

ZODIAC ACADEMY

ORIGINS OF AN
ACADEMY BULLY



SUPERNATURAL
BULLIES AND BEASTS

CAROLINE
PECKHAM

BOOK 0

SUSANNE
VALENTI

Zodiac Academy: Origins of an Academy Bully (A Supernatural Bullies and Beasts Novella)

This is a prequel novella, set five years before the Supernatural Bullies and Beasts Series.

[Zodiac Academy: The Awakening releases August 2nd 2019 and is on sale for just 0.99 before release!](#)

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Welcome to Zodiac Academy, here is your campus map.

Note to all students: Vampire bites, loss of limbs or getting lost in the wailing wood will not count as a valid excuse for being late to class.

Click on the map to explore it more closely.



Darius Acrux

The silvery light of the moon pooled on the water which gathered at the end of our property, making the horizon seem to shimmer silver as I waited on my father. I kept my gaze on the lake, my face still, hands in my pockets as I reined in the fierce excitement that was burning its way through me.

It was finally time for my powers to be Awakened. At just fifteen, I was going to be gaining my magic three years before my peers but even so, this moment couldn't come soon enough.

I couldn't imagine the torment of waiting until my official enrolment at Zodiac Academy for my magic to be set free and for the first time in a long time, I was glad to be an Heir to the Celestial Council. As the eldest son of one of the four ruling families, I was afforded certain privileges that the rest of the Fae could only dream of and this was one of them.

Alongside the other three Heirs, Caleb, Seth and Max, I was about to embrace my birthright and feel the kiss of the Elements beneath my skin. We would spend one week sampling what was on offer at Zodiac Academy as temporary students before being privately tutored for the three years until our official enrolment.

By the time we attended we would be so far into our magical education that we were certain to be able to claim our positions at the top of the social order. As was only right for the sons of the four most powerful families in the kingdom.

No doubt some of the other students would see this advantage as unfair but in all honesty I couldn't care less what they'd think. I just wanted to gain control of my own power. Perhaps if I learned to wield it well enough, I'd feel a little like I was in control of my own life more too. Although that

would only ever be an illusion. My path had been mapped out from the moment my parents had gotten married.

Everything in my life had been planned, right down to the date of my conception. My parents were both of the Dragon Order from a long line of pure blood on either side. They'd done everything they could to ensure a strong Heir, right down to deciding that I should be born a Leo. A Dragon Shifter with the Element of fire was always going to be one of the most powerful creatures on campus. And anywhere else after that too.

As a child, I'd often been concerned about emerging as some other Order when my shifting abilities finally surfaced and having to face the shame and disappointment of my entire family if not the entire population of Solaria. The Acrux family were Dragons. If I'd ended up shifting into a Werewolf or a Griffin because of some wayward recessive gene then I knew I'd never have lived it down.

Thankfully, on my eleventh birthday, my friend Seth had gotten a little too exuberant while dancing and had managed to knock my entire birthday cake to the ground. My anger and disappointment had been punctuated by me turning into a thirteen foot golden Dragon right in the middle of my parent's banquet hall.

Amidst my memories of people scrambling to get out of my way as I destroyed the furniture and set the curtains alight, one image always stood out to me from that day. My father's eyes had shone with more pride than I think I'd ever realised he was capable of as he'd looked upon my transformed state. His lips had hooked into a smile and he'd run his hands along my glimmering scales in a touch that was as close to an embrace as I'd ever gotten from him.

He'd never looked at me like that before. Or since. But for several long seconds, I knew what it felt like to earn his approval instead of his ire.

And even though my Dragon form had now doubled in size and I'd mastered the art of flying and breathing fire in every way imaginable, he'd still never looked at me like that again. My transformed body was almost the size of his green Dragon form now and I was almost positive that I would be bigger than him in the end. It was likely I would be a larger man in my Far form too.

At almost six foot I was still growing and given four more inches, I'd be the one looking down on him. I was determined to see that day come to pass. Even if the only thing it earned me was his quiet mood swings. That was better than his rage any day of the week anyway.

The sharp tap of high heels approached down the marble staircase behind me but I didn't turn from my silent vigil in the doorway. A cool breeze blew in around me but I didn't feel a chill from it. My blood ran hot with the fire in my veins even without my magic being woken yet and the cold rarely bothered me.

"Your shirt is untucked," Mother commented as she came to stand beside me.

I made a noise of agreement in the back of my throat and she tutted as she began to push the material beneath my waistband when I made no attempt to. Her black hair, which I'd inherited, was pulled up in an elaborate style on the back of her head and her makeup was painted on to perfection. Not a hair out of place. The day I saw her ruffled would be a strange day indeed. Something as trivial as her eldest son's Awakening certainly wouldn't cause the facade to slip.

When she was finished with me, she moved away again. Smalltalk wasn't her thing. Neither was long talk or meaningful anything really. She was kind of like a ghost who just floated around the house in designer clothes and a push up bra. I hadn't even seen her in her Dragon form for

years. The transformation didn't tend to mesh well with carefully planned hairstyles and she'd decided that if she had to sacrifice one of the two things it'd be the Dragon. Who needed to turn into the most powerful creature in existence and fly through the clouds when you could enjoy the feeling of a tightly coiled quaff of hair on the back of your head anyway? Safe to say, aside from my dark hair and eyes, I hadn't inherited much from my mother.

"*Please* can I come?" Xavier's begging reached my ears and an amused smile tugged at the corner of my lips as my younger brother tried to convince our Father to bring him along for the ride. "Perhaps being around so many students will encourage my Dragon form to break free at last," he urged, knowing that that was the only thing which might persuade Father to change his mind.

"If spending time amongst your own kind has done nothing to tempt the Dragon from your flesh then why would mixing with Harpies and Griffins make a difference?" Father replied, the sneer on his face clear from his tone without me needing to confirm it by looking his way.

Xavier relented with a dramatic sigh, quickly followed by a yelp as Father clipped him around the ear for the disrespectful noise.

I turned to look at Father, inclining my head an inch in deference to save my own ear from the taste of his knuckles. His yellow hair and green eyes were a stark contrast to my own but I had his muscular build and strong jaw. I liked to think I had nothing more of his but I knew his temper lay coiled within me. Though I was better than him at keeping it in check. Of course, he had no one to reprimand him when he unleashed his foul moods so I supposed he didn't feel the need to stifle himself. As one of the four most powerful Fae in Solaria, no one could stand against him. Only the

other three Councillors were his equal in magic and might and they were the only ones safe from his rages. At least most of the time.

“Come, Darius,” he snapped. “We don’t want to be late.”

I moved towards him as he pulled a silk bag from his pocket, biting my tongue against pointing out the fact that I’d been waiting here for half an hour and *he* was the one we were waiting for.

Mother reappeared, suppressing a sigh as her gaze fell on Xavier’s wayward black curls which were once again sticking up all over the place. I offered my brother an amused smirk as he backed up a few steps, disappointment shining in his green eyes. He wanted to come and I’d have liked nothing more than to have him along with us. In fact I’d happily have traded his attendance for Mother and Father’s and taken a car to the academy as well if I’d had the choice.

But of course that wasn’t an option. The Acrux family would arrive by stardust just to prove a point. It didn’t matter that the stuff cost a fortune or that the journey would take little more than half an hour by car. The point was that we could afford it and to remind the other families that without Dragon Fire there would be no stardust for anyone to use regardless of cost.

I stood shoulder to shoulder with Mother as Father tipped the glimmering black stardust into his hand and held it up between us.

My eyes caught Xavier’s and I offered him a silent goodbye just as the glittering stardust was blown in my face.

The world tipped and spun, stars exploding into view around us and capturing us in their silvery light before spitting us back out again in the midst of a field within the Zodiac Academy grounds.

“I was beginning to think you weren’t coming,” Seth said, a grin lighting his features as he ran forward to greet me. His chestnut hair was getting longer, hanging around his chin as he grew it out. He’d lost a bet to Caleb a

few months ago and had agreed not to cut it for a year. The longer style weirdly suited him, enhancing the wildness that moved within his eyes. I could only imagine Mother's horror if I were to decide to try the style for myself.

Seth threw his arms around me, his fingers reaching up to brush against the back of my neck for a moment before he drew away again. Ever since he'd started transforming into a Werewolf, he'd been becoming more and more tactile and I accepted his familiar hugs with an air of understanding which I knew he appreciated.

It was hard for him to hold back on his innate behaviour, especially around those he considered part of his pack and as his best friends, the other Heirs and I were prime targets for his affectionate embraces and even the occasional nuzzle. Dragons tended to be a lot more reserved with our affections but something about Seth's wolfy ways always seemed weirdly liberating to me.

The tight press of Mother's lips let me know she didn't agree with my take on it but she'd never speak out against a member of one of the other houses over something so trivial.

Caleb moved forward to greet me next and I gave him a wide smile as we exchanged a brief hug. Though his Order hadn't emerged yet, we were all fairly sure it would tonight. His family were all Vampires and to replenish their magic, they had to feed on the blood and power of other Fae. They were the one Order whose emergence was predictable; as soon as their magic was Awakened, they'd develop their Vampire abilities too. As his family bloodline was almost as pure as mine, it was fairly certain his fangs would emerge alongside his magic.

Max joined us last, his dark skin covered with navy blue scales which marked him as a Siren.

“Don’t say a word,” he muttered, a trace of embarrassment colouring his deep voice. He still hadn’t quite gained control of his transformations and whenever he experienced heightened emotions, he got overwhelmed and his scales appeared.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I replied, throwing an arm around him so that he could draw some of my amusement into himself with his Siren power.

Max offered me a grin as I felt my joy transferring into him for a moment but I withdrew my hand from his shoulders as I felt Father’s gaze landing on me. He’d made his feelings clear on feeding the parasitic Orders more than once: he believed that allowing a Siren or Vampire to feed on my magic would make me look weak. They were supposed to overpower their sources and offering myself up could be construed as admitting that Max or Caleb were more powerful than me. I didn’t agree with him though; why shouldn’t I offer my friends some of my power when they needed it? I could replenish my own easily enough and if it made them happy then I saw no harm in it.

Despite my personal feelings on the subject, I stepped away from Max as I knew Father wanted. It wasn’t worth the headache when I returned home just to prove a point.

“We can begin when you’re ready,” a woman called and I looked beyond the other Heirs to find her waiting for us at the top of the hill. “I’m Professor Zenith and it’s my absolute pleasure to awaken your powers tonight,” she cooed, her eyes roaming over us hungrily as we moved to form a circle around her.

My heart began to pound a little harder with anticipation. This was it. The moment I’d find out just what power I held within me. I already knew I’d be able to harness fire as my star sign was linked to that Element but I was harbouring the hope that I might hold another Element in my grasp.

Perhaps even two. It was wildly uncommon but my great grandfather had held fire, earth and air and Father had been mentioning the fact frequently enough for me to know he hoped for that too. I wondered vaguely if he'd look at me the same way as he had when I'd revealed my Dragon form if I managed to harness three Elements.

The Professor began calling out in Latin and I turned my head to the sky as she asked the stars to unleash our gifts.

I fixed my gaze on the North Star as my heart thumped a wild tune against my ribs. Raindrops spilled against my cheeks and I blinked as the water splattered through my eyelashes. A heaviness built in my chest and it felt as though the water was filling me up, slipping beneath my skin and making a home for itself there.

I didn't realise what that meant until Max released a breath of laughter from my left. I let my attention slip to him and noticed the water shining on his face too despite the fact that there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Caleb's mouth had hooked into an amused grin as he surveyed the two of us and the rain finally slowed.

"Congratulations, Max and Darius," Professor Zenith said encouragingly. "You both hold the power of water."

Before I could get my head around that nugget of information, she began calling out in Latin again and I waited to see if I might hold the power of air too.

Seth's bark of laughter drew my attention to him as his hair billowed around him in a wind I couldn't feel and I pushed aside the moment of disappointment in favour of being pleased for my friend.

"Congratulations Seth and Max, you have both harnessed the gift of air," the Professor said.

Max was grinning like a Cheshire Cat and I couldn't blame him. Two gifts under his belt already. His father couldn't help but clap in excitement and I found myself staring at the overt display of enthusiasm for his son. The Professor was calling on the stars once more as I watched him, unable to tear my gaze away.

“Congratulations, Caleb and Seth, you both hold the power of earth.”

I finally looked away from Max's father to find my two friends entwined in the trailing embrace of vines and grass which hadn't been there a moment ago. It dawned on me that I hadn't managed to match my great grandfather's ability of holding three powers as my Father sighed just loud enough to let me know he was disappointed.

I swallowed down his displeasure without allowing my face to show I'd noticed it let alone cared about it.

Heat suddenly flared around my legs and a ring of fire scorched the ground as the warmth spread right through my limbs and into my soul.

“Well this is delightful!” the Professor cried. “Each of you holds two Elements!”

I dragged my attention away from the writhing magic within my body to see that the grass around Caleb's legs had been burned away too.

He grinned at me in excitement, his fangs appearing in the starlight and confirming his Vampire Order. Seth made a show of pretending to be afraid of getting bitten and I couldn't help but laugh.

Caleb's mother burst into tears of joy as she raced forward and flung her arms around him and an uncomfortable feeling twisted my insides.

I turned to my family with a smile on my face which dropped away as I found my Mother inspecting her makeup in a compact mirror while Father looked decidedly bored.

“Oh well,” he said, keeping his voice level in light of our company. “Perhaps your brother will be the one to harness three then.”

I bit my tongue against any response to that and turned away from him once more as I returned my features to their usual bored expression. My friends were all enjoying the excitement and approval of their families and I tried not to stare at the overt displays of affection. My family didn't do affection. Overtly or privately. We were strong, solid, immovable. A Dragon had no need of others. We could look after ourselves.

Seth had made it into the midst of his family and his parents and three younger sisters were all caressing and petting him as they shared in his excitement. Everyone else's siblings were here and I couldn't help but wish Xavier had been permitted to join us too. He'd have shared in my excitement even if my parents didn't.

Seth's mother noticed me looking and held out an arm to encourage me to join them. I cleared my throat uncomfortably, glancing at my parents and wondering if my father would self-combust if I threw myself into the midst of a Werewolf nuzzling session or if he'd just beat the desire to ever do so again out of me in front of everyone here. *Likely the latter.* I gave Seth's mother a polite smile as I turned away and pretended not to notice the pity in her eyes.

I took a few steps up the hill as I focused my attention on the new power which was simmering beneath my skin instead and I couldn't help the smile that pulled at my lips.

The magic within my veins was warring to get out and I could feel the gentle caress of both flames and liquid lapping within my flesh. The two Elements were opposites and the tangled caress of them inside made me feel freer than I'd ever felt before.

My palms tingled and my heart raced. This was it. I'd finally claimed my own power. And I longed to find out what it would be like to set it free.

Lance Orion

“Zodiac Academy are the winners of the Pitball Cup!”

Not a single sound in the world beat the roaring applause post-game after winning my final match at Zodiac Academy. I stood at the heart of the Pitball pitch, nothing less than a king as the other students called out my name and waved flags with the gold and red colours of our school.

The game had been ours since half time. The opposition from Omega Academy had been so poor they might as well have not shown up. But then if they hadn't, we couldn't have beaten their asses and shown them what real winners looked like.

The towering domed roof above me amplified the noise in the stadium tenfold. Here, I was a god. It was my favourite place in the whole of Solaria.

The path of my life had been chosen for me a long time ago, but I was determined to divert from it. No matter what dark, desolate road I had to march along alone to get away. But it didn't look desolate right then, it looked goddamn divine.

“Orion, get your shirt back on and get off of the pitch!” Coach called from the sidelines, his silvery hair stamped to his forehead with sweat.

He always got worked up during a game and this one had been the final match of the year. Now I was about to graduate, he knew I was a goldmine in the making. He wanted to be the guy who coached Lance Orion before he made it into the Solarian Pitball League. And that wasn't just a dream anymore. Next week, I'd been invited to try out for the League. The actual *League*.

“Orion!” Coach barked and I grinned, soaking in the screams of my name for one final second. A thrill beat a path through my body, telling me

this was where I belonged.

I jogged after my team who were already heading into the locker rooms and bumped shoulders with a few of my teammates. The Waterback, Cindy, gave me a look that said she was ready to party after Coach released us from his play-by-play of the match. He'd break down every mistake, every way we could have gotten more balls in the pit. But that didn't bother me; I was walking on air. Nothing in the world could bring me down from this high.

After a shower and nearly thirty minutes of Coach's nit-picking, we were released from the locker room and I made a beeline back to the stands. The huge stadium was growing quiet, the pitch still smoldering from some of the fire Elementals' strikes. Some of the professors were getting to work fixing it up again for another day. But that was it for me. My last match at Zodiac. And though I was sad to be saying goodbye to the academy which had been my home for four years, I was excited as hell to start my new life. A damn better one where my mother couldn't have a single say in my fate.

My heart beat like a drum and I couldn't wipe the grin from my face as I hunted for the girl I'd missed for weeks.

"Lance!" her voice caught my ear and I spun around. I was halfway up the emptying stands as groups of students tried to engage me, showering me in compliments. Sirens brushed their hands over my arms to feed on my happiness and I didn't care enough to shake them off. I had bucket loads to spare today.

I spotted my sister a few rows down, waving a hotdog as she bobbed on her heels. I leapt over the seats parting us and snatched the food from her hand with a grin.

"Thanks Clara," I said around a mouthful of bread, sausage and ketchup. I was hungry in two senses of the word and though this would sate one half

of me, the other needed something much more specific.

“Hey trouble.” Clara beamed. My sister was a year older than me and a head shorter. She was the sensible one, the one Mom praised ten times a day. I was rebellious one who Mom clapped around the ear more often than she hugged me. We were total opposites, but since she'd graduated from Zodiac Academy last year I'd been lost without her. There wasn't a person in the world who I confided in but Clara. And since she'd been gone, I'd realised how much I relied on her.

“You played like a pro out there.” She wiggled her eyebrows, but her smile didn't quite touch her eyes. And if I wasn't mistaken, she looked thinner than the last time I'd seen her. “Although I don't think they'll let you play for the League until you sort out that issue with your head.”

I pushed a hand into my damp hair, casting heated air from my palm to dry it. “What problem?” I scoffed.

“The size of it.” She flicked me on the forehead with a grin.

I snorted a laugh. “I'll keep that in mind.” I plucked at her vest. “You're not on some low-carb, no-fat, no fun diet are you?”

She shook her head. “Of course not.”

“Then where's a third of my sister gone?” I teased and she pursed her lips. She'd always been small but this was bordering on an intervention level of skinny.

She shrugged off the comment and I figured I had to let it go. If this made her happy then fine, but I didn't see why girls had to live on air to be content with their figures.

My eyes drifted to a group of freshmen girls gathering at the base of the steps. They were eyeing me and intermittently giggling with each other. It looked like a prime opportunity to regain my magic stores and my fangs grew sharper in response, aching to sink into their soft flesh.

Clara poked me in the ribs and I returned my gaze to her with a mischievous smile. “Are you still wasting your time with freshmen?” she teased. “You do realise there’s much bigger, more succulent fish to fry than them?”

“I’ve got double Element seniors on tap,” I said with a shrug. “Doesn’t mean I don’t like the taste of something different from time to time though.”

She shoved me as I finished the last of my hotdog and we headed out onto the stairway, my eyes drifting to the girls again.

“Go feed,” Clara said in exasperation. “I want to talk to you when your head’s straight. Meet me outside the stadium when you’re done.” She jogged away and I rolled my shoulders back, locking my prey in my sights as I strode down the steps toward the four girls.

“Hi,” one said meekly while another pushed her chest out as subtly as she could manage.

But I wasn’t here to invite one of them back to my room. I wanted one thing. And it looked like the blondie with the big lips knew it.

She raised a wrist, her eyes sparkling, though frankly I would have taken it even if she hadn’t been offering. “You must be starved after the match.”

“Ravenous,” I agreed, grabbing her arm and slicing my fangs into her wrist without a moment’s hesitation.

Hot, metallic blood rolled over my tongue and I was instantly connected to the well of her magic. I pulled it into my own body, more and more, taking everything I needed until the world faded away and the power in me was restored.

When I’d fed from all of them (because why the hell not?) I headed outside to find Clara. The rolling landscape of Earth Territory spread out in every direction and the summer breeze wrapped around me like an embrace. The crowd had dispersed from the stadium and the sound of a

party starting up at The Orb reached me. I'd sworn off of alcohol for the sake of keeping in shape. My dream was more important than a few nights I couldn't remember. And tonight would be no exception. Especially now I was so close to attaining everything I'd worked my ass off for.

My sister was sitting on a boulder, her legs folded beneath her as she toyed with her magic, creating a tiny rain cloud in front of her before evaporating it.

Her expression was taut, her ebony eyes distant and I knew in the depths of my soul that something was wrong.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets as I came to a halt before her.

“What's up?” I frowned.

“Nothing's up.” She faked a smile. “You know the Celestial Heirs were Awakened last night, right?”

“Yeah...and?” I shrugged.

“Mom said....well she just wanted me to remind you to watch out for Darius Acrux, that's all.”

I pressed my tongue into my cheek, irritation racing under my skin. “And she couldn't have shown up here to tell me that herself, huh? Not like it was my final game of the season. Or that it was the pinnacle moment of my life, defining whether or not I get the chance to try out for the Solarian League next week.”

Clara gave me an apologetic frown. “She's busy-”

“Don't defend her,” I said harshly, annoyed that she would even try. “You've been spending too much time with her since you graduated.”

“Don't be like that,” Clara sighed heavily. “You don't know what Mom has to deal with.”

“Oh and you do?” I bit at her, the tension growing in my shoulders. “Since when are you on her side anyway, Clara?”

She gazed down at her knees, picking at a loose thread on her jeans. “Just keep an eye on Darius, that's all I wanted to say.”

“I always look out for him,” I grunted, my hands balling up inside my pockets. “But she's asking more than that. I'm not dense. She wants me to join her little Acrux family fan club. But I'm not interested.”

Clara glanced away, her freckled cheeks lining with colour. “All of this Pitball stuff is just dreams, Lance.”

My heart disintegrated. My sister had been the only one on my side about this for my entire life. She'd *never* wanted me to follow in my family's footsteps. And neither had she. Which could only mean one thing.

“You're working with Mom,” I snarled. “Aren't you?” Heat rose in my blood and power flickered in my palms.

How had she convinced Clara to change her mind about everything we'd fought against our entire lives? Mom was the Acrux family's personal consultant. Which was basically code for her using dark incantations to keep them happy. Totally illegal and dodgy as shit. If the government ever got wind of it, there'd be hell to pay. And now they'd wrapped my sister up in that shady career too.

Clara didn't answer and rage built in my chest like nothing I'd ever known. I glared at her, trying to seek out the wilful girl who'd had dreams beyond the dark double life our family led.

“How did she get to you?” I demanded when she maintained her silence.

“She's not all bad. It's not like we haven't embraced some of her teachings, Lance. We've always practised dark magic.” She whispered that last part and I couldn't help but throw a glance over my shoulder. The idea that anyone heard her saying that was terrifying. It was against the law to practice dark magic. And if anyone caught wind that I cast it I'd never get my shot at the League.

“Watch your mouth,” I hissed, my spine prickling.

“No one's listening,” she insisted. She tugged at her sleeves, making sure they were firmly over her wrists. I frowned, picking up on the movement and tugging her sleeve back before she could stop me. A slim cut lined her wrist and anger rolled through me.

“Why haven't you healed this?” I growled.

“I'm all out of power,” she breathed, pulling her arm away and cradling it against her. “I just did a few blood spells in the car before the game started. Nothing to get upset about.”

“Are you crazy?” I hissed, snatching her arm again and releasing a wave of healing magic to remove any trace of that incriminating cut. “How long were you at it to be completely drained?”

She shrugged, lips pursed.

“Clara,” I whispered, anxiety eating me up. “You can't use it that often. Dad said-”

“I can handle it,” she insisted, rolling her eyes at me. “Stop overreacting.”

“I'm not,” I said through my teeth. How could she be so careless about something so damning?

“Look, I just came to tell you that there's a job waiting for you when you graduate. Try out for the Pitball League but if you fail...”

“*I won't fail,*” I snarled, my muscles tightening at the doubt in her voice. How could she say that? She'd always supported me. To even suggest I wouldn't make it onto the team this close to my try out caused a painful lump to rise in my throat. “We're not like her,” I pressed, trying my best not to shout. I didn't want a yelling match with my sister. And the look on her face told me she felt guilty as hell about it all anyway.

Clara continued to avoid my gaze. "I am." She finally looked back at me, her eyes suddenly hard as stone. "And I'm going to prove that to the Acruxes tonight." She slid off of the boulder, moving closer to me, though I'd never felt more apart from her. She wrapped her arms around me and I remained stiff as she tip-toed up to whisper in my ear. "Embrace who you are, Lance. It feels better than you can ever imagine."

She walked away toward the parking lot and I stared after her in fury.

Whatever my mother had done to convince her of her screwed up ways, it must have been something big. Because the Clara I knew never would have joined her without a fight. And I was damn well going to find out what it was.

Darius Acrux

I spent my first day at Zodiac Academy attending classes with the freshmen before watching the school win the Pitball Cup in a match that would go down in history as one of the greatest performances the school league had ever seen.

Lance had outdone himself and I had no doubt that he'd be offered a deal playing professionally once he'd passed the try outs next week. I waited for him to return in the Aer House common room, twirling a little Pitball flag between my fingers as the minutes dragged on.

There weren't many people about; most of the students had already headed down to The Orb to celebrate at the huge party which was going on down there. But I couldn't wander the grounds without my appointed student mentor as I wasn't an official student myself. And as much as I was tempted to test Principal Nova's limits when it came to the other Heirs and myself, I guessed that doing so on my very first night here probably wasn't the smartest move.

Besides, it had been too long since I'd seen Lance. Our families were linked and the Orions lived on the neighbouring estate to us. His mother worked closely with my father and we'd spent more evenings and weekends together with his family over the years than I could count.

We'd always been close, more like brothers than friends despite the six year age gap. I'd missed his presence while he'd been away at Zodiac Academy and I knew that distance between us would only grow once he was signed up to a major Pitball team. But we shared the kind of bond that could transcend time apart. No matter how long we spent living our lives away from each other, we always fell straight back into our familiar relationship as if no time had passed at all once we were reunited.

It was obvious that my father had had some involvement in selecting him as my student mentor, but for once I didn't mind his meddling. The Acrux family was always intertwined with the Orions one way or another and despite the odd rumour which circulated about our connections, I knew that what I shared with Lance wasn't anything other than solid friendship. The kind that meant he wouldn't forget me while I sat waiting for him unless he had a damn good reason for it.

The door to the common room burst open as someone sent a gust of wind crashing into it with way more force than necessary and I leaned forward in my chair just as Lance prowled into the lounge.

“You don't look like someone who just won the game of his life,” I commented as I pushed myself to my feet, dropping the little flag on a coffee table.

Lance's scowl fell on me for a moment and I raised an eyebrow at him in response. He swiped a hand over his face, shaking his head as he tried to force the pissed off vibe from his features.

“Sorry, Darius. I shouldn't have left you waiting...”

“No problem, man. What's wrong?” I asked, moving closer to him and sidestepping all the bullshit. I knew something was eating him and he knew he could tell me anything.

“It's Clara,” he said, his teeth gritted. “She's working with my mother.”

I let out a long breath. Xavier and I had often sat with Lance and Clara dreaming up lives that we might live if we weren't bound by family and duty to follow certain paths. For the two of them, the dreams had a little more chance of becoming reality than they did for my brother and I but we'd always known deep down that it was unlikely any of us would stray from the family line for real. If Lance really did make it into the Pitball League then I planned on living out my dreams vicariously through him.

My own path was set in stone, dipped in steel and chained to the core of the earth. Unmovable. Unchangeable. Undeniable. But for the Orions there was the faintest chance that that wouldn't have to be so.

"It was always the most likely outcome for her. She left the academy a year ago and she hasn't found anything else," I reasoned. "And you know what Aunt Stella is like when she wants something." I'd always called his mom my aunt even though we weren't related and he did the same with my family.

Lance growled angrily, slumping into a chair beside the fire as he dropped his head into his hands. "I know," he spat. "But for a moment there I'd let myself believe we might be able to have something... else. Something of our own for once."

"*You* still can," I pointed out.

Lance nodded but he didn't seem very enthusiastic. Clara was the only family member who he really loved and I knew he'd do anything to save her from herself.

"She's up to something with your family tonight," he muttered. "I don't know what but I know it's not good."

"Let's find out then," I said enthusiastically.

Lance looked up at me, his eyes twinkling with a spark of hope.

"Really?"

"Why the hell not?" I replied with a smirk. "Do you know where she is now?"

"She was meant to be staying in town tonight. I can find out if she's still at the hotel or not."

"Do it. If she hasn't left yet then we'll head over there and follow her when she leaves."

Lance's face dropped. "That sounds great and all. But Clara's a Vampire like me; she'll hear us coming a mile off if we try to sneak after her. And if we let her get far enough ahead to avoid detection then we'll more than likely lose her."

"Pfft," I said dismissively, puffing out my chest with a grin. "Who do you think you're talking to, Lance? I'm a goddamn Dragon. I can follow her silently from the sky and there's thick cloud cover tonight; she won't have a hope in hell of spotting me."

"And what am I supposed to do while you keep up your aerial surveillance?" Lance asked irritably.

My grin widened as I realised I could have my own little rebellion against my father while helping Lance go against his mother.

"Have you ever ridden a Dragon?" I asked, raising my eyebrows in a dare.

"But..." Lance bit his tongue against the objections he'd been about to raise.

Yeah, it went against the rules of the Dragon's Guild: an ancient set of guidelines laid out by members of my Order hundreds of years ago. Dragons were noble creatures, never to lower ourselves to carrying passengers or transporting goods. But the Guild rules weren't laws. No one could stop me from ignoring tradition. The only person who would try would be my father. And he'd probably beat the shit out of me if he knew I was even offering to do this, let alone what he'd do if I actually took Lance for a ride. But I didn't care. I was sick of living by his rules and following his agenda. My powers had been Awakened and I wanted to choose the kind of man I was going to become and not just blindly follow the path laid out by my father. So yeah, maybe it was a bit of a childish act of rebellion but I

didn't care. I'd lived by his rules for too long. And tonight I was done with at least one of them.

"Come on," I urged with a grin as I headed for the stairs which led up to the roof of Aer Tower.

Lance didn't need telling twice and he joined me as we jogged up the steps. He put in a quick call to Clara's hotel, checking that she hadn't gone out yet and adrenaline trickled through my limbs as he confirmed she was still there.

We were really doing this. And it felt damn good.

The wind whipped around us as we made it to the roof and I pulled my shirt over my head as I reached out to caress the part of my soul which yearned to fly and breathe fire. I kicked my boots off next then unbuckled my jeans.

"Bring my clothes with you," I said as I tossed them into Lance's arms. "Otherwise you're gonna be stuck looking at my naked ass if I have to shift back before we return."

"Wouldn't want that," he agreed with a grimace and I rolled my eyes.

"And try not to touch my wings when you're climbing on," I added.

"Are they fragile?" he asked in surprise.

"No. They're ticklish," I admitted.

Lance snorted a laugh and I dropped my boxers as I called on the Dragon within me.

My vision darkened for a moment then sharpened intensely as the transformation began to take place and I was gifted the ability to see so much better in the dark than I could in my Fae form.

I fell forward but before my hands could hit the cold stone of the roof, claws burst from my fingers and golden scales sprang to life across every inch of my flesh.

I fought against the urge to release an animal roar as I more than quadrupled in size and my huge, golden wings spread from my back.

Lance was forced to leap away from me and my head snapped around as the beastly side of my nature clawed against my will, wanting to strike at him for being too close. A snarl escaped my lips and a wisp of smoke coiled from my nostrils as I fought against the desire to bite him. One bite from me in this form would be deadly.

I blinked a few times, adjusting to my Dragon form as the world came alive in scents and colours I couldn't normally comprehend.

Once I was sure I had total control, I lowered my head, dipping my wing as I crouched down for Lance to climb on.

"This is insane," he breathed but I could hear the undercurrent of excitement in his voice as he stepped closer.

He was right. It was insane. The Dragon's Guild rules might not have been actual laws but I was certain that no Dragon I'd ever met had ever gone against them. They were sacred. Unquestioned. Holy. And I was about to break the cardinal rule.

Lance reached out, his hand pressing against the golden scales on my flank as he hesitated for a moment, looking at me to see if I wanted to change my mind.

When I didn't pull away, he reached up to grasp one of the spines that ran along my back.

I jerked my wing suddenly and Lance swore as he leapt away from me before falling onto his ass.

If I'd been in my Fae form I'd have been pissing myself with laughter, as a Dragon I was only able to release my amusement through a series of snorts which almost sounded like a laugh. Lance clearly understood though

and he swore at me as he used his Vampire speed to leap up onto my back before I could repeat the trick.

His knees squeezed me tightly and I felt him gripping the spines which ringed my neck as I flexed my wings, testing the wind as I prepared to take off. Lance's weight on my back would make a little difference to my usual movements but I doubted it would be too difficult to adjust.

"Giddy-up pony," Lance teased as I hesitated.

You'll regret that.

I leapt forward with a rush of speed, tucking my wings in tight and diving straight off of the tower.

Lance's grip tightened but I didn't open my wings as we free-fell towards the ground. A yell escaped him a moment before I snapped my wings out and straightened, my claws brushed the grass then I beat my wings hard and hurtled towards the clouds again.

Lance released a breath of laughter as we sped across the sky and I couldn't help but enjoy the flight too. His weight was a little strange but it made no difference to me really. I was more than strong enough to carry him in this form and it felt good to show off what I could do to an outsider. Especially as I knew how much it would piss off my father.

It took less than ten minutes to reach the town outside the Academy grounds. Tucana lay about five miles north and the hotel where Clara was staying was on the edge of town. I began circling as we reached it and before long, my heightened eyesight picked her out as she left the hotel.

Lance spotted her too and I could feel him leaning out, peering over my shoulder as I soared above her silently.

Clara took a path into the woods and I swept ahead of her to see where it led. At the top of a hill, an old barn stood alone, the only building on the path and almost certainly Clara's destination.

I banked hard, tucking my wings as I brought us down to land in a clearing just beyond the barn. We didn't have long, Clara was using her Vampire abilities to run up the track and it wouldn't take her much time to reach the barn with her enhanced speed. We'd need to be in a position to spy on her before she arrived or she'd quite likely hear us coming.

I landed as close to silently as a two tonne reptile could and Lance slid from my back as I withdrew into my Fae form again.

"Holy shit, Darius, that was... I don't have words for that," he admitted.

"I know." I grinned as he tossed my clothes back at me and I hurried to shrug them on.

We made our way towards the barn silently and I let Lance lead the way, his Vampire senses keener than mine now that I was in this form.

We made it to the trees which ringed the barn and Lance held out a hand to stop me a moment before Clara appeared.

"One more minute and I'd have given up on you." My heart stilled at the sound of that voice and my hand closed on Lance's wrist as he turned to me with wide eyes.

"You know I wouldn't miss this for anything," Clara breathed as she moved close to the ruined building.

My father stepped out of the shadows and I recoiled further into them. If Clara's business was with him then I shouldn't be anywhere near it. If he didn't want me to know about it then I shouldn't. But then why wasn't I walking away?

Father smiled at Clara as she stepped closer to him and he reached up to unbutton his collar.

Clara moved forward and the clouds parted, allowing moonlight to shine down on the pair of them and it glinted off of her fangs as they elongated.

My mouth opened in confusion as she drew closer to him and he tilted his head to the side, allowing her access to his throat.

My mind spun. This was the man who preached about the importance of maintaining superiority in all things. Who balked at the idea of a Siren so much as touching him let alone a Vampire closing in on his neck.

There was no hesitation in Clara's advance as she moved towards him. She reached up to cup his cheek with one hand, standing on her tiptoes as her mouth made it to his throat.

My father's hands fell on her waist as her teeth pierced his flesh and I didn't miss the faint smile which pulled at his lips as she fed on him. Lance stiffened beside me, clearly as shocked as I was.

What the hell was going on? She was young enough to be his daughter and nowhere near powerful enough to overpower him and demand his blood.

Clara eventually pulled back and Father brushed his fingers through her hair in a way that seemed almost affectionate, if he were capable of such a thing. Then he reached up to heal the wound at his neck with a flash of red healing magic.

"Better?" he asked softly.

"Yes," Clara replied enthusiastically. "You know how much this means to me."

"And you know how much I enjoy satisfying your needs," he replied. "Your mother tells me you've made a decision about our offer?"

Clara nodded but I caught a look of unease on her face mixed in with the adoration.

My father's voice dipped as he leaned closer to her but I just managed to catch the words he spoke. "Then perhaps you'd be willing to do me a favour?"

“Of course,” Clara breathed.

Father glanced around and Lance and I shrank back into the trees as he drew her into the barn. I looked at Lance, wondering if he could hear anything else they were saying but he shook his head in frustration.

The faint sound of rocks grinding together reached me but before I could ask Lance if he’d heard it, he shot away from me.

I cursed beneath my breath as I ran after him and I headed into the barn cautiously.

“They’re gone,” Lance growled from the darkness and I drew on my inner Dragon just enough to sharpen my eyesight.

I spotted him standing in the shadows by a stone door which looked like it led into an old cellar or perhaps a tunnel.

“They went down there?” I asked, drawing closer to him.

“Yeah. And it’s sealed with your father’s magic. There’s no way we’re breaking through that.”

A shiver raced down my spine at his words and my jaw ticked. Whatever Father was planning with Clara, it didn’t look like we’d be uncovering the truth of it tonight. But the question remained. What the hell did he want her for so desperately that he’d go against everything he stood for and offer her his blood in return? It just didn’t make sense. But if the look in Lance’s eye was anything to go by, I was pretty sure we weren’t going to stop digging until we figured it out.

Lance Orion

Something had burrowed into my sister's soul and tainted it. Everything she stood for had been stripped away and I suspected power was at the root of it. It wasn't uncommon for Fae to go Hannible Lecter for power. It was in our blood, our genes. We were designed to clamber, tear, rip, claw and fight our way to the top of the food chain. Even the least resourceful of our kind held that deep-seated desire in their hearts. And my sister had succumbed to it entirely to the point of abandoning her morals. Dark magic could get someone hooked on power. I feared she'd become an addict and he was now offering her one of the most tantalising sources of power in Solaria. But for what in return?

I couldn't just let him get away with this. I was her brother. Her steady rock. And I wasn't going to let her fall prey to the false kindness of *Uncle Lionel's* generosity. Darius's father wasn't being philanthropic by donating blood to a Vampire. In fact, from what Darius had told me about him, the guy wouldn't donate a crumb to a mouse, let alone power to a fellow Fae.

I rolled off of my bed in Aer Tower, carefully stepping over Darius who was asleep on the floor as I moved to my closet. The wind rattled the shutters over the large, vertical window in my room, a summer storm raging against it in an effort to break the bolts.

Tugging open the closet, I took out the wooden box at its base hidden beneath a pile of blazers and rested it on my desk. Power hummed in my blood as I opened it to reveal a bunch of Pitball collectors cards. I ignored them, unlocking the secret compartment at the base and taking out the four carved bones which were concealed there. Each one was engraved with the symbol of an Element and the energy within them crackled expectantly. My

own Elements of air and water wove around one another between my veins, my organs, coming to life at the promise of spell casting.

I pocketed the bones alongside a switchblade from my desk drawer then kicked Darius in the leg to wake him. He grunted angrily and I smirked as he sat upright with squinting eyes.

I never pitied Darius Acrux, but I'd often gotten angry on his behalf. The guy could shoulder more shit from his parents than most kids in this academy combined. And he did so on a regular basis.

At least my father had treated me with respect and kindness up until he'd gotten himself killed. Dark magic was volatile. If you did it wrong just one time, it could consume you. But before he'd died six years ago, he had given me a sturdy foundation upon which to base my moral compass. The world was not black and white. It wasn't even a patchwork of greys. It was rainbows layered upon rainbows. The nicest Fae in the world could turn around and stab you in the back. The cruellest would occasionally offer a helping hand to a stranger.

That was why casting dark magic didn't unsettle me. Sure, I hid it. I knew by law it was a seriously punishable offence. But it was also in my blood. It was something my father had taught me and though it had brought about his demise in the end, I didn't want to let go of that part of myself. Even if it meant I would never entirely escape my family's ties.

My mother was the one who tried to decide my fate; for as long as I could remember, us Orions had forged a clad-iron relationship with the Acruxes that relied on us sharing resources. *Our* resources came in the form of our dark abilities and theirs came in the form of Dragon Fire and sheer power.

“I need to find out what my sister is up to, Darius.” I folded my arms, my jaw tight and my shoulders set. “I'll do anything to protect her. Even

this.” I produced the bones from my pocket and he eyed them with curiosity followed by a rising comprehension.

“Dark magic?” he asked, a flare of mischief lighting his eyes.

I grinned conspiratorially, the call of power ringing in my soul at the prospect of doing this again after so long.

For the past year, I'd abstained from using blood magic. It was addictive and downright dangerous. And if I was caught, I'd not only throw away my chances to make it into the Solarian Pitball League, I'd be imprisoned. At best, I'd get life behind bars. At worst, execution. Although, the Acruxes would probably cover it up before things ever got that far. But it hadn't been worth the risk of tarnishing my name until now.

The rumours were already rife about my family, but due to our infallible bond with the Acruxes, no one dared accuse us outright. Now that my sister was undoubtedly in trouble, I needed the help of blood magic to find answers. Illegal or not.

The prospect also meant doing the unthinkable though: getting none other than Darius Acrux, son of the Dragon Commander of Solaria, one of the Celestial Heirs to the goddamn throne, to cast it with me. Lord Lionel Acrux might have protected my family, cleared our name on more than one occasion and offered us the benefits of the Celestial Council, but he would also never lay a finger print on dark magic himself unless absolutely necessary. If he knew I was about to incriminate his golden child, he'd have handed me to the authorities himself. The one thing he cared about more than anything was power. And ensuring his eldest born sat his ass on the throne was not just a desire to him, it was a necessity.

I nodded slowly and Darius assessed me. I watched as his momentary reluctance gave way to the rebelliousness we always bonded over. The only thing that irritated me about the fact that we got along so well was the fact

that that was exactly what my mother and his father wanted from us. But I wasn't going to avoid his company out of spite. And besides, they never would have suspected our relationship would give way to us conspiring against them and me teaching Darius the coveted secrets of our family.

“How does it work?” Darius asked, rising from his bed in nothing but his boxers. He was only fifteen and should not have had shoulders that size. I made a mental note to point Coach in his direction when he was looking to replace me on the team.

“We can't do it here. Get dressed.” I nodded to the bathroom and Darius took some clothes out of his holdall before heading into the en-suite.

It was just before eight o'clock and rising early for me was nothing short of a miracle. The only thing I was never late for was Pitball practice. My mother always told me my internal clock ran slow, but I put it down to showing up for what I cared about. And if my sister was falling into the clutches of her sharp and manipulative claws, I'd be right on time when showing up to save her ass.

Fifteen minutes later, Darius and I were heading out of my room into the busy corridors of Aer Tower.

“Great game yesterday, Orion!” students called to me, “Team Zodiac rules!”, “Best game ever!”, “Bet we'll read about you joining the League soon bro!”

I ignored them for the most part, offering stiff nods while my mind remained fixed on the bones in my pocket and the Celestial Heir walking next to me who I was about to introduce to a whole world of messed up shit.

Gotta think of Clara. And besides, he has his own mind. He'd say no if he didn't want to do this.

We headed out into the battering storm and the groaning, whomping noise of the huge turbine high up on the tower droned in my ears. The vast plain before us which led to the edge of the eastern cliff was being battered by the sweeping sheets of rain. The air was writhing and alive with the turbulent wind as it guided the downpour in twisting patterns across the grounds. Not many students were around but a few stood up on the cliff, guiding the air with their magic whilst their whoops and cheers joined the hollering storm.

I pushed magic from the boundary of my skin and my strongest Element, air, shoved back against the raging storm until we were contained within a pocket of calm. Darius admired my work with a raised eyebrow and we strode on, following the edge of the cliff as I guided him toward my secret place which I hadn't visited in many months.

Where the cliff curved, a sheer set of steps were cut into the chalky ground, running all the way down to the sandy beach far below. The waves were merciless, battering the cliffs and exploding against the impenetrable boulders which stood in the roiling ocean. To me, chaos was more beautiful than calm. The magnificent power of the sea was something no one could harness. Fae or otherwise.

We reached the base of the steps and I led Darius along the beach, hugging the cliff wall as the path grew narrower and narrower. I increased the pressure of the air, enforcing the bubble of safety around us and entire waves rolled over it, encasing us in their grip, but unable to take us with them as they receded.

“Do you often take fifteen year old boys to secluded places?” Darius joked and I snorted a laugh.

“Only the hot ones.”

“Lucky me,” he jibed.

The wet rocks beneath us became overly slippery and Darius quickly cast fire from his palm, the intensity of it drying out the path as we continued moving along it. He already had a stupid amount of control over a power he'd only just Awakened. But that was the Celestial families all over. Powerful and smart. A deadly combination.

We soon reached the spot where a cave lay hidden by layers of illusion magic I'd added to for years. As its maker, I was the only one who could feel its presence and as I approached it, I pushed my will against its boundaries and the cave was revealed.

“Holy shit,” Darius breathed as the walls of the cliff appeared to peel back before him and the truth was shown.

We headed deep into the cave where the uneven ground rose high enough to remain dry from the forceful storm. I pushed the air away from us, wrapping it against the boundary of the cave to keep the battering wind from finding us.

Darius let the flame in his hand grow brighter and guided it to hover lazily above the cave floor.

I dropped down onto a rock as an echoing drip, drip, drip of water fell from a stalactite above us. Darius knelt beside the fire and I took the bones and the switchblade from my pocket.

“Are you sure you wanna do this?” I asked, locking him in my sights.

“Don't doubt me, Lance. I'm in. All in. Now let's start.” He rested his hands on his knees as he waited for me to act.

I took a slow breath, drawing my power to the surface of my skin before placing the four bones in a line before me. Each were from a powerful Fae who'd possessed one of the Elements. Fire, water, air and earth. Their power still rippled in the remnants of their bodies. And that power could be harnessed in a way that was never, *ever* taught at Zodiac Academy.

I flipped the switchblade out and turned my hand over. Darius glanced at the triangular tattoo on my left wrist which represented air with intrigue.

I ran the blade from the tip of the triangle, right up the centre of my palm. Blood oozed and I glanced at Darius to check he wasn't about to back out. But he didn't wince or recoil, he just watched with a patient kind of interest that reminded me why I could trust him with anything.

As the blood dripped onto the bones, I curled my hand into a fist and squeezed more onto each of them.

A breath brushed against the back of my neck, a whispering voice eluding me as it fluttered close to my ear. I waited for the best part of this, guiding my magic into the blood that poured from my cut onto the bones.

Then it happened.

Power bloomed in my chest like a living thing and I sighed headily as it coiled seductively around my heart. I released a slow breath as dopamine flooded my body, laying a thick cloud of calm over me. Only dark magic felt like this, Elemental power didn't provide this intoxicating rush.

I opened my eyes and reached for the bones, scooping them into my hand. When I spoke, my tone was throaty and deep. "Show me what my sister is gaining from the Acruxes."

A vision pushed against my senses, gentle then a little harder as I called it to me. At first there was nothing but an endless sky of stars, darkness broken by a hundred thousand droplets of light.

"What do you see?" Darius's voice was both near and far away at once.

Light burned in my periphery. A fireball tore across the vast sky, ripping a violent path through my vision. A white ghost remained stamped on my retinas as it passed out of view and the image faded.

A feminine voice tickled my air. "Throw the bones and ask."

"Is my sister in trouble?" I asked aloud, knowing what to do.

I tossed them from my hand, my eyes opening half mast as the rush of power kept hold of me like a drug. The bones fell, two facing up with their Elemental symbol to the cave roof, the other two face down.

“What does that mean?” Darius asked.

“It means her fate is undecided. The answer is both yes and no.” I took a steadying breath as the power thumped in my chest again, the most addictive feeling I'd ever known. It drowned away my fears and planted ecstasy in their place.

“I can't see anything else. But the more power we offer the bones, the more they'll reveal to us.” I lifted the switchblade, eyeing him for a reaction.

“You want my blood,” Darius stated, cottoning on fast.

“I won't ask anything of you, Darius,” I said firmly, holding onto that noble piece of myself before the allure of power chased it away.

He took the blade from my hand, mimicking the cut I'd made on his own palm without a word. A moment of uncertainty passed across his expression as he moved his hand towards the bones. If he did this, he'd truly betray his family. If anyone ever discovered that he'd cast dark magic, he could lose his claim to the throne.

I reached out and wrapped my hand around his fist, closing it before the blood escaped.

“Wait,” I whispered, but he pushed my hand from his and squeezed the blood onto the bones. He sucked in air as the power invaded him and the rush of it fed into me too, tearing down my fears again.

His mouth hooked up at one corner, his shoulders dropping and his eyelids drooping. I recalled the first time my parents had showed me how to cast blood magic. I'd been a few months shy of his age, my mother had made the cut, my father had passed me the bones. What he was feeling now

was the greatest high of his life, which also made it the most dangerous power in Solaria.

If Darius couldn't control his desire for more, he'd spiral fast. Stronger minds than mine had given into the call of blood magic, cutting themselves so deeply that they'd severed arteries and bled out before they regained enough consciousness to heal themselves. And if they were strong enough to resist the bloodlust, then the shadows could lure them in instead and never let go. This was one of the most deadly dark magics. And as that thought rose in me, I took the switchblade away from Darius and tucked it back in my pocket.

“Here.” I lifted two of the bones and pressed them into his palm, curling his fingers tightly around them.

I took the other two and we both jerked as the vision descended on us at the same time.

Darkness swallowed me, thick and impenetrable. A howling noise raked at my ears and the world around me seemed made of soot and ash. The shadowy realm I appeared to be standing in seemed to twist and I moved with it, the whole image distorting until I wasn't in darkness at all but standing before a flame so bright and so deeply crimson it could only be Dragon Fire.

A fallen star shone at the heart of it, glittering and sparkling with flashes of silver, purple, blue and violet. It crumbled to dust beneath the intensity of the fire and as the vision shifted, an enormous green Dragon was revealed as the source of the flames. I felt rather than saw Darius react. This was his father. But there was nothing strange about a Dragon Shifter creating stardust...

A whisper rushed over us and burrowed into my bones. “Death is coming.”

Suddenly the fire turned to blood, the world ran red and the coppery scent of my favourite taste hit my senses. My fangs tingled and the urge to drink devoured me from the inside out. I was drained, hopeless, lost. Then darkness hit me like a thunderclap.

I was on my back, gazing up at Darius as he shook me. Sharp stalactites glinted above his head coated in the silvery residue of minerals.

“Lance,” he growled and I pushed him back, my heart heavy and lurching. My mouth was overly dry from the comedown and my palm was stinging from the incision.

“Did you see it?” I demanded.

He nodded, his jaw tight. “And I heard a voice...death is coming.”

“This is bigger than my sister,” I said, clutching his shoulder as he locked eyes with me. “Our families are planning something, Darius. Something terrible.”

Darius Acrux

Though the other Heirs and I were supposed to be enjoying a week on campus at Zodiac Academy, my father had decided to throw a feast in celebration of our Awakening at our manor.

I sat in the back of the chauffeured limousine which had been sent to collect us and smiled along as Seth stood and started howling out of the sunroof with Max at his side.

Lance was in the corner, his eyes locked on the view out of the window as he sat brooding over what we'd learned from the blood magic.

I rubbed a thumb over the flesh on my wrist where the cut had been. Lance had healed it for me but I felt the strange urge to open it up and give myself to the darkness again. Lance had warned me about that; now that I'd had a taste, it would try and draw me in again. I needed strength of will and mind to resist it. Luckily, as a Leo, I wasn't lacking in either.

We'd both agreed that coming to the feast tonight was a good idea if we wanted to try and dig up more information on whatever our families were planning so we were attending with an ulterior motive in mind. Not that either of us would have dared refuse an invite from my father regardless. But I couldn't deny the fact that it felt good to be coming here with a goal to undermine my father's plans. Good *and* a little terrifying if I was being entirely honest. Not that that would stop me.

We rolled up outside the manor and the other Heirs spilled out of the car. I caught Lance's eye as he made a move to follow and he offered me a determined smile.

"When everyone is distracted, we'll try to get into Father's study," I muttered, confirming the vague plan we'd come up with this afternoon.

“Let’s just hope he’s left a paper trail for his nefarious plans,” Lance replied dryly.

“Well he’s always been meticulous and I’ve never known him to leave the details of anything to chance. If this plan is important to him, he’ll have written down the finer points of it,” I assured him.

Besides, Lionel Acrux was one of the four most powerful Fae in existence, he had no reason to fear anyone finding that kind of information - they’d never be able to break into his home let alone his study. Of course, he’d never suspect his obedient son would go against him so he wouldn’t have thought to shield it from me. He believed his control over me was so tight and complete that I’d never dare to move against him. So had I until recently. But I had the determination of a Dragon and I was fast approaching the time when I’d be willing to stand alone as my kind were meant to.

We followed the rest of my friends out of the limousine and headed into the entryway. Our home was arguably big enough to house a small army. The huge, gothic building sprawled out before us, stone dragons silhouetted against the sky along the rooftops.

The front door was big enough to admit a full grown Dragon, though we rarely bothered to open it. Sat at its base was another smaller door with a knocker in the shape of a golden dragon head. A servant pulled that door wide as we approached and I followed the other Heirs inside.

The sound of animated smalltalk and soft music came from the arching doorway to our right and we headed that way.

This part of the manor was only really used when we had guests. We had a ballroom where my parents held state events and a huge dining hall which housed a long table large enough to seat fifty guests. That was where we would be attending the feast tonight.

One of Father's servants took our coats for us and we headed on through the doorway.

The usual cascade of impressive flowers had been brought to life by my mother's magic to decorate every available surface and she'd chosen a mix of red and blue blooms in honour of the two Elements I'd claimed for my own.

As we made it into the dining hall, eyes turned to us and Lance moved aside as everyone gave a smattering of polite applause to me and the other Heirs.

I gave the kind of smile I knew was expected of me before parting from my friends as we all headed to take our places around the table with our families.

"Darius, dear, how have you been enjoying your stay at the academy?" Lance's mother, Aunt Stella, gushed as I took my seat across from her. She was a slight woman, but had an intensity in her midnight eyes which dared anyone to rise against her. Her signature oaken brown hair, held by all of her family, was cropped short and gave a severe look to her angular features.

Clara was sitting to her left, only two seats along from my father who naturally claimed the spot at the head of the table for himself. I noticed her gaze trailing towards him but he was showing no sign of noticing.

"Very well, thank you," I replied formally. "Lance has been showing me all kinds of secrets about the place."

Lance caught my eye with a knowing smile as he dropped into the place beside his mother.

The seats either side of me were empty and I frowned a little as I looked around for my brother.

“And have you had to endure many challenges to your power yet?” Father asked, his voice demanding everyone’s attention as he addressed me.

“Not yet,” I said. “So far, everyone I’ve encountered has seemed excited by the prospect of meeting the Celestial Heirs and none of them have felt the need to ask me to prove my strength.”

“So you’re getting an easy ride of it,” Father grumbled dismissively. “I always feared you’d grow lazy in your position. It won’t do for you to become overconfident without anyone to challenge your mettle.”

I bit my tongue against the response I wanted to give and was thankfully saved from replying by Xavier’s arrival.

“Darius!” he exclaimed excitedly as if I’d been gone months instead of days. He clapped me on the shoulder and offered me a wide smile as he dropped down into the seat which divided me from Father and I grinned in return. The two chairs to my left remained conspicuously empty.

Father didn’t bother to hide the sneer at our display of affection for each other and I repressed a sigh as I saw which way this night was headed. This so-called celebration in honour of my gifts being Awakened was more of a test, which I was already failing within moments of walking through the door.

“So how is the Academy?” Xavier asked enthusiastically, ignoring the warning signs of Father’s mood.

“Good,” I replied without elaboration and the conversation around me stalled.

“Lance told me he thinks you should try out for the school Pitball team once you enrol officially,” Clara piped up with a warm smile which suggested she didn’t spend her evenings sucking on my father’s neck.

“Of course he will,” Father said before I could answer. “Team sports are a great way to build character during your youth. It holds value as well as

garnering support from your peers. All useful things for the real world once you graduate.”

“Pitball is more than just a useful way to impress your peers and learn about teamwork,” Lance muttered, drawing the table’s attention to him. “Some people make a living playing in the Solarian League.”

Aunt Stella laughed loudly like that had been a joke and everyone around us joined in. I offered Lance an expression of support as his jaw ticked with irritation.

The empty seats beside me were whispering questions in my ear and I finally gave into the demand of them.

“Who are we waiting on?” I asked, turning my attention to Mother who was sitting on my father’s left like a pretty bauble in light pink lipstick.

“We have a surprise for you,” she admitted with a small smile.

I frowned at her vagueness, looking about to see who was missing from the usual line up of important family members and Councillors but I couldn’t see anyone obvious who was yet to arrive.

Before I could press the subject, the doors opened again and a girl walked in accompanied by my father’s cousin, Oscar. I couldn’t tell if she was familiar or not behind the huge head of auburn hair which was wild and untamed around her shoulders.

Our family was large and there were always uncles, cousins and various other distant relatives coming and going on some business of Father’s but we rarely saw Oscar. His family lived in the far north of Solaria and ran the ice barges which held a lot of importance even if they were boring as all hell.

“Do you remember Oscar’s daughter, Mildred?” Mother asked softly, drawing my attention away from the late arrivals.

The name was vaguely familiar to me but I couldn't say I had any real recollection of meeting her. When I was a young child we'd taken a trip up to visit Oscar's family and I had a fuzzy memory of playing with his daughters but I couldn't say anything about them had stuck in my mind.

"Not really," I admitted, giving my attention to the first course as it arrived.

I tore into a slice of bread, dunking it into the rich green soup which had been placed before me.

Oscar and his daughter filled the seats beside me and I glanced up, offering a polite smile in greeting.

I choked on my lump of bread as my eyes fell on the face of the girl to my left. She smiled widely, her bottom teeth protruding much further than her top set. Her skin was blotchy and red and her muddy brown eyes were not the same size as each other. Looking upon her face had almost shocked me into choking to death.

I quickly looked away from the hideous girl and grabbed a glass of wine to wash away the offending lump of bread.

When I finally regained my composure, I found Father glaring at me. The stern look in his eye surprised me; it was as though he was giving me a warning about something but all I'd done was half kill myself over a lump of bread and an ugly girl.

"We thought we should make this a double celebration," Father said, smiling in a way that would have looked warm to an outsider but I knew to be calculated. Some plan of his was coming together and I got the feeling his cousin and his inbred offspring had some role to play in it.

"Why? What else is going on?" Xavier asked, not catching on to the secretive undercurrent which had begun at the table.

Instead of the silencing glare I expected Father to shoot him, a smile was offered instead.

“Mildred has recently come into her Order; she is officially a Dragon like the rest of her line.”

“Congratulations,” I muttered, not subjecting myself to looking at her face for a second time.

I wondered why some distant relation’s Order emerging was being given such recognition. This was a meal to celebrate the Awakening of the four Heirs to the Celestial Council. Seth, Max, Caleb and I were the future rulers of our kingdom so why the hell was this troll-faced girl even here?

“How old are you?” Xavier demanded of her.

It was no secret that he was desperate for his Dragon form to reveal itself. He was thirteen and more than a little irritated that it hadn’t appeared yet, though as I looked upon his slender frame I wondered if there was a chance that it wasn’t going to happen for him. My gut clenched at the idea and I forced the thought away. Dragon males tended to be built like tanks even in their Fae form but it wasn’t always the case; perhaps he was just a late bloomer.

I glanced along the table, easily picking out every male Dragon amongst us by their size alone and bit my tongue in fierce denial. If Xavier didn’t end up emerging as a Dragon, I hated to think what Father would do about it. In his mind, every other Order was lesser. Our bloodline was as pure as possible with Dragons reaching back on both sides but there were always recessive genes, the odd Harpy or Cyclops in the mix and you could never be entirely sure what form anyone might take until their Order emerged. I hoped with all my heart that Xavier wasn’t destined to life as anything other than a Dragon.

“I’m fifteen,” Mildred said, her voice low enough to be mistaken for a man’s. “I’m a late bloomer in most things. I only just started my periods too.”

I snorted on my mouthful of wine and almost spat it all over Stella and Clara opposite me.

Lance covered his mouth to hide his amusement and Father cleared his throat as if he hadn’t heard her.

“This generation is sorely lacking in female Dragons,” Father said loudly. “And it is delightful to find a girl from a long, *pure* line such as Mildred here.”

I raised an eyebrow at him, wondering why he was pointing out the purity of her blood. She shared great grandparents with me, I knew how pure her blood was on that side anyway and it was no surprise that her mother’s side could trace their lineage back too. That was what our kind did. Fae sought to preserve and pass on power in every form and powerful Orders were a big part of that. No Dragon was going to marry a Sphinx or a Griffin unless they were foolish enough to fall in love with one and risk the ire of their entire family for muddying the bloodline. Though as I glanced at Mildred from the corner of my eye, I couldn’t help but wonder if she had a bit of Minotaur in her because her face and broad shoulders certainly shared qualities with a half bull.

Caleb caught my eye from further down the table and less than subtly mimed puking into his soup as he looked at her. I fought against a laugh, biting my lip in amusement.

“We thought it would be a good idea for you and Mildred to get to know each other, Darius,” Mother said and I glanced up at her with a faint frown.

“Why?” I asked, realising a beat late that that was probably a little rude.

“Well, because...” Mother stalled, looking to Father for backup and I fell still, a spoonful of soup halfway to my mouth.

A shiver raced down my spine and I felt like something truly awful was about to happen. Especially when Father hesitated too. He didn’t hesitate. He didn’t balk or retreat, he only ever barrelled forward like he knew everything and anything he did was absolutely right. So if he was taking his time in replying then he must have really known that I wasn’t going to like what he was about to say.

“Because we think that Mildred would be a good match for you,” Father said, his voice firm, commanding, offering no room for manoeuvre.

“What?” I breathed, my heart pounding as I refused to accept what he was suggesting.

“Your generation has been lacking more than ever in viable matches. A few of the families have failed to produce offspring, there are far more males than females and of course there was the whole Medusa incident with the Johnsons.”

I stared at him, refusing to accept what I was pretty sure he was suggesting. It hadn’t slipped my attention that the Dragon Order families hadn’t produced many female offspring in my generation but I’d never given it much thought. It wasn’t like I was looking for a wife - I’d only ever kissed two girls.

“You can’t seriously be suggesting-” I began but he cut me off.

“Mildred’s lineage is undisputed,” Father said loudly, his tone warning against further outbursts. “Her parents are-”

“Your cousins. Her father is your cousin. She’s my goddamn *cousin*,” I spluttered.

“*Second* cousin,” Father growled. His eyes flashed to green, reptilian slits.

I was pushing him and I knew it but how the hell did he expect me to just sit here while he married me off to this walking dog turd beside me?

“I’m *fifteen*,” I said loudly. Loudly enough to draw the attention of a lot of the other people in the room. I could feel their eyes on me but I didn’t care. I took a lot of shit from my father but not this. I wouldn’t do this. He couldn’t force me into a life of misery married to an ogre just because she had Dragon blood.

Lance’s lips parted as he caught my eye but he clearly had no idea what he could say to help me.

I looked to Mother. Beautiful, vain, perfectly put together Mother whose only interest was appearances. Surely *she* wouldn’t want to see her handsome son tethered to this wretched creature?

“Perhaps another option will present itself before you’re wed,” she said slowly, her lips pursing with distaste as she looked upon the troll who might be the mother of her grandchildren if Father got his way.

I looked at Mildred, hoping that she might share a little of my displeasure at this suggestion. Sure, she wasn’t being pushed towards an ugly asshole but did she really want to marry a total stranger?

She looked back at me with her misshapen eyes but I didn’t find the horror I hoped for there. Her mouth was shut but those huge teeth which filled her lower jaw still protruded through her fleshy lips. The idea of kissing that mouth was more than horrendous. I wouldn’t do it. Never.

“What do you think of this madness?” I demanded of her when she didn’t offer up an opinion.

“I would be honoured to be the wife of the Heir to the Celestial Council,” she said and my heart sank like a stone. Power. Of course she wanted me. I could elevate her into a position most women dreamed of. The hand of one of the Heirs would raise her social standing above most Fae.

But what would I get from this union? A pig ugly wife and gremlin children.

“Fuck no,” I spat, shoving myself to my feet and dropping my soup spoon. It hit the bowl and green soup flew everywhere.

Silence fell and everyone in the room was looking at me. My father’s eyes were filled with a promise of violence but for once I didn’t care. I refused to let this happen. For years I’d endured the misery of being a part of this family and I wouldn’t bind myself to some woman I could never even look upon with desire let alone love.

“Resume your seat, Darius,” Father growled, his voice icily low.

“I’m not marrying her,” I snarled, pointing at Mildred without looking at her. My gaze was locked with my Father’s and I felt my eyes shifting into reptilian slits as anger tore through me.

“You will do what is expected of you and-”

“Not that!” I shouted and flames sprung to life in my palms unbidden.

Everyone was staring but I didn’t give a damn. Everyone had a breaking point and I’d found mine. I wouldn’t marry that girl and I would shout about it until I lost my voice or burn this whole house down on top of us if that was what it took to drive my point home.

“I think you need to calm down,” Mother said, her jaw clenched with embarrassment. “Why don’t you go and get some fresh air.”

“Fine by me,” I snapped.

I kicked the chair out from behind me and it fell to the floor with a loud bang. I didn’t bother to look back as I stalked from the room, managing to extinguish the flames before I made it to the door.

I didn’t care what my father did in retaliation for my outburst. He couldn’t force me down the aisle. And he sure as hell couldn’t make me marry that girl.

Lance Orion

I planted my cutlery down, rising from my seat and Darius's father gave me an encouraging nod. I didn't return it.

“Good man,” Lionel praised me like his pet dog.

“I’m not doing it for you,” I muttered as I marched out of the room after Darius. This wasn’t on his orders. I was checking on my friend who'd just been forced into an arranged marriage with his goddamn cousin. Who may or may not have looked like the wrong end of a rhino.

A furious conversation erupted in the dining room, but I didn’t look back. The front door was wide open and I stepped onto the stately porch which ringed the house. Darius was sitting on the steps, his head in his hands. I dropped down beside him with a sigh, nudging him with my elbow.

“This is the worst thing he's ever done,” Darius said, his tone defeated.

My heart went out to him as the quiet fell between us and the chirruping of cicadas filled it.

I rested my elbows on my knees, gazing across the pristine lawn under the full moon. “You don't have to do what he says.”

Darius jerked around to look at me, his face taut with fury. “It's not that simple. He's one of the most powerful men in Solaria.”

“So what?” I growled, giving him a hard stare. “He might be your father but he doesn't own you, Darius. You're only a few years off being a man who rules his own world anyway.”

His eyes narrowed then softened as that idea sank in. He nodded slowly, falling into deep thought.

“You're right,” he said at last and I grinned.

“I'm always right,” I said, blowing out a laugh.

He cracked too and I knocked my shoulder into his. “Go to Zodiac and work your ass off. Get bigger and stronger than that jerk.”

He nodded decisively. “I’ll go along with his bullshit engagement for now, but I’m not marrying her.”

“You won’t,” I agreed. “But just in case you do, I’m not available as a godfather to your goblin kids.”

Darius barked a laugh and for a moment a ray of light seemed to shine down on us.

“Lance?” my sister’s voice jolted me back to reality and I turned, finding her hovering in the doorway. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

Relief filled me that she’d sought me out. She’d barely made eye contact with me all evening and it was breaking my heart.

I rose to my feet, patting Darius on the shoulder as I headed after her. She led me through to the kitchen which looked suitable for Henry VIII with its huge Aga, dramatic red tiles and golden fittings. My heart thumped erratically from the shirt storm that had hit this house tonight. And I had an awful feeling it was far from over as Clara’s frantic eyes met mine.

“What’s up?” I asked, my gut knotting at her expression.

She opened and closed her mouth, seeming unsure of her words.

“Clara,” I urged and she glanced up beneath her long lashes. Tears glimmered in her glossy obsidian eyes which were the mirror of mine. They remained there for half a second before she blinked them away. “What is it?” I begged and she took a shaky breath.

“I’m sorry, Lance,” she whispered as if she was afraid someone would overhear. She clutched my shirt and I suddenly found myself truly looking at my beloved sister, not some stranger who shied away from me and kept me in the dark. “I’ve been so off with you lately. But I don’t mean to be. It’s the dark magic...”

“You have to be careful with it, you know the rules,” I said firmly. Our father had repeated them a thousand times until we'd listened. Once a week and if the darkness calls to you, stop completely.

“Mom has different rules,” she said, glancing over her shoulder then back to me.

An angry heat scolded my insides. “Screw Mom,” I snarled. “The only thing that ever held her in check was Dad.”

Clara's brow creased with lines and it pained me to see her so worried.

“What is it she's asking of you?” I urged. “I can help you, just talk to me like you always used to.”

She rested her hand on my chest, patting softly. “I'm fine, Lance. Really. You don't need to worry.” She took a heavy breath. “And I'm sorry about what I said the other day. You should follow your dreams. I was being selfish and I...” She glanced over her shoulder again in that jittery way and I gritted my jaw in frustration.

Who was she so afraid of? Mom? Because I didn't care if she was my flesh and blood, I'd call her out on manipulating Clara and force her to stop whatever she was planning.

“Tell me what's going on,” I insisted, holding onto her shoulders, sure the moment I let go of her she'd drift away from me again and I'd never get her back. I almost spilled that I'd seen her drinking from Uncle Lionel, but I couldn't spit the words out.

She pushed her bangs out of her eyes and tilted her head up. “You'll find out tonight,” she whispered just as the door flew open and hit the wall from the force the perpetrator had used.

Lionel strode in like a tank on legs. He was stiff and imposing, his muscles primed in an effort to threaten me. But I stared coolly back at him, squaring my shoulders as I rose to the challenge in his eyes.

He might have been a Dragon Shifter but I only had to get my teeth into him long enough to disable him.

“Out,” he said in a deadly calm tone, his words clearly for my sister.

To my horror, she actually obeyed, scampering out of the door as if he owned her.

Hell. No.

I stood my ground as he approached and the pressure in the air seeped into my lungs.

“So,” he said calmly. “You and my son seem to be getting along well. I'm glad to see you have bonded in the way we hoped.” He didn't need to elaborate for me to know the 'we' he was referring to was him and my mother. Plotters, both of them. His wife gave zero shits about the power game her husband was playing right under her nose; so long as she was gifted a loaded platinum card to spend on whatever boob job or nip and tuck she was in the mood for, she was content. But Darius's father had found his manipulative equal in my mother. Cruel and conniving in their own particular ways, so together they were an unstoppable force. And the only way to beat an unstoppable force was with an immovable wall. So that was what I had to try and be.

I gave him a curt nod in answer, sensing there was more to him coming here than pleasantries. If you could call his mirthless tone pleasant.

“I'm not sure if your mother has explained your responsibilities to you yet, but let me lay it out for you, Lance.” He stared at me across his golden kitchen island, splaying his hands on the pristine surface. “You'll be graduating next week, yes?”

I nodded again, grinding my jaw as I tried to figure out where he was going with this.

“Congratulations.” Nothing in his tone told me he meant that. “As of the moment you graduate, I hope you're aware you'll be fully joining the alliance between our families?”

“I'll look out for Darius so long as I'm around,” I said with a shrug.

His mouth curved up into a degrading sneer. “Ah yes...the Pitball dreams your mother mentioned.”

My gut turned to stone as his eyes became momentarily reptilian, flashing deepest green.

I'd never backed down from a fight before, and even if this guy was the most powerful Dragon Shifter in the kingdom, I wouldn't be surrendering any time soon.

“I'm a patient man, Lance-” *Liar*. “-but I have no time for idle dreams and wishy-washy ambitions. Like my son's, your destiny has already been laid out for you. You will take on the official role as Darius's guardian and I will compensate you handsomely for it. You can't say fairer than that.”

My heart rate spiked and adrenaline kicked in, making my fangs tingle for blood. “Fair? I'm a Libra, *sir*, I think I know what's fair and what isn't.”

His features skewed to abject rage. “Do not backchat me, boy. This is not a request. It is in an order. A decision made long ago by your mother and I-”

“And where was I while this decision was taking place, huh?” I snapped, my hands curling into fists. It wasn't like it was the worst job in the entire world but it meant stamping on my dreams and burying any notion of becoming more than just a pawn pushed around by the Acruxes.

Not gonna happen.

“You were snivelling in your cot,” he growled. “*That* is how long ago the choice was made for you. And you will do better in life if you never question me again.” He turned as if the conversation was over. But it damn

well wasn't. And not only that, he'd just turned his back on me which was the biggest insult you could offer another Fae in Solaria. Which proved exactly how much respect he had for me.

“Fuck you,” I snarled and he halted, his back muscles tensing against his fancy-ass shirt. “I have my own life to lead. I'm not entering any alliance. Darius is a friend, that's it. My allegiance to you and your family ends there.” My mouth had gotten me into detention more times than I could count at Zodiac Academy, but this felt different. Like I'd just poked the most venomous snake in the world and offered it my wrist.

He flung around and I gasped, throwing out my arm to deflect the magic he shot at me. A whip of fire caught my wrist as I released a burst of powerful air at Lord Acrux himself and he smashed into the wall with a furious snarl.

Pain daggered out from the whip of flames which was wrapped around my arm and the scent of searing flesh sailed under my nose. I yelled as I cast water from my other hand, dousing the flames. But they weren't any ordinary flames, this was Dragon Fire.

“Release me!” I bared my fangs, raising my hand to defend myself when another whip caught me from behind. I was jerked around and found Darius's mother being useful for once as she moved to back up her husband.

“What the hell is this?” I snarled. “You think *this* will make me bow to you?”

The fiery whips cooled against my skin and yanked me toward the door. Lionel marched forward, shoving a hand against the back of my head to push me along. I lunged for him, trying to sink my teeth into his arm, but he moved out of reach a second before I had him. His eyes sharpened on me and I didn't think he'd underestimate me again. If he did, I'd win.

The chains of fire forced me to his heel as I was dragged after him and guided toward a door under the staircase.

He wrenched it open and struck his hand across the air so that the chains pulled me through the doorway. The door slammed in my face and I was plunged into semi darkness; the only thing lighting the space were the magical chains which had wrapped my hands together behind my back. I jerked my shoulders, pulling hard against the binds, but it was no good.

Rage dug a pit in my gut and I threw a hard kick at the door with all the force I could muster. The wood splintered but didn't give.

“Lionel you piece of shit!” I roared, kicking the door again.

I stumbled down a step from the force I used then snarled ferociously, readying myself to throw my shoulder at it like a Pitball tackle.

Before I charged down the door like a wild bull, it flew open and Darius was thrown in. An oomph escaped me as he crashed into me and we stumbled down several steps.

An oppressive heat raced through the air and I instinctively turned my head away from it. Lionel stood in the doorway, his menacing shadow falling over us. He cast the searing air from his palms, corralling us so we were forced to move down the stairs away from it.

Darius wiped a split lip with the back of his hand. “Father stop!” he yelled as we staggered down the steps into the depths of a huge cellar. Cold, stone walls stared back at me and the hollowness of the place filled me with a prickling kind of dread.

The heat dissipated and Lionel came at Darius fast, a blur of pure muscle. I yanked at my hands in alarm as his fist connected with his son's jaw. Darius threw up his hands and fire bloomed in his palms, but it was haywire and his father soon had it extinguished. I rushed forward,

propelling myself with my Vampire speed and forcing my shoulder into Lionel's side in a bid to help.

“Oh now you want to protect him, do you?” Lionel spat at me, throwing out a huge line of fire which scored a divide between us. I stumbled back, unable to cross it as it continued to blaze and light the entire concrete room around us.

Lionel laid into Darius with the brutality of his fists, all magic abandoned. Panic and rage ate at me until I couldn't bear it any longer. Every punch made me shout out, but Darius remained icily quiet as if this had happened before. And the thought alone made me want to rip his father apart on his behalf.

A creak sounded on the stairs and I turned, finding my mother there and my sister just behind her.

“Free me,” I gasped in relief, tugging at the binds which continued to hold my magic in check.

Mom shook her head, her face stern. “It's time, Lance. We can't have you avoiding this.”

I stared at her in horror. I knew she was a bitch, but dammit she was supposed to be *my* bitch. Batting for my goddamn team.

I looked to my sister and her eyes were filled with apology. But still, she stood there and did nothing.

I winced against the cracking sound behind me and Darius said something inaudible through a mouthful of blood.

“Fuck!” I roared, running at the fire, knowing it was a death wish.

The flames disbanded a second before I reached them and my eyesight adjusted too late as Lionel caught me by the throat. With a surge of magic which rocked the foundations of my body, he brought me to my knees beside Darius.

The fiery chains holding my arms guided my hands forward and my fingers locked around Darius's wrists. He blinked woozily at me through swollen eyes as blood slid from his mouth, dripping steadily to the floor.

My heart beat like I was an animal in a trap waiting to die. The cold bite of the concrete beneath my knees was all I could feel. That and the fear of what Lionel was about to do.

"I'm sorry," Darius said to me then spat a wad of blood on the floor beside him.

"Bastard," I snarled at Lionel, the injustice of this making me want to yell until my heart burst.

He moved behind Darius, resting a hand on his shoulder and I felt someone placing a hand on mine. I didn't need to look to know it was my treacherous mother and my throat swelled with anger.

"You are to be bound forever," Lionel said calmly, his bloody knuckles shining under the light of a fire he'd cast above us. "Lance Orion, you will guard my son at the detriment of your own life. Nothing will ever be more important to you than that," he announced and my hopes and dreams wavered before my eyes.

"Wait," I gasped, but found no ounce of mercy in his gaze.

"Father *no*," Darius barked at him which served him a forceful shove.

Lionel continued in a gruff, resounding voice, "Adiuro te usque in sempiternum."

Darius held onto my wrists and released a noise of fury. I tried to pull away but the pressure of Lionel's magic increased until my nails dug into Darius's flesh and drew blood.

Panic chewed at my heart and left it in ribbons.

Please no.

Not this.

Don't take away everything I've worked for.

“Adiuro custodiet te mihi in filium,” Lionel's voice rose in tenor and a deep power pushed into my body, taking my very soul in its grip.

“Please,” I forced out, desperate to stop this.

“It's too late for pretty words, my boy,” my mother purred in my ear, her hand tightening on my shoulder. “This is the way of our families. You've diverted from your true path for far too long. It's time you joined your sister and I.”

“Never,” I said through my teeth, but Lionel's magic rushed into me once more and I buckled forward. Darius crumpled too and our foreheads met in the middle, our hands still painfully locked around each other's arms.

“Adiuro te usque ad mortem!” Lionel cried and the walls trembled with a fearsome magic.

My heart suddenly burned with all the heat of Dragon Fire and that same pain beat a path within my wrists, through my veins, my blood. It planted a seed inside me which grew thorny roots and spread throughout my entire body.

Sweat poured down my spine as the heat blazed on and on, never letting me out of its scorching grip. I hissed through my teeth, blinded by the agony as it raced under my skin, reaching into every cell in my body.

When it finally receded, I was able to release Darius's arms. Nail marks lined both of our wrists and in the crook of our right elbows was a mark seemingly burned there. Mine was the symbol for Darius's star sign, Leo, and he held mine: Libra.

“What have you done?” Darius panted, pressing his finger to the mark on his arm.

I ran my finger over the sign on mine, the welt raised and red, sizzling beneath my touch.

“What I should have done a long time ago,” Lionel muttered. “Lance is your guardian from here on out until one of you takes your final breath. Get used to each other. Because your lives are now intertwined.” He looked to me and my upper lip peeled back. “Your life is pledged to his. Where he goes, you go. End of story.”

Darius Acrux

My father stepped back and I hung my head as pain and rage raced through my body in equal measures.

I hadn't fought back when he'd started pounding on me. I never did. I'd always thought that it would only make it worse anyway.

Agony seared sharply through my ribs which I'd heard cracking during his onslaught. I couldn't take a deep breath. The taste of blood filled my mouth. There was hardly a space in my mind for anything other than pain and fire.

Lance was staring at me like he'd never seen me before and I couldn't stomach the pity which I found in his gaze.

"Get up," Father snarled. "This night is far from over. The two of you have spent too long turning your eyes away from the truth of our power. But now it's time you accepted it. You need to see what it takes to hold the kind of power you've been born to."

Lance made it to his feet before I did, reaching out to grasp my arm as I stumbled. I could feel blood running down the side of my face and as I glanced down at my white shirt I found it splattered with red.

"Get those pathetic looks off of your faces by the time you come upstairs. I've informed the rest of our guests that this night is over. They believe your childish outburst about your betrothal is the reason for the end of the festivities and have agreed to give you time to collect yourself."

Father turned and stalked from the room alongside Stella.

Clara hesitated, shifting towards us with tears glimmering in her eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Lance," she breathed. "I thought if I took on the role Mom needed then she might let you live your life away from this. I didn't want this to happen."

Lance stared at his sister in horror. “What have they done to you?” he gasped.

She pushed the sleeve of her dress back and revealed a Leo mark on her own arm. “I’m bound to Lionel,” she breathed. “It’s not all bad, he cares about me, he-”

“He lets you feed on him?” Lance spat. “We know, we saw.”

Clara bit her lip, her gaze drifting to me. “If you feed on someone with that much power it’s like...”

“Don’t go getting any ideas,” I growled. I had no intention of letting her start sucking on my neck too.

“I wasn’t. I was just trying to say, there are good points to this too.” She shrugged weakly and I could tell she’d spent a lot of time trying to convince herself of that.

Lance looked at me and I narrowed my eyes. “That goes for you too. I’ve lost enough blood tonight without donating any,” I muttered, my lame attempt at a joke falling flat as the two of them stared at me. I must have looked like shit warmed up because Clara almost started crying again and Lance’s jaw was set so tightly that I was afraid he might crack a tooth.

“Lionel is manipulating you,” Lance said to Clara, his expression hard. “What is it he wants in exchange for his blood?”

Clara shook her head, her eyes falling to her feet. “I want it too I’m just...I’m afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” Lance begged, reaching out for her but she shied away.

“We shouldn’t keep Lionel waiting,” Clara breathed eventually. She cast one long, mournful look at her brother before scampering up the stairs and out of sight.

“Let me help you,” Lance said quietly, moving towards me with his hand outstretched.

“Don’t worry about it,” I muttered, wiping a line of blood from my cheek and trying to ignore the sting of pain as my knuckles brushed against a cut there.

“I can’t leave you in pain like this,” he said.

“It’s fine. Mother will patch me up when she sees me,” I said dismissively. “It’s the only indication she ever gives that she knows he does this.”

Lance’s mouth fell into a firm line but he didn’t back off. “I *have* to help you, Darius,” he said forcefully. “It’s not a choice. Seeing you like that is making my brain hurt, it’s like your pain is mine and I...”

Lance trailed off as we regarded each other. This was what my father’s magic had done to us. He couldn’t bear to see me in pain and he had to help me no matter what.

I gave him a stiff nod of acceptance as he closed the distance between us and pressed his palm to my skin.

A red glow started up beneath his hand and the warming flow of his magic trickled into me as he worked to heal my many injuries.

We stood in silence as he worked and the agony slowly left my body. My ribs cracked again as they were pulled back into their correct position and Lance winced in response like he’d almost felt it himself.

I inhaled deeply as the pain abandoned me and Lance staggered forward a step as he released me from his healing magic.

I caught his arm to steady him, noticing the dark lines beneath his eyes.

“Are you drained?” I asked, frowning at him. I knew he wanted to help me but he could have left the minor wounds alone if his magic was running that low.

“Yeah. I used a lot of magic trying to fight Lionel off,” he admitted, gritting his teeth at the discomfort he felt without his power filling him.

The sight of his distress filled me with sadness way beyond the normal amount of care I’d usually have for someone in his position.

“Here,” I said, offering him my wrist without really thinking about it.

Lance frowned at me in surprise. Powerful Fae didn’t just offer up their blood to Vampires and I was stronger than him even if I wasn’t well trained yet.

“I can’t... seeing you in discomfort is making me feel like shit,” I admitted irritably.

I hadn’t asked for this bond between us, neither of us had. But I didn’t see any way for us to do anything other than just accept what had happened for the time being. And that meant I couldn’t cope with him looking like crap and lacking in power.

“Are you sure?” he asked, though his fangs were already growing in response to the call of my blood.

“Just hurry up; I don’t need to take another beating for keeping Father waiting,” I said darkly.

Lance’s eyes flashed with anger at the idea of me being hurt again but he pushed the emotion aside as he took my wrist in his grasp and bit down.

The prick of pain was quickly followed by a rush of pleasure as I noted the satisfaction in his eyes. This felt right, *good* even. I was rewarding him for helping me and I realised that I wanted to do that almost as fiercely as I didn’t want to marry that butt ugly girl upstairs.

I found myself wanting to reach out and pull him closer but I fought against the weird impulse, knowing it wasn’t really mine.

Lance drew back once he’d taken enough and he released my arm as he looked at me.

“Shit,” he breathed. “You taste like...”

“That felt a little too good to be normal,” I admitted. The memory of my father feeding Clara played on my mind and I couldn’t help but think of the way they’d almost been caressing each other.

“Yeah. Your blood is like my own goddamn brand of heroin,” Lance said, his dark eyes alight with the power I’d just given him.

“I’m thinking we avoid doing that again,” I said, pushing aside the pang of longing that went with it. “The last thing I need is you trying to dry hump me while you’re feeding.”

“You might be right about that,” Lance replied, his tone joking but his eyes alight with desire for my magic.

“Mmmhmm.” I walked away from him and headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time.

I emerged in the entrance hall just as a car pulled away beyond the open doors.

“The last of our guests have just left,” Father announced as his sweeping gaze fell on me and Lance.

He didn’t comment on the fact that I’d been healed. He never cared about Mother healing me after his attacks either. I guessed sating his rage on my flesh was enough for him without him feeling the need to insist on me sporting the injuries afterwards.

“Let’s go,” Aunt Stella said eagerly as she emerged from a room to our left. She’d wrapped herself in a midnight blue cloak and pulled the hood up over her head as I looked at her.

Father beckoned us like we were a pair of dogs and headed back through the house towards the dining hall.

When we arrived, I found that the Heirs and their families had all left us but most of my uncles and cousins remained. Several of them had removed

their shirts and my gaze fell on Oscar's scarred chest as he moved towards us. Thankfully, his ugly daughter was nowhere to be seen and his gaze was fixed on my father instead of me.

I hunted the crowd for my brother but he wasn't present either.

"We're ready to go when you are, Commander," Oscar said, addressing my father with his title as leader of the Dragon Clans. It was a term I rarely heard but it meant that whatever they were up to was important.

"It's time," Father said. "Everyone gather close."

Lance drew nearer to me as the Dragons, Stella and Clara all clamoured towards him.

Father produced the bag of stardust from his pocket and my heart beat a little faster as I realised he planned on taking us somewhere away from here.

With a flick of his wrist, he tossed a handful of the priceless stardust into the air and it fell over all of us, dragging us from our current position in the world and transporting us elsewhere.

Freezing air buffeted me as we arrived on an open clifftop, the sound of crashing waves filling the air.

Lance caught my arm, pointing up at the sky behind me and I turned to look as a lunar eclipse started in the heavens.

My lips parted. Celestial events like this held huge power. Whatever my father was planning, this wasn't a coincidence.

Fire sprang to life all around us, billowing up towards the sky as the Dragons removed their shirts and began to chant in some ancient language I didn't recognise.

My gaze caught on Clara as she began to unbutton her long dress with shaky hands. She dropped it and her mother wrapped her in a flowing blue robe like her own.

One of the Dragons started handing out wooden masks carved with grotesque faces as another passed out more robes.

“We have to stop this,” Lance breathed, his eyes wide with horror. “This is beyond dark magic, this kind of ritual was forbidden long ago. It’s meddling with powers we can’t control. If anyone here sinks too far into it they’ll be lost, their soul consumed by the shadows.”

Before I could reply, a cold hand landed on my shoulder.

“You boys are here to watch tonight,” my father’s dark voice wrapped around me like a spell. “We’ll have no input from you yet.”

I looked up at him in surprise but before I could respond, his power slammed into us, knocking us to our knees.

Lashes of strong magic wound their way around my body, immobilising me at the sidelines of this madness as the chanting around us only grew louder.

“You have to stop this,” Lance growled, battling against his own restraints. “You can’t possibly hope to harness this kind of magic! My father told me that-”

“Your father wasn’t strong enough to harness the shadows. He was a disappointment and a fool. We will not make the same mistake twice.” Father strode away from us without another word and we were left there, kneeling in the dirt and forced to observe this twisted ritual.

“We have to do something,” Lance insisted, despite the fact that we both knew it was hopeless.

His gaze was fixed on Clara as his mother passed her a mask. For the briefest moment, all I could see was her tear-stained face and the fear in her eyes before the mask concealed her features and she slipped into the movements of the ritual.

The chanting was louder, fiercer now, building up to a crescendo as the moon slid closer and closer to the moment of total eclipse.

The magic in my veins was simmering to be set free and a trail of sweat raced down my spine.

Something was coming. They were drawing something here which didn't belong.

My heart pounded violently against my ribs and I looked up at the sky in panic as a ring of light surrounded the moon.

The chanting suddenly fell silent, the Fae stilled and all of the cloaked figures raised their hands to the sky in a silent plea.

A burning trail of movement drew my eyes to the right and I gasped as I spotted the meteorite hurtling toward us in a trail of burning glory.

It was so bright that I could hardly bear to look at it but I couldn't tear my gaze away either.

The darkness rode on that falling star. And it was coming straight for us.

It hit the Earth with enough force to make the ground tremble and tore a blazing trail into existence as it scorched across the ground.

A yell of fright escaped me and the heat coming from it almost burned my flesh as the huge rock slammed to a halt right in the midst of the cloaked figures.

Silence fell so thick and deep that it rang in my ears. I didn't know what they'd summoned from the sky. But I was filled with the most potent sense of dread as I looked upon it.

Lance Orion

I knelt at Darius's side in utter shock at what I was witnessing. The meteor had created a vast pit before us, the heated rock glowing from the impact. The chanting of our two families carried on the wind and tangled with the frantic sound of my heartbeat.

Lionel lifted his arms above his head then ran toward the edge of the cliff with intention. My throat constricted as he dove toward the sea and though I knew what he was planning, part of me hoped he'd hit the rocks before he shifted. That would do us all a favour.

Silence fell as he disappeared beyond the ledge and the crash of waves was the only noise to call back to us. The quiet was pressing and I shared a loaded look with Darius as we waited for his father to reappear.

A bellowing roar split the air apart and the shadow of an enormous beast shot up toward the sky. Lionel spread his wings and the light of the fires glinted off of his metallic green scales. He was bigger than any Dragon form I'd ever seen, his wing span immense, his tail whipping out behind him in a fan of deadly-looking spikes. He soared overhead and the wind rushed across us. We were pressed forward and the grass bent to follow his movements through the sky.

He circled the crater once before the world lit up in crimson flames, pouring out a vat of hellfire itself. The fallen star melted beneath the onslaught, the meteor turning to nothing but a shimmering pile of soot. Just like the vision the bones had delivered me.

“Darius,” I hissed, fear lacing my tone.

He gave me a desperate look. “We have to stop this.” He bucked against his restraints, but there was little hope. We were immobilised, outnumbered and underprepared. He swore through his teeth, straining against his binds.

I searched the crowd of masked faces, hunting for my sister amongst them. I recognised her frame ten paces away and called out to her, my eyes begging her to come to me.

She shook her head and I cursed the stars themselves. I despised the idea that we were enslaved to our fates. The vision we'd seen had ended in blood. So much of it, I couldn't bear to imagine what was about to happen. And then there were those words...*death is coming*.

“Clara!” I shouted, giving her my hardest stare. My mom responded instead, drifting toward me and adjusting the creepy ass mask over her face. She knelt down before me in the grass and brushed her fingers over my cheek.

I jerked away, baring my fangs. “Something bad is going to happen if this doesn't stop,” I told her, praying I'd get through to her.

“Remember what your father always said. There is no good and bad,” she said gently.

“That's not what he meant!” I snapped, but she shook her head, a tut sounding from behind her mask. She stood, walking back to join the circle of chanters and my heart thrashed angrily beneath my ribcage.

Lionel swooped away from the crater, landing gracefully on the grass. He folded his wings, his scales rippling as he prepared to return to his Fae form. His wife moved forward, holding out robes for him and he released a low growl before his entire shape shifted. A moment later he pulled on the robes his wife had offered and walked barefoot to the edge of the crater, the wind pulling the hem of it out behind him.

“Stardust created on a lunar eclipse takes the traveller to only one place,” Lionel spoke to everyone and my heart rate ratcheted up.

What is he talking about? What place?

I glanced at Darius whose expression told me he had no idea either.

“Tonight we’ll be the first Fae to ever enter the Shadow Realm,” Lionel announced and the breath stalled in my lungs.

“Are you insane?” Darius demanded of his father, his brows pinching together tightly. Lionel ignored him, staring into the pit intently with a thousand hopes and dreams shining in his eyes.

The Shadow Realm was the darkest mirror world in existence. Nothing good came from there. But there was one rumour that had yet to be confirmed. That the Shadow Realm was home to the elusive fifth Element: the Element of darkness.

My shoulders knotted with tension as I stared at Lionel, unable to believe he was foolish enough to attempt this. Didn't he have enough power as it was? He was one of the four Celestial rulers. Since The Savage King had met his end, he’d sat on the throne beside the other three Councillors.

“It's time, Clara,” Lionel called to her and my heart clawed its way up my throat.

“Time for what?!” I cried but she ignored me, moving toward Lionel, her movements giving me a hint that she was nervous. And if she was nervous, it was nothing in comparison to what that made me feel. “Clara!” I begged. “Don't do anything for him!”

She glanced my way and the rigidity in her posture told me her mind was made up on whatever she was about to do. “It's not for him, Lance,” she called, taking the mask from her face and dropped it to the ground. “I want this.”

“Please stop,” I breathed, emotion scraping at my heart. This wasn't really her. Dark magic had corrupted her, made her crave power to the detriment of herself. And I knew my mom and Lionel were to blame. They'd manipulated her. Bribed her with Dragon blood. And now she was so deep in this shit, she couldn't see her way out.

Lionel rested a hand on the base of her spine then gave her a push that sent her stumbling into the crater. She moved carefully down the steep pit toward the smouldering heart of it, her entire body shaking as she went. The large pile of sparkling ebony stardust was more than I'd ever seen at one time.

My sister knelt beside it, pushing her fingers into the silt and sifting it through her fingers. She let it trickle back into the pile before taking something from inside her robes. A knife glinted under the firelight and fear quickened my pulse.

“Clara!” I called, my voice cracking. Lionel shot me a fierce look, but I wouldn't be silenced by him.

She continued to ignore me, lifting the blade above her arm and scoring a line into her flesh.

Blood magic...but why?

As the blood dripped onto the stardust, she moved the blade to her other arm, slicing another cut into her skin. The stardust began to throb as if a pulse lived within it, then slowly it coiled like a snake and rose up to wrap around the wounds on her arms. I knew in my bones that this was the darkness, the shadows coming to claim the power she offered.

Clara's shoulders trembled but she leaned into it instead of away. My breathing became shallow as she released a soft sigh, the blood magic giving her that familiar high. Her eyes rolled back into her head and the stardust slithered further up her arms.

The others were chanting, louder and louder but I couldn't peel my eyes from the horrifying sight before me. I kept crying out to my sister until my throat was hoarse, but she never turned her head.

The stardust crept over her shoulders and panic seized me as it tickled her throat.

Darius shouted at his father, but I couldn't hear the words, too shocked by what I was seeing. The dust wrapped around Clara's neck, sliding high, covering her mouth, closing in on her nose.

She remained in its grip, tilting her head back as if she was riding the biggest high of her life.

“Lionel!” my mother's voice rang in my ears.

“Calm, Stella,” he growled at her. “Your daughter is pure, she will be fine.”

Pure? What did that even mean?

The dust enveloped my sister entirely, folding her into the depths of the surging mound. I began to tremble with rage, terror, panic. Darius pressed closer to me and I sensed he was trying to comfort me.

What's happening?

How long will it take for her to come back to me?

The dust rose higher and higher toward the lunar eclipse, a pillar of twisting, writhing darkness. The group started muttering, their chanting falling away, but Lionel continued on resolutely.

As it spiralled above our heads and its shadow fell over me, a deep chasm of fear opened up in my chest.

Something's wrong.

With a sound like falling rain, the tower collapsed, pouring down toward the centre of the pit in a cascade of shimmering grains. The moment it met the ground, the dark substance turned to blood. It exploded against the base of the crater, showering up the sides of it. So much blood, it was all I could see. A red pool oozing and swirling.

My heart free fell in my chest as the horrifying reality set in.

My mother screamed.

People were shouting, cursing.

My heart was unravelling at the seams and all I could think was, *she's gone.*

She's gone, she's gone, she's gone.

Mom's hands were on me, hugging me, pawing at my shirt. But I couldn't move, I couldn't tear my eyes from that crater swimming with the remains of my sister.

“It was her choice,” Mom sobbed into my shoulder as if trying to convince me of that. “She wanted this.”

“We've failed,” Lionel spat.

“How can that be all you care about!?” Darius roared at him.

Mom continued to cry and her tears soaked through my shirt as I remained frozen in total shock. Emotion clawed at my heart, ripping it to shreds as I tried to process this horrible truth.

Clara is dead.

My sister is gone.

I couldn't move to push my mother away, but the second I was freed from this hellish place, I would never let her lay a hand on me again. She and Lionel had done this, and I would never forgive it.

The world was awash with rain as I stared out of the window of my one-bed apartment in the town of Tucana. Darkest blues melded with deepest greys. Down on the street, people moved under the cover of umbrellas, the only splashes of colour in the world.

The sound of the skylight opening behind me drew my attention and I turned, finding Darius dropping into my kitchen naked. “I hate flying in the rain.” He pushed his wet hair back, walking straight into my bedroom.

I waited for him to return, accustomed to this routine. A moment later, he strode back into the kitchen/lounge in sweatpants and a t-shirt, moving to grab himself a beer from the fridge.

“Not much of a summer,” he commented and I grunted in affirmation.

Silence fell, but not the uncomfortable kind. It had been two months since my sister's death. Two months which had felt like a nightmare I'd been stuck in on repeat.

“Did you write to the League?” Darius asked casually and a stony coldness filled my chest.

“No.”

“Maybe they'll let you try out if you just-”

“No,” I snarled and he dropped it.

I'd missed my shot with the Solarian Pitball League. I'd been in no state to try out after the loss of my sister. And you only get one shot with the League.

The plinking of raindrops against the window was the only sound to fill my apartment.

I sighed, turning to Darius who was sitting on the grey kitchen counter with a can of beer in his hand.

“I got this today.” I walked to the pile of letters by my front door, plucking up the single page which had arrived from Zodiac Academy. The school was currently funding my apartment. Principle Nova had apparently deemed me fit for a payout because of the publicity I'd offered for the school Pitball team. Which was utter bullshit. This was pity money. But I'd swallowed my pride and taken it because the other option had been taking money from Lionel or my damn mother. So this was the better of two shit choices.

I planted the letter under Darius's nose and he plucked it up, his eyebrows arching as he read it. "They want you to apply for a teaching role?" he scoffed. "You're not exactly the button-down shirt type, mate."

I shrugged, taking the letter from his hand. "Could be though. Better than sitting around here, waiting for my funds to run out."

Darius frowned and I sensed something was circling in his mind.

"What?" I demanded.

He chewed on the inside of his cheek for a second. "Well...I just thought, what if my father had something to do with this? I'll be enrolling at Zodiac in a few years. And if you're there, you can continue to 'guard' me just like he wants."

I nodded slowly, having considered that myself. The bind he'd put on Darius and I was as strong as ever. I was ingrained with a deep need to protect him, but I tried not to let that bother me. I'd always looked out for him anyway. Only now, I didn't have a choice about it. Besides, my dreams were long gone, so this was all I really had left.

"Not that you wouldn't make a *great* professor." He snorted and I broke a grin. Since I'd lost Clara, it had become easier and easier to detach from my emotions. I could fake a smile as easily as I could crack an egg. But with Darius, they tended to be genuine.

"I'm not just a pretty face," I played into his joke. "I got straight As across the board in my finals."

"Oh yeah I forgot you're a secret geek." His mouth hooked up at one corner and he snatched the letter back again. "So what are you gonna do? Put on a nice shirt and dance to my father's tune?"

I ran my thumb across my bottom lip. "No...I think we should play him at his own game. He wants me to watch out for you? Fine. I'll take this job

and teach you everything I know. In lessons and out.” I smirked and his eyes darkened with mischief.

“Dark magic?” he guessed, a note of excitement in his tone.

“You can be more powerful than even your father, Darius.”

“You want revenge,” Darius said uneasily.

“Yes and no,” I sighed. “Clara made her choice but it was Lionel’s blood that sealed the deal.” My throat tightened at my sister’s name on my lips. I wasn’t sure how long it had been since I’d last said it out loud. “I can do something to get back at him, Darius. And so can you. I want to see you rise. To be the most powerful Heir of them all and crush your father beneath your heel.”

His eyes sparkled with the idea. “Do you really think I can?”

“Yes,” I said firmly. “I’ll help you. And nothing will *ever* stand in our way.”

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Darcy

I blinked a few times and found Professor Orion standing before me. The scent of bourbon floated from him. He was frighteningly tall and all those muscles made me weak, but he was still just another asshole with a pretty face.

“Thank you,” I forced out.

“Your gratitude isn't what I want.” He snatched my arm and in one, single heartbeat I knew what he was going to do. My thoughts went haywire and my body tumbled into panic mode. Before I realised what I was doing, my hand smashed against his face and a loud clap filled the room.

Oh holy shit I just slapped a teacher.

The moment following my strike lasted for two whole eternities. Orion stared at me and I stared right back. His cheek was pinking with the imprint of my hand and he lifted his fingers to touch the mark as if he was unsure whether it had actually happened.

My tongue was a desperately dry lump of flesh but I managed to speak in a hoarse voice. “Don't bite me.”

He leaned down so he was nose to nose with me and the heavenly scent of cinnamon sailed from his skin, tangling with the sharpness of bourbon on his breath.

His lips pursed and all amusement fled from his expression. “How are you going to stop me?” he asked as if he genuinely wanted an answer out of me. I suddenly felt like I was in a quiz.

I took a slow breath, the proximity of him making my thoughts harder to grasp than usual. “I know how to wield air. I can push you back.”

“Are you sure about that?” He shifted closer, opening his mouth to reveal the sharp points of his fangs.

I shook my head. “Honestly? No. But I'm asking you not to and I'm telling you I'll try to fight you if you do.” My voice barely quavered and I gave myself a mental pat on the back considering the night I'd had. Small victories and all.

Orion stepped away, a thoughtful glint in his eyes. I tried to move around him but he snatched my arm and sliced his fangs into my skin. I gasped in horror, bringing up my other hand as I tried to will magic into my fingers. But I couldn't focus and the second my hand got close, he slammed it against the door behind me. The hard plain of his chest flattened me to the wood and I winced as his bite deepened, my heart hammering like a rabbit's.

A draining feeling tugged at my insides and power flowed in a channel toward my wrist. My magic was being taken from me, swallowed by this ruthless creature.

His hands on me were unyielding and as hard as I concentrated, I couldn't conjure so much as a gentle breeze against him. Now he was drinking from me, he seemed to have my power in his grasp and it was all moving toward him, the well inside me emptying out.

He released me at last and my head spun, darkness momentarily curtaining my vision. A stream of the vilest swear words in my vocabulary swarmed through my head as I clutched the two bloody pinpricks on my wrist.

Orion gave me an even stare. “Everything in Solaria is about power, Miss Vega. Don't forget that. Everyone takes what they want. It's our way. And if you don't start taking it yourself, you're going to fail at this academy before you've even attempted to pass The Reckoning.”

Tory

My gaze roamed over Darius's features as the distance between us was reduced to millimetres. The heat between us was building, sparks of energy lighting my skin with a carnal need which I was sure only he could satisfy but I refused to acknowledge the fact.

"What Order are you?" I breathed, wondering why I'd never asked before. He always acted like a monster to me so I guessed I'd never needed proof of what his nature was. But as I stood before him I began to feel like coming here had been a terrible mistake. The look in his eyes said he might just devour me whole and I got the feeling that wasn't an empty promise.

"I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours," he replied mockingly and for a moment I could have sworn his eyes changed. They'd looked golden, the pupils shifting to reptilian slits before he blinked and the deep brown colour had returned. Perhaps I'd imagined it but I didn't think so.

"But I don't know my Order yet," I said. "Professor Orion thinks growing up in the mortal world suppressed our abilities."

Darius eyed me intently as though he were looking for a lie and I resisted the urge to try and shrink into the door he'd boxed me against.

He stepped back suddenly and unhooked his belt buckle before unbuttoning his jeans.

"What are you doing?" I gasped, my gaze locked on his movements as he dropped his pants, boxers and all and I was given an eyeful of every single inch of him.

"When you stop eye-fucking me I'll show you what you're so desperate to know," he replied mockingly and I snapped my gaze back up to his face, throwing him a scowl.

"People don't tend to whip their junk out in the middle of a conversation," I quipped. "So if you didn't want me catching an eyeful of

little Darius then you shouldn't have brought him into our discussion.”

Darius released a breath of laughter and for half a second it was as though we didn't harbour eternal hatred for one another.

He leaned close to me again and I had to work hard on maintaining eye contact as his naked god-like body shifted so close that I could hardly breathe.

“If you come to my room uninvited again then it had better be because you're ready to bow to us or to beg me to bend you over that headboard and make you scream my name,” he purred and the total confidence with which he said it made my traitorous libido kick into overdrive. I bit down on a reply, not wanting him to know the effect he had on my body as I pressed myself back against his door defensively. Thankfully the movement was minimal and I managed to maintain my disinterested scowl.

Darius turned away from me suddenly then took a running jump out of the open window beside us. I gasped in surprise, my heart leaping as I shot forward to look out at what had happened.

For no more than two seconds, Darius free fell from the ten floor drop before his body shifted with unexpected ease and a huge, golden dragon burst from the prison of his flesh as if it had been there all along.

My mouth fell open in shock as I stared at the glorious beast of legend as Darius gave a few flaps of his powerful wings and spiralled up towards the clouds. Each of his scales glimmered in the light of the setting sun like a million gemstones. The thin membrane of his wings let a soft orange glow through them as he banked hard, weaving across the landscape of the fire territory with more grace than should have been possible for such an enormous beast.

As if that display wasn't enough to make my heart pound and my desire for him grow ten-fold, he released a powerful roar which made the whole

glass structure of Ignis House shudder. He followed that up with a blast of dragon fire so potent that it warmed the skin of my cheeks despite the huge distance between us.

My gaze stayed locked on him as he tore through the skies and I found myself desperate to join him in the clouds. I wondered if there was any chance that when my Order revealed itself, I would be granted the blessing of wings. Flying through the clouds seemed like its own beautiful kind of freedom and I knew that if I could experience it even once then I'd be able to die having lived a life fulfilled.

I stood watching Darius in his dragon form for way longer than was necessary but I couldn't help it. He was beautiful, magnificent, a king amongst beasts. He'd been right when he said that we'd find nothing to tame this hatred between us though. Mine and Darcy's very existence threatened his position as a monarch of this realm and I knew with one look at his shifted form that a creature such as him would never be tamed.

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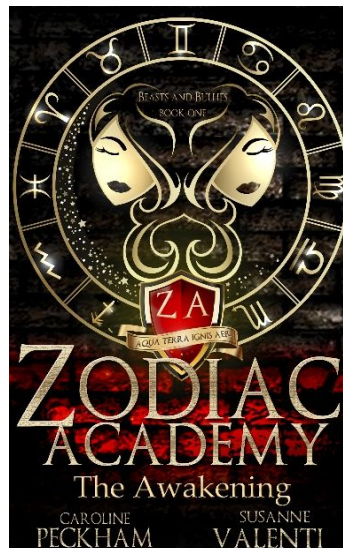
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