contacting half-bloods all over Europe was easy enough, but convincing one in a specific location to help? Not as easy, she had said. They risk a lot, she had said. The Hunters are always monitoring out networks, and we have our coding to deal with that, but we must still be careful.

As they carefully waited for her contact to show his cowardly arse, the children might be dying, or worse.

You tried to kill two children, Nathan!

Nathan gritted his teeth. He focused on the road, on Ellen standing at the mouth of a narrow side-street, cast in shadows by one of those endless, colourful buildings the city was ripe with. He was not going to zone out. He was going to stay vigilant. He was going to save those children. He was going to do something good.

Steps, light and careful, down at street level. The faint crackling sound of droplets hitting waxy cloth. Nathan leaned from the balustrade he was perched on. The contact seemed alone; Nathan could hear the faint hissing of his cellphone, but only his. Probably. Sometimes it was hard to tell in a city, with all the cables and repeaters and technology in every pocket. But at three in the morning, that residential area was empty and quiet.

Nathan stalked the contact from cornice to cornice. Viviana was on watch on the other side of street, so the risk of being discovered or ambushed was minimal.

If she was to be trusted, that is.
With only three of them, Nathan didn't have much choice.

The contact was within four metres of Ellen. He raised his left hand, showing three fingers. The sign. Nathan jumped down from the cornice. Before the guy could completely turn, Nathan had him pinned to the wall, an arm pressing against his throat. The impact knocked the wind out of the contact, who gasped, “Oh shit please don't kill me!” in a perfect English accent.

Nathan slowly turned to Ellen.

Ellen rolled her eyes. “Of for the love of--- he's probably, like, the only English half-White of Poland!”

The only English half-White of Poland struggled. Nathan pushed him hard against the wall, once. “Stop. Squirming,” he hissed.

“Oh god. Oh my fucking god you're him, aren't you? Please don't kill me, I'm here to help Nikita! I swear!”

Nathan contemplated unsheathing Gabriel's knife, just to see if the halfblood would piss himself. Instead he asked, “Nikita?”

“Give me his phone,” she answered.

“Hey man, I can totally just hand it t---”

Nathan dug into the guy's jeans' pocket and fished it out. Ellen took it and hovered a finger over the locked screen. She ignored the keys, and traced a glyph instead. Nathan felt, more than heard, the tiny spark right after; like the hissing of electric devices, but without the pain knifing through his brain. It left a tang of ozone and excitement in the humid air.

“What was that?” he asked.

“A hex,” she said. “If you want to be part of the network, you have to convince five different people who are already in it to put part of this hex on your phone. Once you have all five, it works. It constantly changes the coding of our messages, so that we don't have to continuously come up with new ones. Plus, if someone tries to crack the hex, it unleashes a curse.”

“Yeah, see?” the contact said. “I do have the trust of the network, totally not a spy here. Well, technically I am a spy, just not against you, aye? So could you maybe let me g---”

Nathan bashed him against the wall one more time.

“I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!”

“I don't know whether to laugh or scold you,” Ellen said.

“Why don't you ask him where the fuck are the Hunters instead?” Nathan bit back.

Ellen sighed. “Please tell me you have good news for us, Totally Not A Spy.”

“Well I don't know about good news, I don't think a party of four Hunters suddenly sprouting in the city is good news for anyone. It's not the first time it happens; we know where they always hide. It must be a safe house, but we never tried to investigate further.”

“And the children?” Ellen asked.
“No children that I saw. But I saw them carrying in two people. They looked young, maybe teens, and they both looked unconscious. Which means only one thing.”

“They're Black,” Ellen said. “Sedated until they can be put in a containment facility.”

“What if they are not who we're looking for?” Nathan asked. “She said 'children'.”

“To a mother, her kids are always children,” Viviana said, emerging from the shadows. “The city and the timing coincide. Even if we're wrong, we'd be helping the helpless. I see it as a win-win situation. And against four? I almost feel sorry for them.”

Nathan almost smiled; he could taste already the savage satisfaction of finding them, hunting them, paying back. Paying all of them back, in kind. But he pushed it down.

_Focus_ , he told himself.

Nathan felt the Fairborn sing. It wanted to cut more. He wiped it on the new pair of jeans Viviana had bought for him for the trip. When he watched in the rear-view mirror, he saw the boy sneaking glances at him, staring at the blade, at the way it caught the early dawn light. He had fared only slightly better than his fellow prisoner; they were both covered in bruises. The girl was still recovering from too many nights imprisoned underground. Nathan guessed the boy was younger, just a year or two shy of his Giving, so he had suffered less.

No signs of torture.

No one else in the underground cellar.

All Hunters dead.

Viviana was taking care of children. Ellen was driving.

Nathan sheathed the Fairborn. They were fine. He had done something good. He _felt_ good. He couldn't wait to tell Arran. Arran would be happy. Worried, of course, but happy.

Would Gabriel? Or would he be angry he had run away again, that he had done something dangerous, that he had left him behind, or that...

Nathan put a hand behind his own neck and breathed deeply. He could not control how Gabriel would react, but he _knew_ he had done a good thing. The point of being good is doing it when it's hard, not when it's easy.

He still wished the hand on his neck was Gabriel's.

Viviana was talking to the children – siblings most likely, seeing the resemblance – and Nathan tuned in to their hushed words.

“What's your name?” she asked.

“Maximilian,” answered the boy, “but everyone calls me Max.”

“And you, young lady?”

The girl's deep blue eyes were still unfocused. She was still reeling from the effect of whatever drug
the Hunters had given her to keep her under control.

When she answered, it was slow, and slurred. “My name,” she said, “is Diamond.”
The Point Of Being Good I

Chapter Notes

As I type this, I've been fighting with my text editor and AO3's text editor to no avail. I cannot figure out why the formatting of this thing is all over the place. I'm still hoping it will magically be fixed once i hit that "post" button. Here's to hope *downs virgin mimosa* Please don't hate me if the format is inconsistent. I swear it looks perfect in my original document... but hey, maybe you can help me? Pls??

Nathan stared at the girl, at the young Black witch he had just saved. “Diamond?” he asked. “Dresden's daughter?”

Diamond's eyes grew wide, then narrowed. “How do you know our mother?”

Nathan took a good look at the shape of her nose and lips, perfectly mirrored in the boy's face; at the different colour of their eyes – her blue, his black – with identical ruby tumblings floating in. He remembered Mercury's description of her when she was just a young Whet – wicked smart and troublesome, according to the old Black witch, too wild to take in as apprentice. And Dresden had insisted, had cajoled and glamoured Mercury with her Gift, the Gift of Joy; and Mercury had let her, but only as long as it suited her. The effect had vanished after a while, like it always did, and Mercury, with no longer a use for Dresden's presence, had sent her away. The last lines about the woman in her diary had dripped with scorn for her, for the fleeting, false affection she could elicit, but never keep.

Marcus had left her too, once her Gift had worn out.

“Who is Dresden?” Ellen asked, her eyes darting from one face to the other in the rear-view mirror.

“A Black witch. Mercury wrote about her in her diary,” Nathan said.

“Wait, if your mother's name is Dresden...” Ellen let the sentence drop. Who had been the woman in the forest? A relative?

“Do you know a woman named Isolde?” Viviana asked.

“Yes,” Diamond said. “We fled Germany together. Our mother died in the first wave of persecutions when the Council of Britain took control and the Hunters started the round-ups. We met Isolde as we ran, and we've been together ever---”

Diamond's voice broke, and her eyes filled with tears. “Where is she?” she sobbed. “She's been like a mother to us...”

Viviana put a hand on her shoulder. “I'm sorry, child. She told us where to find you, but there was nothing we could've done for her.”

What a lie, Nathan thought. There are so many things we could've done to help her. Things the Alliance isn't doing.

“How do you know Mercury?” Diamond asked as she tried to control herself. Her brother was a
frozen statue next to her, not looking anyone in the eye. He was gripping one of Diamond's hands so hard, his knuckles were white.

Nathan thought about what to tell her. Dresden had been his father's lover. It had been after Nathan's own birth. His eyes fell on Max, silent at her side. Younger, bruised, scared; he looked so frail.

"I worked for her for a while," he finally said. "We had a contract."

"Don't mind his long ominous silences," Ellen quipped, "Nathan just likes to be dramatic."

Nathan glared at her.

"And to glare at people," she added.

The two siblings stared at him with twin expressions of bewilderment.

"Are you... Nathan Edge? The son of Marcus?" Diamond asked in awe.

Nathan scowled at her. "I am Nathan, son of Marcus and Cora. And my name is not Edge."

Diamond looked much less in awe when she asked, "Don't tell me you feel White."

"Whatever the fuck I feel is none of your fucking business."

"Now, now," Viviana interjected, "that's a rather loaded conversation to be had when we just escaped the Hunters, no?"

Diamond and Max exchanged a loaded glance. Then Max said, "Our mother always told us stories about Marcus, about how great a Black Witch he was. I'm really sorry we didn't manage to reach the Alliance before and meet him, because... Nathan," he said, fighting through the quiver in his voice, "I am your brother."

"It's been days, Arran," Gabriel said.

Arran could only nod. "I know." Then he asked, "What are you going to do when he returns?"

Gabriel sighed, and didn't answer.

"Are you still angry at him?"

"Yes. Yes I am still angry. And then I feel guilty for feeling angry. And then I'm angry again for feeling guilty. He spat at me, Arran."

"I know."

Gabriel studied his face, searching for that enlightened, god-like empathy Nathan was so in awe of.

"Do you think I shouldn't be? Angry, I mean."

"Honestly, I think you both need time off from each other."

Gabriel flinched at that. "Why? You think I'm not good for him?"

Arran shook his head. "It's not that, Gabriel. Never that. I'm thinking of both your well-being. You need time apart. I don't mean months or even weeks. But I see how glued at the hip you are. Is that healthy? I know Nathan is so far removed from 'healthy' it sounds ridiculous to frame it like that, at least now... But we both know he has a lot of trauma to deal with, so that's nothing new. But what about you? Are you taking care of yourself? I see you devoting all your time and energy to Nathan, but I don't see him reciprocating."

"He can't right now," Gabriel said. "You said it yourself. He's not well."

"No, he's not. And I'm willing to give him time, and so are you. But that doesn't mean you don't need a break sometimes. If I told you, right now, to stay on your own for a few days, to just do your own thing without thinking about what Nathan is doing, would you be able to?"
"I've been doing that for the past four days, Arran."
"What you've been doing," Arran said, crossing his arms over his chest, "is cycling between worrying yourself sick and wishing you could strangle my brother. Have you done anything for yourself lately?"
Gabriel looked away. "I'm not sure I even remember how to do that."
"Well, maybe it's time to---"
"What's the point?" Gabriel interrupted him. "It's not like I can just go back to reading or driving my sister around or going to pool parties with Fains. My sister is dead. We're at war. If Nathan comes back, we'll be back at fighting, and running, and fighting again. Don't you see?"
Arran stayed silent. He listened.
"Don't you see?" Gabriel repeated. "I joined the Alliance only to stay close to Nathan. I fight only because I can't help but staying close to him, for as long as possible. Which, let's be honest here, it won't be long, and it'll end in a bloody, messy death."
Arran straightened. In that moment, he was iron; he was unbent and unflinching in the face of terrible odds in every way Gabriel knew he himself wasn't. In that moment, he was every inch Nathan's brother. "That's not how it has to end."
Gabriel wanted to believe him. He wanted to believe him, and believe in Nathan, and believe in the Alliance, so much.
Arran's gaze softened. "One person cannot be your only reason for living, Gabriel. I really wish you can find more reasons to go on, but I guess my unreliable brother will have to be a start for now."

"I have only one brother. He's the only family I have left," Nathan said, his heart hammering in his chest. "And his name is Arran Byrn."
"The White?" Diamond asked, incredulity evident in the slight rise of one eyebrow. "Do you really consider him your brother? I had heard you called yourself Edge, now that you're free from the Council of England. Do you call yourself a Byrn, Nathan? Really?"
"I'm your half-brother," Max pleaded, "I swear it's true. I understand we don't know each other, but aren't we both on the run from the Council? Black witches, united against the Whites who would wipe us out?"
"Shut the fuck up, both of you," Nathan snarled.
"Woah, woah, let's all please calm down," Ellen said, her eyes skipping frantically from one face to the other in the rear-view mirror. "Nathan, for the love of all that's holy, do not go ballistic when I'm driving."
"My brother," Nathan repeated, enunciating every word as he locked eyes with Max's, "is Arran."
He was not going to explain the depth of such a simple sentence to him, to this stranger. He felt raw and exposed just thinking about it with other people around. Arran was his brother; the one who refused to be called anything else, who had always refused to, even when it would have been the easiest, pragmatic choice. Nathan's love and loyalty for him ran too deep and too scorching to put into words, to bring to the surface.
Max cowered under his glare, and fell silent. Diamond fell equally silent at his side. She put a hand on his shoulder and glared back for the remainder of the trip.
It was a long, long trip.

As soon as Kolkasrags came into view, Viviana asked Ellen to stop the car.
"Why? We're still so far, I don't want to walk all the way up the stupid hill, Viviana," Ellen griped.
"Remember what happened last time someone not from the Alliance trespassed the cursed forest?" Viviana asked.
"Oh," Ellen said. "Right."
She pulled over.
Nathan bolted out of the car. He had finished Van's cigarettes near the Polish border. There was only so much an open window could do for his nausea and headache. He breathed in the salty air in big gulps, covering his eyes with his hands as he summoned the healing. The small rush of it was a welcome distraction from what lay ahead. Excuses to make. Apologies, too. And now there was this other thing behind him.

He made a point not to turn to check on Max and Diamond.
"What can you even do to grant them access?" Ellen asked.
"I can think of a thing or two," said Viviana, as they started for the murdering forest.
"What are you even talking about?" Diamond asked. "What's this about a curse? Are we in danger?"
Max, in the meanwhile, was eyeing the trees suspiciously. "What does a cursed forest do? I hadn't heard that the Alliance even was in Latvia, let alone that it was protected by a cursed forest."

Nathan listened to his slight German accent, to the cultured wording of his sentences. Resentment was a sudden stab he did not expect. Marcus, for all that he lived as an animal most of the time and avoided human contact as much as he could, had been just as articulate. He wondered where Max had learned what he never did, what kind of life he had had. Not the kind where everyone attached "son of Marcus" to "must be crushed under my boot like a bug", obviously. Maybe he went to school. Maybe he went to all his classes properly, maybe he braved the constant hissing of cellphones and computers. Maybe he even had good grades. Maybe Nathan had always been right, and Arran always wrong; he was just stupid, and decent English was too much for him.

Diamond stopped dead in her tracks, pulling Max behind herself. "If you don't tell us what's the deal with this 'cursed forest', we're not coming with you."
Ellen looked at Viviana. "I must say, she's not wrong. What are you going to do?"
Nathan hesitated only for a second. He could respect the way Diamond was protecting her brother. He could also not afford to think about this, too, now. Or ever. He didn't turn, and ran into the forest, ignoring Ellen's outrage and Max's dismayed, short-lived call.
Of all the things Marcus could've left him, this he didn't expect, and couldn't figure out the tangle it left in his chest, wrapping like newly-born vines around places that were messed-up to begin with. Nathan felt like screaming. Specifically, he felt like screaming at Marcus. And he couldn't. Oh, how much he wanted to scream at his father. Mercury had warned him after all. She had been right. Marcus had been a selfish being, thinking only about himself. Nathan knew there had been exceptions. His mother, somehow. Himself, somewhat.
Too little, too late. But just enough to leave a gaping hole of a "what-if" that would stay with him until the day he died.
He ran without thinking about where he was going, who he was running to. Better to just get it over with. The thought of this moment, the dread of it, had turned slowly in the back of his mind, always, without ever leaving him, for every single day he had spent away. He almost laughed at the fucking irony.

**Hey Gabriel, look! I did a good thing! I saved these children! Also one of them claims to be my half-brother.**

Then he felt like hitting something. Nothing ever was as simple and good as it was supposed to.
At least Gabriel... at least Gabriel could be that simple and good thing. He could. If only... If only Nathan could show he deserved him.
He ran to the edges of the camp outside the fortress. He startled a sentinel on his way, who managed to half-ask, half-cry in a strangled voice, "Password!"
Nathan shot him a dispassionate look. He had basically ran into him, and yet the sentinel hadn't seen him until it was too late. Or it would have, if Nathan had been a Hunter. Celia and Greatorex really needed to upgrade the security around Kolkasrags.
He gave the password. "Celia gave orders to bring you to her as soon as you were back," the man said.
Nathan shuddered, and felt like killing him where he stood. Then he caught himself. He had come this far. He could not fuck things up this close to do things as right as he could. He had to stop sabotaging himself.

The man startled when Nathan turned into a hawk and flew away.

The door to his and Gabriel's small balcony was open. His animal perched on the railing, as eager as Nathan was to see him. But the room was empty. The bed was still covered with the dusty blankets from before - they really needed to throw them out. As the animal flew up again in search of Gabriel, Nathan thought idly that he could, maybe, clean the room a little as a sign of goodwill. Then he berated himself for being like this. Gabriel didn't even care about the stupid bed and the stupid old covers. Or did he?

The animal screeched when it saw him. He was sitting on the fallen tree on the beach, the one washed white by the clawed fingers of wind and sea.

Gabriel was alone, reading a book with frayed, yellowed pages. The paper was stiff and coarse under his fingers; it was an old book, salvaged from one of the rooms in the fortress. The civilians were being put to good use, emptying and making habitable as much space as possible. He had found an entire pile of old books thrown into a corridor, most of them with old bindings, falling apart, losing pages. Some titles were so faded it was impossible to say what book it even was, who had written it. He had found, miraculously, an old edition of Beaudelaire's *Les Fleurs Du Mal* in the pile. He remembered that one time he had recited a poem from it to Nathan. The image of him looking at him, looking at Gabriel like he was a thing of arcane mystery, black eyes shining and lips slightly parted as he listened... he listened the same way he did everything; utterly, in absolutes. Gabriel had started with an ironic touch in between the verses; there was no irony left when he had reached the final line.

Slowly, then all at once - in the space of a few decadent lines, he had foundered, sweetest shipwreck in the sweetest sea.

When the hawk landed ten paces away from the tree, and transformed into Nathan, he wasn't even surprised. He slowly looked up, hearing the slight flutter of the wind in between the pages, the endless whisper of the waves. Nathan didn't talk for a long time, as was his thing. Gabriel was determined, this time, not to make things easier for him. Deep down he knew he was going to forgive him. He would never find it in himself not to. He just wished that Nathan, for once, worked for it. Not because he didn't deserve empathy, but because Gabriel deserved it, too.

Nathan walked slowly to him, his face stony, fists balled - anyone else would think he was preparing for a fight. Gabriel knew it was his way to deal with nervousness. When Nathan saw an upcoming fight, he relaxed. That was his element.

Dealing with his feeling and asking for forgiveness - not so much.

Nathan sat on the bone-white tree.

Gabriel exhaled. He thought about being mature, about talking calmly, and reasonably. Then he thought, *Fuck no.*

He shut the book close with a satisfying snap.

Nathan started with, "I was with Viviana. And Ellen."

"I know who you were with. Everyone knows. Celia is going to kill you."

Nathan scowled. "Celia can try. I will kick her ass if she tries."

"Maybe I should help her."

Nathan went very still. Gabriel grimaced.

"Sorry," Gabriel said, in a much less cutting tone.

"It's okay," Nathan said. Gabriel had never heard him using such a subdued tone. "I deserved that. Besides, I know you would not do that. You hate Celia much more than me."

"True enough."
"I'm sorry for... what I did to you, Gabriel."

Gabriel sighed, then shook his head slowly. "You're just sorry because I'm angry at you."

"I'm sorry because you don't deserve that," Nathan rushed to say, his words jumbling together. "Look, I---I know I'm bad to you. I'm bad to everyone who tries to stay close to me, I know I'm stuck too much in my own head, but I---it's hard not to. I try to forget about what happened before but I see it every time I fall asleep, I see it even during the day. I'm not trying to make up excuses!" he added when he saw Gabriel trying to interject. "I just mean, even just knowing I do it--- it's because of you. You've been good to me, you've done so much for me. You made me realize I want to do the same for you, but I need more time, and I know that's not fair."

Gabriel couldn't help it; he found the way Nathan was working himself up, his cheeks flushing, terribly endearing. I am a terrible, selfish person, he told himself, and he wished to cup Nathan's face, to know if his skin felt as hot as it looked.

Finally Gabriel said, "It is fair. I just wish you didn't go ballistic on me every time you relapse. I'm the one who always gets the brunt of your bad spells, am I not?"

Nathan suddenly found a great deal of interest in counting the grains of sand under his feet. "I wish I could do that with Celia. But I don't pass all my time with her."

"That's my point. When you're not running off who knows where, you pass all your time with me. I used to feel privileged by that – you don't spend half as much time with Arran – but at a certain point it stopped being wonderful and it started getting unbearable, Nathan. I'm always waiting for the next time you lose touch with reality, or you scream at me, and I don't know how to make it better. I thought just staying by your side, showing you that I care, was going to help. But it's not helping."

His words had started levelled, but Gabriel could hear his own voice getting louder, the never-really-gone anger surfacing.

"I'm sorry I gave you the drugs. I'm sorry I breached your trust. But I didn't know what else to do. If the other option is telling you something and knowing you're going to kill someone for it... I don't know how else to stop you, Nathan."

The sand became blurry. With each breath Nathan felt more and more like the air was knifing through his burning throat.

"I don't know either," Nathan whispered. He crossed his arms over his chest, hugging himself. For a moment, he felt the itch of a sheepskin against his cheek, the sting of the northern cold on his skin. He turned away, his back almost completely to Gabriel now.

There was a long silence between them then. The constant sigh of the sea, the lonely calls of a lonely seagull only made it deeper.

"I wish I knew how to heal you. I would fix it all, if I could," Gabriel said.

But you can't, Nathan thought, as the first tears rolled down his cheeks. I'm the only one who can get my shit together.

Sitting there, listening to Gabriel's defeated, tender tone, was just too much.

When Nathan said nothing, Gabriel went on. "I thought giving you my everything was the solution... but I've come to realize I was just living my own fantasy. The mad, all-consuming love of the poets. It felt suitably agonizing, and just as exhilarating. It felt much better than the blank space that was my future once I'd get back my Gift – if I could at all. But then..."
But then you kissed me like you meant it, and it stopped being a tragic story of hopeless love, and it became something I wanted with a desperation I had never felt since wishing my mother and sister weren't dead. And unlike that wish, it was something almost there, almost real, just out of my reach...

But then I saw you fighting so hard to get better, to hold onto what little good you had – Annalise, Marcus, Arran – and loving them with everything you had, even when Annalise had given you so little – barely more than standard human decency – even when Marcus was more an idea of a father than something real – and seeing his flaws was not enough to curb your hope – even when Arran was so far away, alive but unreachable.

But then I saw how, in the face of terrible odds, you still didn't even think of giving up. You kept dreaming of freedom.

Instead he said, “When Michèle died, I told myself I was not going to give up. I told myself I was going to get back my Gift, and start again from there. But the truth is, when I had time to think, when Mercury didn't give me any strange or straight-up deadly task to occupy my mind with, I felt only dread. I was without purpose. What was the point of getting back my Gift? What would I use it for? Yet, I wanted it back. I needed it back. But I knew that if I succeeded, I'd be adrift again.”

Nathan listened in silence. It was odd to hear Gabriel talking so much about himself. For being someone filled with so many words, for all that he was usually so chatty, so easy to speak to... It felt like talking, or even breathing too loudly, was going to break a fragile spell floating in the air.

“I've been told that another person, one single person, cannot be your only reason to live,” Gabriel went on. “I've come to realize, however, that's exactly how I've been living ever since my mum died. I took care of my sister. I took care of my dad. I stole and spied and won the Blacks' trust, all for them. Not for me. I was having fun as I did it – for the most part. But that was a lucky by-product. Even when it was unpleasant, even when it was dangerous or painful, I did it. Because they needed it.

Then I met you.”

Nathan stayed silent. He so wanted to see Gabriel's face, but he didn't want to turn and show him what a useless, pathetic mess he was.

“Do you know how they say 'love at first sight' in French? It's coup de foudre. Getting struck by lightning. That's how it felt, seeing you for the first time in that airport.”

Gabriel remembered it like it was yesterday. Holding his breath when he first spotted him, the plainest of clothes doing nothing to blend him with the crowd. Nathan standing there, perfectly still as he swept the bustling area with a thousand-yard stare, taking in every Fain, every potential threat. Then he had seen Gabriel. And he had moved. His every step oozed Blackness. He was graceful, he was commanding, and he was deadly. And then he had been there, close enough to kill Gabriel, if he had felt so inclined. Close enough for Gabriel to feel his pull, a black hole he could not escape. He had no desire to escape.

“But that's just a beginning, no? That was just seeing you, not knowing you. And the more I knew you, the more I grew enthralled.”

His very own event horizon.

“It feels right, Nathan. Loving you. I don't care what others think about it. I don't even care that you don't love me back.”
Nathan had to turn to him then. “I do love you,” he said, voice hoarse and throat burning with the effort to suppress the sobs. “I'm just... not there yet. To what you want.”

Gabriel wiped a tear away with a gentle swipe of his thumb. He moved slowly, so as not to startle him. He cupped Nathan's face, and kissed him on the cheek. He heard him holding his breath, then releasing it with a trembling exhale.

“What I want,” said Gabriel, “is for you to be yourself again, healthy and free. And I want to be there with you.”

“I want to stop hurting you,” Nathan said, his eyes closed to better soak into Gabriel's closeness.

After a long time, Gabriel said, “Arran thinks it would be a good idea to take some time apart from you.”

Nathan started to say something, caught himself. His words became an inarticulate noise, trapped behind his sealed lips, but eloquent. Distressed, agreeing, not agreeing, resigned.

“I disagree.”

Nathan felt very much like hugging him, letting himself be wrapped in his arms. He slowly backed away instead, wiping the tears away with a sleeve. “I don't. He's right. What did you do as I was away?”

“Worried myself sick. Thought about how angry I was with you.”

“I meant, in general. The other times.”

“Worried myself sick. Thought about how angry I was with you,” Gabriel repeated.

The look Nathan fixed on him was dismayed and guilty.

Gabriel sighed. “It's true I don't have a reason to go on other than you right now. But I want to live to find it. That's the best I can do.”

Nathan knew he didn't deserve such devotion. Yet he wanted it. He'd do anything to keep it, to bask in it, to soak it in.

“We saved two kids in Poland, Viviana, Ellen and I,” he said.

Approve of me.

Gabriel looked surprised at that. “Is this related to the corpse mysteriously torn to pieces you left behind?”

“Do you think I did it?”

“Of all the different ways I've seen you killing someone, riddling them with holes was not in the list. Who killed her? Viviana?”

“The forest.”

Gabriel looked, if possible, even more surprised, but also intrigued.

“That's not important,” Nathan said, annoyed. He wanted Gabriel to know. Approve of me, approve of me, please approve of me.
“She told us of her children, her adoptive son and daughter, before she died. They had been captured by Hunters. We saved them. They're here now. Two Blacks, one is still a Whet.”

Nathan studied Gabriel's every tiniest twitch in expression, waiting for his judgement with a trepidation that made him sick to his stomach. He could see the moment Gabriel understood. And Gabriel saw how Nathan was taut like a bowstring, tension and expectation trembling in his every muscle. Gabriel sighed, softly. He didn't turn away, he didn't yell at him for doing something so dangerous.

“Is this going to become a thing? Rescuing people?” he jokingly asked instead.

“Maybe. It felt better than killing Hunters, after. I mean, killing Hunters feels good, but when I think about it later, I always feel bad, because most of the time they're just recruits, so I want to kill more to feel better again. But I don't feel bad about rescuing these two. And it's something difficult, and good, that no one else would've done, but I did. But of course, I just gave myself a new fucking problem.”

“Well yes, I can see how you just disappearing and going who knows where in White territory could be a problem. Did I mention Celia wants to kill you?”

“No, I meant--” Nathan said, then thought better of it. Maybe he could at least try to lighten the mood. For once. “You will never believe who I found in Danzig.”

When Gabriel went back to the fortress, he was seemingly alone. He didn't make it very far before he found unpleasant company. Celia was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairwell that led to his and Nathan's room.

"Where is he?” she asked, her face a stony mask of fury.
"I'm not sure, honestly," he answered, keeping his voice as bland as possible.
Celia raised an eyebrow, and said in a sarcastic tone, "And you don't care, is what you're telling me?"
Gabriel stared hard at her. "Whatever I decide to do regarding him is none of your concern."
She scoffed. "I know you won't push him away. You're just as naive as Arran. Or not, maybe; maybe you see exactly what he is, and that's what you find so compelling. You are, after all, a Black." She said this matter-of-factly, like she was talking about the sun rising in the East.
"If you find Blacks so repellant, maybe you shouldn't work so hard to avoid their genocide."
"It's not a matter of saving the Blacks. That is a by-product of killing Soul," she said. "And in any case, I've always been of the opinion Blacks could very well be left alone. You do a good job of killing each other anyway, wouldn't you say?"
Gabriel didn't grace her with an answer. He did, however, wish he could shoot her. He settled for a very vivid fantasy in which he threw the book he was holding at her, hitting her straight in her ugly nose and making it even uglier.
"But no," Celia added, "actually there are a lot of Blacks who simply keep to themselves. As long we live separately, we can restore peace. We can avoid involving civilians, we can avoid the senseless bloodshed Soul started to gain more power. But I digress. Since you don't know where Nathan is, I guess I'll go see the next best suited person to tell me. Of course," she said as she walked away, "it might be that I won't find him there, and that I'll have to imprison both you and Arran for hiding a dangerous, deranged killer who you think you're protecting, when you should really start to protect yourselves."
And with that she was gone.
Gabriel walked up the steps, closed their room's door behind himself, and said, "Well, that went well."
Nathan turned visible. He was fuming. "That fucking cunt."
"Now now, no reason to use such misogynist language. Besides I thought you liked her."
"She's not on top of my list of people to kill. She used to though. Maybe I should make an adjustment."
Gabriel chuckled. Then he sobered. "You can't avoid her or the generals forever," he said.
"I know. I just... want a break, I guess. Although the trip to here probably counts as a break. It took longer than three days to come back. It was faster, going. We didn't meet any Hunters, it was quiet even."
Quiet, but for the silent antagonism of Diamond, and the quiet hurt of Max, and the decidedly not quiet protests of Ellen.
"Why did it take so long? If you didn't meet any Hunter..."
"I had finished Van's cigarettes, and the moon is full. We couldn't travel during the night. If I had been alone, I'd have napped during the day and moved much faster. I don't need as much sleep when the moon is full. But Ellen can't do that, and neither can a Whet. I tried to endure the car during the night, but it was too bad."
"Quite inconvenient."
Nathan stared at him. "Are you making fun of me?"
"Who, me? I could never."
Nathan scoffed, but didn't say anything. He was relieved they could joke at all.
"What are you going to do now?" Gabriel asked.
"I want to see Arran."
"What about the Alliance meeting about your fate that is probably happening, if not now, in a few hours, tops?"
Nathan grabbed a pack of cigarettes he had left near the balcony, opened the door, and stepped out to light it. He breathed in the cold, salty air, together with the first mouthful of smoke. "Do you think my presence would change anything?"
"Probably not, I'm afraid."
"Then I'd rather spare myself the stress."
Gabriel sat down in an armchair he had brought on the balcony himself. It was old, covered in velvet and golden trims, and one armrest was torn open. It was just as decadent as Gabriel liked it. "That's wise."
"I still want to see Arran though. How has he been? During my absence, I mean."
"I think you should ask that yourself."

"What do you mean, I'm not allowed to the meeting?" Ellen asked, outraged. "I was there. I was there the entire time. You need my testimony!"
"No we don't," Nesbitt said. "This is a matter that will resolved between the higher authorities."
"Viviana is not even a general, yet she will be listened to!"
"Well that's good, right? You were together, Viviana will say what happened, everything is going to be peachy," he tried to appease her.
Ellen glared at him with suspicion plain in her frown, crossing her arms on her chest. "First you tell me not to even talk to her, now it's 'Oh don't worry Ellen, let her do the talking'? What's going on here, Nesbitt?"
"Ellen," he said, not unreasonably, "you must understand that you're a scout. Not a higher-up, not even a full Witch yet. You have a lot more understanding of what goes on only because you're, inexplicably but, I must say, amusingly, friends with Nathan. You were there, in Barcelona, only because of that. To convince him to join, to give him one more incentive. But that's over now. Keep your head down and do as you're told. Okay?"
"But Nesbitt..."
"And please, don't follow Nathan and Viviana to who knows where, doing insanely dangerous
things. You already do those, that's what a scout does. There's no reason to go looking for more deadly situations."
Ellen stared at him with a look that was half gratitude and half defiance. "And who's going to do the right thing, then?"
Nesbitt laughed. "You think those two are doing that? Like what, helping people?"
"Nathan is! Nathan wants to," she amended.
"Nathan is sick. I'm not sure he's not completely deranged by now. I wish I was wrong," he said, preventing Ellen, who was starting to protest, "but he is. He's unstable, at the very least. I like the kid, Ellen. And I like seeing how much you care for him. But even if there was anything to be done about it... let Gabriel handle it."
"Why? Why Gabriel? Because he loves him? It's not like you can love someone into being healthy again, Nesbitt, what Nathan needs is to not feel alone anym---"
"Because they're both Black."
Ellen paused. "What do you mean?"
"You might look at Gabriel and see a cuddly, starry-eyed boy who is so in love. He's not. He's a powerful Black witch who would snap your neck without thinking twice if you enraged him enough. And getting a Black angry isn't hard at all. You should never forget that."
Before answering, Ellen collected herself, made sure she was perfectly calm. "You're wrong. Your prejudice doesn't let you believe what is plain before your eyes."
Nesbitt chuckled. "Hah, youth."

Viviana stood, poised and perfectly calm, in front of the generals. Greatorex and Van looked every bit as collected as Celia did not; she was furious, and it was evident. Iskandra was carefully observing a web of relationships she didn't fully understand yet.

"So you're telling us," Van said, her usual pink-smoking cigarette perched between her fingers as she gestured, "that by complete chance, a Black witch ended up near Kolkasrags, by complete chance the forest killed her, and by complete chance she used her final breath to tell you where to go to find these two witches? And oh, by complete chance, one of them is Marcus' lost son?"
"To be fair," Greatorex interjected, "there had been rumours about it a few years ago. His mother, Dresden, was quite fond of telling so to everyone who would listen. However..."
"No one believed her because she was a narcissistic, pathological liar," Celia said, too angry to try to sound diplomatic.
"Dresden was both blessed and cursed by her Gift. She could make anyone around her happy, made them love her as a by-product of the happiness she brought. But the effect was never permanent. She was never good at dealing with the loss of their admiration and affection. So, she made up a lot of extravagant stories about them all. The most infamous one was, of course, that she had been Marcus' lover," Greatorex said.
"How do you even know about this? Was she captured?" Iskandra asked.
"As a matter of fact, she was, but I heard all this way before that," Greatorex answered. "She had a little of a... problem... keeping a low profile. As Celia correctly said, she was a narcissist."
"Is the boy really Marcus' son?" Iskandra asked Viviana.
"I have no idea," Viviana said. "The resemblance isn't there, but he looks a lot like his half-sister, so I'm guessing they take after their mother."
"And he's still a Whet," Viviana continued, "so we cannot know what Gift he will have. Their age difference cannot be more than a couple of years, looking at them," Viviana said.
"Considering what Mercury wrote in her diaries," Van said, "Diamond must be nineteen. What is her Gift?"
"Potions."
"Mmh. I'm almost sorry she doesn't have the same Gift as her mother. I never had the pleasure to
meet her. Then again, it would be a useless Gift for us," Van said.
"Yes. Now that that is taken care of," Celia said brusquely, "why don't we talk about Nathan?"
"Indeed we should," Viviana said with a pleasant smile.
"Has he accepted the idea of the trial held against Annalise?" Van asked. "We cannot wait further. Tension between Blacks and Whites is at an all-time high. We must quench it as soon and as effectively as possible, and this trial might at least help in smoothing out some issues."
Viviana listened as Celia, Greatorex and Van discussed the logistics of it all, and how to best restrain Nathan during the event. Iskandra, too, listened. Then she interrupted them with a bizarre non sequitur. "Do you have a proposition, Viviana Di Dunarea?"
That silenced them. Viviana's smile turned sardonic. Iskandra was trying to flatter her, wielding her name to silence them so effectively. "In fact," she said, enunciating slowly her every word for effect, "I do. What I did with Nathan and Ellen got me thinking. The Alliance has opened its arms to civilians fleeing from Soul and its Hunters, but that is not enough. Those are just the desperate, those who are absolutely sure they won't live to see another day if they stay. And most of them are useless in battle. They are helpless, and they turn to you not because you offer an alternative, a cause to fight for, but because there is no other alternative but death."
"That is a problem not easily solved," Greatorex said.
"Especially since virtually every battle-able White has been conscripted into the Hunters," Van added, "and we have little sway with the Blacks. Councillor Iskandra has brought us more support from the White side, at least in this area of Europe," she added, with a nod in Iskandra's direction, "and we have some new recruits as a result. But that makes the Alliance's composition ever more problematic."
"If I know Blacks at all and how they react when cornered, is that they will become even more selfish and closed-off," Celia said.
Viviana sent her a scathing look. "Yes, I'm sure you're an expert in that department."
"Are you suggesting I'm wrong? It's not like we haven't tried to make the Alliance as appealing to them as possible. Van effectively founded it. We welcomed every single Black who came to us. We gave space to the most reasonable and unusually tolerant ones, such as Gabriel..."
"And in so doing, alienated the ones who see the Whites much more as a threat. Isn't that so? What is that Black's name, the one whose ear Marcus cut off?" Iskandra asked.
"Gus," Greatorex said, arms crossed and expression troubled. "I wish the Blacks had another advocate for more power in the Alliance's internal equilibrium, honestly. I empathize with their demands, but Gus is..."
"Gus hates Nathan and he's afraid we'll end up favouring him over a more experienced Black leader. Who is, of course, Gus himself," Celia said. "Like Nathan even wants to do such a thing," she muttered.
"Nathan has no desire to lead, that is true," Viviana said. "But his heart is in the right place, and I think it would be both a just and advantageous thing to give him the means to do good."
The generals fell silent, each one of them curious and wary at once.
Viviana crushed her cigarette's stub into an ashtray. "Please, don't leave us hanging, Viviana."
Viviana smiled at the hint of antagonism, but chose to ignore it. "What you lack, and desperately need, is propaganda. Actions and news of that action, that makes you clearly fall on the side of justice and victory, and Soul on the side of tyranny and doom. At this point, he and his Hunters look invincible, and those who are already in their area of influence feel like there's no hope in opposing them. We have to change that tide. I propose two things."
She looked each one of them, gauging their reaction. In that moment, she looked every inch the seasoned warrior she claimed to be, ready to take on giants and spill blood. "The first thing: create a special infiltration force, small but skilled, to free whoever is in the Hunters' custody."
"Like what you just did," Van said.
"Of course, you'd want Nathan for that," Celia said, glaring. "Not only he's not fit for such a delicate, dangerous task right now, but if he were, we would not leave him to you and to this task-force. He's way too valuable."
"Because you want to make him your invulnerable weapon, thanks to Ledger's amulet?" Viviana said. She savoured Celia's stunned expression, brief as it was.
"You haven't been as discreet as you thought, Van," Greateorex finally said.
Van said nothing.

"Think about it," Viviana pressed on. "It would paint the Alliance in a great light. Not only because we would save people everyone thinks dead already, but because we'd defy Hunters in the most spectacular fashion."
The generals fell silent as well. Greateorex looked at Celia, but neither said anything. Van let out a curt laugh. She knew exactly what Viviana was trying to do. "And of course, you would lead this heroic force, gaining the support of both Blacks and Whites, and swiftly cementing a place in this war room. The answer," she concluded, "is no."
Viviana's smile turned icy, but she didn't say anything further.

Iskandra put her elbows on the great table in front of them, meditating a little more before finally saying, "The outcome of a war cannot rest on the actions of one single soldier. Even if it wasn't a suicidally risky idea, and it is, I am uneasy at the thought of putting the fate of all witches of Europe on one boy's shoulder, one who was a whet up until barely two months ago. We need more witches. We need more manpower, and more allies."

"Are you saying you back Viviana's idea?" Van asked, eyes narrowed.

"What I am saying," Iskandra said in a cutting tone, "is that you're too focused on this foolish idea with the amulet and Nathan. We are generals. It's time you start to think as one. What war was ever won by a single soldier? This is reality, not a myth. Let Nathan be our hero, give him all the power necessary to fight and inspire, but never forget that every battle might be his last." Then she added, "What is your other proposition, Viviana?"
"To call a Gathering," Viviana said.
"A Black Gathering? You have the authority to call one?" Greateorex asked.
"No. The Alliance will, in the name of a Descendant."
This time, Van didn't manage to hide her surprise. "Even if we knew a Descendant - and I definitely don't - what makes you think that Blacks will even answer such a call? Those clans are gone."
"Wait," Greateorex said. "You have lost me here. What is a Descendant?"
Van dismissed the very notion with a cutting gesture. "Ancient Black clans claimed to descend from eight leaders of legend. Each one of those clans was lost. Some in war, some to internal strife, some were assimilated in later clans. At any rate, no lineage remains."
"Lineage? You mean, these clans had some sort of, what? Royal line?" Celia asked.
"Essentially, yes," Iskandra said. "I am surprised you won't claim that title for yourself, Viviana. You bear, after all, one of those ancient names yourself."
"Unfortunately," Van said, "Viviana is not Black."
Viviana bowed slightly, a clearly mocking gesture. "My mother gave me this name, a relic of an ancient clan that was assimilated more than four hundreds years ago. But my father was indeed White, and my mother was a True Witch like me. For how things are now, I cannot expect to receive any respect from the Blacks, nor to gain their loyalty... not fast enough, at any rate." She enjoyed the looks using those words - True Witch - got her from the four women present.
"Then what do you have in mind?" Iskandra asked.
"Why is it so important, anyway? I don't understand what's so special about these Descendants. Did they have more authority on Blacks than, say, modern covenant leaders?" Greateorex asked, intrigued.
"As a matter of fact, they did. Celia was right in calling them 'royalty'. They used to be the ones with the most authority, the most stable claim at leadership. When the Descendants still existed, feuds could be controlled much more easily. They were not prevented, of course... but still. They had the power to call a Gathering, and their Gatherings were more than the social meetings of today. They
were official calls for all Blacks in a large area of influence. They were effectively diets," Viviana said.  
"You're thinking of re-creating such a Gathering? To what end?" Van asked. 
"I have passed the greatest part of my life gathering all Black under a single flag, Victoria. I can do it again."
"The last time you tried, you failed," Van noted. 
"The last time I tried, they didn't have a common enemy so hell-bent on committing genocide against them."
"This conversation is pointless," Iskandra said, "since we don't have this Descendant. Are you implying we should just make one up?"
"That wouldn't work," Van said.  
"It would be a very risky move, and it could make everything fall apart if it was discovered," Greatorex said.  
"That's true, but that's not what I was talking about," Van said. "The Descendants were tied to eight specific locations only they could access. They're called the Serpent's Teeth, they're scattered all over Europe. Each Descendant could interact with one of those places, tied to their ancestor, and use it to call a Gathering. They won't work with any Black we might find and use as stand-in. And if they don't work, every Black will know our stand-in is a fake, and that we are liars. Not very good for our image."
"I assume, then," Celia said, shooting a hard stare at Viviana, "that among the many things you apparently know, you also know where to find a true Descendant."
"Maybe," Viviana conceded.  
Celia said, quite angrily, "'Maybe' isn't good enough. Do you or don't you?"
"I do. I'm just not sure they'll want to act as Descendant. To that end, I think it's time we start resolving the tension between the two sides of the Alliances. There shouldn't be two sides to begin with." 
Greatorex sighed. "That is true. We're dangerously close to infighting. Gaining Kolkasrags gave us time, but..."
"It's time to start that trial," Celia said. "Provided we don't start it only for Nathan to go into a blind rage, destroying the Alliance in the process."
"You should have more faith in your former student, Celia," Van said, her voice dropping just enough to convey her annoyance. "Not to mention, this trial, if guided properly, could do much to put his mind at ease. We need him. We need him and his Gifts, and the amulet, to win. He's our best asset in this war."
Iskandra scanned the expressions of the other women present. "I feel," she said, "this trial will have to be carefully, very carefully handled. A lot of things hang on it going exactly as we want."
A silent assent understanding passed between them.  
"If - and it's a big if, no matter how careful we can be - we'd manage to prove Annalise was not a spy..." Greatorex said.  
Van sighed. They had a long day ahead of them. "This is going to be a nightmare."

Nathan stared at the wooden door in front him. He could hear a faint chattering from within the infirmary, the comforting noise of people simply talking, recovering. A big difference from just less than two weeks before.  
He didn't even know why he was nervous. This was Arran. He was going to be happy to see him, to see he was back, and perfectly unharmed at that.  
Was he going to be as happy when he told him about Max? Should he even tell him?  
He frowned. Was Max going to go around telling everyone Marcus was his father? The thought angered him in a way he didn't understand. It was a reflex; something that happened before he could think about it, like turning at a sudden movement in his periphery vision. What was Arran going to
think?
The more he waited about like an idiot, the more it was possible that someone simply opened the
doors to get out, and he would be there, standing. Like an idiot.

He raised his hand to knock. Then he caught himself. He opened the door with a wide swipe of his
arm, making a suitably stormy entrance. Arran was giving a glass filled with a tea-like liquid to a
woman, sitting on her bed. When he caught sight of his brother, his mouth fell open, and he stilled
for a moment. Then he pushed the glass in the woman's hands -- who fumbled with it, but Arran
didn't pay her any mind -- and ran to him. Nathan was reminded that no matter how tall he might
have grown, Arran was still taller, and Nathan's head still fit perfectly in the crook of his shoulder.

"You're back," Arran whispered, hugging him with all the force he could muster.

"I'm back," Nathan said. "Sorry," he added later, wary.
Arran let out a shuddering laugh. "You're in so much trouble."

"So I was told."
"By Gabriel?"
"Yes."

"Ah," Arran said simply. "Are you in trouble with Gabriel, too?"

"Maybe not."

"I see," Arran said. Then he added, "Let's get out of here."
They went to Arran's room. Nathan was surprised to see it was small, almost monastery-like, and just
as bare. Somehow, impossibly, he had expected something similar to their old, shared room;
something quite as small, but much more lived-in - if one considered boy-related chaos "lived-in". Or
maybe he had expected Arran to have some degree of privileged treatment. Surely being the best
healer other than Van in the entire fortress must have counted for something. He noticed, however, a
small luxury sitting in a corner, on a low stool.

"Did you know that Skaidrite's Gift is enchanting technology?" Arran asked when he noticed him
staring at the practically antique telly. "She can will anything electricity-powered to act on its own,
without needing power. Do you think something like that would still give you headaches? Since it
doesn't actually work with electricity anymore."

Eagerness was shining in his eyes. Nathan knew what he was thinking of; the sweetness of it was
enough to almost bring tears to his eyes - again.

"I don't know. Why don't we try it?"

"Ah, I wanted to bring in a sofa or a settee first... I've been neglecting decorating this room. I've
barely slept in it, actually."

Nathan tried - and mostly succeeded - to sound stern. "Can you at least try not to work yourself to
death? Do I have to start dragging you in here, kicking and screaming, and then lock you inside for
the night?"

"Just... help me drag in a settee. I've seen one in some sort of drawing room or whatever
downstairs. I bet no one will dare stop me if you help me steal it."

"What a criminal mastermind you are," Nathan joked. "You should exchange notes with Gabriel."
No one, indeed, dared to say anything when they stole the settee. Some dared to shoot them a dirty
look or two, but they readily subsided when Nathan shot them a glare of his own, making them
scatter like the flock of croaking crows they were. Nathan noticed how much more lively the fortress
looked, with people bustling about more or less constantly, the place almost completely cleaned up.
When they made it back to Arran's room, Nathan waited for his brother to catch his breath. He
fiddled around with the telly to pass the time, trying the old knobs and buttons. It wouldn't turn on.

"Are you sure this thing works?" he asked.

"Skaidrite said it was going to work only if the person requesting the spell used it. Or, I think she
said that. Her English is a little..."

"Terrible?" Nathan supplied.

"Rough. I was going to say rough. Not that it's a problem! She can make herself understood pretty
"Arran, it's not like I'm going to run to her and tell her, my brother thinks you're an ignorant fucker because you can't speak English," Nathan said. "I had never heard of a Gift like hers. Had you?"
"No. What's honestly more surprising is that she's a Black witch. You'd expect a Gift related to technology to develop in a White witch, maybe, not a Black. I wonder if she has any trouble with electronic devices like you do. That's a common thing with Blacks, right?"
"Only with the powerful ones."
Arran made a noncommittal noise at that. Then he crouched in front of the telly, and pushed a button. It turned on with a little effort, the image flickering for a few seconds. Nathan closed his eyes, waiting for the hissing to stab his brain. Then he opened them, and turned to Arran.
"I don't hear anything," he said.
Arran beamed at him.
Nathan stayed with his brother a long time. He didn't keep track of how long; he hadn't been very good at it anyway, lately. It was easier to forget everything that lurked outside the door. The shaky, unstable ground of his relationship with Gabriel. The bewildering entrance into his mess of a life of Max. Celia somewhere out there, waiting to give judgement. Maybe to punish him, maybe to imprison him. He failed to stop a shudder of revulsion at the thought. He realized he had gotten away with a lot in the last few weeks. But before there was no place to imprison him in.
Now there was.
And there was the matter of the trial coming.
At a certain point, he had laid down on the settee, using Arran's legs as a pillow. He couldn't calm down. He couldn't talk himself into not panicking. But he had to take it. He had to still his legs, that just wanted to run away, and to clench his hands, that itched to slash and maim and tear away. He had to go through this. He had to let the trial happen, and see Annalise again, and let the Alliance do of her as they see fit. If he even tried to envision the scene - Annalise standing - whereas Marcus laid dead - almost certainly in some Hunters' hands - maybe even Wallend's - and the Alliance not killing her... Nathan tried to steady his breath, as adrenaline and hate made his every limb shiver. Arran combed a hand in his hair, as soothing as Nathan remembered it. He waited, and focused only his brother's fingers slowly untangling his messy locks, and stayed. He wasn't better. He was still filled with anxiety and violence, that pulled him in too many different directions, all at once. But it was better to fall apart in Arran's arms, the quiet chattering of the telly an echo of a distant, simpler past.

In the end, Nathan was given orders not to leave his assigned room until the trial began. When Nesbitt told him so, he laughed in his face. Then Nesbitt dipped a brush in a cup Van had given him, and painted a straight simple line in front of the door of Nathan and Gabriel's room. Nathan felt something was wrong at once, and tried to throw the nearest heavy object - the bowl of nightsmoke - at his head. Gabriel was swift enough to grab it from his hand.
"Gotcha," Nesbitt said, infuriatingly, as he retreated with the usual mockery in his bouncing steps. Nathan's fury was short-lived, however, if only because he hadn't been planning on running anywhere. He was more mad at the idea of not being able to go to Arran's room; but the idea of roaming the corridors of Kolkasrags, knowing the preparations for the trial where underway, knowing that he might cross people he really didn't want to see until the very last possible moment... If he couldn't run away - and he couldn't, he couldn't, he had to go through with this... then holing up in their room was the next best thing.
No one bothered him for three days - no Celia, no Nesbitt, no Max. No Ellen, no Arran, no Viviana. It was obvious they were prevented from speaking to him - he wasn't pathetic enough to think otherwise, not yet.
(Or maybe not anymore.)
Gabriel took care of food, and gathering rumours and messages. Nathan started to get restless, and fidgety, and stressed. He threaded very carefully around Gabriel, and Gabriel did the same. It was
like they were both waiting for something, or for the other to do something, but neither knew what. 
At the very least, Nathan's dreams were bothering him less. He kept repeating to himself his father's 
words -*the point of being good is doing it when it's hard, not when it's easy* - as he laid down to 
sleep. Every night he reminded himself of the good he had done, of the people he had saved. 
Diamond. Max. Skaidrite. He even had one pleasant dream once, although he remembered it very 
hazily. He was sure it involved Debs. There had been flowers, the wild kind they used to gather by 
the armful in the pastures behind their old house. There had been a woman reading a book out loud. 
Their mother, maybe? He had woken up with a sense of peace; peace like a ray of dawn-light hitting 
a pearl of dew just right, making it glow - beautiful and as serene as early morning, but fleeting. 
The more he paced the room, the more he grew restless. The more he was reminded of the cage, the 
more his dreams grew worse.
When they finally came to bring him to the trial, he was almost relieved.

There was no ballroom in Kolkasrags, no spacious room of wealth and relaxation to convert into a 
court. However, true to its founders' long-standing authority in the Baltic Council, it had a war room, 
complete with gallery overhead for people to watch, and judge, and be suitably reminded of their 
own place and submission.
The war room was enough to house what seemed like the entire Alliance, soldiers and civilians alike. 
Nathan was escorted by Nesbitt and, to his surprise, Viviana. He didn't know what to make of that, 
nor of Nesbitt studiously ignoring her. Nathan exchanged a quick glance with Gabriel, who shot him 
an equally dubious look - *No clue*, it said. It was hard to imagine Van adjusting to her presence so 
easily. Whatever was happening between them, it was well-hidden behind closed doors.
Viviana, in any case, seemed her usual self, and not overly worried. This was comforting for Nathan. 
He was pretty sure if he had been in danger, she would have at least tried to warn him.
The closer they got to the room, the stronger the noise of clamouring people became - witches talking 
and whispering and anticipating. Nathan started to feel queasy. Even when he had been summoned 
for his assessments, it had been only him, and Gran, and the Council. And lots of Hunters, but 
mostly out of sight. Nathan wasn't even sure when was the last time he had been in the presence of a 
crowd. In Geneva? And he had never in his life shared a room with so many witches. He tried to 
calm down by reminding himself they weren't there for him, that he wasn't the accused - Annalise 
was. But who was he kidding?

He almost jumped out of his skin when Gabriel linked his own arm with his. He didn't say anything; 
just his look was enough. 
I'm here with you. You're not alone.
Nathan's heart was hammering in his chest. Nervous didn't even begin to cover it; he felt so sick with 
nerves, he felt dizzy. He grabbed Gabriel's arm so hard he was sure he was hurting him, but Gabriel 
didn't complain.
When he entered the room, the noise ceased. It was so sudden, it left a ring in the air. 
His escorts guided him to one side of the room. At the dead centre of it was a simple chair; in front of 
it, a long table. To the sides, a series of benches. Nathan and Gabriel sat on one of them. Nathan 
couldn't help it; he let out a silent sigh of relief at not being guided to the chair. The chattering 
gradually re-started, if a little more subdued. Nathan didn't look up, didn't want to see the stares, the 
glares, the words whispered behind obviously placed hands. He kept squeezing Gabriel's arm for 
comfort, and tried not to give himself a heart attack. He was vaguely aware of Gabriel whispering in 
his own right, words that were meant to be comforting but didn't reach him.
Then the room fell silent. Again.
Nathan didn't look up. If he did, he wasn't sure what he would have done. Instead he listened. Two 
sets of steps - heavy-booted, long strides. One set much lighter. Hesitant.
He had to look eventually. When he did, she was being seated and strapped down, her wrists 
chained. Her hair, once so similar to silk, was matted and dishevelled. Her clothes were tattered in 
places, with old dirt-and-grass stains. She was frightened, that was obvious, but sat with her back 
straight, looking ahead, not paying any mind to the crowd. The crowd itself was a lot less sneering
than Nathan had anticipated. That would have been enough to make his blood boil. Then she noticed him. She was surprised, first; of what, he couldn't imagine. Surely she expected him to be there. Then she looked at Gabriel, her eyes falling to their still-linked arms; and she looked quickly away. She was still so ethereally beautiful. Nathan wished to skin her alive with a violence he hadn't felt in a while.

Nathan was so focused on her and his hate of her, so deafened by echoes of Connor's snivelling and phantom guns firing, so blinded by the image of his father falling, his blood running, Annalise's face wet with tears and ugly with anguish, that he didn't even notice that the generals had entered the room, and had sat at the table, silencing the crowd with their entrance. He had to force himself to look away from her.

Viviana was standing next to the generals' table, on Van's side, who was seated at one end of the table itself. Nathan vaguely wondered why she would stand so close to Van, when she had made it pretty clear she wanted Van dead. Plus the feeling was mutual. But Celia was seated at the opposite end of the table. It made for an interesting tableau. On one side, three Whites – two former Hunters, one former Councillor. On the other side, one Black, and one ambiguously Black. It was imperative to show a united, but equally matching, front. The generals fell short on that, and felt it keenly. There had been talk of elevating another Black to the rank of general, but that idea posed the problem of who, exactly, among the highly-volatile Blacks remaining, was fit for the task. Viviana wasn't exactly Black, nor someone Van was ever going to elevate to any rank of power, but it was still easier to let her stand there, next to them, and let the people of the Alliance draw their slightly misguided conclusions on who she was, than facing the alternative.

Viviana was the first to speak. "People of the Alliance, we welcome you to this assembly. These last few weeks have been hectic, to say the least; now that you have all finally settled in Kolkasrags, there are a few things we have to make official. The first one. My covenant sisters have bestowed on me the honour to serve in this Alliance. Some of you may remember me from the raid in Bratislava. My name is Viviana Di Dunarea. On that day, the Alliance struck back against Soul and his degenerate Council. You saved many lives that day," she said, with a sweeping look at the entire crowd. "That's something we should all be proud of. That was also the day councillor Iskandra joined us," she added, turning to the Councillor. Iskandra nodded in acknowledgement. "Indeed it was. My Council doesn't exist anymore, swallowed as it was by Soul's grab for power. What is left is nothing but a row of puppets in his hands. Let it be a warning for anyone thinking that they can weather this, that if they keep their head down, this also will pass. It will not, my brethren," she said. With her white hair and lined face, she was like an ancient fir on the side of a winter mountain, covered in snow, majestic in its quiet power. "It will take hold, at a great cost. As long as Soul had his eyes on Britain, we could tell ourselves we just had to stay away from there. But Soul doesn't want only Britain. And he doesn't want his new lands to be tainted by Blacks, or opposition. We're in this fight together, not only because we're stronger this way, but because our very existence depends on it."

She paused then. The crowd, silent at first, started to whisper, but it was subdued. Frightened. "Before we start with the trial," Van said, "an explanation is in order for what happened recently with our covenant sister, Viviana, and Nathan."

The crowd's sudden chattering felt almost like an explosion, after the hesitant murmurs of just a few second before. Van waited for it to subside. Nathan glared as fiercely as he could to no one and everyone, growing tenser by the minute, until his every muscle was locked and aching.

"Viviana, Nathan, and one of our scouts, Ellen, encountered a Black witch fleeing from Hunters on the outskirts of the fortress," Van continued. "The woman was killed by the curse of the forest when she attempted to cross it. Ellen," she said, rising her voice. "Yes ma'am," Ellen said, coming to the front of the crowd. She was on the gallery on the upper level
"Do you confirm that the woman was killed by the forest?"
"Yes."
"Can you tell everyone present what happened after?"
"The woman, Isolde, begged us to help her adoptive children, who had been captured by Hunters and brought to Danzig. She was in terrible pain from the wounds. They were fatal. We then decided to follow her information and free the children."
"This is not a Fain army and we're not Hunters, but we still expect every member of this Alliance to follow orders and respect the chain of command. Why did you decide to take independent action, instead of reporting what had happened?"

_Because if she had, now two more innocent Blacks would be dead!_ Nathan wanted to scream. He did. In his head, but he did. He was hating this already. He had thought the times in which he had to scream the bloody obvious in his head were gone. Gabriel stroked Nathan's arm gently, trying to reassure him, or distract him, whichever worked best.

“Because Viviana ordered me to,” Ellen said, and Nathan froze.

Van slowly turned to Viviana. “Explain.”

Nathan looked at Ellen. What he read on her face reminded him of when she was Nikita to him – playful, cunning, and shrewd. He relaxed a fraction.

Of course Viviana would take the fall for them. Of course.

“I knew that reporting back, and then deciding whether or not to act, would have doomed the woman's children,” Viviana said. “I decided to take action instead. Something the Alliance has been sadly lacking in, as of late.”

“The Alliance,” Greatorex said with great care, “has had great ordeals to face.”

“I'm not denying that. Are you denying that those kids would be dead now, if I had reported in?”

Angry murmuring from the crowd. Nathan wasn't surprised to spot Gus in the midst of it. He wasn't surprised by seeing the majority of Blacks standing on one side, and by him being in the smack middle of it, either. The only exception he could see was Adele. She was standing next to Arran, who was right behind Ellen.

“Everyone in this room is glad two more witches could be spared from the Hunters,” Celia said. “What we don't want is to see more witches dead because they feel inspired by your stunt.”

She embraced the entire crowd with a hard stare. “Let me remind to everyone present that Viviana's and Nathan's talents are exceptional. I trust no one will try their hands at what they did.”

The people in the room took issue with that, and a lot of them started to talk all at once, or shouting at the generals. “Why didn't you do it before?” came a call from the crowd. Angry. Edging on desperate.

So many lives had been lost, left behind to hands that could do unspeakable things to tender flesh and innocent minds.

Celia tried to speak, but it was too loud for her to be heard.

Nathan edged closer to Gabriel. The ruckus wasn't helping his nerves any.

The chasm between Whites and Blacks had never been more evident. The indistinct grumbling soon became a shouting match of accusations and vitriol.
"You never cared for Blacks dying like dogs, now you want us to die to save other Whites?"
"Soul is killing Whites too!"
"Whites who can't even fight, and who will then come here and sit on their asses all day, like you do!"
"Why do you suddenly care what happened to the captured Blacks? The majority of you didn't even want to join! You never cared to save them!"
The crowd didn't show any sign of calming down. Then Celia stood up, and silence fell abruptly. Her imposing figure was enough to command it.
Gabriel felt Nathan's jolt like a stab.
"Shut up," Celia said, "all of you."
"I must remind to all of you," Van said, using her much more collected demeanour to effectiveness, "that no matter how much we ache to help our fellow witches in the hands of the Hunters, we have no means to know where they are, or how many there are. It was sheer luck that brought Isolde to us. It's not something we can repeat. Our scouts are already in constant danger. We cannot afford to send them close to Hunter's bases, let alone approach Hunters to gather such sensitive information. It pains you as much as it pains us."
Nathan couldn't suppress a snort. It earned him a few spiteful looks from the witches closer to him.
"I want to remind you all that our scouts are the ones who were more decimated at Białowieża. We can't lose more," Greatorex added. They are also the ones with the highest casualty rate on the line of duty, she thought, but didn't say.
Celia swept the crowd with one last glare. Then she sat down.
Nathan relaxed slightly. He noticed he had been gripping Gabriel's arm very hard, and worried about leaving imprints. "Sorry," he whispered. Gabriel only smiled at him.
"Now. Let's move on to the reason why we're all gathered here today," Greatorex said.
The silence turned icy, and very still. All eyes fell on the girl at the centre of the room, who had stayed quiet and hunched on herself throughout the ruckus.
"Annalise O'Brien, you're here to stand trial for treason."
She rose her head then, straightening her back, but she didn't look defiant. If anything, she looked exhausted; the last month had ground her bones to dust.
"We will ask you what happened at Białowieża. You won't be given a truth potion, but a potion of my own devising that will punish you if you lie. If you decide to lie anyway, consequences will be unpleasant," Van said. "Do you understand?"
Annalise's voice was clear when she answered, "Yes."
The crowd's noise, its anticipation, fear, and bloodlust was like the tide, surging and retreating, then surging again. For once, Nathan felt a part of it. This was it; this was the moment of truth. This was the moment Annalise finally said the truth, all of it. This was the time his father's murderer was going to be punished.
Or maybe not.
Nesbitte gave Annalise a cup to drink from. She did so without a fuss.
Nathan was pretty sure the last time he had been this tense was the day of his birthday, when night had fallen and he had been almost out of time. His arm was still locked with Gabriel's. He didn't move it, and clasped his own hands together. He slowly stroke the warm gold of his father's ring. Up and down, up and down, tiny, almost invisible movements, feeling the warm metal move around his finger.
It didn't help at all. He felt too brittle to exist, like at any moment he would shatter and scatter on the floor like broken glass.
He kept stroking the ring.
"Let's start from the beginning," Van said. "Start from that day in Białowieża. Tell us what happened when we attacked the Hunters."
"I was with the other suppliers," Annalise said, without hesitation. She was scared, that was plain for
everyone to see - her hands, trapped by the chains, were trembling - but she did not falter. She was ready to face the scrutiny. In that moment, Nathan realized she still thought she had done the right thing.

Oh, how he hated her.

"We were called to gather the Hunters' guns once the battle was over," she resumed. "When Greatorex called I went to one of the supplies caches, where Nathan, Nesbitt, and Marcus were. But when I arrived, Marcus had a prisoner at knife point, saying he was going to kill him. I realized it was my brother, Connor."

"You're not the only one with kin fighting, by choice of by coercion, on the other side," Greatorex said. "A lot of other witches here face the same dilemma. Yet they fight. They realize the position they're in, and still choose to fight, not to serve a tyrant."

"How come your brother became a Hunter, all your brothers did, in fact - but not you? What made you decide to join the Alliance instead?" Celia asked.

Annalise was silent for a long moment. She pondered her answer, fearing whatever would happen to her if she was not absolutely sincere with herself, and then with everyone listening. With a specific person, listening, murdering her with every glance.

Finally, her answer came, a whisper barely audible, full of guilt and wistfulness and the desperation of things forever lost. "Nathan," she said.

Nathan tried to leap to his feet, but he felt Gabriel's arms like a vice around him, and Nathan let him stop him. He still snarled at Annalise, who didn't look at him, choosing to stare at the floor. She had been warned, and even before that, she had heard whispers and gossip. Nathan wasn't well. Van had been very clear with her. She was not to provoke Nathan in any way. Or else.

"Nathan was the reason," she repeated. "I escaped England because I couldn't watch my father, my brothers, my uncle in the eyes, knowing what they did to Nathan, what they were planning to do. I don't know how---" she choked then, unshed tears shining in her azure-and-silver eyes. She fought through the rawness of her throat, the threat of it closing and her composure dissolving. "I don't know how any White, in the village, in the Council, anyone who knew, could bear that. How could they know how he was treated, and live with themselves. I could not. I tried to hide it for as long as I could, but when I heard he had escaped... I fled, too. That's why I came to the Alliance. I had been looking for years, waiting for the right moment, but I could never find the courage before. And Connor helped me."

Someone in the crowd guffawed. "Out of love?"

Annalise wished the room was empty. Saying all this in front of the generals, of Nathan, of all these witches...

Connor had been dead less than a month. The naiveté she had had, in not thinking of consequences when she had joined, while her entire family was on the other side; the thrill she had felt shivering in her body, when she had first kissed Nathan, knowing how much her father would have hated that; her foolishness not ten minutes before, when she had seen Nathan, seen the bottomless hate in his eyes and the arm linked with Gabriel's, and she had felt her heart sink, and then burn, hating herself and hating him and hating Gabriel, too. Everything was confused, and nothing made sense.

Yet the truth was only one, and it was going to cut. No one in the room was going to understand. They despised Nathan just as much as her family had. She did not deserve this. He did not deserve this, no matter...

Tears sprang to her eyes.

He had killed two of her brothers. If he ever met the third, he would kill him too, and then demand she didn't grieve him.

She hated him.

She still couldn't see him as a monster.
"Out of humanity," she said.
"This is irrelevant," Celia said with a cutting gesture. "I don't care what your motives were to join. Everyone here has a different reason, a different story. The Alliance doesn't care what its witches did before, as long as they have motive to fight Soul in any way they can."
"That night, when we were ambushed by the Hunters. Your brother was there; he was a bait. Correct?" Greatorex asked.
"Yes. Connor was there. He had been taken prisoner."
"Did you know he was going to be there?"
"No," she said at once. Then she saw the generals were looking at her keenly, and realized. She started. But still, nothing happened.
"Very well," Van said, lowly.
"I had no way of contacting him or Niall," Annalise added.
"Silence," Celia intimated. "You'll speak when addressed."
The girl fell silent, stunned. She was used to be treated with deference by Hunters - no Hunter she had ever encountered was unaware of her position, of her relation to her uncle Soul. Yet it was public knowledge how she had dared to love the wrong boy – the worst possible kind of wrong boy, and that also elicited a veiled scorn, always. She remembered being treated with that mixture of deference and contempt by Celia, just a few years before, when they both still walked the corridors of the Council's palace.
"Tell us what happened afterwards. Tell us of the ambush," Greatorex said, a little gentler.
"I think... I'm not sure I remember correctly. It all happened so fast. I know Marcus and Nathan were there. They wanted to kill him, but I picked up a gun and pointed it at Marcus. I begged Nathan to stop him. He asked Marcus to let Connor go, and he did. Then the Hunters attacked. In the confusion, Connor tried to reach one of the crates full of guns and---" her voice shook. She looked at the generals and saw only sombre sternness. Not an ounce of pity, or understanding. She didn't need to turn to know that Nathan was glaring daggers in her direction, wishing her dead. She wanted to turn behind, see if at least someone in the crowd...
She tried her best to steel herself, and hoped it was enough. "Marcus saw him. He stopped him before he could even grab a gun, and he--- he stabbed him. He grabbed him by the hair and stabbed him in the throat." Annalise was crying in earnest now. "And I shot him. Twice."
A roar came from the Black side of the crowd.
"Just like that? You want us to believe you killed the most powerful Black witch of his generation that easily?" someone shouted.
"You can see she's not in excruciating pain," Van said, not rising her voice. "She would be if she was lying."
Then she turned to Nathan. He was curled around Gabriel's arm, fixing Annalise with a still, wild glare. "Do you confirm what she said?" Van asked.
He remained silent for a long time. "Yes," he finally said.
The most important part had been left out, the part that tormented him in his nightmares.
You promised!
He was glad she hadn't mentioned that.
"Was it planned?"
Annalise was stunned into silence. "What?"
"Was it planned?" Van repeated.
Annalise's answer was lost in the cacophony that followed. Most Blacks were already sure it was. Most Whites couldn't believe she was even accused. What was she guilty of? Defending her brother against the most vicious, unstable Black witch to ever walk the Earth?
Nathan caught pieces and shreds of what was being shouted, but it was enough. Marcus had been a vicious killer, that was true.
He still helped when almost no one else had, out of pure generosity. There was no gain for him in any of it. He knew he was going to die for having tried. How many witches out there secretly hoped Soul was killed, and knew what terrible things were being done to Blacks, and did nothing?
Viviana took one menacing step towards the crowd. "I will ask only once. Be silent."
The noise subsided, but only barely. Viviana met Nathan's eye. He was of half a mind to get up and
do something stupid, like summoning lightning. Her look made him pause, and observe.
"I said, be silent!" she yelled, and unleashed her Gift. It was only a fraction of a second, just enough
to feel the inverse-pull, to feel your stomach drop and your feet leave the floor for a terrifying
moment. Stunned, the witches fell silent. Some actually fell to the floor, their sense of equilibrium
momentarily disabled.
Viviana swept the room with a scorching stare. "It is not you we're gathered here to listen. Am I
making myself clear?"
Silence was her answer. Satisfied, Viviana stepped back.
"Repeat your answer," Greatorex ordered Annalise.
"It wasn't," she answered.
"How did you get away? Were you helped by the Hunters?"
"No! My Gift... it's invisibility. I used it to get away from the battle."
"Were you ever offered the chance to spy on Nathan by your uncle?"
The sudden change of subject caught her off-guard. "What? No!"
Then she was bent in two, her hair spilling over her face as she dry-heaved.
Nathan wanted to drink in that scene, to enjoy it as one tastes the first bite of a succulent meal. But
what he felt was barely a jolt of satisfaction. A sense of dread towered over it.
"Do you want to rephrase that?" Van asked.
It took some time before Annalise sat upright again. She coughed a few times before answering. "He
didn't outright ask me... but I think... he wanted me to. He hinted at it, but it was so roundabout, and I
never---"
"What did he hint at?"
A shiver coursed through her. "He said... something about the stick not being enough. That if you
want a Blacks to submit, you have to give them something that makes them want to keep on living,
even when they are put in their right place. I'm sorry, this is not---"
"Keep talking, Annalise," Greatorex told her, not unkindly.
"He didn't say it, but I kind of thought he was talking about Nathan, because... I already knew no
Black was ever released alive once captured. It doesn't matter who they are or what they have done,
if they have at all. They are killed because they exist. And he knew I knew. And right after, and it
was so random, he started asking me about the Ashworths. Wondering about Mrs Ashworth's health,
and how Deborah and Arran were faring. I told him I didn't know. I was... I was terrified he was
asking."
Nathan's blood turned to ice.
"Did Soul let you escape England, to allow you to spy on Nathan, or the Alliance, or both?"
Annalise almost gave a knee-jerk answer again, but caught herself. The sting in her bones and flesh
when she tried was warning enough.
"...I think my escape was a little too easy." And that made her wonder. Connor had helped her. If it
was planned, if they had known... had it been by chance that he was in Białowieża, in the bait
group?
"You didn't answer the question. Did you accept to spy for him?"
"No."
"Did you ever feel like the door was left open for you, to easily come back with information, or just
relaying it?"
Annalise wanted to say she wasn't sure. She wanted to, so much.
"Yes," she finally said.
"Did you ever report back to the Council, or the Hunters, or anyone affiliated with them?"
"No."
"Did you want to?"
"No!"
"You realize, of course," Van said very slowly, "that it is entirely possible that Soul found a way to make you relay information to him, while also making you forget you did? There's no limit to what a talented potion-maker can do. And there are a lot of them in his service."

Annalise felt sweat beading on her upper lip. Her hands, too, were slippery with it. "If that were true, how would I know about it?" she asked.

"You wouldn't," Van said. "And neither would we."

Nathan turned to whisper into Gabriel's ear, "Can they really do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Potion-makers. Can they really do anything?"

"I'm not sure. I mean, if that were true, in all the millennia witches have been around... Think of the things they could've done. Or, the things Soul could have done already. There must be a limit to what they can do. Now that I think about it, one limitation I know for sure. Van mentioned it, remember? To work well, a potion must be tailored to the person who's going to drink it."

"Did you want to kill Marcus?"

"I didn't plan to--" Annalise tried to say, but Celia made a cutting gesture that silenced her at once.

"That is not what I asked. Did you want to kill him?"

"Yes," Annalise said, crying in earnest now. "Yes, and I'm sorry! I'm sorry for what happened, I'm sorry so many people died, but he---" she bent again, as the potion wrecked her limbs.

The generals watched her in silence until the effect subsided.

"What you meant to say was, I'd think, that Marcus wanted to kill your brother, and you tried to stop him. We know that isn't true," Greatorex said. "Your brother died instantly, and you saw it. You knew he was dead, and attacked Marcus with the intent to kill. If there was any need, it's proof that Whites and Blacks are much more alike than Soul would want us to believe."

"Which begs the question: where you aiming at Marcus? Was your goal to join the Alliance so that you could kill him, under the Council's orders?"

"This is ridiculous!" someone shouted from the White side.

"You will be silent, or this trial will go on without you all!" Celia shouted back.

Viviana strode into the crowd, which parted at once for her. She found who had shouted easily enough. When she grabbed her and pulled her in front of the generals, Nathan recognized her: it was Sarah, Annalise's good-for-nothing friend, the one who had told him to fuck off, because she needed someone "nice" - meaning White, meaning not Nathan.

(Oh, how happy she must have been with how things turned out.)

How many Whites wanted to side with Annalise now? How many thought she should walk away free?

Viviana pushed Sarah so that she was between Annalise and Nathan. She shot one look at him and tried to break away, but Viviana grabbed her by the arm and held her in place.

"What?" she mocked her, "not as brave now, next to the big bad Black Witch? Not to worry, he's half White. Maybe you can elicit some sympathy from him, if you try hard enough."

Nathan didn't try to scare her his usual way, by grinning like the mad beast everyone thought he was. That, in and of itself, was worrisome.

"Would you like to repeat what you said?" Van asked Sarah, looking for all intent and purpose like she was going to kill her if she dared, and kill her if she didn't.

The girl stayed silent.

Typical White, Nathan thought. Most of them don't even know what fighting means, let alone how to grow a spine.

"I thought we had made it clear. No one is allowed to speak out of turn. We are your generals," Celia said, "because we have fought Soul from day one, risked our lives to build this Alliance. Do you think you have the right to speak?" this she asked Sarah, who didn't dare to say anything. Her defiance was clear in her face, however; she wasn't trying to hide it.

"Do you think you have any idea what it means to fight against Soul? And I don't mean the battles, the killing. No, there's more to that. There's the gathering of information. There's the searching and
finding spies in our ranks, in our ranks' relatives and friends. You think we haven't found any? You think you're above suspicion? It doesn't matter if a White wants to be a spy. Soul will use anything to blackmail someone. Do you know how many have the strength to say no? Do you know what happens when they say no?"

The girl babbled something, too softly to be heard.

"I can't hear you!" Celia shouted.

"No! No, I don't know," she answered then.

"You're a civilian. I know your family, you've come to us after your parents were killed. They tried to help a family of Black halfbloods to leave England, didn't they? And they were killed for it," Greatorex said. "What they tried to do was commendable, but what happened was entirely expected. There's a reason why every White with fighting potential is conscripted into the Hunters. You think it's because Blacks are so much powerful, and the Council needs all the womanpower available? Well, yes. But what is the result? Every White witch combat-able is under the direct control of the Council. All the Whites remaining have no battle training. They're cattle. They're at the mercy of the Council and of the Hunters," Greatorex said. She let those final words hanging in the air.

"You, and everyone like you, came to us because you needed our protection. We have created this Alliance to give you that. But don't think, for even one second, that you deserve any say in what we decide," Celia added. "You have to prove yourself first. If you haven't, or if you can't, then you will be silent."

"We assume Annalise is a spy because we have to. Once we have explored every possibility, asked every possible question, everyone will know whether she is or not. We can't afford to not suspect her because you think it's too much, or because we're unfair. Or do you think the potion we gave her won't work?" Greatorex asked.

The girl mumbled again, staring at the floor. Viviana waited a few seconds for her answer; when it didn't come, she hauled her back and almost threw her into the crowd again. She silenced the outraged murmurs with a scathing stare.

"You all should take Greatorex's words at heart," she said. "You're all cattle, and you have the gall to speak! What are we, Fains? A Witch who wants to count for something does so by blood, or by craft! There is no other way! Use your Gift to make our enemies bleed, or apply it with your mind and your skills to be useful. Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?"

The question hanged in the air, ringing in the silence.

"Whites used to be better than this," Viviana continued. "What happened to you? Have you lived so long among Fains that you really are no different than them now? What is the difference between a White and a Fain today? The Gift? And what in the Descendants' name do you do with your Gift?"

She didn't expect an answer, but she still waited for it. She could read the answers in the dark glares sent her way.

She laughed then. "To work? To make money out of your fellow Witches? To barter, like peasants centuries ago? You really are nothing more than Fains if you think that. You want to sit over there?" she asked, pointing at the generals' table. "Then prove yourselves, and then kill the general you want to replace. That is the Witch way. That is what Witches have done over the centuries."

She retreated back to her spot then, and stood in silence once again.

"Let's try and get back to this trial, hoping it won't become a spectacle again too soon," Celia said, obviously annoyed at Viviana's words. Viviana didn't turn to look at her, but she didn't hide a half-smile at her annoyance.

"Annalise, answer the question. Did Soul, or anyone associated with him or the Hunters, give you orders to kill Marcus?"

"No," she answered. "Can I ask a question?"

It was the generals' turn to be reduced to silence. Even Viviana looked surprised. They were too aware of themselves to look at each other in puzzlement, but it was a near thing.

Finally Iskandra said, half-amused, "Let's hear it."

Annalise turned to Viviana. "You said that only Witches who prove themselves deserve to speak."

"That is not a question," Viviana said, mocking evident in her tone.
"What about those who have a weak Gift? They can't help it. Shouldn't they deserve a chance?"
"I said they can't speak, not that they can't exist. This was the Witch way, before the witch hunts and the fall of the Clans changed everything. Do you want to change that, little girl?"
"I just think it's not right. Everyone should have a chance to count for something, even if their Gift is not strong."
Viviana snorted. "You say that like I'm asking them to pay taxes without the right to vote. I'm no Fain, Annalise O'Brien."
"Useless questions notwithstanding," Van said, "I think we're done. We have heard enough to come to a verdict. Do we all agree?" she asked, looking at her fellow generals. After their assent, she resumed. "Annalise O'Brien, you are doubtlessly guilty of murder. Your actions led to a catastrophic defeat for us, in which more than half of our forces were wiped out. That ambush was unrelated to your actions and it was going to be costly for us anyway, but Marcus could have saved a lot of lives. There is also the not irrelevant fact that your actions caused severe problems to one who was supposed to be the strongest of our warriors. You have, effectively, crippled this organization with one unplanned, emotion-driven, and useless act of vengeance."
Nathan started at the oblique mentioning of his state. He had expected to be asked more; maybe the generals didn't want to risk it. In all honesty, he couldn't fathom what he would say if asked. It could have been anything between a level-headed recount of what happened, and deranged calling for Annalise's violent death. But this was it. It was going to finish.
She was going to die, Van all but said it, they were going to execute her, yes, yes, finally he would be able to sleep well at night, at least this...
"You have proved you are not a spy. That is why I will be merciful. My sentence is execution. Swift, and painless," Van said.
No one dared to speak, no one dared to breathe. Nathan didn't dare either. Then he felt his lips slowly, slowly stretch in a smile, a disbelieving smile...
"My sentence," Celia said, "is also execution."
Annalise let out a suffocated sob.
Greatorex seemed to hesitate before speaking. She took a breath before finally doing so. "You have damaged this Alliance greatly, Annalise. I feel like you were too naive when you joined us, too quick in condemning violence and this war. Yet see where you are now. Do you think you have new insight in the reality of this war, now?"
Annalise was crying again. "I-I don't know. I just..."
Greatorex waited. Nathan wanted to kill her. Why was she trying to ruin this perfect moment?
"I think, if I had a chance... I'd try to make it up to all the people who suffered because of me. I would... I don't know how," Annalise sobbed, "but I'd find a way."
"I believe you," Greatorex said. "My sentence is imprisonment in this fortress, until the Alliance is satisfied that reparation is given. As a reminder of your guilt and of your duty towards your victims, you will be bound to Kolkasrags with a spell-collar around your neck. If you try to leave the premises, it will release a powerful acid, and kill you. If you'll fail to live up to your duties, the ones we'll find suitable for you, it will release the acid, and kill you."
Nathan was stunned. He felt Gabriel get even closer, if that was possible. Celia seemed impressed with Greatorex's proposal.
Iskandra hadn't spoken much. It would have been out of place of her, new as she was; she hadn't been a part of the fallout during Bialowieza. Greatorex's sentence, however, pleased her. It was better to keep a relative of Soul alive and at their bidding, if the chance was there for the taking.
"I support Greatorex's sentence," Iskandra finally said.
"It seems we are at a draw," Van said. She turned to Viviana. "We need a fifth sentence. What would you propose?"
Viviana kept an absolutely straight face as she betrayed them and the deal they had. "I think Nathan, as the one whose father was murdered in front of his eyes, should decide."
Van wasn't a witch prone to explosive bursts of violence, regardless of her Black nature. It was, however, a near thing. Celia's face was like steel.
Nathan had no idea what to say. It suddenly dawned on him that he never had the power to decide someone's life or death with just a few words. He had killed plenty, but this felt different. Calculated in a way that was alien to him. If he had been asked just a few seconds before... there would've been no doubt in his mind.

"Do you agree with Greatorex, or with Van's sentence, Nathan?" Viviana asked, very softly. She could afford it; the room was so silent you could've heard a pin drop.

She had killed Marcus. She had done so for nothing, for a brother who was a coward and a Hunter, and who had been dead anyhow. She had caused so many to die.

She was one of the few decent Whites he knew. Even in the face of death, even in this room with very little humanity, she hadn't faltered in her belief that he was worthy of respect. Even when he hated her, and she hated him.

_The point of being good is doing it when it's hard, not when it's easy._

"I agree with Greatorex," Nathan finally said.

It took an entire day to calm things down. It was a long and tedious affair, almost entirely comprised of giving various witches a good talking to, or a good reason to shut up. In one memorable case, a Black witch threatened a White to cut her ear off. Nathan didn't understand why she'd choose an ear when the problem was that she wouldn't shut up, but he liked to think it was in honour of Marcus.

After a fight almost broke out between him and Gus, he decided to leave. No one tried to stop him, luckily for them. He walked out of the fortress and down the winding path that led to the beach, Gabriel following him in silence. He hadn't spoken much during the trial at all.

"What do you think?" Nathan asked him.

"About what, exactly?"

Nathan shrugged. Whatever Gabriel was thinking, he was willing to listen.

Gabriel sighed. He was completely worn out. Worry and jealousy didn't mix well; they were way more tiresome that he had imagined. They both took a lot of effort.

"I think the generals did their best. I'm surprised no one killed anyone, honestly. I'm sure the generals are surprised by that too, actually. Although they did plan on killing Annalise."

"You noticed, huh."

"Yes. I'm surprised by that too. I thought Celia would protect her anyway, because she's White."

"Do you think I made the right choice?" Nathan asked anxiously. It had been so quick. He hadn't thought about it that much; had he thought about it at all?

"Yes. I think you did. I know it's not what you had planned, but it's a good punishment. She was always naive, but also idealistic... Maybe she'll learn. If she dies, she can't learn anything. Promise me you'll avoid her, though?"

Nathan stared at him. "Avoid her?"

"...Nathan. She's going to be imprisoned inside the perimeter of Kolkasrags. That means she won't be in a cell; she'll be free to walk around. Maybe with some limitations, but still," Gabriel said, disbelief written clearly on his face.

"...Oh. I hadn't thought of that."

"Seriously? Didn't you think about it when Viviana asked?"

"I don't think... I really thought about it. I did what felt right," Nathan said, clearly embarrassed now. Gabriel sighed. Then he wound his arms around Nathan's tense frame, and waited for the tension to slowly leave his body. "Honestly, I don't know what I expected. That's such a 'you' thing to do."

Nathan let his warmth and the call of the sea lull him. Then he heard the sand scrunch under someone else's steps. When he looked up, Viviana was walking towards them. They parted, slowly.

"Did anyone die in our absence?" Nathan asked, to which she laughed.

"Nah. Who would dare to steal your spotlight so?" she answered. "Are you all right?"

"You gave me the possibility to choose," Nathan said. "I saw Van's face, and Celia's. That wasn't what they had planned, wasn't it?"
"No it wasn't. They didn't want to take any chance, you see."
Nathan snorted.
"But people don't heal if you don't give them a chance to. You needed to be given this chance.
Whatever your choice," Viviana said.
"Your decision might've ended with Annalise dead. Didn't you think about that?"
"Honestly, Nathan, I don't care about that girl."
Nathan stared at her in disbelief. Then he burst out laughing.

"Such a Black thing to say," Gabriel said, dryly.
"I know something about giving people a second chance. About giving them a choice," Viviana said, softly.
"Is this the beginning of another one of your history lessons?"
"Ah! So impudent," she answered, amused. "You'll ask me one day, you'll see. It's about your father."
"What? What about him?"
"Oh, now he wants to know. Too bad, I'm not in the mood for a history lesson right now."
Nathan glared at her. Viviana laughed, and walked away. She laughed again when Gabriel said, "She had you there."

When Adele found her, Viviana was hiding among the trees nearest to the beach. The days were already turning gloomy and grey, the sign of an early winter, as was to be expected near the cold waters of the Baltic. Adele approached her slowly, taking care to step on a few twigs to alert her. Viviana didn't turn, but a small smile blossomed on her lips.

"Will you look at them," she said, amused.
Adele got close enough, and chanced a look in the direction of the beach. Nathan and Gabriel were sitting on the sea-bleached fallen tree. Their shoulders touched, and they seemed deep in conversation. The wind snatched a scrap of laughter, twirling like a dancing partner's skirt.
"Seems like my favourite spot was taken," Viviana said.

"I wanted to speak with you, if it's not too much trouble," Adele asked, ignoring the pair on the beach for now. That was something to be neatly filed away, and relayed to Arran as soon as possible.

"Well that's obvious, isn't it?" Viviana answered. Her smile was full of mirth.
"There's something that has been on my mind since the day of the trial," Adele began. "Something that me and Skaidrite have been talking about."

"Oh? And how do you talk to each other? I thought she didn't speak English."
"Her English is rudimentary, yes. But that's not a problem with the Gift she has."

Viviana waited. When Adele didn't say anything at first, she simply raised an eyebrow. She knew Adele was going to fold. It was just innocent playfulness, but Adele was reminded again of the chasm dividing herself - a young witch barely past her Giving - and this powerful, mostly unreadable ancient witch. Someone who had no hurry, someone no one could really read, or compel to do anything.

"You know of the Fairborn line, of course," Adele finally said.
Viviana's eyebrows arched gracefully. "Oh my. Is she a Fairborn?"
"Yes. Through her paternal line, so she doesn't have the name; her family kept to the ancient customs. But she has the Gift."
"What an interesting development. How did such an old, inherently White Gift pass on to a Black witch? No wonder she ended up under a White's protection. How did her original Black community react to her Gift?"
"I didn't ask."
"Of course not. Well, Adele. Why are you telling me this?"
"The Fairborn Gift is to give will to inanimate objects. Skaidrite is the first one in three generations to show it, so she's pretty sure no one knows how it applies now. The last known Fairborn with this
Gift was a smith, and so were the ones before him. But Skaidrite can give a will to any object that was crafted by human hands, Fain or Witch. For example, she can will a voice recorder to translate her words into English. Or, she can will something like a smartphone to work as a spell-placer, and listen to the conversations held with the cursed device."
"Hah! Remind me never to accept a present from Iskandra!" Viviana said, delighted. "Did she use this very useful Gift of Skaidrite to spy on her fellow Coucill members?"
"More than once."
"Sly old fox. She honours her clan. So tell me, Adele. What devious idea did you and crafty Skaidrite come up with?"
"Together with Nathan and Ellen, you saved those two Black siblings. I want to do that too. I want to do that with your help, and Nathan's, and anyone else's, if they are willing. I know the generals won't agree with this idea, because it's dangerous. I don't know what they have in mind for Nathan, exactly, but they've gone to great lengths to keep him alive and around, so I'm guessing they need him for something vital. But I know Nathan, I know what kind of person he is by now. I know he wants this. Besides, realistically, to do something so insane, we'd need the strongest witches available. That means him, and you."
"Don't discount yourself so easily," Viviana said. "I've seen you training with Celia and Greatorex. Those women are brutal, but you hold your ground against them."
"Thank you, but my point remains. Besides, that's not the main obstacle."
Viviana smiled. "You're quite right. The main obstacle is how to obtain the information to do such operations. We'd risk killing all out scouts to gain such information. But with Skaidrite's Gift..."
"We could effectively plant a wiretap. We just need to find a way for Soul, or someone close to him, to receive one cursed object. It could be anything, as long as it's something that stays in his office."
"And then we'd have a fountain of information at our disposal," Viviana said. "Tell me, Adele. I never quite understood how you received the information about the attack on Iskandra's Council. How did you know about that?"
"I'm not privy to such information. How did you know? You appeared just at the right moment."
Viviana chuckled. "Yes I did, didn't I? So suspicious."
"That's not an answer."
"You just asked me to become part of your task-force to save innocents from the Hunters, Adele. If you had doubts on my loyalties, it'd be a little too late to get squeamish now, hm? You shouldn't bring me with you if you don't trust me with your back."
"I don't have to trust you. I know you will take this idea away from me."
"Oh really, now."
"Yes. It's the perfect opportunity for you, isn't it? You need a way to gain the Alliance's approval. Saving their own is the perfect tool. You know you can't become a general by simply distinguishing yourself on the battlefield. Van would never permit it. So you need a popular acclamation. This task-force would be perfect."
Viviana smirked. "Clever girl. I will remember that."
Adele didn't say more. There was no need; she had known from the beginning that Viviana was going to say yes. Viviana turned to the beach again.
"It's time to show Soul and his pathetic Council what a true war between witches looks like."
The Serpent's Tooth

Chapter Notes

Spot the Teen Wolf reference!

Nathan stared at the dusty mattress like it had personally offended him. Decades of neglect had covered it in a thick layer of fuzzy dust motes. It was hopeless. It needed to be thrown out.

How was he supposed to find a replacement? Could he just... file a request with the foragers? He tried to imagine the scene; to just walk to one of them and ask, “Hey, any chance you could send a queen-sized mattress my way?”

Could they even bring something that cumbersome to Kolkasrags? How was the fortress even supplied these days?

He glared at the offending piece of useless furniture some more as he mulled over the problem. It was ridiculous to have a room for themselves, after so much time running, and so many nights spent anywhere from castles to a forest, and not sleep in it. He had told himself he was going to make it better.

He was stuck at step one. Or step zero, really.

“Are you trying to make the bed spontaneously combust with the strength of your glare?” Gabriel asked.

"No!” Nathan said, too quickly. Then he added, "Wait, can I?"

It was, after all, a very old sort of mattress. It was probably just straw inside. But getting rid of it didn't solve the problem of getting a new one. Who was he supposed to ask? The thought of asking was enough to give him a headache. He was almost sure the chief organizer for foraging was Nesbitt. He groaned.

"Nathan, don't let it bother you," Gabriel said.

Nathan sighed.

"Just forget it, okay? Forget I said anything."

Nathan turned to stare at him.

"We'll just do as we always did. Just... forget it."

...What the fuck? Nathan thought. Then he realized what Gabriel was talking about.

“What I fucking want is to share the bed with you, how about that?”

Nathan fought very hard not to blush, and mostly succeeded. Let Gabriel make his assumptions. If Nathan was careful, he might even manage to surprise him. Surprise him positively, for once.

"...Okay," Nathan said, finally.

"Good. Come on, I'm hungry," Gabriel said, starting for the kitchens.

When they arrived, the room was mostly empty. Blacks followed closely the dawn and twilight cycle, getting up and eating early, when most Whites weren't around, and every other subsequent meal was accordingly earlier. Their hours were bound to change with the arrival of winter, however.
They were already changing, with the two different breakfast times - one for Blacks, one for Whites - getting closer and closer to each other. Nathan didn't mind terribly much. He liked seeing Arran more often in the morning, and they always sat next to each other when it happened. Ellen pestered him at unpredictable hours, and that wasn't likely to change - her assignments had no fixed schedule. When they entered the communal dining room, she was there. She spotted them at once, and waved her spoon as enthusiastically as she could to beckon them over. Whatever she was eating landed in a fat glop from her spoon on Arran's shirt. He stared at her in horror, but she didn't even notice. Adele, seated next to him, snickered. Opposite them sat Diamond and Max. They both stared at him as he and Gabriel walked to the table. Nathan ignored them both and didn't say anything as he sat down on Arran's other side. Gabriel shook his head fondly, and offered his hand to both siblings as he introduced himself and made small talk. Nathan listened as he ate what Arran had kept warm for him.

There was talk of new Hunter raids in Germany. Black witches were disappearing, or fleeing. The Councils that had allied with Soul that day in Bratislava were starting to round up Blacks in their territory, but they didn't have as many or as many powerful Hunters, and they were having much more trouble than their English counterparts in not getting killed. Nonetheless Blacks were starting to flee from Germany, and France, and the Netherlands, but where could they go? Europe seemed destined to fall. There was no real opposition.

Soul's Hunters had caught a group of Blacks smuggling other Black witches out of France. Their leader had a powerful Gift – she could plant her own thoughts into other people's minds, controlling them. She had stalled them on her own, in a battle deep in the mountains of Alsace where she had the advantage of a higher position, hidden in an abandoned ruin perched over a valley. In the end, the Hunters' leader had killed her. She had waited until sleep and fatigue had worn her down. She had gone invisible, and climbed the other side of the mountain, and shapeshifted into one of her friends when she had infiltrated the ruin. The Black leader had thought her a friend. The Hunters' leader had killed her then.

Jessica.

Nathan's food suddenly tasted like ashes. His stomach did a strange somersault at the knowledge she was alive after all. It dropped at the thought of seeing her again - and he knew it was going to happen. But he was also relieved she wasn't dead, because Arran cared about her still. Even though he didn't say so, Nathan knew it was true. His brother was just that good.

Nathan's appetite was gone. He picked up an apple and unsheathed Gabriel's knife. The blade glinted faintly as he peeled the fruit. "How many Hunters can turn invisible now?" Diamond ask, dismayed. "I had never heard of something like this. How can they all have the same new Gift?"

"We only know it has to do with a tattoo they are given," Gabriel said. "The Hunters who ambushed us in Białowieża all had it."

"That bitch Hunter... the Alliance should hunt her down. Now that would be a blow for Soul's council," Diamond said. Arran looked very intently into his empty plate, shuffling some remaining crumbs around with a spoon. He said nothing at all, his face a study in composure.

Nathan's knife knocked on the table when he cut the apple in half. The blade knocked again on the wood when he cut the fruit again, and again, and again. He didn't look up. He stabbed a slice with the blade and offered it to Arran, who took it wordlessly. A small smile ghosted on his lips. Diamond watched them, and fell silent.

"Nathan," Max said, observing him with keen eyes. Nathan met his look. The boy had been quietly hounding him, listening to his every word and gauging his every action. Nathan didn't know how to deal with it. He vaguely felt Max's expectations, and the fact he didn't know what exactly he wanted from him unnerved him.

"What," Nathan finally said, offering another slice of apple to Gabriel. Gabriel beamed at him and ate it happily. Nathan almost told him, It's just a bloody apple, Gabriel.
Was he going to look as happy if he gave him another slice?
"You told me you don't use the Edge name. Can I ask why not?" Max said.
The small blossom of a smile barely blooming on Nathan's face vanished. He considered telling Max
to fuck off. Again.
Then again, who else was there? Who else could understand what it meant to bear such a legacy? He
wanted to know if Max understood.
"All my life, I've been considered a copy of my father. No one thought I could ever be like my
mother, that I could be White," Nathan said. "I never had room to be 'me'. Even when I was a whet,
when I was a kid, it was already decided. I would be like my father, did what my father did. Which
amounted to being a violent sociopath, basically. Sometimes it feels like life just had fun fucking me
over. I don't only have his same Gift. I look exactly like him. And for a time, I wanted to be like him.
Being Marcus would... make everything easier. But I want to be myself. If I called myself 'Edge' I'd
just go back to where I was before I escaped."
He could have said more. He could have talked about how it was so difficult, so painful to untangle
what he was, and what he was expected to be. What the Alliance expected him to do, how the
Alliance was, in the end, nothing else than the sum of its parts - a White witch who tortured him for
years because she saw him as his father, a Black witch who saw the Black in him and didn't care
about the White, and then an endless sea of shapeless faces seeing him, moulding him as his father.
How much could he be himself, how much did he even know what 'himself' meant, when for so
long the expectations of those around him had been so violently impressed in his mind, in his flesh?
Could he be anything else but what was expected of him, when he was never allowed to be anything
else?
But that was not something he was ready to put into words. It was certainly not something he was
going to tell Max.
Diamond's eyes darted in Arran's direction, but didn't dare to actually look at him. She had to be
blind not to notice he was not to be disrespected in Nathan's presence. "Does this has to do with your
half-siblings, too?"
"I don't have half-siblings. My sister was killed by the Council. I only have Arran left," Nathan said,
and earned a light smack on the arm from said brother.
"Don't be an arse, Nathan," Arran told him. Nathan pouted at him. He looked him in the eye as he
passed another apple slice to Gabriel, who took it as he snickered.
"There is the Hunter," Diamond said, cautiously.
"Jessica isn't my sister," Nathan said. He didn't have to say anything more than that. The venom in
his voice was enough.
Max turned to Arran. "You seem to care about Nathan, even though he's half Black."
Arran's answer was unwavering. "More than I could possibly say."
Max's eyes widened a fraction at that, and he seemed to remain speechless for a second. Then he
captured himself. "Forgive me for asking this, but... what's the point of Nathan having your last name?
It seems like a pointless charade. Everyone in Europe knew he's Marcus' son, it was never a secret. I
could understand using the matrilinear name, but that's not something the Whites seem to do much..."
Nathan stabbed an apple slice clean through, embedding the knife in the table underneath.
"Nathan, stop being an edgelord," Ellen said, rolling her eyes. Nathan wordlessly pointed the knife at
her. Gabriel picked its point between two fingers and gently guided it down.
"Keep stabbing the apple, loulou" Gabriel said. Nathan had no idea what he had said, but he felt
something in his stomach he couldn't name - a flash, a second of weightlessness like when his animal
leaped, far higher than humanly possible. Nathan stabbed another slice and started to eat it.
"I'm not sure why it was done, or who decided it," Arran said. "I was very young at the time, and I'm
sure you understand... everything related to that was absolute taboo. We never talked about it. I
wasn't very aware of it for a long time, but I realize now... our grandmother must have been terrified
of any minor slip, of any slight curiosity we might have had. Luckily, we didn't like to pry. The one
who gave her nightmares was probably Deborah."
His voice pitched down at the end, lowering like flowers closing at night. Nathan schooled his
expression the best he could. In a flash he remembered a recent dream, the images breaking the surface of his memory in abrupt splashes - Debs laughing, a little girl rolling down the slope of that hill near the woods, flowers tangling in her tawny hair and eyes shining like stars.

"I like to think that our mother didn't want to single Nathan out, giving him her last name," Arran continued, "but I really don't know. Maybe she didn't have a choice. I like the fact that we have the same name, though."

Nathan snorted. "What?" Arran said, offended.

"My father killed your father, but sure, you like that I have your same last name. Goody-two-shoes," Nathan said.

"Nathan, we talked about this---"

Nathan stuffed Arran's mouth with an apple slice. "Bloody hell, Arran, I know, I was trying to make a joke."

"Hold the fuck on, Nathan is trying to make a joke?" Ellen yelled, standing up as she smacked the table with an open palm. "Is it snowing outside? Is it raining fire? Is it the end of the world as we know it?"

"Oh for fuck's sake, Ellen," Nathan said. She just giggled as she sat back down.

"Did you ever think about taking your mother's name?" Adele asked. "I never understood why Whites took the Fain custom of using the paternal line's name, honestly. It seems to me like you respect your grandmother a great deal."

"What was her name?" Max asked.

"Ashworth," Arran answered.

"It's not only Whites who take their father's name, though," Nathan noted. "Gabriel's Black, but he has his father's last name."

"Yeah, well," Gabriel said. "Sometimes things are complicated."

Nathan thought better than to ask. Instead, he offered him the last apple slice.

"So... you're not planning on changing your last name?" Max asked.

"Why would I do that?" Nathan asked.

"Well, if you want to distance yourself from Marcus' legacy... Although I should think the Alliance would want a word in on that. Propaganda, you know," Diamond supplied.

"If they ever thought about parading Nathan around with one name or the other," Gabriel said with a smile, "they must have also thought better of it."

"If I ever change my name, and I don't even know why I'm telling you this, I'd do it after the war is over. It seems pointless to make a fuss over it now, only to die tomorrow," Nathan said.

"What kind of reasoning is that? What a downer," Ellen said.

"If we only did things with this mindset of yours in mind, we'd stop living and just eat and sleep as we wait for the next battle," Adele said.

Nathan thought, Isn't that what we do? Then again, maybe Adele actually did more with her life other than killing and having nightmares about it. Maybe she had a point.

The knife in her hand cut down. The noise was faint, gentle. She was not using much force. The kitchen filled with the scent of freshly-cut lemons, the air brimming with the flavours coming from the various pots. There was a vase filled with wild flowers on the table - white and yellow daisies, dandelions, and chamomile adding to the tableau of scents. Nathan grabbed a handful of yellow flowers, and walked to her. Her back was to him.

He walked to her. Her knife cut down. Harder. The noise was deafening. Harder. It was like a thunderclap. Her arm swung up, as up as possible, before striking down.

There was blood everywhere on the kitchen counter, dripping on the floor.
"Debs?" Nathan called, tentatively. The familiar scent of blood filled his nostrils. Her back was to him. Her arms were limp at her sides, and her head hung. Her hair wasn't braided like usual; it hung in an unkempt mess over her frame. She looked thin, her wrists like birds-bones. Nathan took one in his hand. She felt cold. "Do you have something for me?" she asked. Nathan put the flowers in her hand. "Such a nice boy," she whispered. "Nathan!"

He swung around. She was behind him, screaming his name, her face distorted by terror. Debs. “Nathan no, nonono don't follow her, don't follow her no NO STOP IT I DON'T WANT---”

Nathan woke up screaming. Then he realized he was not screaming, his body slack and unresponsive, and he went into full-blown, mindless panic. He fought his still-asleep limbs, commanded them to move, and managed only some choking wheezes. Gabriel half-sat up, blinking away his own heavy sleep. "Nathan?" he asked. "Are you all right?"

Nathan rolled onto one side, his heart hammering at the inside of his ribs. He heaved, and gagged. He tasted the ghost of something viscous his mouth, heavy, sweetly enticing. He put his elbows and forehead on the cold stone of the balcony. Then he felt Gabriel's warm hand on the back of his neck. He tried to calm down. He was awake. He could move. It had been just a nightmare. What kind of nightmare was that? The details were already leaving him. He tried to grasp them, to keep them, but they slipped like sand slips through one's fingers. Oh, how he wanted to run.

Gabriel watched him, his lips a downward, thin line. "I keep having this strange dream," Nathan whispered. "No, that's not true. I think it's always a little different. But I keep dreaming of the same person."

"Who is it?" Gabriel asked. "I think it's Debs."
"...Oh."
"Do you ever dream of Michèle?"
Gabriel let out a whisper of a laugh, the most bitter sound Nathan had ever heard from him. "No. You know who I dream more often about?"
"Who?"
"Caitlin. That's the great thing about revenge. I dream of the moment I pulled the trigger so many times. There's no space left to dream of the good things."
Nathan averted his eyes. "Is that why you thought me sparing Annalise was a good thing?"
Gabriel shrugged. "I'm not sure that changes anything. You're still having nightmares. But maybe not about her?"

Nathan sighed. It was a heavy, trembling sound, as trembling and heavy as his body felt. His human, traitorous body, that chained him down with phantoms and whispers in his mind. He stood up, throwing his blankets aside, ready to leap into his animal, into freedom and mindlessness. But then he paused. He looked down to Gabriel. He was sitting up now, sleep gone from his eyes. Even in the dark of a clouded-over night with no stars, his eyes shone. Gabriel didn't say anything. He just looked at Nathan for a brief moment, and then averted his gaze. He already knew how things were going to unfold; he was not going to try and stop him. Nathan suddenly missed his voice, that soothing tone, the way his accent made his sentences into almost-questions every time.
On an impulse, Nathan asked, "Do you want to come with me?"
Gabriel looked up, surprised. "Where?"
"Running."

It wasn't an answer, Nathan knew. But it didn't matter. He didn't have a destination in mind. What mattered was just the act of running itself.

Gabriel slowly stood up. He looked expectant, excited, and even a little nervous; Nathan was stunned when he realized that. He decided to not think about it, and just enjoy how good it felt to do something right by Gabriel, for once. How good it felt to not see him miserable.

"Try to keep up," he said, and he leapt over the balcony. When he touched the ground he was a wolf - the giant black wolf he had transformed into the first time he used his Gift, the animal he was most comfortable with. It felt a little like coming home, and a little like smelling a fresh battleground. Familiar, bloody, primal. He didn't race at full speed like they usually did, however. They made sure Gabriel was following. Nathan was still reeling from the nightmare and just wanted to lose himself in the simplicity of being his animal self, every thought and complex emotion shaved off until only the raw nature remained. Yet there was something keeping him anchored to the present, to the animal leaping and darting through the trees. They weren't running like usual; his animal kept circling back, a sprint in his paws Nathan was unfamiliar with. Every time Gabriel caught up, they darted forward again. Then it struck Nathan. The animal was playing. He was enjoying Gabriel's presence, enjoying the chase Gabriel was never going to win.

Nathan had never experienced playfulness or joy when in animal form before.

When they reached the far reaches of Kolkasrags, where the trees gave way to the cliffs, they stopped for a moment. Gabriel was panting slightly, but it was okay, Nathan knew. He was much stronger now than the last time they had raced like this. He had his Gift now, and his Gift was strong. The wind-swept grass was rippling like the black sea down the slope, one whispering with a million grass blades, the other sighing its never-ending song. The animal stood silent, sniffling the air for prey or enemies. Gabriel stayed silent a little away, and observed. He had never watched Nathan in this form so close, if not that one time it was ripping Mercury apart - and he didn't get to see much that time, other than a struggling mass of fur and claws and blood and limbs. Gabriel had reached for the animal when it was over, but he had had barely the time to plunge his fingers in the coarse fur before it had transformed back into Nathan. This time it was different. The animal was calm. It just wanted to run. It was letting him follow. It felt special in a way he didn't completely comprehend yet.

The animal turned to him, pointing up its ears. It gauged him for a few silent seconds, before coming up to him and brushing its flank against his leg. Then it leaped forward again, jumping about and stopping a few steps ahead. It turned to him, as if in saying, *Are you coming or not?* Gabriel ran after them.

When they came back, the pre-dawn grey light was tinting the underside of the clouds blanketing the night sky. Gabriel led them to a side door he had found a few days before - in the absence of Nathan, sick with worry and in desperate need of a distraction, he had explored their wing of the fortress quite thoroughly. They followed the corridor, lined up with nightsmoke. When they were back in their room, Gabriel wanted nothing more than to crash down and sleep. He hadn't had a lot of peaceful nights of sleep, lately. But when he sat down, ready to bundle under the covers, he noticed Nathan, still in his animal form, watching him from the other side of the balcony.

"Aren't you going to sleep?" Gabriel asked.

The wolf sat down, rested its head on its paws, and silently watched him. Gabriel wasn't going to argue with an animal. He wasn't even sure Nathan could really understand him in that form - he always had a lot of trouble explaining what it was like, to transform, when he tried. It was more than turning into an animal; it was like a shift in his state of being. A transformation - or a return? - to something primeval that defied words and logic.
Gabriel laid down and murmured, "Okay then."
He fell asleep almost instantly.
Nathan and his animal watched him as the sun slowly rose above the horizon. It was silent. As the light played with the mahogany strands in Gabriel's hair, Nathan thought he hadn't felt this peaceful in quite some time.

Nesbitt was down in the garden, talking animatedly with Diamond. The young witch seemed more and more puzzled by whatever she was hearing. Nathan glared down at him. He could almost hear his stupid mouth spewing the usual stupid shit.

Gabriel sniggered. "What did Nesbitt do to you this time? Are you planning where to hide the body?"
"I already know where I'll hide his fucking body," Nathan answered. Truth was, he had been right. Nesbitt was the main foragers' organizer and chief coordinator for all supplies gathered. If Nathan wanted a mattress replaced, he had to go through him.

Nathan was never going to get a new mattress.
"Are you going to tell me why you're trying to kill Nesbitt with your glare? Other than the usual reasons. Is there a new reason?"
"He exists."

Gabriel threw back his head and laughed. At least three witches down under the terrace turned to look at him. Nathan glared at them too.
"I think I'll join them," Gabriel said, gesturing to the witches sparring and learning on the lawn. "Why? You're more than good enough," Nathan said. "Maybe, but good enough could still get me killed." Nathan couldn't argue with that.
"Do you want to join, too?"
Nathan snorted. "Do you want someone to end up with a broken bone or twenty?"
"These people could learn a lot from you. I know you can control yourself. It's just..." Gabriel trailed off.
"What?"
"It's just that a lot of the fresh recruits have never fought a Hunter in their lives. They have no idea how terrifying it can be. It doesn't matter if a Hunter is well-trained or not; you can't tell once you have one in front of you, anyway. But everyone is terrified once that happens. Even you."
Nathan nodded. That was still true, even now that he had more Gifts than any other Witch alive.
"So, since you can be pretty terrifying yourself when you fight, even when it's just practice, I think it would be to their advantage if you joined. Besides, Viviana is there."
Nathan's head whipped to the garden. "Where?" he asked.
Gabriel laughed again. "Wow, Nathan. Should I be jealous?"
"What?" Nathan asked, outraged.
Gabriel laughed harder.
"Fucking start running, Gabriel," Nathan said.
Gabriel, still chuckling, sauntered down the steps and joined the witches who were practising hand-to-hand combat with Greatorex. He made a wide arch around Celia, who was tutoring another group. Adele waved at him, then looked at Nathan and waved again. Nathan hesitated before dubiously waving back.

Nathan crossed his arms on the railing and watched. The numbers of witches training, compared to the time before Białowieża, was pathetic. The ones left, though, were definitely good. But still not enough. Nathan remembered Sameen in a flash of white and dark red; the whites of her wide eyes standing out in her brown face, her mouth open; the red seeping into her clothes and pooling on the green grass, quick like a river. And then more of it when Nathan had slashed her throat, and released
her.
It still felt like a stab in the chest, violent and burning.
He could still count how many merciful deaths he had given on the fingers of one hand. Marcus. Sameen. Isolde. He didn't understand why, but they all hurt the same, and hurt more than anything else he had ever done, no matter how terrible. He suddenly wondered what Marcus would have told him about his guilt. Maybe that it was pointless; that he had done what Marcus has asked, and then that he had spared those women senseless pain. Or maybe that he should have left them to die, since they were bound to anyway? He couldn't figure it out. His father had been a vicious killer, and had killed people on a whim, but he had never been cruel about it. Thinking about it just upset him. And it was pointless, and stupid, and so he tried to tell himself to stop it.
Then he wondered what his mother would have said. He couldn't figure that out, either - but for a different reason entirely. What kind of woman had his mother been? Everyone around him had always been so focused on Marcus, dissecting any and all little thing Nathan might have done or said or thought to compare them. And it had always been a script already written, the outcome already decided, like he had told Max. But... certainly he must have had something in common with his mother, too? He focused back to the witches sparring. There was one witch who could tell him more, maybe. He walked down the stairs, slowly making his way through the trainees. A witch sparring near Celia turned to stare at him; Celia backhanded her on the head and sent her sprawling. When the witch yelled at her in outrage, Celia stared her down until the witch was reduced to silence. Nathan remembered very well how that felt. Celia's steely gaze and imposing figure radiated the kind of aura that made you cower on the ground and hope you won't be crushed. Nathan shook his fingers and didn't look at Celia directly. He wasn't a little kid anymore, he reminded himself. He could kill her in a lot of new, creative ways if he wanted to now. When he reached Viviana, she was showing Max a self-defense technique.
"Ah, Nathan," she said when she saw him. "Just perfect. Come on Max, try it on him."
"On him?" Max asked, shooting a worried glance at Nathan.
"On me?" Nathan asked, crossing his arms.
"Sure. You don't want to?" Viviana asked. "Fighting against the strongest is the quickest route for learning."
Nathan arched an eyebrow at her. No one ever wanted to spar with him, and he had no complaints about it. Then he looked at Max, who seemed equal parts lost and hopeful, his eyes travelling from Nathan to Viviana and then back.
Nathan sighed. "Okay. What are you even teaching him?"
"Just refining his technique. He was already taught, but not very well, if you ask me. Just strike him at shoulder level."
Max took his fighting stance, fists up and ready. Nathan waited just long enough to be unnerving, still as a viper ready to strike. And then he did, quick as lightning. Max staggered back. To his credit, he didn't yell or even said anything.
Viviana's eyebrows almost reached her hairline. "Was that necessary?"
"You said to strike him," Nathan said.
"Yes, I didn't mean it for real, Nathan, just the gesture would have sufficed. Is this how you usually train?"
"I don't train much."
"Oh? You think you don't need it?"
"I mean with the recruits," Nathan amended. "What would be the point, anyway? I need to understand the Gifts I have now, but I can't really use them against someone in training. I'd kill them. So, I train on my own."
Viviana pulled Max closer and examined his shoulder as she said, "What about basic training? Hand-to-hand combat, knife-fighting, aim with a projectile weapon? I'm pretty fond of crossbows."
"I hate guns and I'm rubbish with them, anyway. Everything else, I'm already trained with."
"Really now."
Nathan heard her scepticism and irony very clearly, and crossed his arms over his chest. "Celia
taught me."
Viviana's eyes narrowed a fraction. Then she used her healing to make the reddening bruise on Max's skin disappear. "Well, I'm very curious to know what she taught you. Think I can handle you?"
"Wasn't I supposed to spar with Max?"
Viviana exhaled slowly before saying, "Indulge me."
Nathan locked eyes with her for a long moment. He didn't understand what she was thinking, but he wanted to know. He took his stance, and so did she.
"Gifts or no Gifts?" Nathan asked.
"Are you kidding me? I don't want to kill anyone today yet."
Yet? Nathan thought, but didn't comment on it. Then he lunged. He was much faster than how he had just been with Max; the boy was just a whet, and even though Viviana might think differently, he had taken that into consideration.
Viviana blocked his punch and aimed for his gut; Nathan stepped sideways and under her guard, aiming at her solar plexus with an elbow. She darted to the side, quick and nimble on her feet. They exchanged blows a few times like that. Nathan couldn't figure out what she was doing. It was obvious she was restraining herself, so he was trying to do the same, but what was the point of it all? This wasn't training. And she must have known, already, that he was a good fighter? She was smiling as they danced around each other. Her blows became progressively faster and harder, but Nathan was sure she was never really aiming at anything vital. It was annoying. He aimed better this time, kicking at her knee and feigning a low blow to the left side and then striking at her throat at full speed. Her hand came up to parry, but she almost didn't make it, the punch grazing her shoulder, and then she kicked the inside of his ankle. He managed to not fall, but lost his footing, and she wasn't going to pass up that opportunity. Nathan saw the punch coming, but he was off-balance, and her timing was impeccable. He scrunched his eyes and waited for the blow.
The blow didn't come. He slowly opened his eyes, and saw her palm hovering, open flat, a few inches from his face. Then Nathan focused on her face. He couldn't read her expression; it was like every sign of life and emotion had left her, leaving an emotionless mask. She slowly relaxed her hand, and carded her fingers through his messy hair. Then she walked away, wordlessly. Nathan watched her, bewildered and uncomprehending. Gabriel appeared at his side just as Nathan realized where she was going, and his confusion only grew. She was walking to Celia.
"What is she doing?" Gabriel asked.
"I have no bloody idea," Nathan answered.
Viviana materialized her sword.
"What the fuck," Nathan managed to whisper, before Viviana swung the blade in a wide arch. Celia managed to avoid it easily, but it had obviously been a warning blow.
"What do you think you're doing?" Celia yelled at Viviana.
Viviana showed her the sword, the blade thin, elegant, and just as deadly. "You were his teacher."
Celia didn't play dumb. "I was a soldier. I followed my orders."
Nathan felt like stabbing her. She had been following orders, that was true... but oh, the enthusiasm she had put into the task. The joy she had taken into punishing the son of Marcus for the crime his father had committed.
"Shut up. I can see it plain as day. You were cruel to him. How old was he when he was brought to you?"
"Is that the problem? That he was a kid? I can assure you, he was not an innocent boy when he tried to kill me with an iron. He wasn't that innocent when he almost killed the two O'Briens little ones in a school fight."
Viviana looked ready to murder her then and there when she hissed, "If there is one thing I hate, that's child abusers."
Then she lunged at her.
Celia unleashed her Gift, and Viviana stumbled, but that didn't stop her. She unleashed her Gift too, and Celia was sent flying. Then Viviana summoned another blade. And another. And another. They
hovered around her, like the halo of a destruction goddess. And then they were flying through the
air, towards Celia, intent on shredding her to pieces. Celia recovered, and stood up. Viviana had
pushed her to the outskirts of the training ground, far from everyone else. As long as she stayed far
enough from Celia, her Gift could not reach her. Viviana summoned her Gift again, using it on the
forest around her, until rocks and trees were hovering around them. Then she threw them at Celia.
Nathan was sure Celia was going to be buried underneath; but she was a seasoned Hunter, and she
had fought enough powerful Black witches with the most powerful and terrifying Gifts to keep her
ground. She dashed forward, narrowly avoiding a trunk. She was fast, and her knife was in her hand
now - a wicked-looking military thing, long enough to qualify as a machete, that was always
strapped to her thigh. When the swords came down on her, she was ready to parry. She was also
going closer and closer, but Viviana didn't want to step away. She knew that behind her there
witches and whets, people who could get harmed or try to help Celia. Probably both, and that would
be supremely stupid on their part. She didn't, after all, want to kill anyone else today. Viviana slashed
with a blade, and a gash appeared on Celia's shoulder. But then Celia managed just one step further,
just enough, and this time she put all her strength in her Gift. Viviana fell to her knees, and the
swords clattered to the ground.

Celia unsheathed her gun.

Nathan acted faster than he could think, *What the fuck is going on?*

He found the roots sleeping underground, and made them explode upwards in a shower of soil and
grass, dividing the two witches. Celia turned on him, and in her blazing eyes he could read the
intention of bringing him to his knees, too.

*Never again.*

He raised his hands, and almost clapped them together and kill her with lightning before she had the
chance to unleash her Gift, when Gabriel and Adele appeared at his sides. Adele put herself between
Nathan and Celia, her skin hardened to steel.

Gabriel aimed his gun at Celia. "Let's all calm down now," he said. "Viviana?"

Viviana was kneeling on the grass, her sword jabbed in the earth. She was breathing heavily. When
she turned to them, they could see why; her nose and ears were bleeding pretty heavily.

"Are you okay?" Nathan said, running to her and kneeling next to her.

"I'm going to be fine," she answered. She was too dizzy to summon her healing Gift yet. The wall of
roots and branches Nathan had created shielded her from the ugly sight of Celia; that in and of itself
was a small mercy. "She sure is quick with that Gift."

"You're a fucking idiot. What did you think she was going to do, warn you before she used it?"
Nathan hissed. He eyed the blood with worry. "Aren't you going to heal?"

"Can't right now," she answered.

Nathan remembered well how it was, how Celia's noise left him dizzy and nauseous for even hours
at a time. The first two days he had been imprisoned with her, she had used it on him so many times
he had felt the aftereffects for a week. It had been an effective way of teaching him to fear it. He
wondered if he could summon the Gift Marcus had left him, the Gift of healing others. Was it similar
to how his own healing worked? He stretched his hand towards Viviana's face, hesitated; then put it
on her cheek, and searched for the Gift, for something similar to the surge and buzz that came with
his healing. He looked at the blood and wished it to stop; he thought of nausea and dizziness, and
wished to replace them with steadiness and health. He thought of his mother, and of Arran, of gentle
hands and warmth. Then he felt it. Something like a bridge, or the slow flow of a springtime stream,
blooming with feather-soft petals. The blood trickled away. Viviana's skin stopped looking clammy,
and took back its usual light bronze colour. She slowly grasped his hand with her own, keeping it in
place on her cheek. Her lips parted in awe, and infinite sadness.

Nathan jerked his hand away when he heard Gabriel speaking behind him.

"Don't even think about it," Gabriel threatened, slow and deliberate. His gun was still trained on
Celia, who had emerged from behind the wall of tangled roots and branches. She looked absolutely
livid.
"If you think I'll let this just pass, Gabriel---" she began. "If you think for even one second that I wouldn't shoot you, and gladly so, think again," Gabriel said. "I don't care if the entire Alliance crumbles because of the death of one sorry excuse of a woman. You'll be dead before you can even think of using your Gift on Nathan again."

Celia stared at him for a long moment, her deep scowl contorting her already ugly face. Then she lowered her gun. As soon as he was sure she had calmed down, Gabriel whipped around and trained his gun at Viviana's forehead.

"What the fuck," he asked, slow and deadly calm, "do you think you're doing?"

"Now, now, what a useless gesture," Viviana said, unperturbed.

"Useless?" Gabriel asked, a hint of the fury boiling in his blood disturbing the calm surface of his demeanour. "As useless as your unsolicited gesture?"

Viviana's lips slowly stretched into a grin. It was nothing like the playful grins Nathan had seen from her before; this one was more than dashed with a touch of humorous arrogance. This grin was all sharp teeth, dripping with the poison of a too-long life spent crushing enemies and killing anyone who dared to stand in her path. She deliberately raised a hand and, just as slowly, grabbed Gabriel's gun. She brought the barrel to her forehead, until the metal kissed her skin. "Do you think you can kill me, shapeshifter?" she asked. "You cannot. You're missing something crucial to be able to do so. Don't you know? Didn't your grandmother tell you the stories?"

Gabriel was still as stone as she spoke, careful to hide the jolt her reference to his grandmother caused. For a moment he thought that killing her would make everything so much easier.

"I know who will kill me," Viviana went on. "It was prophesied, long before you were even born. And although you're a shapeshifter, and that's one point in your favour, you don't have a scar over your right eye. You're not the one who will kill me."

Nathan stared at her. He knew someone who fit that description perfectly. Someone he had made fit the description perfectly - by slashing her face with his Fairborn. Jessica.

"I don't have to kill you," Gabriel said lowly. "I'd be perfectly satisfied with shooting you in the leg for putting Nathan at risk."

Nathan almost pointed out that he could very well defend himself - but between Viviana suddenly going crazy and Celia being Celia, he wasn't sure what could have happened if they hadn't both stepped down so quickly. Besides, the sight of Gabriel radiating fury on his behalf was just too good. Nathan wanted to enjoy it as long as he could.

"Defending the one you love with such bloodthirsty eyes," Viviana said. "How very Black of you. How refreshing."

"If you're done being a creep," Gabriel cut her off, "you can stand up and leave."

Viviana chuckled. Then she stood up slowly. Her slight smile vanished when she cast her eyes on Celia, waiting in silence a few feet away.

"It's such a pity she's dead," Viviana said. "She would have loved the chance to make you pay. It's too bad no one of her children inherited her vengeful streak. Well," she amended, "no one on our side."

And with that, she walked away, heading towards the beach. Silence fell heavy on the witches present, interrupted only by a handful of scattered, timid murmurs. Then Celia, her face still a mask of barely-contained rage, said, "Dismissed."

When the witches failed to disappear at once, she repeated, "Dismissed!" - just a breath away from yelling it.

The witches and whets scattered. Nathan saw Max falling slightly behind, looking back and searching for Nathan. He looked worried when he saw him still standing there, next to Gabriel, but when he tried to lock eyes, Nathan looked away. He had other things to be worried about, he thought, as he glared at Celia. He furious expression was like a punch in the gut, and the punch was a trip to a past both too close and so far. He didn't lower his eyes. The only one he had ever avoided the eyes of had been Clay. Clay had been so brutal, Nathan had even thought better of Celia after having a taste of his treatment. Celia's cruelty had had clear rules and clear objectives. The fact that
Nathan fought in every way he could think of those rules and those objectives didn't change the fact that he could avoid punishment if he wanted to. Clay hadn't been like that. Clay didn't want anything from him other than testing how much pain he could take. After the first few laps around the cottage, Nathan hadn't dared to look him in the eye - anything to avoid provoking him, anything to make him stop. Of course, it hadn't worked. When had it ever?

It wasn't easy to look Celia in the eye when she was so close to being his Celia. His teacher and guardian. His jailer and kidnapper. But he wanted to fight his old self, the old Nathan, too young, too helpless, a prisoner, barely more than a rabid animal desperately wishing for freedom.

Gabriel noticed the tension in his body, and moved closer. His gun was lowered, but still ready. Celia stared hard at him, paying no mind to the few witches still looking - Adele, who was ready to bolt in between them; Greatorex, who tried her best to keep the witches from intervening in the fight. Then Celia, too, walked away, towards the fortress.

Gabriel sheathed his gun only once they were alone. He breathed deeply as the tension left his body all at once, suddenly turning his limbs to jelly. Then he turned to Nathan, who was staring at the ground, still as tense as when the entire debacle had started. Gabriel was slow in his movements, not wanting to startle him, leaving him room to move away if he didn't want to be touched yet. He put a hand on Nathan's shoulder. As Gabriel slowly embraced him, Nathan let out a shaky sigh. He didn't say anything as he wound his arms around Gabriel's waist and closed his eyes.

The incident was the talk of Kolkasrags for days. If Nathan couldn't walk the fortress corridors before without being followed by whispers and murmurs, now it was even worse.

He hated Viviana.

That's what he was thinking as he looked for Ellen. He hated Viviana, he hated her dramatic antics, he hated that she hated Celia. What good was that now, anyway? He was trying to leave that behind, he told himself - but it was a very weak argument even for his delusional self. It was too little too late, but he liked that she cared. She cared on principle. She didn't know him, not really - she was probably invested in him because of his mother, or his father, or both. Or maybe she just felt a sort of kinship, both being Half-and-Half and all - and the only ones left at that. Still, she cared. She cared because in her eyes, he was just a kid, a kid who had been mistreated.

Abused.

That's the word she had used.

He had never thought of it like that before. 'Abused' implied a level of wrongness - of something wrong done to someone who didn't deserve it - that he had never associated with himself before. He was a freak. A monster, son of a monster, killer of his own mother, a disgrace for his beautiful, good White family.

How could someone like him be 'abused'? How could someone like him be a 'child'?

He had asked himself so many times why no one could see it like this, and now that he had found someone, he felt like hating her.

Why it was so important that Viviana thought so, when he knew that others cared - Arran and Gabriel, at least, and maybe he knew enough decent people that they'd be outraged, too, if they knew - he couldn't say. Gabriel knew every terrible detail, because he had decided to tell him (what had possessed him to just - outright tell him everything after knowing him for maybe two weeks, Nathan would never fathom. Maybe the sun had gotten to his head). Arran had no idea what had really happened because Nathan elected to spare him - the blank space of silence a comforting habit for them both.

Maybe what mattered was that Viviana had been enraged so much, and so quickly. She had said
something that had been stuck in his brain ever since. He was almost sure she had been talking about
Cora when she had said, *She would have loved the chance to make you pay.*

Had she been alive, would his mother had cared enough to attack Celia like Viviana had done?

Lost in his head like he was, Nathan didn't notice he had reached the lower levels of Kolkasrags until
he was at the top of the final flight of stairs. The entrance salon and cavernous corridor stretched
wide under his eyes, scattered witches milling around, crossing the wide-open front door. It was then
that he noticed Ellen, and also how all the people present seemed to stay well away from her, an
obvious circle forming around her.

She was talking to Annalise. Nathan froze at the sight of them, the surge of too many emotions like a hot lurch of his entire being. Annalise looked much better than she had at the trial. Her hair was washed, for starters, and back at
its old shine. She wore a pair of jeans too big for her, and a simple flannel shirt. Nathan hated her just
as much as he hated the unbidden memories rushing to him at the sight of her graceful frame. If only he
could tore those images out of his brain - her hair spread on the pillow, the amber glow of her bare
skin under the candlelight, the smooth warmth under his hand as he followed her back as it arched up--- *fuck*, he'd tear his eyes out if it helped.

Ellen noticed him staring. She said something to Annalise, whose head jerked to the side a little.

Then she thought better, and didn't turn. She said her goodbyes, and left, the witches around her
parting in silence - some watching her with loathing, some with pity, all of them keeping their
distance. Nathan caught a glimpse of her collar under her hair, and wondered if they had been gentle
and considerate when they had put it around her neck. Then he turned to Ellen, and glared. Ellen
sauntered up the stairs, paying no mind to his implied threat.
"'Morning Nathan," she said.

Nathan stared harder.

Ellen rolled her eyes. She opened her mouth to say something - something ironic and dismissive,
Nathan knew, and braced instinctively, every muscle in his body ready to fight, curses already
surfacing on his tongue - but then she stopped herself. She took in his stormy expression, the way his
shoulders and crossed arms were hunched and tense. Ellen sighed, and opened her arms.

Nathan stared at her, but this time in confusion. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"I want to hug you, but I don't want a knife in the stomach for trying, so I'm giving you ample time
to prepare yourself mentally. Have you prepared yourself mentally?"

"What do you m---"

Ellen hugged him, and Nathan stopped breathing.

Her arms wound around his shoulders, tight and without shyness. She was standing on her tiptoes,
her weight almost completely on him. It was so very *Ellen* - a full-force, full-body hug, nothing held
back. Nathan was suddenly very aware of all the people who might be watching them. Had someone
ever hugged him in public like this? He was pretty sure the answer was no.

"You know, it's very awkward if you don't hug me back," Ellen said. "Also, your elbows are bony
and in my sternum."

Nathan uncrossed his arms and hugged her back, very lightly.

"You're always so ready to fight everyone," she murmured, "it must be exhausting. I guess I
understand why you do it, but... you know I'm on your side, right?"

It took him a long time to answer. "You were talking to her."

"Yes I was. I am still your friend. Please don't look at me like I have betrayed you just because I was
talking to Annalise."

"I don't like you talking to her. I don't like that she's alive."

"She's alive because you spared her, Nathan."

"I never said I was a coherent person."

Ellen giggled. Nathan felt her hands rubbing his back gently, then patting it before she parted from
him. "Are you feeling a little less murderous now?" she asked.

Nathan tried his best to glare at her, but he was almost sure he didn't succeed. She giggled again.

"So what brings you here in the lower levels, among us mortals?" she asked.
"I was looking for you, actually."
Ellen smiled happily, her ever-changing sea-coloured eyes lit up.

_Ugh, Nathan thought. _Happy people._

"I wanted to ask you something. Can we...?" he trailed off, gesturing awkwardly to the upper corridors.

"Oh yeah, sure, let's walk. Is this something secret and important?"
Nathan sighed. "No, Ellen."

Still, he didn't say anything until they were out of sight, and Nathan was fairly sure there was no one around to hear them. He guided her to a half-hidden wing, a dead corner where a set of stairs plunged down and a parapet looked over a narrow gallery. Nathan jumped over the railing, and walked on a thin cornice of stone that hugged the wall. It led to a wider one jutting out under a series of tall windows - it was just enough space to sit down. Nathan let his legs dangle in the void, a drop of several stories under him and the wooden beams of the roof high above.

Ellen sat down next to him. "Why did you bring me here? What's with all the secrecy?"

"Well..." Nathan started.

Ellen looked at him expectantly.

"I wanted to ask..." Nathan started again, wringing his hands. He didn't know why he was so embarrassed by it, but _fuck_, he was.

She nodded, urging him to go on.

"You're, uhm, friends with the foragers, right?" Nathan finally asked.

"Yeah, sure! Do you need something?"

"I... need some, uhm," Nathan started, cringing at himself and his lack of loquacity. "Furniture?"

"Furniture?" Ellen asked, confused.

"Yeah, well, a mattress. The room I and---" Nathan suddenly wondered if Ellen knew he was rooming with Gabriel. He also wondered why it suddenly mattered to his stupidly floundering brain, but it did. He had shared a tent with him at camp before - but people would assume Gabriel was just helping him through the first days of shock after Białowieża. What would Ellen assume?

Comprehension dawned on Ellen's face. "Ooh, I see. A mattress. Sure, the one in the room must be pretty old. Dusty much?"

Nathan nodded wearily.

Then Ellen flashed a wicked grin. "Do you also need silk bedsheets, scented candles, maybe a few roses? I'm sure Gabriel would love that."

"Do you have to?" Nathan half-heartedly yelled at her, his cheeks colouring.

Ellen giggled and grabbed his shoulders. "Sorry, sorry. Yes I can try and find a mattress for you. I wonder how they find anything these days, but the Alliance's foragers are incredibly resourceful. Must be Brenda's help, her cuts make everything so much easier."

Nathan just grumbled under his breath.

"Come on, Nathan, don't be such a sourwolf. You know I wish you and Gabriel all the best."

"Ellen, please, we are not together."

"Why not?"

Nathan sputtered. "Why not? Ellen, my last girlfriend killed my father, and that was, what? Not two months ago? It doesn't feel right."

"So it's not a matter of not loving Gabriel, just a matter of timing?"

Nathan glared at her.

"You do a lot of glaring, have I ever told you that?" Ellen said.

"I do like Gabriel, I'm just not-- I'm not sure it's the same. For me. He's..."

"Madly in love with you?"

"Does everybody know that?"

"Well yeah. He never tried to hide it. Half of the Alliance was waiting for him to just snap and kill Annalise."

"He would never do that."

"No, but that's what Whites expected him, a Black, to do."
Nathan didn't have anything to say to that. "Want to know what I expect him to do?"
Nathan looked at her dubiously. "Do I want to know?"
"I expect him to keep being smitten, and not doing absolutely anything but looking at you lovingly
and waiting for you to do something."
Nathan wanted to protest. Then he thought of that time he had kissed Gabriel, a spur-of-the-moment
decision that was as much him as his animal - it had been so natural, such a clear action. No thinking
behind it, no reasoning - just the pure, unadulterated pleasure of feeling Gabriel so close, of tasting
and then devouring his lips and tongue, of their bodies tangled together.
Ellen noticed him going silent, and the red dusting his face again. She succeeded in not squealing,
but she just had to squeeze Nathan's shoulders and shake him a little in joy. "Oh my god, tell me!"
"What?" Nathan asked, half-trying to shake her off.
"Was I wrong? Did he actually try something? Or did you?"
"I am not telling you."
Ellen laughed and hugged him again, pumping her legs in the void, paying no mind to Nathan's
warnings about the possible fall.

Viviana kept to herself in the days following her fight with Celia. She didn't visit the fortress at all,
but she was careful to appear on the beach sometimes, letting the Alliance know she was still around.
Nathan found her once in the woods, but she silently disappeared between the trees. He respected
her desire to stay alone, even though he was burning with questions.
"She said something about Marcus before," Nathan told Gabriel one afternoon. "She was just as
dodgy about it as ever, but she knows something. And what was that about Jessica? Was she talking
about Jessica?" he asked, pausing his carving to flip his knife around in frustration.
Gabriel kept calming disassembling his gun. "I don't really know. I don't understand why she would
mention it, either."
"What do you mean?"
"Well, think about it. She has been hiding for years, right? Witches with the Gift of prophecy don't
know anything about her, and you can't have visions about people you don't know at least the name
of. Prophecies always relate to either the Gifted witches themselves, or someone they know. That's
how so many prophecies were running about you and Marcus; everyone knew who Marcus was.
But talking about a prophecy, putting it out there, it's almost half of making it come true, isn't it?"
Nathan squeezed the mostly-shapeless figurine in his hands strongly enough to feel the raw wood
bite into his palms. "Marcus came to the Alliance knowing he was going to die by staying close to
me. He welcomed it. He said that he had lived long enough, that he didn't care to die, as long as he
could know me."
Gabriel extended a leg until their calves brushed lightly. They were sitting in their balcony, strewn
with covers and pillows Ellen had left to front of their room. She had also left a card on top of them
with a heart drawn on the paper. Gabriel had been slightly confused, but had laughed it off. Nathan
had been mortified, and vowed never to ask her anything again.
(The mattress hadn't arrived yet.)
"I know," Gabriel said, softly. "That's what I meant. Would things have been different, had that
prophecy never been made, or never made public? Are prophecies part of the very same events they
put into motion, do they cause them, or are they completely separate from them? I'm not sure even
the witches with that Gift know for sure. But Viviana telling it outright, for everyone to know..."
"Well, she has survived until know. She must be quite old, right? Maybe she's not afraid anymore."
"We don't know when this prophecy was made, though. If the one who will kill her truly is Jessica,
would the prophecy be made before or after Jessica's own birth?"
"I... have no idea."
Gabriel shrugged. "Me neither. Lately it seems like a lot of witches are making prophecies, all of them seeing the same thing - you, killing Soul. But if you had asked me before this war started how many prophecies were floating around, I would have told you, none. Where were all these witches before?"

"Beats me. Do you think they're lying?"
"I don't know what to think. I'm more worried about the fact that a lot of Whites seem to think that, since this prophecy about you is so widespread, it must be true, and they don't have to fight Soul because you'll kill him anyway."

"What if Soul wants them to think that way? Do you think that's possible? He has less defectors to think about like this, right?"

Gabriel made an unconvinced noise. "I don't think so. It still undermines him, no? He's not as invulnerable and invincible if a prophecy says he can be killed. And by a 17-year-old, at that."

Nathan kicked him lightly. "Hey, I'm a dreadful Black witch, eater of hearts."

Gabriel kicked him back just as lightly. "You're a mess, that's what you are."

Gabriel's eyes fell to Nathan's frayed t-shirt, to the way the thin white material accentuated his shoulders and biceps, and the deep earthy colour of his olive skin, and almost, almost added, No matter how hot. He bit his lip, and stayed silent for a while.

Once he was sure he had himself in check, he added, "However, that prophecy works very well as an excuse for Whites not to fight in a war the Alliance is shouldering all on its own. If they are right, the Alliance wins, Soul dies, they are free. If they aren't right, the Alliance dies, but they are safe in their warm comfortable lives under Soul's rule. Pretty convenient."

Nathan scowled. "Did I ever tell you how much I hate Whites?"

Gabriel chuckled. "You don't. But as a whole, their track record is pretty terrible, yes."

"So, do you think Jessica really is the one who will kill her?" Nathan asked, as he reached for the knife he had left on the floor. When his fingertips touched its handle, however, he felt it slip away.

He turned just in time to see it slide forward, the blade gleaming in the pale sunlight, before stopping in the square of light drawn on the floor by the balcony's door. Nathan and Gabriel both stared at it.

"What the fuck?" Nathan wondered, slowly getting to his feet. Gabriel followed suit, as they wearily entered their room.

Nathan felt like a bloody idiot as he reached for the knife - Gabriel's gift - as though he was reaching for a skittish stray. But as soon as he was almost close enough, the knife lurched away, and disappeared into thin air.

"Hey!" Nathan yelled, dashing forward. Then he felt it; the sensation of being flung into a vacuum, wind roaring in his ears, and then the solidity of the ground connecting hard with his feet, the shock making his knees buckle - and the slight aftertaste of nausea. A cut. He had dove right into a cut.

"Gabriel?" he called, turning around frantically.

"Here," Gabriel said, putting a steadying hand on Nathan's neck. "But unarmed, which: not good."

"I can assure you, Gabriel, you won't need any weapon," Viviana said.

She was standing in front of them, her hands cupping Gabriel's knife like an offering. She was dressed in full Uzbek regalia, a long dark red tunic with silver embroidery decorating the large cuffs and the high, rigid collar. Her blouse and hood had a variety of black metallic disks and beads and jewels dangling from the hems.

Brenda was standing next to her. So were a few other Blacks from the Alliance Nathan didn't know the names of, as did Adele, Diamond and Max.

"Please forgive me for borrowing your knife, Nathan," Viviana said. "I know how important it is for you. You can have it back now."

Nathan stood still for a while, before gingerly taking the weapon from her hands. She didn't stop him. Once the knife was safely back in its sheath, Nathan looked at them all.

"What are we doing here?"

"And where is here, anyway?" Gabriel asked, looking around. They were in a sort of clearing, but the trees looked different from the ones of the cursed forest. They were taller, broader; in facts, the
one behind Viviana looked big enough to pierce the sky. The clearing was dotted with ponds of water, the ground was covered by moss and tiny red flowers.
"This," Viviana said, "is a Serpent's Tooth."
"A what?" Nathan asked.
"It's an ancient, sacred ground for Black witches," she explained. "When the Clans still existed, their leaders could call a special kind of Gathering here. They were Gatherings with a special meaning and special power; no White could ever step in this clearing. Neither would a White Hunter be able to attack a Gathering done here."
"That doesn't sound right," Nathan said. "I've heard of Black gatherings raided by Hunters. If they had such a place to use, why did that happen?"
"Because for the protection spells to work, the Gathering must be called by a Descendant," Viviana said. "If it's not, this place has no special power. And there are no Descendants left - not officially, not that the Whites know of. Your grandmother was very careful to hide her ancestry, wasn't she, Gabriel?"
Gabriel simply stared at her, silent and still like a statue. Nathan looked at him, half waiting for answers, and half wondering if he was okay. Gabriel looked ready to bolt and never look back. Finally, he said slowly, "Those are only stories. You have no proof she was saying the truth."
When she shook her head lightly, the disks framing Viviana's face tingled. "No, but I can have it. Right here, right now. Aren't you curious?"
"I didn't inherit her Gift. That line is dead."
"That doesn't mean anything."
Nathan watched them in confusion and frustration. "Could someone please tell me what the fuck you're talking about?"
Gabriel crossed his arms, unease written plainly on his face. "My grandmother claimed to be a descendant from an ancient Clan of Black witches with a legendary ancestor. That's why she was so opposed to my parents' marriage, and to my mother dating a Fain, later; because she wanted her to preserve the line by marrying a powerful Black witch. The Clan's ancestral Gift was manipulating fire; I don't have it. Which must mean the line is dead."
"As I said," Viviana repeated, "that doesn't mean anything. The only thing that matters is if the bones of the Serpent will answer to Gabriel's call; the stories are crystal clear about this, at least. Do you want to hear the story, Nathan? I wonder if Gabriel, himself, heard it. Did your grandmother tell you the story of your ancestor, Sequanna, and of how she fought alongside Viswa?"

In ancient times, when the first Black witches roamed the earth free and powerful, a serpent came from the northern seas. It was a terrifying monster, as tall as the trees of the Black Forest, as long as the Vistula river. It had black scales lined with gold, fangs dripping a venom so powerful, a single drop could scorch the soil; its flaming eyes were filled with cunning and cruelty. When it arrived, it saw that Fains were weak and powerless, and that Witches were scattered and divided. It saw this, and laughed, and started to hunt. Viswa the Huntress was a witness to its killing, as the tribe she ruled was close to where the monster emerged from the sea. She ordered her clan to stay behind, for she couldn't bear the thought of them being poisoned and die in terrible agony, and went to slay the serpent alone. Her Gift was a strong one; she could make blades of air, invisible and lethal, and cut down mountains with a gesture of her hand. For three days and three nights she fought the serpent; and in the end, she cut it in two, from head to tail, and its bones gleamed white under the black of the blood. Viswa cheered; but great was her horror when she saw the two halves move, and the white bones crawl outward, and the flesh knit itself over them. Where there had been one monster, there were now two. The monsters laughed at Viswa's fear. Knowing she could not kill them, knowing that she had to let it be known that cutting them would only multiply them, she fled.
The monsters roamed the land, killing Fains and Witches alike throughout Europe. Viswa tried to warn her fellow Black Witches that the cut of a blade could not kill the serpents, but she was branded a coward, and not listened to. Soon, there were four monsters, then six. Again, Viswa tried to rally the Black Witches, and make them fight together; but Black Witches are proud, even arrogant, and they would not come together, because that would mean to follow a leader, and a Black Witch does not follow.

Viswa, cast out of her clan for cowardice, despaired. She resolved to try and kill at least one monster, and to die in battle. She took her bow and fashioned a mace out of the branch of an oak, and searched for her prey. When she found it, she saw that another Witch was fighting it. Danapris, the Black Fox, had followed the serpent all the way from her land, the Caucasus, after it had attacked a village of innocent Fains and had let them all to die of its flesh-dissolving poison. Great was Danapris' strength; her Gift was ice – she could freeze the water in the air, the blood in her enemies' veins, even the waves of the sea. Danapris had frozen the blood and the water in the serpent's eyes, rendering it blind, and yet it fought. The serpent was strong, and Danapris was wounded. She, too, had tried to sever the monster's head, and so she was now battling two of them. Viswa fought at her side. Danapris pinned the monsters down with shards of ice; Viswa used her club to kill them, without using blades. One monster died. The other freed itself and opened its jaws to spit its venom; Viswa used her Gift to cut off its maw. The basilisk screeched, but it had not died, and so its flesh did not form a new monster. Danapris took a fang, dripping poison, and drove it into the monster's flesh. Convulsing and cursing the two Witches, it died of the same agony it had brought on the land. Danapris wanted Viswa to come with her, to find other Witches to fight alongside them. Viswa told her, "The Blacks don't want to fight alongside each other. It's their ways."

Danapris answered, "We are Black and we fought together. Others will do, too."

The tale of their accomplishment spread, and their rallying cry was heard. There were five serpents left to kill. Six other Witches came to Viswa and Danapris to fight: Viadrua, who could control the shadows and make night fall; Rayn, who knew the Ancient Words which could control any being, human or animal or plant; Sequanna, whose Gift was to control fire; Itil, who could see the future with such clarity as to always know where her enemy would strike next; Dunarea, who could tear the very fabric of the world and make it collapse around her in black silence; Aniža, whose hands were poison and could make anything wither and die. There were five serpents to kill, and eight Black Witches to kill them all. And killed them they did, united, one after the other, their powers combined an exalting wonder. Wherever a serpent fell, they would take a rib from its giant body and drive it in the earth, as a sign of what was coming for its brethren. "Black Witches do not forgive," they would say as one, and march again.

The last serpent was the mother of them all, the first one Viswa had tried to kill: Kelai-Khasis, the Black-Gleaming. Again Viswa fought it for three days and three nights, but this time she wasn't alone. Danapris, who had believed this alliance was possible first, led them, and together they slew the monster. It was a terrible battle, and by the end of it, the Witches were covered in wounds, and the venom and blood of the monster had soaked in them, causing them terrible pain. Their eyes took on the same colour of Kelai-Khasis's scales: black, with golden tumblings in them. Wounded but alive, the Huntresses pledged on the last giant rib driven in the earth to keep the Black Witches united as they were in that moment of victory.

Their descendants are the only ones with the right to lead Black Witches; Black Witches will accept orders only if issued by a descendant of a Huntress. The places where a serpent's bone juts from the earth are the sanctuaries where only Black Witches can gather; the sanctuary where a Descendant might ask her fellow Black Witches to heed her calling.
“So that's what you want Gabriel to do? To find this serpent's bone or something?” Nathan asked Viviana. “Why? And why are these other witches here?”

“Black witches need to fight this war. Together,” Adele said.

Nathan snorted. “No offence Adele, I respect the fact that you're with the Alliance and all, but that's not normal for a Black. If knowing that Hunters are committing genocide against their kind didn't make them join, I don't know what else can.”

“A true Gathering like this hasn't been called in decades, maybe centuries. Blacks care for these ancient stories and spells. They see themselves as the true repositories of witch magic, because White have lost their ways, becoming too similar to Fains,” Viviana said. “Besides, the call through a Serpent's Tooth is something else. It's a spell; it's a compulsion. Not many are able to resist it.”

“At the very least, they would show up. That would be a beginning,” Brenda said. “Last time Van tried to call a gathering, not even half of the witches invited showed up.”

“You're all assuming that the Blacks will care that I am a Descendant, if I am at all,” Gabriel said. “What if they do show up? What am I supposed to tell them? I can't make them join.”

_I can't even tell them I cared to join – I don't care about the Alliance!_ He mentally added.

"If Gabriel doesn't want to do it," Nathan said, taking a step forward, "you can't force him to." Viviana inclined her head to the side. Nathan took her threat in stride, and uncrossed his arms, his fingertips ready at the Fairborn's sheath. Viviana narrowed her eyes, yet she was smiling as she said, "That would be just counterproductive, wouldn't it?"

"Gabriel, we need allies," Adele pleaded. "At the very least, to have a chance at surviving this war. Blacks could be a tremendous help."

Gabriel sighed. "I'm not denying that. I'm just not sure I'd be able to do anything useful to convince them. If Van couldn't, what else can I do? My grandmother loved to tell that same story, to tell herself she was so great because of her ancestry, but it didn't mean anything. She wasn't special, she didn't have the respect she thought she deserved. She thought herself some sort of royalty, but that was all in her head. You should have seen how she walked, how she acted with other Blacks. Don't even get me started with how horrible she was to Half Bloods. If that's what it means to be a Descendant..."

"There is no right or wrong way to be a Descendant," Viviana said. "There is only the power to make a difference, and the decision to use that power or not."

Gabriel didn't say anything. Viviana looked at him in silence; then she turned to the giant tree towering over them. "This discussion is premature. I am pretty sure you are a Descendant, but we have to test my theory first. Look," she said, pointing to a place higher up, where the trunk was mangled and charred - where lightning had struck, splitting the wood open. The bark had re-grown over the dead parts, but a long chasm remained. Inside it, there was something that looked like the old, burned trunk; but a closer look revealed it was something else. The Serpent's Tooth was enveloped in the tree; black and gleaming, it looked like obsidian."

"Is that really the bone of a giant bloody snake?" Nathan asked.

"Who knows," Viviana said. She went to the trunk, jumping over its twisting roots, and the others followed - even Gabriel, although reluctantly. When he was close enough, she made way for him, and pointed to an opening in the bark. The black material of the Tooth glimmered under it. The opening was wide enough for a hand to fit. A series of intricate carvings surrounded it, so old as to be nearly indistinguishable from the bark that had grown with them.

"So that's what you want Gabriel to do? To find this serpent's bone or something?" Nathan asked Viviana. “Why? And why are these other witches here?”

“Black witches need to fight this war. Together,” Adele said.
Gabriel stared at it. "What's going to happen if it works?"
"If you just touch it, nothing will happen. It should just wake up," Viviana said.
Nathan glared at her. "What if it doesn't work? Is this thing dangerous?"
"If it doesn't work, the spell will reject him. Honestly, I've never seen it happen. I've heard stories about terrible curses and whatnot, but they're just stories, right?" Viviana said with a smile.
Nathan had half a mind of yelling at her, but Gabriel gestured at him to calm down. "She's kidding, Nathan," Gabriel said.
Nathan grumbled something unintelligible.
Gabriel stepped forward. There was no point in hesitating. He sent a sarcastic thought to his grandmother, who had wanted so much for him to pick up her supposed legacy, to be the aristocratic Black she had always envisioned. What a fool she had been. There was no aristocracy among Blacks. Only the predominance of the most violent and ruthless, the bloodiest the better. Did he really want to jump into that? He didn't have to turn to know that Nathan was watching his every move, while at the same time keeping track of what everyone in the clearing was doing.
Gabriel pressed his hand into the crevice. The Tooth was shockingly cold when he touched it, and he gasped in surprise.
"You okay?" Nathan asked at once.
"Yes," Gabriel answered. "It's just much colder than I expected."
Then it wasn't. It wasn't like touching an inert object anymore; suddenly it felt warm, and alive - yet it stayed exactly what it was, a hard, gleaming glass-like substance. Gabriel heard a distant echo - fire crackling, the distant calling of voices singing between valleys.
He heard the soft gasp Nathan made. "Doesn't that hurt?" he asked.
Gabriel looked at his hand. A symbol had appeared on the back of it; the lines were smoky, like ink dripping into water. "No, it doesn't," he said, and removed his hand. The symbol gleamed for a moment, and then slowly vanished. It didn't leave a trace.
"Well," Viviana said, "I guess we have our answer now."

When they went back to Kolkasrags, Viviana wanted to go directly to the generals, ready to force their hand. Gabriel refused. Viviana's icy glare was scorching, but her smile was still in place when she said, "Your indecisiveness is pretty surprising, I must say. Every hour we waste is more innocent lives lost, more fear and power in Soul's hands."
"If you want me to call this Gathering for you, if you want me to be a Descendant," Gabriel said, "you better get acquainted with listening to me, not ordering me around."
Viviana stared at him in honest surprise. Then she burst out laughing. "Oh, I see! I see how it is, Gabriel, son of Sequanna. It does make sense," she added with a smirk, looking in Nathan's direction. "If you'll excuse me, then, I'll just go talk to the generals alone. Prepare them for the grand event. Or do I have to ask for permission?"
Gabriel's stare was icy. "I'm sure you're dying to show them your new admirers," he said, nodding in the direction of the Black witches who had accompanied them. "Go take your seat as general."
"It's still too early for that," Viviana said, "but I'll get there. You realize that you could easily have the same seat, don't you?"
Gabriel looked away. "I don't care for political games. They end up with bloody, messy deaths, in my experience."
"Yet you're the one who might have the biggest interest in playing the game," Viviana said, her voice softening. "Someone with power can use it in many ways. One way is to protect."
Gabriel said nothing. Viviana turned with a flourish of red fabric and tingling metal, and she left, followed by the others. A lot of curious eyes followed them, too. Gabriel had no interest in any of it. He felt gutted and empty. For so long he had laughed at his grandmother's ridiculous, anachronistic antics; for just as long, he had carefully hid her last name, used his father's even though that was not
the Black custom. He never wanted to be special. A simple life, a sunny place, woods of birches, a quiet home full of books and a place to go rock climbing; those were the only things he wanted. A place to live in peace... a place where he and Nathan could live quietly. That was everything he could ever want. The war, the Alliance, Soul, the Hunters... those had always looked like insurmountable obstacles, hurdles too huge to be won over, the stuff of nightmares. The thought of playing this game made it worse. He had had a taste of how Blacks did politics in Florida; confronted with that, spying on Whites and passing for a Fain in White territories had seemed easier, and way more fun.

Nathan grabbed his hand. He didn't say anything, but the worry in his black eyes was enough to melt Gabriel's fear. He smiled at him, and said, "Let's go to our room. I feel like I could sleep for days."

Whatever uproar Viviana might be causing, it didn't reach them up there. That was not the reason why Nathan's stomach did a little somersault when he reached their floor.

The mattress had arrived. Someone had left it outside of their door - a good sign that the wards around the room worked perfectly, and no one could enter it uninvited.

"Uh? What's that?" Gabriel asked. Then he looked better at it, and laughed. "Did you order this?"

"Shut the fuck up, Ellen will never let me live this down," Nathan rushed to say. "Just help me pulling it inside."

Gabriel sniggered, but helped him nonetheless. It took some effort to work it inside the door, but they managed in the end.

"How did you even manage to get a mattress?" Gabriel asked as they shuffled it in. "I thought the balcony was fine with you."

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Nathan elected not to answer and save himself the embarrassment of an explanation. It took more time than he expected to remove the old mattress and throw it out; its material was so old it frayed in unexpected places, spilling half-rotten wool and straw on the floor. The dust in the air was so thick they had to open all windows and doors in the hopes of it dissipating. When the mattress was finally ready, Nathan pulled in the sheets and pillows. Gabriel helped him to set the covers. As he tucked an angle of the sheets under the new mattress, a happy half-smile ghosted his face. Nathan was more than a little distracted by it, focused as he was on Gabriel's every tiny reaction. He needed to know if he was doing things right.

When the bed was all set, Gabriel crossed his arms and admired the result. "A decent bed, hot water in the bathroom, and books. Now we're only missing some new clothes, and we're basically rich."

Nathan flopped down on the bed. The way his body bounced slightly off it was deeply satisfying.

"I wonder how we could even get some clothes," Gabriel mused. "It's not like we can just go into town and buy them for ourselves. Are we supposed to ask the foragers? I suppose we can't be picky, but it would be nice to have something at least our size. Then again, it's not like it matters much right n---"

"Do you really want to be a Descendant?" Nathan interrupted him.

Gabriel didn’t answer right away. He slowly sank down on the mattress too, lying on his side to face Nathan. "It's not a matter of wanting or not. I am one, am I not?"

"You know what I mean."

"I said I was going to commit to this war. I meant it."

Nathan rolled on his side too, and searched his face. "You said you were going to stay and see if you could find a reason to really believe in the future. It's not the same thing."

"To get to that future, though, I have to pass through this war. We already discussed this. You're not going to run away; you're much braver than I am. Come think of it, you should be the Descendant. Left to my own devices, I'd do exactly like every other Black is doing now; I'd just mind my own business and hide. Are you sure you don't have Huntress' blood in your family, somewhere?"

"I don't know much about my Black side, actually," Nathan mused. "You're trying to distract me."

Gabriel chuckled without humour. "Well, now you've caught on to my evil plan."

Nathan's concerned look. "I am scared, Nathan. But I want to try and work through it for once. Aren't you scared, too, when you think about facing Hunters, or facing Soul?"
"Yes," Nathan said. "But I want to be free. The only way is through them all. Hiding is useless."
Gabriel curled a hand in between them. Nathan slowly, gently grasped it. "I'd like for a little of that
courage to rub off me," Gabriel said. "I'll need that to convince the Blacks to listen to me. The
thought of succeeding is almost as scary as them getting offended and deciding I need to die to make
up for it."
"Why would succeeding be scary?"
"Because then I'd have to act as their leader. Also, I'd have to deal with Viviana. She's going to use
this, Nathan, and she's so much more experienced than me at this, the thought I have any chance at
keeping her at bay is laughable."
"You don't have to. Let her have her seat among the generals. What does it matter to us? We're just
soldiers, you and me. Or do you think she's a spy or something?"
Gabriel sighed. "I don't know. I don't think so. I'm just worried. The last thing we need is infighting
right now, and she seems hell-bent on moulding the Alliance into what she wants it to be... I'd rather
not encourage her."
Nathan stayed silent for a while. He stroked Gabriel's hand with his thumb as he thought. "In the
end, you are Black, and she's not," he finally said. "Maybe things were different before, but today's
witches would rather listen to you than a Half Code. Besides, I don't think they need another
bloodthirsty killer as their leader. They need someone reasonable, and who can collaborate with
Whites."
"Well, what they need might not be what they want, and what am I supposed to do about---"
Nathan bumped his forehead lightly with the heel of his hand. "Why are you being so negative?
Fucking stop it. You're handsome, you speak well, you don't let others trample all over you, and
your Gift is powerful. You're going to be fine."
Gabriel grinned at him. "Oh yeah? I'm handsome?"
Nathan tried to hit him again, but this time Gabriel expected it, and he caught his hand in between
them. Gabriel laughed as he said, "No really, tell me more about my wonderful qualities, I want to
hear it."
"You're insufferable," Nathan said, as he drank the sight of his playful smile. So up close he could
count every golden tumble in his hazel eyes, see the almost coppery shine his hair caught in the sun.
The wavy strands were half-spreading on the covers, half-falling into his eyes. Nathan reached with
his other hand to brush it aside, and curled it behind Gabriel's ear. He saw the moment in which
Gabriel stopped breathing, when his entire being focused on that tiny place where Nathan's fingertips
were brushing his skin. His eyes widened a fraction, but it was short-lived; Gabriel wasn't, after all,
anything but honest in his attachment. What filled his eyes was hunger, and longing, and fire.
Nathan dove in, and kissed him.
Gabriel couldn't breathe, and he couldn't have been any happier. Nathan had one hand firmly entangled in Gabriel's hair, and the other scorched Gabriel's skin where it was splayed, on his neck. Nathan kissed him with complete abandon, pulling him closer and closer, like he couldn't get enough. A sentiment Gabriel shared. His hands found Nathan's waist at once, diving under the hem of his shirt, but staying there, caressing the teasing strip of skin right above Nathan's jeans, and straying no further. Gabriel swallowed Nathan's surprised gasp at the touch, feathery soft, and then the chuckle that followed it. His thoughts were shattered and scattered, little more than flashes of sensations. It felt like his body was lost, or maybe forgotten, and the only parts he could feel were the ones Nathan was setting on fire anywhere he touched.

His scalp, were Nathan's fingers alternated between gentle carding and delicious pulling. His neck, and then his shoulder, and then his chest where Nathan's hand tried to sneak in past the shirt's hem. Nathan battled with it for less than a second before losing his patience and removing it, throwing it as far as he could for good measure. He almost dove in again, hungrily, then caught himself. He looked into Gabriel's face, waiting, giving him a moment, if he wanted it, if he needed one. His hand moved from Gabriel's hair to his face, and he cradled it. His thumb found Gabriel's bottom lip, and traced it, slowly, finding it wet and soft and enticing. Gabriel didn't need time, didn't need to think. He pulled Nathan down and kissed him again. It was more languid this time.

Nathan's hands travelled on Gabriel's skin. Nathan took his time with it, knowing that there was no rush. Nothing hovered in the back of his mind, no doubt or unwanted, prickling knowledge of something - someone - existing between them. Nathan let himself sink, let Gabriel know and feel his abandonment, how at ease he was in his arms. He was so focused on the kiss that his hands stopped moving. Gabriel traced the outside of Nathan's thigh, slowly down once, and then even slower up, gauging Nathan's reaction. Nathan was almost annoyed enough by this hesitation to break the kiss and yell at him. Only a bit. He didn't. He opted instead for teasing one of Gabriel's nipples. A dare.

Gabriel gasped in between the kisses, but it was short-lived. If he hadn't been so occupied with thoroughly tasting Nathan's mouth, he would've smirked. Instead, he squeezed his hand right under Nathan's arse. A challenge.

Then his hand shot behind Nathan's knee, and he pulled it, wedging his own leg in between Nathan's. This time, Nathan's gasp was audible, breathless, and delighted.

"Gabriel...!" he breathed, and that, too, was a challenge. When Gabriel moved his leg, Nathan's hips followed of their own accord. The friction was heavenly fire, and Nathan's body sought it hungrily; but Gabriel's hand locked Nathan in place, forcing him to follow a much more languid rhythm than he would have liked. It was torture. It was delicious. How did Gabriel even manage to be in such
control?
Nathan let himself be guided. It was something novel, to just trust his body into someone else's hands, willingly, and enjoying it. He didn't think of anything. He just let himself feel. When it was over, when Gabriel parted long enough to open his eyes and look at him, it was too soon. Their legs were tangled, their chests flush against each other. Gabriel's hair was a complete mess, stray locks sticking everywhere. The sight made Nathan giggle. Gabriel looked at him like he had just hung the moon and all the stars in the sky. The sheer awe and love in his eyes popped the bubble of Nathan's high.
"Uhm..." he tried, stuttering like the bumbling idiot he was every time he needed to say something important. He was almost willing to cut himself some slack, for once in his life, in account of his really distracting half hard-on.

Gabriel shushed him by putting a finger over his lips. "I know exactly what you want to say. Don't. I know."
Nathan guiltily avoided his eyes. It would have probably been right, or decent, to shuffle a little away. He didn't move. Gabriel pushed him until he was lying over him.

"Don't give me that," he whispered, and kissed him again. They were lighter kisses, one after the other. They reminded Nathan of the taste of plums, of tiny, sweet morsels ripe with summer sun. Nathan felt the excitement melt away into a softer glow, settling so much deeper, right into his bones. "You are way too good at this," he murmured, eyes closed. Gabriel's answering laugh was lost between their lips, reverberating through their tangled limbs.

"And you're not very good with words, yet you still try to ruin a perfect moment with them."

Nathan grumbled, dejected.

"There's nothing left standing between us, no?"

"No."

"Then it's fine. I want to see where I can take you... if I can make you fall in love with me."

I'm already a little in love with you, Nathan thought, but didn't dare to say.

"I'll woo you, Nathan Bynm," Gabriel said, laughing and laughing.

Nathan didn't want him to ever stop. So he said, "Oh shit," like he dreaded it, like his face was aflame with embarrassment and not with pleasure.

Gabriel laughed again.

Skaidrite's room was even more crowded than before with antique-looking knick-knacks and clockwork machinery, but all the dust was gone. Nathan took it all in with curiosity as she poured the tea for everyone present – The Squad, as Ellen had already decided to call it. Nathan, Gabriel, Skaidrite, Adele, Brenda, Viviana, Diamond, Max, Arran, and Ellen herself. (It was a completely ridiculous name, of course. Of course, Nathan knew that Ellen would make sure it stuck. He wouldn't be surprised if she was planning matching jackets for everyone.)

As he accepted his tea, Nathan realized it was the first time he shared a room with so many Blacks. Brenda and Arran were the only full-blooded Whites present. Arran was seated on one of the sofas, next to his brother, and he looked perfectly at ease as he sipped his cup. Brenda was fidgeting with her hair, rolling between her fingertips the thick braid her cornrows ended in, but Nathan had shared
enough battles with her to know she was just anxious by nature.

“So,” Adele started, “first of all, we have to make sure you're all onboard with the idea. Saving people from the Hunters is insanely dangerous, and I don't want to take anyone for granted.” She looked pointedly at Nathan when she repeated, “Anyone at all.”

Nathan stayed silent. He wondered who “we” was. He felt the weight of everyone's eyes on himself, the weight of their expectations. He didn't have a choice, not really. Not when Arran was in, not when Ellen was, too. And he wanted to. He clutched his cup more firmly to hide his hand's tremor. His thumb found his little finger's nail, where the smallest tattoo gleamed black and almost forgettable, and stroked it. He wanted to be good.

“Also, we need a united front when we tell the generals. If you don't feel like risking your lives like this, I understand.”

“The generals don't know about this?” Diamond asked.

“No. The idea was mine,” Skaidrite said. She looked comfortable, sprawled with ease on a plush armchair; any trace of her injuries seemed long gone. She was wearing a decidedly not antique-looking earpiece; enchanted with her Gift, it translated everything that was told into Latvian. Her answers, however, were in a simple but effective English. “I told Adele, Adele told Viviana. Viviana told Ellen.” Her tone made it clear how much she disapproved of this action – as did her pointed look in Viviana's direction.

“You know how it is,” Ellen joked, “Viviana loves me.”

Viviana chuckled. “I guess I do. I also know better than wait and hope the best spy in the Alliance doesn't discover something we're actively trying to keep from the generals.”

Ellen beamed at her.

“You just wait and see, Ellen's Gift will be something like reading minds for sure,” Brenda said with a nervous laugh. Nathan could barely stop himself from cringing. He could see Ellen's frozen grin well, as she was seated right across him. Brenda sensed she had somehow stepped on painful ground, and tried her best to melt into the sofa. If her black skin had allowed it, Nathan was sure she'd be red to the tips of her ears.

Arran was quick to come to her rescue. “I must wonder why you'd keep this idea from the generals. For how long? It would be impossible to do something like this under their noses, I'd think.”

“Not for long,” Viviana said. “We'll wait until the generals announce their next move – having Gabriel call a Gathering.”

Adele nodded. “The point is to prevent them from vetoing this. Hopefully, if we announce this to the entire Alliance, those who clamoured for the Hunters' prisoners to be saved will be overjoyed.”

“The generals won't be,” Gabriel noted.

“Fuck the generals,” Nathan muttered into his cup. Gabriel and Arran exchanged a fond, smiling look at this.

“There is also the problem of what they have in store for Nathan. They wouldn't let him throw himself into danger like this if they could prevent it,” Viviana added. “They need him alive for a little while longer, at least.”
“The amulet, right?” Ellen mused, looking at Gabriel.

“What amulet?” Diamond asked.

“The Alliance has half of an amulet that, if made whole again, should grant invincibility,” Gabriel explained. “It used to be my grandmother's. Apparently, Van knows who has the missing half; a witch called Ledger, hiding somewhere in the United States. The generals intend to use the amulet on Nathan.”

Diamond's eyes narrowed. “Did they steal that from you?”

“What? No,” Gabriel said. “I gave it to Van as payment for saving my life. It's just half of an amulet, it doesn't work, and anyway I have no use for it. I'm more than happy to leave it to the Alliance.”

“That still sounds like stealing to me. Like blackmail,” Diamond pressed.


Max stared at her, then at his sister. “I can't tell whether that's a compliment or an insult,” he said finally, pouting. Diamond just rolled her eyes at him.

“Gabriel doesn't care about the stupid amulet. He cares about Nathan not--- not dead.” Skaidrite said, flustered at her inability to being as eloquent as she could be in Latvian.

“Not dying?” Arran gently suggested.

“That. Yes. Also,” Skaidrite added, glaring at Viviana, “stop say that shit about Blacks and Whites.”

Viviana held up a hand in a pacifying gesture. “I didn't mean to offend. Of course I know that there's nothing inherently Black or White. The people in this room are a testament to that. I just mean that expectations are powerful, and a lot of people end up performing to their tune. Nevertheless, I'll mind my words better.”

“Let's get back on track,” Adele said. “Do you think Van will say anything about this amulet in the next assembly? Does she even know how to contact this Ledger?”

“I'd be very surprised if she did,” Viviana answered, looking at the ceiling like she could feel a headache coming. In facts, she could. That was usually what happened whenever Ledger was involved in anything. “Ledger is as slippery as an eel. She has been hiding for longer than me.”

“Ledger... I think I heard this name before,” Diamond mused.

“According to Greatorex, she used to be a pretty influential Black Witch a century or so ago,” Adele said.

Gabriel's eyes widened. “Is that... an hyperbole?”

Nathan glared at him.


“No, it isn't,” Adele answered, trying her best to remain serious. “She's at least as old as Mercury was, and although no one knows exactly how old that is, it should be around one hundred years.”

“It makes sense. Mercury's twin sister, Mercy, was Marcus' grandmother. Mercury could have been anything between ninety and one hundred-and-twenty, easy,” Nathan noted idly as he stared at the
last dregs of tea in his cup, thinking of how shocked he had been when Rose had told him. Now it just felt like something inevitable. Of course he’d end up killing one of the few relatives he had; of course that relative would be hell-bent on killing him out of hate for Marcus. That was his life. It took him a few seconds to notice the silence that had fallen in the room. When he looked up, everyone was staring at him – again – save for Gabriel and Viviana. Nathan wasn't surprised that she knew.

“What?” he asked, hackled raised in an instant, the silent _The fuck you're staring for?_ ringing as clear as a bell.

“So Mercury was your...” Brenda started, then hesitated. “Great-great-aunt, like?”

“Yes.”

“And... Marcus killed his own grandmother because...?” Ellen said, eyebrows raised.

“How the fuck am I supposed to know?”

“Sorry, sorry. Not important,” Ellen tried to pacify him.

“What matters is, this Ledger must be a powerful witch for having lived this long, right?” Max interjected. “Why would a powerful witch go into hiding? Mercury had a secret base, but she never stopped being an influential Black. Something pretty terrible must have happened to send her into hiding, I'd think.”

Viviana sighed. “It did, but it also didn't. Ledger saw what was happening between Whites and Blacks before anyone else. She saw where they were headed, how the communities were stopping living in the same areas, slowly migrating away from each other. And she saw the first small outbursts of violence at the newly-formed borders for what they were.” Her voice hardened to cold steel when she added, “And she decided she had no business with it. She decided to wait it out.”

A storm of disbelieving questions swept the room, everyone talking at once. Viviana waited for it to pass, observing them all. Kind, sweet Arran, dismayed in the face of callous selfishness, and Adele a mirror of his dismay next to him, but with a steely, harsher light in her eyes. Ellen's outrage was like a storm clouding her young features, ready with the enthusiasm of youth to tear this incomprehensible adult apart. Brenda wore the weary look of someone who was let down too many times to be surprised anymore; as a White Witch in the Alliance, she had all the right. Skaidrite's only reaction was to look even more bored and cynical than ever, as if to ask, _What, are you surprised?_ She, too, had all the right, Viviana figured. Diamond and Max moved imperceptibly closer to one another. Max noticed her watching, and quickly averted her eyes; Diamond was too busy looking around the room and asking her own questions to notice her. The only one who didn't lose his composure at all was Gabriel. He wasn't surprised in the least; he just kept on sipping his tea. Nathan didn't turn to look at him, but still he noticed him, watched him from the corner of the eye, and so he just crossed his arms and waited, too.

Viviana held up a hand to try and calm them down. When they were more or less listening to her again, she explained, “ Ledger was there when the White Councils started to become more akin to Fain governments – with laws and enforcers and very clear ideas on what to do to Blacks who happened to break those laws. White Hunters existed before, but they weren't a police force like they are now. They certainly didn't dare to kill any Black on sight; the retaliation from the Clans would have been swift and bloody. When that started to change... some decided to fight. Some decided to keep out of it. Before going into hiding, Ledger told me that fighting it was pointless, that history is like a wheel. Blacks and Whites were going to fight each other, like they had done before, and then it would quiet down, and then they would start living together again.”
How much she had hated her, then. Saying “it” like it was a natural phenomenon or an inevitable cataclysm, not actual people, actual witches who were doing terrible things. Killing anyone who dared to oppose the new laws, White, Black, Half-blood, it didn't matter. Taking care to kill more viciously the Half-and-Halves, especially. Torturing them, exposing them, stringing them up on trees. There weren't very many to begin with. She looked at Nathan, knowing she would never tell him this, but his eyes were steadfast when she met them. He didn't need to be told. He knew. He knew very well what it meant to live in between two worlds who hated each other to the bone. He knew what he represented for both. They were monsters, the both of them. Wonders. The Other, mixed with the Same. Something impure and disquieting. Something that needed to be humiliated, brought low, destroyed.

When she brought the nearly empty cup to her lips, Viviana's fingers shook so slightly, the tremor was almost invisible.

Their rage was powerful. Their rage could bring the entire Witch society down. But her rage was honed, sharpened by centuries of making her words be heard, by voice or by blade. Nathan's rage was a cowering, explosive, wounded thing. He deserved time to heal she couldn't afford to give him.

“If Ledger was so powerful,” Diamond asked, “why did she hide? What is her Gift? It must be a rare one.”

“Mind-control,” Viviana answered. She could see the little jolt that sent through them. One of the scariest Gifts, to be sure. “She can also shapeshift, and move objects with her mind.”

Diamond scoffed, filled with derision and contempt. “She could control minds, and decided to hide instead of using her Gift? I know witches who would have killed for a Gift like that. Witches who would still be alive now if they had it.”

“I'm afraid Ledger doesn't care about all the lives that were and will be lost as she waits for the wheel to turn,” Viviana said lowly.

“I don't like this Ledger,” Nathan said.

“Me neither,” added Arran, “yet it seems we'll have to find her, sooner or later. Or, the Alliance will.”

“Honestly, I have no idea how they'll manage that. I have no idea where she's hiding, and I'm one of the last ones to see her at all. Even if I knew where she's hiding, I probably wouldn't tell,” Viviana said.

“That's not true,” Ellen quipped.

Viviana saluted with her cup. “Wish it was.”

“The Alliance knows where she is,” Gabriel said. “Or rather, they have hints to figure out where she is. Mercury knew, and she left a diary.”

“Think they'll be able to figure it out?” Brenda asked.

“The generals are not stupid. They will,” Nathan said.

“True,” Skaidrite agreed. “Iskandra says, they work on it. They will figure it out.”

“And when that moment comes, they'll ask Nathan to wear the amulet, and then they'll go to war,” Brenda said. She started to worry her braid again.
“I don’t think it’s war they have in mind,” Gabriel said. “I think they’ll throw Nathan at Soul and hope he kills him.” He said that without animosity, like he had rolled the thought enough in his mind to accept it, like water does to a rock with jagged edges, until it becomes a smooth pebble. Nathan knew it wasn’t so. He felt his outrage and his worry, his stupidly endearing desire to protect him. Nathan thought, *I’m going to kiss him for that later.* Then he thought, *What the fuck was that?*

“I agree. Now that they have Kolkasrags and its cursed forest, they feel safe. They can stay holed up here as long as they want, waiting until they find Ledger... I don’t think they’re in any rush to gather more allies,” Adele mused, her disapproval giving an edge to her measured words. “I understand the desire to not just throw more lives away after what happened before, but...”

“Iskandra doesn’t,” Skaidrite said.

“Iskandra is a warmonger,” Brenda said.

“So am I,” Skaidrite retaliated. “This is war. We’re witches. We fight.”

Arran shook his head slightly. “For how things are now, it makes sense to wait. More than half of the people here aren’t even foragers, let alone soldiers. But as far as plans to get more soldiers stand...”

“There aren’t any,” Ellen concluded. “That’s why this idea is so important. We need to draw more allies, more witches willing to fight. And we have to convince the Blacks to fight. Honestly, what are they even doing? They’re dying by the hundreds, and not doing anything about it. At the very least, I thought they hated Whites just as much as Whites hate them. Enough to fight back.”

“They do,” Adele said, “we just have to remind them. As far as I know, most of them have opted to emigrate.”

Max listened and hesitated for a long time before speaking. “I know they look like cowards, but most Blacks I know lived in isolated families. We don’t have an assembly like the White Councils. Once the Hunters started to round us up, we didn’t have anyone to turn to. Those who had family or friends tried to escape with them or hide together, but... that’s it.”

“It’s also true that most Blacks reacted with complete selfishness to it,” Diamond added. “Every witch for herself. When you’re alone against a trained force devoted to slaughter you, the only sensible thing to do is fleeing.”

“That’s why we need Gabriel to call that Gathering, and that’s why we’ll be the ones to save as many Witches from the Hunters as we can,” Viviana said, watching them all. “Are we all together in this?”

Slowly, everyone nodded.

“Good. Then at the next Alliance assembly, we’ll announce it. The generals will call one shortly, to notify everyone about the Gathering at the Serpent’s Tooth.”

“Then we miss only one thing,” Skaidrite said. She stood up and walked to the table covered in antiques, her hands at her hips as she sized up every piece of her collection. “We need a spy.”

“A spy?” Nathan asked.

“We need a way to gather information about Hunters’ activity. Where they keep their prisoners, when they plan new raids, things like that,” Adele explained. “Skaidrite can enchant objects with her Gift. We were thinking of sending Soul a gift he might like, with the object working as a transmitter. It would be like planting a bug in his office.”
“If he kept it in his office, or if he kept it all,” Arran said. “That's the tricky part. If we could find out something Soul liked or collected... You met him, right, Nathan?” he asked, his voice infinitely gentle.

Nathan tensed all the same. “I've only ever seen Soul in a Council's room. During my assessments. There was nothing personal of Soul's in there.” Nathan focused on his brother, trying to block out everyone else. In the corner of his eye, he could see Diamond turning to Ellen, mouthing a question, and Ellen shaking her head.

“What about Wallend?” Adele asked. “They're close, right? Wallend is his right-hand man, isn't he?”

Nathan didn't stray his gaze from his brother's. “I think so.”

“He definitely is. There are already reports of Soul and Jessica being ready to stab each other. They both want more power than the other is willing to concede. Wallend is a scientist and a researcher; he's not a threat for Soul's influence,” Adele commented.

“We could focus on Wallend,” Ellen added.

“Do you remember anything about him that could be useful?” Adele asked.

“Like what,” Nathan said, flat and strained, his voice lowering.

Adele heard it, heard the tension building. Her next suggestion was a fraction quieter. “Something he might like?”

I was too busy screaming around the metal gag stuck in my mouth to ask him what the fuck he liked, Nathan almost spat in her face, the memory of the scalpel burning his skin where it had carved him to the bone. Then he felt Gabriel's hand resting very lightly on top of his, and the weight of both his and Arran's worried gazes, and it was so ridiculous – what with them being seated at both his sides, looking at him – that he couldn't help but roll his eyes. “Stop that,” he said. Gabriel sheepishly tucked a strand of hair behind an ear, like he always did when he was embarrassed. Arran pouted.

“What about his office?” Viviana asked gently.

“I've never been to his office.” Nathan tried not to remember the room too clearly. Room 2C, with the medical feel to it, the faint antiseptic smell, the thinly-padded bed where he--- fuck. Fuck. The needle. The pain. The helplessness. Wallend talking like it was nothing, like it was just another day of work, words calm and serene, not even once raising his voice, not even when Nathan was crying and screaming around the gag. Wallend's words were empty, but his eyes were not. He wasn't smiling, but his eyes were. They were filled with delight when Nathan met them at the end, right when Nathan understood where the last tattoo would go. And Wallend, the bastard, the fucking sick arsehole, he took his bloody time, lowering the needle on Nathan's neck as slow as possible, and...

Under his breath, he was humming a tune.

“I think...” Nathan said slowly, “he might like classical music. I heard him whistling a tune. It's famous.”

“Which one?”

Nathan didn't know. But he always had a good memory. He hummed it.

Skaidrite scoffed loudly and threw her hands into the hair, saying something in Latvian that definitely sounded derisive. She opened a cabinet in the bookshelves lining the wall, then extracted a filing
cabinet from it, and started rummaging through it. Finally, she extracted a big, square-shaped cardboard envelope. Everyone silently watched her as she came back to the table and pushed some things around to make space for a big phonograph, its horn shiny and almost golden. Skaidrite carefully extracted a disk from the envelope and put it on the turntable. Then she grabbed the crank to the side and wound it up. The clicks of it almost echoed in the silent room. The disk began to spin. Skaidrite slowly lowered the needle on it, and at first the only thing audible was scratching. Then the tune began; the same Nathan had just hummed, the same he had heard from Wallend.

“Neunte Sinfonie,” Skaidrite said. “Ludwing van Beethoven.” She turned to Nathan and asked, “This?”

Nathan nodded.

Skaidrite hissed. “This Wallend is a bad, bad man.”

Nathan raised an eyebrow. “True, but how do you know from a song?”

As the tune unfurled, Gabriel recognized it and shook his head. “It's based on a poem by Schiller... about peace and fraternity between men.”

“Then it's only fitting we send him this very tune... and use it to destroy him and Soul. That will certainly bring peace and fraternity,” Viviana said.

“What are we going to do? Send him a CD of it? We can't know for certain he has a phonograph,” Ellen asked.

“We'll send him the whole thing, with as many vinyls of classical music we can find, this one included” Adele said. “Hopefully he's an estimator and he will keep it in his office. It's also quite heavy, so that should help, as long as we send it to his office in the Council building.”

“Leave it to me,” Ellen said.

“Then it's settled,” Viviana said, and she rose. “We're almost ready.”

When they parted, Arran hugged Nathan briefly, brushing the messy hair at his nape for a moment. Then Nathan left, Gabriel at his side. They climbed the stairs of the nearby tower, and reached its flat top. Nathan sat between two merlons, his feet resting on the side of one of them, and lit a cigarette. Gabriel sat in front of him. Nathan let one of his legs dangle in the air to make more space; Gabriel put his arm around Nathan's bent knee, his fingers stroking gently Nathan's lower thigh. Nathan looked at him for a while, at how the sun and wind played with his hair. The golden tumblings in his eyes shone like light scattered on a calm sea. Nathan wasn't going to say he was fine; it would have been pointless. He breathed in the acrid smoke, and looked out toward the woods surrounding the fortress, the green-and-black ocean mirroring the grey at their backs. When he pulled his hand away, he paused, looking at his own left palm. He turned it over, exposing the tattoo left by Wallend. 0.5B, it said. No amount of scraping and pain he could bring on himself would ever get rid of it. He knew. He had tried. It didn't stop the instinctive, visceral lurch he felt inside, the burning desire to make the tattoo disappear. He looked up only when Gabriel reached for his nape and put his hand there, warm and comforting. Gabriel didn't say anything; he slowly drew Nathan near, and kissed his forehead. Nathan moved the hand holding the cigarette away, then let his arm fall altogether, limp at his side and forgotten. He tipped his head up and kissed Gabriel.

Nathan heard the steps coming. He just didn't care. From the way Gabriel's lips moved into a smile,
he didn't either. The gasp was loud. Nathan sighed as they broke the kiss. He went back to his cigarette while Gabriel coughed politely.

Diamond's crown of curly black hair was visible above the edge of the hatch; she stood up just enough so that her blue eyes were visible. She grimaced as she said, “Sorry.”

“It's okay,” Gabriel said, wishing he could strangle her. But only a little. “What is it?”

Diamond climbed up, Max at her heel. She looked slightly embarrassed, but she didn't hesitate. “I have to tell you something. It's about my Gift.”

Nathan didn't look at her, intent on blowing the smoke away from Gabriel and Max.

“I lied to the generals about it. I told them it's potions.”

At this he stopped smoking and turned.

“It's not. I have the Gift of Command. I can make people do anything I order them to.”

“Impressive and scary,” Gabriel commented. “I can see why you'd lie about it. The Generals would have locked you up immediately. Why telling us, though?”

“We're going to fight together. We'll have to trust each other,” Diamond answered. “Besides, it's very probable I'll end up using it in battle. It's better to just tell you now.”

“How noble,” Nathan finally said. “Give me one reason why I shouldn't kill you right now.”

“The effect wears off right after the command is executed if it's a simple action. If I order someone to see something that is not there, or to think something they didn't think before, the effect lasts ten minutes, tops. Once it wears off, the person I used it on remembers everything they actually wanted to do, so I can't escape retaliation if I used it on you, or anyone in the Alliance.”

Nathan took another drag. “Fair enough. How do I know you're not lying?”

“Want a demonstration?” she asked, and then put a hand on Max's shoulder. “Max, tell Nathan everything you think of him.”

“I think you are so cool, you look exactly how I pictured our father to be. You look so cool when you fight, that day against Viviana was amazing. I don't even care you got me a bruise, I want to learn to fight just like you, and to stand up for myself just like you do. The way you use the Fairborn is amazing, and all the cool animals you transform into are so amazing too! Plus you and Gabriel look so cute together,” Max said instantly.

A moment of silence passed, before Max turned cherry red. “DIAMOND!” he yelled, swatting her hand away.

“Well,” Gabriel said, “that was... interesting.”

Nathan glared fiercely at the sibling and didn't say anything. Max floundered under his gaze and stammered out an apology, trying to get Diamond to apologize too. His sister, however, looked perfectly unrepentant.

Gabriel chuckled. “Don't mind him, he's just embarrassed.”

Nathan glared at Gabriel then, but Gabriel wouldn't be fooled. The slight pout on Nathan lips was definitely a hint of his embarrassment. One just needed to know the signs.
Gabriel's amused smile was enough to mollify Nathan, even though it was at his expenses. Nathan flicked his cigarette to the stone floor and crushed it under his boot. “Thank you for telling us, I guess,” he said, taking care to look at Diamond with his best threatening glare. “Does Viviana know?”

“No,” Diamond answered.

“Really,” Nathan said, sceptical.

“Really.”

“How do I know you're not making me believe you right now?”

“I have to actually issue an order for that to work. You'd know in ten minutes, anyway.”

Nathan fell silent, and stared at her some more. Then he met Gabriel's gaze. If there were dangers he couldn't see, more possibilities to think of, he trusted him to be the best suited person for the task. Gabriel nodded slightly, then turned to Diamond.

“Thank you for telling us,” he said, dismissing them both.

“You're right in not trusting me,” Diamond said. “I'll show you with my actions that you can. I will for sure.” She turned to Max then, and almost gestured for him to follow her back down, before she hesitated. “Oh, and... uhm...”

“What now,” Nathan asked flatly.

“I didn't know that part about... you two. Of what Max said. Sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you.”

Max hissed at her in German, slapping her arm.

Nathan sighed. “You should apologize to your brother, not us. Besides, everyone is going to know soon. It would be stupid to be embarrassed now.”

“Oh,” Diamond said. “Okay then.”

The siblings left. As soon as the sound of their steps faded, Gabriel beamed at him. “Soon?”

Nathan glared and scoffed and hoped his cheeks weren't reddening. “I don't want to hide and I am not embarrassed, okay?”

Gabriel laughed. He stood up, and took Nathan's hands to have him stand up too, and pulled him close. “Sure you're not. That's why you're so red in the face right now.”

“I am not,” Nathan said, outraged, and was just about to protest some more, when Gabriel pulled him so close, their noses touched each other. Nathan stopped talking at once, his eyes fluttering shut. Gabriel gently brushed their noses together, delighting in how tenderness was the most effective way to make Nathan pause. He could feel Nathan's limbs, usually so tense, melt in his embrace.

“We were in the middle of something before being interrupted,” Gabriel whispered.


Gabriel kissed him.
When the time came to prepare for the Gathering, Viviana was, according to Gabriel, awfully excited. When Gabriel said so to him, Nathan rolled his eyes and told him he was projecting. Nathan. Told him. That he was projecting.

Gabriel pondered on the irony of his mentally ill boyfriend – whether it was PTSD, or depression, or something else besides, it wasn’t in his power to know – telling him that he was projecting, and on how he was probably right. It was marginally more entertaining that paying attention to what was happening around him. He had not one, not two, but three seamstresses assigned to him, tasked with creating the perfect garment for the Gathering, one that would impress the witches who would heed its call.

His call.

As the three women practically danced around him, folding fabric and pinning needles and chattering in Russian, Gabriel tried very, very hard to keep calm and composed. To forget about how his life was already spinning out of his control, just as his grandmother has always wanted, right into Viviana’s hands. Or the Alliance’s. Whichever managed to profit from it best.

All the prestige, none of the power. Not that he wanted that power, he was perfectly okay being just another Black Witch, but being a pawn in these games...

Surrounded by those women, with Van’s gaze weighting on him, Gabriel felt exactly like a doll. Something to be dressed up and then exposed to hungry eyes to be admired.

He suppressed a sigh, and stood still instead. He did, however, turn his head just enough to see Nathan better. He was sitting by a window, sipping a mug of coffee, looking dead on his feet.

Just then, the door to the room opened, and Adele entered. She was clutching a hand-written letter. “Van,” she said first, bowing her head slightly. “Hi Gabriel,” she added, and then hesitated when she saw Nathan. “You look terrible, Nathan. Are you okay?” she asked.

“I didn't sleep well,” Nathan grumbled into his mug. The coffee inside was just as he liked it: full of sugar and creamer until it was more like coffee ice cream than actual coffee (Gabriel shivered in mock-horror every time he prepared a mug for him). It wasn't helping much. He was so sleep deprived his stomach was queasy all the time, and his head ached constantly. Ever since they discussed Wallend, Nathan had found himself back into that room every night. It had been more than two weeks.

Nathan wondered if Adele knew he didn't need much sleep at all to be perfectly fine; he wondered if she'd say something about it. Whatever the case, she didn't. She showed Van the letter instead. “Skylar’s letter came in. She pledges to do everything you asked to ensure the safety of Raphael Boutin.”

“Good,” Van said. “We can't take any chances. The last thing we need is Hunters going after him if Gabriel's name gets to them somehow.”

Gabriel stayed still as a statue.

Adele watched him, her face pinched in faint worry. She looked at Nathan, hoping to get some sort of guidance, but he misunderstood her glance, and glared at her. Adele didn't sigh, but it was a near thing. She knew he couldn't hold it against him, how he was always so defensive, how he always interpreted every look as a threat, but still.

“There's also a letter from your father, Gabriel,” she said finally.
I don't want it, was Gabriel's first thought. “Thank you. Give it to Nathan, I'll read it later.”

Adele did, and then she sat next to Nathan on the windowsill, watching the three seamstresses at work. They were working with some sort of heavy black fabric, with a slight sheen to it, and trying out different colours for the internal lining and cuffs. From what Adele could gather, they were bickering about what colour was best between burgundy, forest green, a pearly grey and gold – since they were pushing each scrap of colour under each others' noses and all. The discussion became more and more animated, until one of them lost her patience and shushed them quite aggressively. Then she asked Gabriel, “Which one do you like best?”

Gabriel smiled pleasantly at her. “As long as it's not gold, anything is fine by me.”

Nathan snickered. “No shit,” he said.

One of the three women looked supremely offended.

“Please just choose one, or they'll start fighting again,” the woman pleaded.

Gabriel looked at Nathan, and tucked a strand of hair behind his own ear. “What do you think?”

Nathan shrugged. The seamstresses had decided on a long, high-collared jacket that reached to Gabriel's knees; it was perfectly tailored to his figure, and coupled with the close-fitted slacks, it enhanced how tall and slim he was. “You'll look stunning whatever you wear, like always.”

Gabriel turned red. Nathan had never seen anyone blush that fast that intensely; it was quite amazing. More amazing still, Gabriel was at a loss of words, his mouth hanging open as he stared at Nathan. Adele was doubled over as she tried to keep her laughter in.

“What? It's the truth!” Nathan told her.

Gabriel sounded positively petulant when he found his words again and said, “I was the one supposed to do the wooing, not you!”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Nathan asked, annoyed.

Van sighed and shook her head. She gestured for the seamstresses to bring her the fabrics, and chose the burgundy. “What about you, Nathan?” she asked then, “do you have any preference?”

Nathan thought he had misheard her. After all, he was pretty busy bickering with Gabriel and Adele, who were laughing at him. “What?” he asked.

Van's second sigh had a very peculiar quality. It was deeper, sharper. It spelled out: Listen to me well right now, because I'm not going to repeat myself, and if you fail me again I'll make you regret it. “I asked,” she said very slowly, “if you have any preference of fabric for your own clothes, Nathan. For the Gathering you'll be attending. You're not only Marcus' son, but...” she glanced at Gabriel as she hesitated only slightly, “the closest confidant of the Descendant calling the Gathering itself. Certainly you didn't plan on attending in ratty jeans and a t-shirt.”

Nathan thought about a lot of things before answering; how he didn't even know if he'd be able to step into the Gathering itself, for example. There was the possibility that the Serpent's Tooth rejected him, since he was only half Black (Viviana assured him the possibility was low; he was not reassured). Or about how he didn't know if the Blacks summoned would like his presence; if Gus was any indication, his status as “son of Marcus” could provide him with as many enemies as allies (but mostly enemies, because of course it would). Or about how he wasn't Gabriel nor Marcus, and he could never pull off such cloth---
A shadow flew past him, cutting through the sunlight for a moment. Nathan looked up, thinking it was a bird outside the window.

It was a bird.

A bird made of paper.

It circled in the air, then dove, striking the glass. The paper flattened almost completely against it, then crisped again and hovered in the air, the bird looking no worse for the wear. It fluttered away again, preparing another dive. Nathan threw the window open. The bird-message flew inside and went to Van. As soon as she cradled it into her hands, it unfolded, revealing a page crammed with words from top to bottom.

proceeding swiftly. However, the subjects available don't allow a broader range of testing. Of the 57 subjects made available in the last month, only 2 were classified as B-08. No subject had the most desirable classification for this project (B-10). The rest were classified as follows:

- 12 B0.5/F0.5
- 19 ranging from B-03 to B-05
- 17 B-06
- 5 B-07

Preliminary test were made on 10 subjects of the same range (B-06). As will be further explained, results do not seem to be linked to classification as much as to a more specific trait – the power of the self-healing trigger response (see Attachment A). However, without test subjects of the desired classification, there is no way of knowing if the results would be the same on Subject B0.5. The results of the initial trials are being taken into careful consideration, as always.

Regardless of classification, tests for long-term effects are underway. Taking into account the importance of the self-healing power, it would be advisable to delay any other direct test of the project and focus instead on narrowing further the range of available test subjects according to their self-healing skills. As this is a classification that wasn't much relevant before, in-depth scaling and tests for B subjects are unfortunately unavailable right now. However, seeing the state of development of Project MB, a fruitful synergy would be possible. Project MB was never intended to have tests in loco, seeing its brute force nature; however, by testing it on the subjects provided for Project Blue, the results would be:

- assessing Project MB’s actual state and efficacy in a controlled environment;
- provide a test for the self-healing trigger and power under duress.

More focused testing would help tremendously in speeding up the process of development of Project Blue.

As for the previous questions posed by the Hunter's Assembly, extensive testing has confirmed the safety of use of the regimental protection equipment (see Attachment B & User Safety Guidance). We urge the Hunters to record anything valuable during field use.

SUBJECTS: 10 B-06, F:5 M:5

CONTROL GROUP: 7 B-06, F:0 M:7; 3 B-07, F:3 M:0

DECEASED: 5 (control group)

UNAVAILABLE FOR FURTHER TESTING: 11

Subjects from this group will be moved to the Long Term Effects Study batch.

If no further subjects of B-06 or higher classification will be provided, testing will resume on lower-classified subjects.

SUBJECT 07-01

“What does it say?” Nathan asked. The silence and the glances were enough to scare him half to death. “What does it say?” he asked through gritted teeth, looking directly at Gabriel. Gabriel took the slip of paper from Van; she didn't object. As he summarized the content of the message, she took out an elegant silver cigarette case. She gestured discreetly at the seamstresses, who gathered their fabrics and Gabriel's discarded jacket, and left.


“Nathan, I don't know---”

“I'm Subject B0.5, right? Who the fuck else could it be?” Nathan almost yelled, his pitch rising and rising.

“Nathan, please---”

“What the fuck are they doing? This must be Wallend's doing, it must be, I can't believe I ever thought of not placing him on top of the list, how many fucking people has that fucking psycho killed, how many is he killing right now to-to do this-this thing, whatever the fuck it is and what did I d---”

“Nathan!”

Gabriel didn't scream; in facts, his voice was barely more than a whisper. It was his hands, one cupping Nathan's nape, the other his cheek, that made Nathan pause.
“You're safe,” Gabriel told him, “you're here now. You're not going back to Wallend. Try to breathe now, okay?”

Nathan tried, tried to take deep and slow breaths, but his mind was still screaming, pulled into too many directions at once, unable to settle in its panic.

Van opened the cigarette case and offered it to Nathan with an elegant gesture.

Gabriel's hand shot out. The case clattered to the ground, the cigarettes flying and rolling onto the ground. “No,” he said, his voice low and threatening.

Van's stillness was just as threatening when she said, slowly, “I was not trying to drug him, Gabriel.”

“I don't know that, do I?” he retorted.

Van's eyes reduced to slits as they stared each other off.

Nathan couldn't stand it anymore. He couldn't stand to be in the same room as Van and Adele, the same room as anyone, he couldn't breathe and he couldn't think and he needed the silence. A dark corner to curl into. He grabbed Gabriel's hand and pulled him along, walking out of the room without a word.

Van watched them go. She let the rage and the pride simmer and then quiet down, let her mind idling on other, more useful thoughts.

Nathan was unstable to the point of unhinged bursts of hysteria. It wasn't good. It wasn't good at all. As if that wasn't bad enough, the two she had relied on keeping him afloat were slipping from her control. Arran was much less malleable than anyone had anticipated; Gabriel was in a position that could give him considerable power, if only he decided to seize it. Van wasn't sure whether he wanted to or not, but one thing was perfectly clear: if he thought it would protect Nathan, he most certainly would.

And that was going to be a problem.

As was to be expected, Gabriel called the Gathering for the next full moon. Viviana guided him again to the Serpent's Tooth – and finally he was told where it was, in Hungary – and stayed at a respectful distance as he summoned all Black Witches, as far as the Tooth's power reached, to the Gathering of the Descendant of Sequanna. Those witches, however, wouldn't know any of that. They'd just feel an urge, a compulsion to be there, wherever that there was. Ancient Black Witches could recognize the feeling, Viviana had said, but who knew how many remembered, or where told enough to guess.

Gabriel hoped a lot. Dealing with a bunch of Blacks pissed off for being where they didn't want to be was bound to be unpleasant.

He looked at himself in the full-length mirror that now resided in their room, a gift by Viviana. Now finished, the jacket fit him like a glove, its slight sheen giving a vibe of silkiness and liquid grace. The high collar was embroidered with black and gold. The cuffs and the lining were made of the same burgundy fabric; when he moved, the tails opened, and showed the internal colour more vividly. It was quite the effect.

The exquisite clothes were supposed to make him look regal and elegant, but he only felt like a phony. He wasn't better or worse than any other Black Witch; he had no idea what it meant to be a
Descendant in ancient times, or even a few centuries ago.

“’You’re overthinking again,’” Nathan said, meeting his eyes in the mirror. “I never knew you could.”

Gabriel combed a hand through his own hair, and chuckled. “You thought I never worry about things?”

“I thought you knew the effect you have on people. Actually I know you do. I’m surprised you’re not smug about it.”

“I’m just polite.”

Nathan raised an eyebrow.

“I mean,” Gabriel amended, “I like people. Being polite is a beginning; if I respect them, if I put them at ease with a little joke, if I can make them trust me, they open up. I like listening. Every person has a different story to share. It’s a little like reading.”

Nathan walked to him, and straightened his jacket’s lapels. There wasn’t no need to; he just liked the idea of doing it. “You’ll be fine. Be your usual self. It works so well that even the girls who know you’re gay don’t care.”

Gabriel chuckled. When Nathan’s hands stayed splayed on his chest, he bit his own lip. “Does it work on the only boy who matters?”

Nathan sputtered and blushed. “You’re ridiculous,” he hissed. He did not, however, move away his hands.

“Payback,” Gabriel joked.

“You’re not doing a very good job with that--- that wooing!”

“Is that so. I have to rectify that at once,” Gabriel said, sealing Nathan’s embarrassed protests with a kiss. “Are you going to get changed?”

Nathan grumbled something unintelligible.

“What was that?”

“I hate those clothes!”


“They’re... not me,” Nathan grumbled.

“Are you thinking of your father?”

Nathan didn’t answer, avoiding Gabriel’s eyes. He remembered how surprised he had been when he had seen Marcus for the first time, the day of his own Giving, dressed in slacks and a crispy white shirt. Nathan hadn’t expected such simple, commanding elegance; somehow he expected something more ragged. Something more like himself. He could never pull something like that off, who was he kidding?

Gabriel gently grabbed his chin and made him look up again. “I promise you, you’ll look perfect in them.”
Nathan had absolutely refused to be touched by the seamstresses, so they had to work a little blindly, but Gabriel was pretty sure they did a decent enough job. Of course, that was not the real problem.

“Why don't you try them on, and then come here, and see how well we match?”

Nathan perked up a little at that. “They match?”

“I'm pretty sure they do, yes.”

Nathan turned and looked at the clothes, still half-wrapped in paper inside their box, abandoned on the armchair in a corner. When he turned back to him, Gabriel was smiling encouragingly at him.

“You just want to see me getting my clothes off,” Nathan tried to joke.

“I've seen you completely naked before. I survived somehow, I can survive this too.”

Nathan did that thing Gabriel loved so much; he almost laughed, and hid it with a scoff that tried to be sarcastic, but was instead endearing and heartbreaking, like laughing was something too strange for him, something he had to hide; and as he did so he looked at the floor for a moment, and then he looked up again with sparkling eyes. It was just a split second. Gabriel knew every little stage like a prayer.

When Nathan went to the armchair and started to peel off his shirt, Gabriel had a moment of inexplicable embarrassment, and his eyes didn't know whether to linger or look away. He had seen Nathan getting changed enough times; Nathan had never been bothered by Gabriel's presence or stolen glances. But now that it had happened – Gabriel's quivering heart didn't dare name it, afraid it would be blown away like a dandelion clock in the wind – it was different.

Different in the way he had been a starving man looking at a feast from an outside window, and now he was a guest invited in, he guessed.

He was still starving, however, in the most delicious of ways.

So he watched through stolen glances, marvelling like he always did at the strength and grace of Nathan's body, carved by hate and violence. Gabriel had never flinched at the gruesome scars on his back; such cruelty at the hands of Whites was unsurprising. It was afterwards – when he came to know how strong Nathan's healing was – that they became horrifying. Now, though, he was used to them. He knew Nathan preferred it this way. So what he noticed, instead, was how his back muscles rippled as he undressed, how exquisite it was to see the ivory shirt conceal the skin anew.

And if he stole a glance or two also of Nathan's exquisite arse, he was almost sure Nathan didn't mind.

Nathan didn't turn until he had secured his belt and knives in place. When he did, he looked into the mirror next to Gabriel. The only thing he liked was the asymmetrical cut of his hooded jacket, because it showed his knives fully and also made them easy to unsheathe. Everything else was... too perfect. Sharp elegant lines without one fold or sewing line too many. Essential to the point of almost geometrical. It was true he and Gabriel matched, at least: Nathan's jacket was lined with the same burgundy of Gabriel's. Whereas Gabriel was dressed head to toe in black, however, Nathan's outfit also had a splash of white.

“So?” Gabriel gently probed.

Nathan stayed silent for a while, looking at the stranger in the mirror. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I don't know. How do I look? And don't say 'stunning'. Be honest.”
“You look sharp in a very literal sense, like a blade. You look dangerous. And also a little older, which I guess will be an advantage.” Then he paused, thinking. “Can I do your hair?”

Nathan self-consciously touched a stray lock. It had been a while since the last haircut, and his hair was as unruly as ever, thick and long enough to show a slight curl. Nathan looked at the artfully dishevelled short ponytail Gabriel had styled his own hair into. “I feel like telling you ‘no’ would be useless,” he answered.

Gabriel snickered. He retrieved some bottles and a brush from the bathroom and had Nathan sit down on the bed. His reflection in the mirror had been both too much and not enough, the memory of his father too overpowering to see himself amidst the confusion, the pull, the repulsion; he both liked and hated how his clothes were both black and white, the symbolism obvious; but having Gabriel in the reflection, right at his side, was enough to ground Nathan into himself.

Plus, he had never seen Marcus with his hair slicked back like this.

When he was done, Gabriel asked, “What do you think?”

“It's okay,” Nathan said, unsure.

Gabriel chuckled. “It will look better once we're actually surrounded by people you don't know and you'll start glaring. That will complete the look.”

Nathan almost glared at him, but caught himself and exhaled loudly in mock exasperation instead.

“Yep, just like that,” Gabriel said. “Ah, one more thing... Stand up, please? Here, look. You tend to do this a lot,” he said, putting his hands on Nathan's crossed arms, “when you're uncomfortable. Showing to all those Blacks when you feel vulnerable isn't exactly advisable. Do think you could do this, instead?”

Gabriel disentangled Nathan's arms, and guided his hands into his slacks' pockets.

“I look like an arsehole,” Nathan commented, looking at his own reflection.

“You look cocky, which is a little bit like being an asshole, true. But those who love you will know that you're actually a sweetheart, don't worry.”

Nathan shouldered him a little, and Gabriel laughed. Then Nathan sobered. “You ready?” he asked.

In the silence that followed, when jokes were over and he couldn't think of anything else of Nathan's to fuss over, Gabriel could hear his own thudding heart and rushing blood again. He was sick with nerves, his stomach twisting and queasy. He took a slow, measured breath, and managed to not let it shudder out. He reached slowly for Nathan's hand, the one where they had been joined during the trance, with the round scar right in the middle of the palm. Their scar. Gabriel folded their fingers together, palms flat against each other, scar-to-scar.

He knew he didn't need to ask, that it was a given, but he needed to hear it. “Will you stay by my side?”


“I'll do my best.”

“Let's go, then.”
They arrived after twilight, when the last dregs of light tinged the sky orange and indigo. Brenda opened the cut for them, but didn't follow them; no White Witch could. The generals had been through with it, tested how the sacred ground would react to a White crossing it. At the very least, no one had died, so Nathan was feeling positive. At most, they dropped unconscious. Most of them had just felt a strong compulsion to walk away, in a sort of confused state, without remembering much about the experience once they were far enough. Just fog, and shapeless shadows lurking in the trees.

The clearing around the Serpent's Tooth was deserted. If any Black Witch truly had come, they were waiting, or hiding. Gabriel hoped they were waiting. What would he do if they didn't come, if the spell didn't work after all?

Skaidrite was waiting just a few steps away, and noticed his anxiety. “What's wrong?” she whispered, careful not to disturb the solemn silence. The few Blacks of the Alliance were all there, lighting torches, starting the central bonfire.

“What if they don't come?” Gabriel asked. He felt the urge to fidget, steeled himself into stillness.

“They must,” she answered. “I am here.”

Gabriel looked at her, uncomprehending.

“I am not Black. Blacks hate me, say I'm like Fain. Electricity doesn't hurt me, my Gift controls Fain technology. They cast me out. Whites hate me, too. Iskandra was only one to help. I'm not like her, either. But I'm here. Know why?”

“Because you felt the compulsion?”

Skaidrite nodded.

“I'm sorry,” Gabriel said.

She made a dismissive gesture. “Leader doesn't say sorry. Be a leader for tonight.”

“Knowing that you think I have to act the part is really discouraging, you know,” Gabriel said, but he felt marginally better. So Blacks would probably show up.

That was scary in its own way, too.

Nathan glared at her. “Stop spooking him.”

Skaidrite huffed and left.

As soon as the last dreg of light died under the horizon, they started to appear. At first it was just a few, isolated, scattered. They looked around in suspicion, or fear, or contempt. When they noticed Gabriel standing in front of the Serpent's Tooth, some were confused, but most of them seemed to understand at once. That would make things marginally easier, Gabriel thought.

Nathan stood at his left side. His hood was drawn over his face, casting it in shadow, his hand resting casually at the Fairborn's hilt. When he noticed Gabriel's glance, he looked up, and his black eyes caught the glow of the fires. There was no trace of his sweetness in them, then. That, too, made Gabriel feel better.

Then people started to really pour in. Blacks, from all over central Europe. Witches who had been
hiding in the thick forests of Hungary. Witches from communities in the most secluded alpine valleys of Austria and Switzerland. Witches on the run, from France, from Belgium, from Germany, who had been on the run for months, moving from village to village. Witches from Slovakia, from Romania, from Croatia. Witches who had left their homes at the call, and witches who had left them forever months ago. They gathered in almost complete silence, filling the clearing. By the time the full moon peeked through the branches, its silver light dancing on the pools of water, hundreds of Black Witches had gathered.

Gabriel half-expected Viviana to give him a signal, to tell him when to start. But no; she knew how crucial it was for Gabriel to look in control. Authoritative. She stood at her place, between the other Blacks from the Alliance fanning at both his sides, decked again in her Uzbek clothes. She had a thin sword in her hand. Moonlight and firelight danced on its blade.

Gabriel assessed the crowd. Those who could had dressed for the occasion. He searched for the ones who were better dressed, at the head of the larger families or groups. He searched for the ones who were worse dressed, looking around themselves in contempt and envy. Different loads for different efforts.

“Welcome to this Gathering,” he greeted them all. “I am the last Descendant of Sequanna, the ancient Huntress who fell the Serpent and planted its Tooth into this clearing. I've called you here in the name of the Alliance Of Free Witches.”

The crowd became rowdy and noisy at once. No polite and scandalized whispering here, as always happened during Alliance assemblies. Gabriel waited patiently for the chatter to subside, waiting. He knew what was coming, or at least he had seen enough gatherings to know what to expect.

Once the noise died down enough, a woman at the front of the crowd spoke. “What does the Alliance Of White Witches want us to do for them?”

Straight for the throat. Gabriel smiled faintly, unsurprised. “The Alliance wants what it always wanted: to destroy the Council of England, to kill Soul O'Brien and free all Witches of Europe from his genocidal tyranny. Don't you want to go back to your land?” She had a Scottish accent, Gabriel had noted. “As long as Soul lives, no Black Witch will ever go back to the United Kingdom. Even when he dies, the system he created will live on. He needs to be killed now, before his system spreads, before it becomes permanent. If we don't kill him, he won't just drive us out of Europe; he will do everything he can to kill us all. The final objective of Soul's Council, and of all his Hunters, is Black genocide.”

“Whites are too weak for that to ever happen,” said another witch at the front of the crowd. “Their Gifts get fainter by the day, because they stay too close to Fains. Their Hunters may be many, but how many of them are truly powerful?”

“Powerful enough to capture Blacks during our gatherings and hung all the children to the trees,” Gabriel said. “Or haven't you heard?”

“The Hunters are strong,” interjected another witch. She had plain, worn clothes on; she must have been on the run. “All the Whites with powerful Gifts get conscripted into them. Even when their Gifts aren't impressive, they have training and weapons, and their spies are everywhere.”

“And now they can all turn invisible,” Gabriel added.

The witches turned to each other in shock at that. “That's impossible!” someone cried.

“The Council of England has a dedicated team to find new ways of applying magic. They work like
Fain scientists and are making incredible progress.” Gabriel explained. “They succeeded into giving the Gift of invisibility to every Hunter. And they're working on more projects, experimenting on the Blacks they capture.”

“You can run all you like,” Viviana interjected, her voice slow and deliberate, “you can try and run to the ends of the world, if you want. The Hunters will kill as many of you as they can as you flee Europe, but some of you will manage. But why should you?” Her eyes swept the crowd, fire dancing on the tip of her tongue. “Why should you leave your forests and mountains, why should you leave the lands that your ancestors roamed? Why should you leave them to the Whites?”

An old witch spoke then; she was wrinkled and thin, but she didn't look frail at all, her back too straight and her eyes too piercing for that. “You speak of the old ways, both of you. Yet the Alliance seeks a new way of living, it preaches coexistence. Which one is it, Descendant of Sequanna? And who is the woman who speaks for you?”

Gabriel wanted to sigh, but he didn't. For all that she tried to make this Gathering about him, Viviana still wanted to gain traction, to garner followers and power. She had her sights set on a general’s seat. Maybe even Van's, he thought, as he looked at her. She was dressed in her usual sharp, androgynous clothes, but with much more black than he had ever seen her wear. And she wasn't going to stay silent, even thought the occasion called for showing a united front. Gabriel let her and Viviana talk. It wouldn't do to talk too much, not when powerful female witches were present. Blacks were more than willing to respect power over gender, but no one there knew anything about his power, or lack thereof.

The issue was raised by a young witch, barely more than a Whet. “Who cares that one of your ancestors was a great witch? What are you now? How strong is your Gift? No one respects a witch with a weak power!”

Then she took a step forward, coming closer to Gabriel than anyone else had dared.

Nathan stepped between her and Gabriel, the firelight dancing on the edge of his unsheathed knife. “Before worrying about his power,” he hissed lowly, “you better worry about me.”

“What are you?” she asked, but some witches recognized him, saw the resemblance, and the knowledge travelled through the crowd like a ripple over water. For once, Nathan was glad. Let them recognize him, let them whisper his father's name. Let them remember how vicious and dangerous he had been, and let them see that in him, now, as he stood between them and Gabriel.

Nathan glared at them all. Then he heard Gabriel moving, felt his hand slowly come to rest on his left hand, the one that was wielding the knife. After a moment, Nathan relented and pointed the weapon to the ground, but his gaze never once left the crowd. Daring each and every one of them to test his willingness to kill anyone who threatened Gabriel.

It felt pretty good.

“It's true that being a Descendant doesn't mean that much,” Gabriel told the girl. He ignored the scathing look that earned him from Viviana. “We all know Gifts are capricious things. The stories say that my ancestor had the Gift of Fire, but how many witches, both Black and White, have that same Gift? And doesn't that mean that the lineage is mixed, that it has been for a long time? You must know that we live segregated only in some parts of the world. It doesn't have to be this way. It can be whatever way we want to. And what I want is to walk free. I want to be free to cross any city I like without worrying about what a White Council will think. But before that, I want the right to exist. That's what's really at stake here. As long as Soul lives, as long as his Hunters exist, no Black Witch will have the right to exist. Do you really want them to keep slaughtering us like cattle?”
“The ones who get slaughtered are the weak ones. The ones who hide in their homes, the ones who don't want to leave their precious things, the ones who behave like Fains. The ones who call for gatherings and talk and talk and talk instead of just leaving. True Witches don't need anything but the sky above their heads and the earth under their feet. The Whites may have lost their ways but we haven't,” said the old witch from before.

“That's bullshit,” Nathan told her, “my father was the strongest Black Witch alive and he still died, and who killed him wasn't even a strong witch!”

A sneer came from the crowd. “Are you saying you're not strong, Nathan Byrn?” someone asked, his voice dripping with scorn at that last word.

“I didn't kill him. I gave him mercy. He had been shot by a White, he was going to die anyway,” Nathan said, but his answer was drowned in the mounting roar of too many voice talking at once.

“Let the Whites have their lands, their borders. Let them look at a meaningless piece of paper and think themselves powerful!”

“I will not let the Whites have a fucking thing! They deserve to die for what they did to us, to our children!”

Nathan stepped closer to Gabriel, an arm stretched out in front of him to protect him.

“Here we go,” Gabriel whispered, sounding pained.

“Is it always like this?” Nathan asked, watching as the crowd erupted into verbal mayhem. He really hoped it was going to stay only verbal.

“Either this, or wild parties with way too much trials to test whose Gift is more powerful, and honestly I don't know which is worse.”

Between the bodies, moving like a wheat field swept by wind, and the roar of too many voices, Nathan almost didn't catch her; he saw her when she was close already, skirting the edges of the crowd. A woman, her gaunt face looking almost skeletal in the light of the torches. Her eyes were fixed on the Serpent's Tooth.

“Hey,” Nathan called her, taking an instinctive step back.

She didn't stop.

“Hey!” he yelled. She didn't even look at him.

The woman clapped her hands together.

Nathan shielded Gabriel and pushed them both as far away as he could.

The thunder was deafening, the roar ringing into his chest, drumming on his bones. As his ears rang, there was a moment of silence. Then his healing kicked in, and the first thing he heard was the cracking of wood. The tree that had grown around the Tooth was burning, its leaves licking the air in flames. The Tooth itself laid bare. The lightning had broken it in two, leaving a charred, blackened stump in the midst of the burning and hissing wood.

Gabriel was nest to him, flat on the ground. His hands came to encircle Nathan's shoulders. “You okay?” he asked.
“Yes,” Nathan answered, scanning the crowd for the woman.

There were no bodies around the Tooth, so everyone close to them had avoided the lightning strike. That was good. A lot of witches in the first rows were on ground, but out of dizziness and fear. Most of them had not fled. Then he saw her. She was on all fours, on the ground, shaking her head. Nathan raised his knife, his teeth bared into a snarl.

But Van was faster. She was on her in a moment, kicked her so hard the woman rolled several paces away. Then Viviana stabbed her with her sword. As the woman wailed, Nathan cursed; wasn't it best to at least interrogate her before killing her? But no, he thought as he moved closer, Viviana wasn't stupid. She had stabbed her in the shoulder, impaling her to the ground. The woman writhed, her hands grasping at the blade, and managed only to bleed more.

“Think very hard and carefully now,” Viviana hissed, her hands on the hilt a clear threat of pain to come. “What were you trying to achieve? Were you trying to kill the Descendant?”

“I... I had to destroy it!” answered the woman, her eyes moving frantically around her.

“It? Do you think he’s a monster? Are you mad?” Van snarled, her usual composure gone from her face.

“What? No! The thing! The thing that clouds this place! I had to destroy it! I had to--- run!” The woman’s eyes opened even wider, and she screamed. “Run! You all have to run! They’re coming!”

Adele appeared at Nathan and Gabriel's side. Gabriel drew his gun.

“Who’s coming?” someone from the crowd asked, and Nathan almost laughed in his face, but that would've sounded as hysterical as he felt, so he curbed that down.

Then he heard them. No cellphones’ hissing – they were smart enough – but their heavy steps. They were running. They must have been hiding pretty far, in order to avoid the Tooth's effect.

The Hunters started to shoot even before emerging from the trees.

Then it was mayhem.

As some blacks fell under the gunfire, others faced the enemy. Some tried to escape – especially the ones with children – but the Hunters had them completely surrounded, and they gunned them all down. A lot of Hunters managed to keep their invisibility steady; those who faltered were attacked at once.

There were few precious places to hide; some tall rocks, some old tree stumps, the giant gnarled roots of the tree. Adele stood in front of Nathan and Gabriel, her skin turned to metal, their backs to the burning tree. If the Hunters closed in on them, they were done for. They hid behind a cluster of rocks, but it was a sorry excuse of a hiding spot. Then there was a rumble, like a tempest rustling through the branches. Viviana used her Gift on a wide section of trees, and the inverted gravity pulled them out of the soil. Nathan saw some Hunters caught in the Gift's radius, struggling helplessly in the air. Then Viviana crashed them to the ground, clearing a great expanse of empty space. Some Blacks tried their luck and made a run for it, but others used the newly-found cover of fallen trees to strike back.

“How many of them are there?” yelled Adele over the roar of gunfire, Gifts unleashed, and death.

“The ones I can see are more or less a hundred, but who knows how many are invisible?” Gabriel answered her.
A jolt of adrenaline and sick fear passed through Nathan. More than a hundred. He had never seen that many Hunters together. Ever.

“There are more than four hundred blacks at this Gathering,” Van said, appearing at Gabriel's side. “My guess is, they didn’t expect these many. They’re outnumbered.”

A scent of pungent spice wafted in the air; the smoke of her cigarette was a dark blue. “Is that cigarette the reason I didn't notice you approach?” Gabriel asked. Nathan wanted to yell the same thing; he had almost thrown his knife at her.

“My Gift may not be useful in a battle, but I have my tricks,” Van answered. “Now. I hate to say this, but we need Viviana.”

Nathan looked for her. He wasn't surprised to see her in the middle of the battlefield, a sword in each hand and two more floating and slashing around her. Just as the first time he met her, bullets seemed to be deflected right off her.

“I wish I was invulnerable to bloody bullets,” Nathan grumbled. Then he heard a sudden hiss, and he grimaced. He turned to Gabriel. “Do you hear it? They must have turned their electronics on.”

Gabriel shook his head. “I don’t, not in this noise. But it could be useful. Can you do something that will scare them to death?”

Nathan nodded. “Cover me,” he told Adele.

She leapt from behind cover and turned her skin into steel. A shower of bullets ricocheted off her. Then she covered her ears, and Nathan was behind her. He clapped his hands. With a blinding flash, lightning erupted at Adele's side; she felt the shock-wave of it hitting her metal skin. The thunder was deafening. Then, it was chaos. Nathan hit one of the trees felled by Viviana; some Hunters had been using it as cover. At least three of them laid on the ground, their bodies charred and steaming. A lot of other Hunters in the immediate vicinity stumbled into visibility, disoriented and stunned – easy prey for the Blacks. Some of them clutched their ears and the nestled earphones inside, unable to hear their orders. Gabriel observed them, and he saw her. The confused Hunters all turned towards a specific warrior – a waifish woman, her uniform unremarkable. In an effort to regroup her forces, she was directing them with wide gestures, yelling orders.

“Do you see her?” Gabriel asked, his eyes trained on the Hunter.

Nathan only hummed as he unsheathed the Fairborn. Adele was waiting, her gun ready. Seeing the contradiction of tension and determination on her face, Nathan added, “Don't try to keep up with me. Find cover and just shoot them.”

Adele didn't say anything; she just nodded at him.

Nathan took a deep breath, then slowly released it, listening to his own wild heartbeat. He felt the air leaving his lungs, then seeping back in, weightless, intangible, filled with hot smoke and the smell of gunpowder. He became one with it, and turned invisible. Then he dashed forward. He heard gunfire behind him – Gabriel and Adele clearing the path around his target – but it barely registered. He let the bloodsong of the Fairborn fill his being. A witch stumbled in his path, a Hunter looming over her, a knife in his own hand; he had his back to Nathan. The witch was the same old, cunning Black who had asked those pointed questions. Nathan grabbed the Hunter's jaw and cut his throat open. The Fairborn's blade was so sharp it cut to the bone with little resistance. Nathan realized he had turned visible again, as the witch looked at him in the eyes and grabbed his arm – then her eyes widened, and he realized his left arm was half-raised, the Fairborn screaming for her blood, any blood.
He forced his hand down and hissed at her, “Don't you know better? Fucking hide, you're a sitting duck here.”

“I can help you, with my Gift,” she told him.

“I don't have time for---”

Nathan didn't see her, but he heard. To his right, running steps approaching, a chocked yell through clenched teeth. He ducked, and felt the hiss of a weapon too close, expected the sting of a cut; but what he got was the crackle of electricity, a glancing blow that made his entire right arm spasm and numbed. He licked his mouth's roof, and a fireball erupted in front of him. The Hunter screamed, her clothes and hair catching fire. Another Hunter – visible this time – came at him, brandishing the same kind of stun weapon. Nathan ducked under her blow and stabbed the Fairborn into the base of her throat, then cut upwards. Half of her jawbone was cut clean through, leaving a portion of her face exposed and open, the tongue lolling out. She tried to scream, but her damaged throat could only manage a sickening wheeze. The commotion drew two more Hunters; one was shot immediately by Adele, while the other fumbled with his gun, reaching for the stunning baton instead – Nathan didn't waste any time and engulfed him in fire too. He looked around, searching for the commanding officer.

“Nathan! Over here!” Gabriel called.

Nathan reached him behind a fallen tree. Adele was close, behind another one.

“Is the commander still visible?” Nathan asked.

“Yes,” Adele answered. “She's stuck behind cover. Some Black down there is holding them, whatever her Gift is. There are some other Blacks helping her. Ten, I think.”

“We are at the centre of a clearing and completely surrounded,” Gabriel observed. “It's only a matter of time before the Hunters circle them and attack them from the back.” There was a Hunter corpse close to them, his bowels cut open and spilling on the soil – work of Viviana, probably. Gabriel studied his face – square-jawed and freckled, around forty – and then turned into him, down to the black Hunter uniform.

Nathan turned to the old witch, who was hiding with them. “Are you going to be useful, or should we leave you here?”

The witch scoffed. “Hah! You have no respect, son of Marcus. Use that fire Gift of yours again. I'll show you.”

A new group of Hunters was closing in on them, more organized this time – and Nathan could hear the hissing of electronics on invisible ones. This time Nathan used one of the tricks he had perfected, alone, in the forest around Kolkasrags. He triggered the fire Gift, and a thin, long braid of fire whipped forward. Its aim was one of the closest Hunters, but when it hit, all of them were scorched – identical burning wounds appearing on their torsos. The invisible ones turned visible, equally affected, the pain breaking their hold on the Gift.

Nathan turned to the old witch with an eloquent, silent stare.

“Hit anyone in a radius of ten metres around the officer,” the witch told him with a sinister grin, “and she'll be as good as dead.”

“Hopefully that will make them retreat.” Gabriel said. “They have slowed down, anyway. Maybe Van is right – they didn't come prepared for these many Blacks.”
“Where's Viviana?” Adele asked.

“Forget about her, we don't have time,” Gabriel answered. “They are still better armed. The more we waste time, the less Blacks will make it out of this alive.”

“How close do you have to be?” Nathan asked the old witch.

“Twenty-three metres.”


They pressed onward, Nathan getting invisible and then visible again when he was in the midst of some Hunters, aiming to terrorize them. Gabriel managed to confuse more than one Hunter with his Gift, giving Nathan ample time to cut them down. The officer was right there, right on their path, but still too far. She had her hands full keeping Viviana at bay – and there was lightning again, aimed at the Hunters. Nathan caught a glimpse of Diamond farther back, shooting at the Hunters with a crossbow. He spared a second to hope Max was all right.

They flanked another group of enemies, and the Fairborn was gloating and singing in Nathan's hand. The Hunters fell under it like wheat under the reaper's scythe. In close combat, with Gabriel at his side, they didn't stand a chance. Then he saw her; a Hunter, appearing out of thin air right in his line of vision. She held her arms open and grinned. A challenge.

Nathan knew without turning that Gabriel was ready to shoot her. He lunged, aiming to distract her.

Then she spoke into her transmitter. “I don't give a damn what Soul ordered! Commander Byrn will love it when I present her his head on a silver platter!”

She unleashed her Gift, and everything went black. All of Nathan's senses were stripped away. He tried to roll to the side, but even his touch was gone, and he couldn't tell whether he was standing or not.

Then pain exploded in his abdomen. Nathan thought he screamed, but he wasn't sure.

When his senses had gone, terror had engulfed Gabriel. He didn't hear Nathan scream, he didn't see him fall – he couldn't – yet he knew exactly what he was going to see when his senses came back. It was still enough to stop his heart dead, to almost kill him on the spot.

Nathan, lying on the ground, feebly clutching at his abdomen. His hand red with his own blood.

The Hunter was running to him, the machine gun still in her hands. Ready to deliver the final blow. Gabriel aimed.

He hit her in the chest. She fell, but she wasn't dead yet. Gabriel stumbled, still dizzy, drawing on his desperation to press on and finish her, and reach Nathan, defenceless and writing in pain, and the Hunter was halfway up, kneeling, and Gabriel prayed, prayed he could make it...

Viviana cut her head off with a blood-curdling scream.

Gabriel kneeled next to Nathan. He heard the battle rage around them, the two sides battling to lay claim on Nathan's wounded form; he was vaguely aware of Viviana moving some trees, creating a makeshift barrier between them and the Hunters.
He cradled Nathan's face with one hand. Gabriel didn't want to look at the wound, didn't want to know, yet he found that his other hand joined Nathan's. His blood was warm. Gabriel felt sick. He wrenched himself out of his own misty terror, forced himself to focus.

“Nathan, your healing, please, you have to use your healing. Can you hear me?” Gabriel begged him.

Nathan's eyes focused on him, but they were wild with pain and fear. His breath was so laboured and his teeth were clenched so tight, Gabriel almost didn't understand what he said. “I can't... They're still inside... The poison, it burns---”

“If you don't heal you'll bleed to death,” Viviana said, appearing at their side. She joined her hands on top of Nathan's and added in a whisper, “Don't worry, I got you.”

She applied her healing Gift, but they all knew she was going to cut him open again to take out a bullet. And another. And then another. And the healing didn't do anything for the burning pain of the poison. Gabriel cradled his face with both hands now. He was powerless to help. He could only watch as Nathan fought so hard against the pain, fought not to succumb to delirium, to the screams clawing up his throat, and ultimately failed.

Then Van reached them, and she quickly pressed a fingertip covered in a grey powder under Nathan's nose. He lost his senses almost immediately. Viviana nodded at her, and then she unsheathed Gabrie's knife from Nathan's belt.

Gabriel turned. The commanding officer had moved closer. The desire to kill her, to kill anyone and relieve the abyss of hatred that had collapsed open in his ribcage, was overwhelming; still, Gabriel controlled himself. Then he met the old witch's eyes. She pointed at the officer. She wanted to finish what they had started.

Van noticed her gesture. “What are you planning?”

Gabriel explained in as few words he could manage. He felt like talking was too much, like any word would be last one before he, too, started screaming.

Viviana didn't look up. “It's a good plan. Get her here.”

Van shot her an oblique look before gesturing sharply to Adele, who used her Gift to escort the old woman across. When the two joined them, Viviana held up her hand, fingers extended and close together.

“I am going to give you a powerful Gift, sister. Maybe someone as well versed in the old traditions as you will recognize it,” Viviana said.

She touched the woman's forehead. It was quick and light, over in an instant. The old witch's eyes widened.

“Go, and wreak havoc,” Viviana told her. Then she went back to tending to Nathan.

The old witch turned to Gabriel. “Can you shoot her from here?”

“Yes, but why?” Gabriel asked. “That would just kill the Hunters in a ten metres radius around her, correct?”

“I think I can extend it now. By a lot.”
A very small part of Gabriel wanted to ask so many questions. But that Gabriel was temporarily buried, hidden for later like a bookmark in between the pages. There was a little tug of reluctance when he pried his hands away from Nathan's contorting, sweaty face, but the thirst for revenge and retribution was stronger.

He readied his gun.

The old witch closed her eyes, and laid her palms flat together.

Gabriel dashed from behind the fallen tree. Adele preceded him, her steel skin catching the light of the fires and the moon, drawing the Hunters' attention away. Gabriel stopped in a pool of shadows, and aimed. The officer was moving in between cover spots, a cluster of Hunters protecting her. Then something happened. For a moment, everything felt suspended, and sharply in focus. He felt the soft, damp soil underneath like he was digging his hands into it. He could smell every odour in the air – the smoke and the blood but a passing, superficial undertone, overwhelmed by the smell of pine needles, resin, rotting leaves, fresh water, mushrooms, and so many things besides. The moonlight and dancing flames drew every detail in contrasting, perfectly clear hues.

A bullet grazed his shoulder.

Gabriel shot the Hunter in the head.

All at once, tens of Hunters fell, as dead as she was; visible and invisible ones, until only a few who had been too far remained. They fled as quick as they could. Diamond put to good use the last dart she had and hit one in the back.

Adele was immediately at Gabriel's side. “Are you okay?”

Gabriel didn't answer. He barely asked himself what had just happened. He went back to Nathan.

“We're taking him back to Kolkasrags,” Viviana told him. “Luckily we have the cut. Van needs her potions. And Arran might...”

She didn't finish the sentence. Gabriel knew how to tell when and how someone's perfect mask was cracking. Viviana's was cracking. He didn't dare to ask anything about Nathan's conditions. He just held his hand, and focused on not crumbling.

As they readied to take Nathan back to the fortress, the surviving Blacks gathered around them. Around half of the witches who had gathered remained.

“What happened to the witch who struck the Serpent's Tooth?” Van asked the crowd.

“Dead,” someone said. Van didn't waste any time wondering whether she died at a Hunter's or at a Black's hands. But what she had said, what she had done... They needed to know what had happened.

Finally, Van stood from Nathan's side. “We're going to the Alliance's fortress. You have seen what the Hunters can do. You have seen them managing to enter even this secret place. The Hunters always find a way. Thinking otherwise is simply foolish.” She looked down at Gabriel. She knew it was too much to expect him to say anything in that moment.

The old witch spoke then. “The White Council of England and its Hunters desecrated our most sacred ground. Cruelty is nothing novel for either side, but this... There is nowhere to flee if even such a sacred, ancient place cannot protect us. I say we fight.”
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