

# THE DARKEST STAR

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# THE DARKEST STAR

Jennifer L. Armentrout



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

*New York*

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE DARKEST STAR

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*For all the fans of the Lux  
series who wanted more.  
I love you, guys.*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# THE DARKEST STAR

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# I

If Mom ever found out I was sitting outside of Foretoken, she would kill me. Like, legit hide-my-body-in-a-deep-dark-grave kind of kill me. And my mom totally had the means to do so.

When she went from Momma baking brownies in the kitchen to *Colonel* Sylvia Dasher, she put the fear of God and then some in me.

But knowing just how much trouble I'd be in if I got caught obviously hadn't stopped me, because here I was, sitting in Heidi's car, applying yet another coat of lipstick with a shaky hand. Shoving the lipstick wand back into its tube, I watched fat raindrops bomb the windshield. My heart threw itself against my ribs as if it were determined to punch its way out.

I couldn't believe I was here.

I'd rather be home, finding random things in my house to take pictures of and posting them on Instagram. Like those new gray-and-white vintage candleholders Mom had bought. They'd look amazing paired with the pale blue and pink pillows I had in my bedroom.

From the driver's seat, Heidi Stein sighed heavily. "You're second-guessing this."

"Nuh-uh." I eyed my final results in the little mirror in the visor. My lips were so red, it looked like I'd French-kissed an overripe strawberry.

Nice.

And my brown eyes were way too big for my roundish, freckled face. I looked scared, like I was about to walk naked into class twenty minutes late.

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“Yeah, you are, Evie. I can see it etched into the five hundred coats of lipstick you just applied.”

Wincing, I glanced over at her. Heidi looked completely at ease in her strapless black dress and dark eye makeup. She had that cat-eye thing down, something I couldn’t re-create without looking like an abused raccoon. Heidi had done an amazing job on my eyes before we’d left her house, though, giving them a smoky, mysterious look. I thought I actually looked pretty good. Well, except for the whole looking-scared part, but . . .

“Is the red lipstick too much?” I asked. “Do I look bad?”

“I’d be into you if I liked blondes.” She grinned when I rolled my eyes. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

I peeked out the window at the dark, windowless building squeezed in between a closed boutique shop and a cigar store. My breath hitched in my throat.

FORETOKEN was written in black paint above the red double doors. I squinted. On second thought, the name of the club looked like it had been spray-painted on the gray cement. Classy.

Everyone who went to Centennial High knew of Foretoken, a club that was packed every night, even on Sundays, and was notorious for allowing outrageously fake IDs to slide by.

And Heidi and I were most definitely seventeen and 100 percent in possession of some fake-as-hell driver’s licenses that no one in their right mind would believe were real.

“Because I’m worried you’re not going to have fun.” Heidi poked my arm, drawing my attention. “Like you’ll get freaked out and call Zoe. And you know you can’t call April to come get you either. That girl is not allowed within a ten-block radius of this place.”

I drew in a shallow breath that felt like it went nowhere. “I’ll have fun. I swear. It’s just . . . I’ve never done this before.”

“Done what? Gone somewhere you weren’t supposed to? Because I know that’s not true.” She held up a finger, and the nail looked like it had been dipped in black ink. “You have no problem breaking and entering when it comes to climbing around abandoned buildings to take pictures.”

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“That’s different.” I dropped the lipstick into my little wristlet. “You sure these IDs are going to work?”

She shot me a bland look. “Do you know how many times I’ve been here and had no problems? Yes, you do. You’re stalling.”

I was totally stalling.

Looking out the window again, I could barely suppress the shiver tiptoeing down my spine. Puddles were forming in the vacant street and there was no one on the sidewalks. It was like once the sun went down and Foretoken unlocked its doors, the streets emptied of everyone who exhibited an ounce of common sense.

Foretoken also had the reputation for something entirely different than allowing fake IDs.

Aliens were known to hang out here.

Like legit extraterrestrial beings that had come from trillions of light-years away. They called themselves the Luxen, and they looked like us—well, a better version of most of us. Their bone structure was often perfect, their skin airbrush-smooth, and their eye colors were shades that we humans couldn’t achieve without contacts.

And not all of them had come in peace.

Four years ago, we’d been invaded, totally Hollywood movie-level invaded, and we’d almost lost the war—almost lost the entire planet to them. I’d never forget the statistic that had dominated the news once the TVs starting broadcasting again: 3 percent of the world’s population. That was 220 million people lost in the war, and my father had been one of them.

But over the last four years, the Luxen who hadn’t been on Team Kill All the Humans and had helped fight their own kind had been slowly integrated into our world—into our schools and jobs, government and military. They were everywhere now. I’d met plenty of them, so I didn’t know why coming here freaked me out so much.

But Foretoken wasn’t school or an office building, where the Luxen were typically outnumbered and heavily monitored. I had a sinking suspicion that humans were the minority beyond those red doors.

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Heidi poked my arm again. "If you don't want to do this, we don't have to."

I twisted in the seat toward her. One look at Heidi's face told me that she was being genuine. She would turn the car on and we'd go back to her place if that were what I wanted. Probably end the night gorging ourselves on those cupcakes her mom had picked up from the bakery. We'd watch really bad romantic comedies until we passed out from a ridiculously high caloric intake, and that sounded . . . lovely.

But I didn't want to bail on her.

Coming here meant a lot to Heidi. She could be herself without worrying about people getting all up in her business about who she was dancing with or checking out, whether it be a boy or another girl.

There was a reason why the Luxen were comfortable coming here. Foretoken was welcoming to everyone, no matter their sexuality, gender, race, or . . . *species*. They weren't a human-only establishment, which was rare nowadays when it came to privately owned businesses.

Tonight was special, though. There was this girl Heidi had been talking to, and she wanted me to meet her. And I wanted to meet her, so I needed to stop acting like a dork who'd never been to a club before.

I could totally do this.

Smiling at Heidi, I poked her back. "No. I'm fine. I'm just being stupid."

She stared at me a moment, cautious. "You sure?"

"Yes." I nodded for extra emphasis. "Let's do this."

Another moment passed and then Heidi broke out in a wide smile. She leaned over, throwing her arms around me. "You're the best." She squeezed me tight, causing me to giggle. "Seriously."

"I know." I patted her arm. "I put the *awe* in *awesome*."

She snort-laughed in my ear. "You are so weird."

"I told you I am." I untangled myself from her hug and then reached for the car door before I could chicken out. "Ready?"

"Yep," she chirped.

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I climbed out and immediately shrieked as cold rain hit the bare skin of my arms. I slammed the door shut and then darted across the dark street, my hands forming the weakest shield ever over my hair. I'd spent way too much time curling the long strands into waves for the rain to ruin it.

Water splashed over my heels, and when I hopped up on the sidewalk, I was surprised I hadn't slipped and fallen face-first into the asphalt.

Heidi was right behind me, laughing as she rushed under the awning, shaking the mist of rain from her pin-straight crimson hair.

"Holy crap, this rain is cold," I gasped. It felt more like the rain that fell in October than in early September.

"My makeup isn't running down my face like I'm some chick about to be killed in a horror movie, is it?" she asked, reaching for the door.

Laughing, I tugged on the hem of my strappy blue dress I normally wore leggings under. One wrong move and everyone would see the skull design on my undies. "No. Everything is where it should be."

"Perfect." She pulled on the massive red door with a grunt.

Violet light spilled outside, along with the heavy thump of music. A small entryway appeared, leading to another door, this one a deep purple, but between that door and us was a man sitting on a stool.

A gigantic man.

A huge bald man wearing jean overalls and absolutely nothing else under them. Studs glinted from piercings all over his face—his eyebrows, under his eye, and his lips. A bolt went straight through his septum.

My eyes widened. Oh my word. . . .

"Hey, Mr. Clyde." Heidi grinned, completely unfazed.

"Yo." He looked from her to me. His head cocked to the side as his eyes narrowed slightly. That couldn't be good. "IDs."

I didn't dare smile as I pulled my ID out of the little card slot on my wristlet. If I did smile, I would totally look like I was seventeen and close to peeing myself. So I didn't even blink.

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Clyde glanced at the IDs and then nodded toward the purple door. I peeked at Heidi, and she winked.

For real?

That was all he was going to do?

Some of the tension leaked out of my neck and shoulders as I shoved my ID back into its slot. Well, that was exceptionally easy. I should do this more often.

“Thanks!” Heidi patted Clyde’s big, bulky shoulder as she went for the door.

I was still standing in front of him, like an idiot. “Th-thank you.”

Clyde raised a brow as he pinned me with a look that had me quickly wishing I’d just kept my mouth shut.

Heidi reached back, grabbed my hand, and yanked me forward as she opened the second door. I turned, and every one of my senses was immediately overwhelmed by, well, *everything*.

The thump of heavy drums poured from speakers, coming from every corner of a large room. The tempo was fast, the lyrics a blur as white light burst from the ceiling, shining over the dance floor for a few seconds before tossing it back into shadowy darkness.

People were everywhere, sitting at high, round tables and lounging on oversized couches and chairs under alcoves. The center of the floor was a mess of twisting, churning bodies, arms up and hair flying. Overlooking the throng of dancers was a raised stage shaped like a horseshoe. Rapidly flickering bulbs lit the edge of the stage, and dancers up there urged on the crowd below with their shouts and their hips.

“This place is pretty wild, isn’t it?” Heidi curled her arm around mine.

My wide gaze bounced from person to person as the scent of perfume and cologne mingled. “Yeah.”

“I so want to get on that stage.” Heidi grinned when my eyes widened. “That is my goal for the night.”

“Well, it’s always good to have goals,” I replied dryly. “But can’t you just walk up there?”

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Her brows lifted and she laughed. “No. You have to be *invited* up there.”

“By who? God?”

She snorted. “Something like that—” She squeaked suddenly. “There she is.”

“Where?” Eager to see this girl, I scanned the crowd.

Heidi stepped into my side and slowly turned so our bodies were angled toward one of the large shadowy recesses behind the tables. “*There.*”

Soft candlelight lit the alcove, casting a glow over the area. I doubted candles were safe in a bar, but what did I know? More oversized chairs flanked a gold-trimmed, crushed red velvet couch that looked like an antique. Two of the chairs were occupied. I could see only profiles. One was a blond guy staring down at his phone. His jaw was clenched like he was trying to snap a walnut shell in two with his teeth.

Across from him was another guy with a shockingly blue Mohawk—like, Smurf blue. His head was thrown back, and even though I couldn’t hear him, I could tell he was letting out a laugh of the deep-belly variety. My gaze shifted to his left.

I saw her then.

Good Lord, the girl was gorgeous.

Easily a head taller than Heidi and I, she had the most awesome haircut *ever*. Her dark hair was buzzed on one side and shoulder length on the other, showing off the sculpted angles of her face. I was so jealous of that haircut, because I didn’t have the courage or the face to pull something like that off. She looked a little bored as she eyed the dance floor. I started to turn back to Heidi, but then a tall figure cut in front of the girl and sat on the couch.

It was a man with sandy-blond hair cropped close to the skull. The haircut reminded me of what you saw from guys in the military. From what I could see of his profile, he appeared to be older than we were. Maybe in his midtwenties? A little older? He didn’t exactly look happy. His mouth was moving a mile a minute. My gaze shifted to who he’d sat down next to.

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My lips parted on a soft inhale.

The reaction was startling and embarrassing. I sort of wanted to smack myself, but in my defense, the guy was stunning, the kind of beauty that almost didn't seem real at first.

Messy brown hair toppled over his forehead in waves and curls. Even from where I was standing, I could tell that his face knew no bad angle, the kind of face that needed no filter. Impossibly high and broad cheekbones were paired with a carved, square jaw. His mouth really was a work of art, full and tipped up on one corner, forming a rather impressive smirk as he eyed the man who'd sat next to him. I was too far away to see his eyes, but I imagined they were just as striking as the rest of him.

But the allure went beyond the physical.

Power and authority radiated from him, sending an odd shiver curling down my spine. Nothing about what he was wearing stood out—just dark jeans and a gray shirt with something written on it. Maybe it was the way he was sitting, thighs spread and one arm tossed over the back of the couch. Everything about the lazy sprawl looked arrogant and somehow misleading. He appeared as if he were seconds away from taking a nap even as the man beside him became more animated, but there was the distinct impression in the way his fingers tapped along the gold trim that said he could spring into action at any given second.

"Do you see her?" Heidi asked, startling me.

Goodness, did I forget Heidi was there or something? I had, which meant I needed to get a grip. Dude was hot, but come on. I was here for Heidi.

I dragged my gaze from the guy and then nodded. None of these people, except for the blond guy and the one who'd just sat down, looked old enough to be anywhere near this club. Then again, neither did we. "Is that her?"

"Yes. That's Emery." She squeezed my arm. "What do you think?"

"She's really pretty." I glanced over at Heidi. "Are you going to go over and talk to her?"

"I don't know. I think I'm going to let her come to me."

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“Seriously?”

Heidi nodded as she sucked her bottom lip between her teeth. “The last three times, I approached her. I think I’m going to let her find her way to me this time. Like, to see if it’s just a one-sided interest or not, you know?”

My brows rose as I stared at my friend. Heidi was not shy or patient, nor did she get nervous. That could only mean one thing. I clasped my hands together. “You’re really into her, aren’t you?”

“I like her,” Heidi said after a moment. A small grin appeared. “I just want to make sure she likes me.” She lifted a shoulder. “We’ve talked a little and danced, but she hasn’t asked for my number or asked to meet up outside of here.”

“Have you asked for hers?”

“No.”

“Will you?”

“Hoping she’ll make that move.” Heidi exhaled loudly. “I’m being stupid. I should just ask for hers and get it over with.”

“You’re not being stupid. I would be doing the same thing, but I think you should at least ask for her number tonight. *That* should be your goal.”

“True,” she replied, forehead creasing. “But that stage . . .”

“Stop with the stage.” I laughed.

The truth was, I wasn’t the best person to be dispensing relationship advice. I’d only ever been in one somewhat serious relationship, and Brandon and I had lasted a whopping three months, ending right before summer.

I broke up with him over text.

Yep.

I was that person.

As awful as it was to admit to even myself, I’d only gone out with Brandon because all my friends had been coupling off and, well, peer pressure was a bitch and I wanted to feel whatever it was they kept going on and on about every time they posted online or in their snaps. I wanted to be . . . I wanted to know what that felt like. I wanted to fall in love.

And all I did was fall into boredom.

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I drew in a shallow breath as my gaze found its way back to the couch, the one with the guy with the messy bronze hair. He looked about my age. Maybe a year or two older. Instinct told me that anything to do with him would not be boring. “Who . . . who is that?”

Heidi seemed to know who I was talking about without my pointing him out. “His name is Luc.”

“Just Luc?”

“Yep.”

“No last name?”

She laughed as she spun me around, away from them. “Never heard his last name. He’s just Luc, but you see the blond guy who appears as friendly as a rabid porcupine?”

“The one looking at his phone?” I smiled, because that felt like a good description of the guy.

She started walking around the dance floor, pulling me with her. “He’s a Luxen.”

“Oh.” I resisted the urge to look over my shoulder to see if he was wearing a metal band around his wrist. I hadn’t noticed it when I saw the phone in his hands.

The band was known as a Disabler, a form of technology that neutralized the Luxen’s otherworldly talents, which were derived by what the Luxen called the Source. *The Source*. Still sounded completely made-up, but it was real and it was deadly dangerous. If they attempted to go all Luxen on someone, the Disabler stopped them by releasing shocks equivalent to being hit by a Taser. While that wasn’t pleasant for anyone, it was particularly painful and debilitating to the Luxen.

Not to mention, all public spaces were designed to immediately quell any incidents that might arise with the Luxen. The shiny reddish-black metal above every door and the specks in the ceilings of most establishments were some kind of aerosol weapons that had no effect on humans.

Luxen?

Whatever mist it dispensed supposedly caused extreme pain. I’d never seen it happen—thankfully—but my mom had. She’d told me it was one of the worst things she’d ever witnessed.

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I doubted Foretoken had such a weapon installed.

Because I was nosy, I asked, “Is Luc a Luxen?”

“Probably. Never been close enough to him to tell for sure, but I’m guessing he is.” Their eye color was usually a dead giveaway, as was the Disabler. All registered Luxen were required to wear them.

We stopped near the stage, and Heidi slipped her arm free. “But the guy with the blue hair? He’s definitely human. I think his name is Kent or Ken.”

“Cool,” I murmured, curling an arm over my stomach. My wristlet dangled. “What about Emery?”

Heidi looked over my shoulder at Emery. Relations of the fun and naughty kind between humans and Luxen were illegal. No one could stop a Luxen and a human from getting together, but the two couldn’t marry and they faced hefty fines if their relationship was reported.

“She’s human,” Heidi answered.

I honestly couldn’t care less if a Luxen and human wanted to engage in a little bow-chicka-wow-wow. Not like it impacted me on any level, nor was it any of my business, but relief still swept through me. I was happy that Heidi wasn’t trying to get involved with someone she’d have to hide her relationship with while also risking paying thousands of dollars or going to jail if she couldn’t. Heidi would be eighteen soon. The responsibility to pay such a ridiculous fine wouldn’t fall on her family.

I glanced up at the stage again, spotting the girl dancing closest to us. “Wow. She’s beautiful.”

Heidi followed my stare and nodded. The girl was older with a head full of shimmery blond hair. She spun and twisted, her body snakelike in its movements.

Arms in the air, hands clasped together, the girl whirled, and her skin was . . . it was fading and blurring around the edges, almost like she was disappearing right in front of us.

*Luxen.*

The girl was definitely on the away team. Luxen had this wild ability to assimilate our DNA and look like this, like humans, but

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that wasn't their true appearance. When they were in their real form, they glowed like a high-watt lightbulb. I'd never seen what was under all the bright light, but my mom told me they had skin that was nearly translucent. Kind of like a jellyfish's.

Heidi cast a grin over at me. "I'm going to dance. You coming?"

I hesitated as I looked at the teeming throng. I did love to dance . . . in the privacy of my bedroom, where I could look like a double-jointed Muppet. "I'm going to grab a water first."

She pointed a finger at me. "You better join me."

Maybe I would, but just not now. As I backed up, I watched her disappear onto the mass of twisting bodies, and then I wheeled around and moved along the edge of the stage. I made my way to the bar, squeezing between two occupied stools. The bartender was down at the other end of the bar, and I had no idea how to get his attention. Should I lift my hand and wave it around like I was hailing a cab? I didn't think so. That would look stupid. How about the three-finger Hunger Games salute? I'd just seen the movies on TV last weekend. A marathon of all four movies had been playing, so I felt like I could pull it off. *I volunteer for a glass of water.*

Luckily, the bartender was slowly making his way to where I stood. I opened my wristlet and tapped on the screen of my phone. There was a missed text from Zoe. A call from April and—

An odd feeling started at the nape of my neck. It was like a breath with no air. It traveled down my spine, raising the tiny hairs all over my body. It felt like . . .

It felt like someone was standing right behind me.

I zipped up my tiny purse and then glanced over my shoulder, half expecting to come face-to-face with someone, but no one was there. At least not creepily close or anything. I scanned the crowd. There were so many people, but no one seemed to be paying any attention to me. The feeling, though, it only increased.

I swallowed hard as my gaze tracked over to that alcove.

The guy who'd sat down was gone, but the big guy in overalls—Mr. Clyde—was inside. He was leaning over that old-looking couch, speaking to Luc, and Luc was—*oh God*—he was

staring straight at me. Anxiety burst open, spreading through my system like a noxious weed.

Did Clyde realize we had fake IDs?

Okay. Wait a second. He had to have known from the moment we came in that we had fake IDs, and even if he now had a problem with the IDs, why would he report that to Luc? I was being ridiculously paranoid—

“Yo. Need a drink?”

Twisting back to the bar, I nodded nervously. Bartender was a Luxen. Those bright green eyes were definitely not in the human color wheel. My gaze dipped. The silver band was tight around his wrist. “Just a, um, a water.”

“Coming up.” He grabbed a plastic cup, filling it up with water he poured from a bottle, and then shoved a clear straw into it. “No charge.”

“Thanks.” I took the cup and then slowly turned back around. What to do? What to do?

Sipping my drink, I ambled around the stage and stopped by a pillar that looked like a unicorn had puked glitter all over it. I stretched up on the tips of my toes and scanned the crowd until I found Heidi.

A wide smile broke out across my face. She wasn’t alone. Emery had come to her, and she was eyeing Heidi like I eyed tacos on most days.

That was what I wanted at some point in my life, for someone to look at me like I looked at tacos.

Heidi’s back was to me, her shoulders swaying as Emery’s arm swept around Heidi’s waist. I so wasn’t going to bust up their little dance party. I would wait until they were done. Meanwhile, I was going to do my best not to think about how I looked lurking by the edge of the dance floor. I knew I probably looked pretty dumb. Maybe even a little creepy. I took another drink. Wasn’t like standing here all night was a viable—

“Evie?”

I turned at the sound of a vaguely familiar voice. Shock splashed

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through me. A girl from school stood behind me. We had had class together last year. English. “Colleen?”

She smiled as she tilted her head. The tops of her cheekbones glittered. She had the smoky eye thing going on, just like me. “What in the world are you doing here?”

I lifted a shoulder. “Just hanging out. You?”

“With some friends.” Her brows knitted as she tucked several strands of blond hair behind her ear. “I didn’t know you hung out here.”

“Um, this is my first time.” I took a sip of water as I glanced over my shoulder. I didn’t know Colleen all that well, so I had no idea if this was something she did every weekend or if this was her first time here too. “Do you come here a lot?”

“Sometimes.” She smoothed a hand over the skirt of her dress. It was a slightly lighter blue than mine, and strapless. “I didn’t know you liked to come—” Her head jerked toward the dance floor, and her flushed cheeks deepened in color. I thought maybe someone had called her name. “I’ve got to go. You’ll be here for a while?”

I nodded, having no idea how long I’d be here.

“Cool.” She started backing up, grinning. “We should chat later. Okay?”

“Okay.” I wiggled my fingers at her and watched as she turned, slipping past the churning bodies along the edge of the dance floor. I knew that people from school came here, but I guess I hadn’t been expecting to see anyone, which was stupid—

A hand landed on my shoulder. Startled, I jumped and water splashed over my hands and hit the front of my dress. Wrenching forward, I pulled away from the grip and spun around, prepared to throat-punch whoever had grabbed me, like my mom had taught me. I froze, my stomach dropping as I found myself staring into the studded face of Mr. Clyde.

Oh, this couldn’t be good.

“Hi?” I said weakly.

“You need to come with me.” The hand on my shoulder grew heavier. “Now.”

My stomach hollowed as I glanced at the sparkly pillar like it could be of some help. “Uh, why?”

His dark gaze met mine, and all I could focus on was the tiny diamond under his eye. That had to be such a painful piercing. He didn’t speak as he gripped my arm with a meaty hand and wheeled me around. Panic blossomed as I looked at the dance floor, unable to see Heidi or Emery in the crush of dancers.

Heart pounding in my chest, I held on to my water as Clyde led me away from my pretty pillar. My cheeks caught fire as a few people at the tables stared. An older girl smirked and shook her head as she lifted a glass of amber-colored liquor to her mouth.

This was *so* embarrassing.

I was about to be thrown out. Just my luck. Which meant I was going to have to text Zoe or someone to come get me, because I was not going to ruin Heidi’s night. Not when Emery had approached her. I was going—

Clyde wasn’t leading me to the front of the club.

He suddenly cut to the left, dragging me along with him. My heart dropped all the way to my pinched toes when I realized where he was taking me. The shadowy alcove—to the couch.

Sitting in the same lazy sprawl as before, still tapping those long, tapered fingers, was Luc. His lips tilted up at the corners.

Shock stole my breath. Normally I would be relatively excited about chatting with an extraordinarily hot guy—especially with a guy who, *wow*, had such thick black lashes—but everything about this was wrong.

I was not the kind of girl who got randomly picked out in a club

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and then escorted by someone who looked they belonged in the WWE for a one-on-one with the resident hottie. I wasn't knocking myself. I was just the embodiment of the Triple A.

Average life.

Average face.

Average body.

And what was happening right now was *not* average.

"What is going . . . ?" I trailed off as Clyde steered me past the blond Luxen, who was *still* staring down at his phone, toward one end of the couch. The hand left my arm and then landed on my shoulder once more.

"Sit," Luc said, and that one word was spoken in the kind of voice that probably left a trail of really bad decisions in its wake.

I sat.

Not that I had much choice. Clyde sat me down and then lumbered off, bumping and moving people out of the way like a human bulldozer.

Pulse pounding erratically, I stared in the direction Clyde had gone in, but I was completely aware of the boy sitting about a foot from me. My hand was shaking, and when I inhaled deeply, I caught the scent of pine and soap over the bitter tang of alcohol. Was that coming from him? The pine and soap scent? If so, he smelled amazing.

Was . . . was I really *smelling* him?

What was wrong with me?

"You can stare in Clyde's direction all you want, but no amount of wishful thinking is going to bring him back," Luc advised. "Though, if you're wishing for that and it works, then you're made of awesome dark magic."

I had no idea how to respond to that. My brain had emptied of all words. The plastic cup crinkled under my fingers as the music halted for a brief second. Several people on the dance floor stopped, their chests rising and falling heavily. Then a thick, steady tempo of drums picked up, and the people on the dance floor just lost it.

My eyes widened as fists pumped the air and the dancers on the stage dropped to their knees, slamming their palms against the

floor. Shouts grew louder and louder, a rising crescendo that matched the drums. Voices rose, chanting out lyrics that made goose bumps explode all over my arms.

*Safe from pain and truth and choice . . .*

A shiver broke out across my skin. Something about this—the song, the chants and cheers—was familiar. The weird feeling of déjà vu rose as I frowned. I didn't recognize this song, but that wiggling sensation was still dominating the back of my brain.

"Like the song?" he asked.

Slowly, I turned my head toward him. His smile was a wolf's smile, leaving me wholly unnerved. I lifted my gaze. The breath I'd taken punched out of my lungs.

The smile faded from his lips, and he stared at me like . . . I don't know. There was an almost surprised pinch to his striking features, but his . . .

His eyes.

I'd never seen eyes like his. They were amethyst in color, a vibrant, polished purple, and the black lines around his pupils were irregular, fuzzy even. They were utterly beautiful eyes, but . . .

Heidi's suspicion was correct. "You're a Luxen."

The blond staring at his phone snorted.

Luc tilted his head to the side as the odd look washed away from his face. "I'm not a Luxen."

Yeah, I was calling total BS on that. Humans did not have eyes like that unless they were wearing contacts. My gaze shot to the hand that rested on his thigh. There was a leather cuff around his wrist with some kind of weird stone in the middle of it. An oval gem that was a kaleidoscope of milky colors. What he wore was not a Disabler used to keep a Luxen from killing half of the people in this club in less than ten seconds.

"Are you a human wearing freaky contacts then?"

"Nope." He raised a shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. Why would he deny being a Luxen? Before I could ask that question, he spoke again. "Are you enjoying yourself tonight?"

"Uh, yeah . . . I . . . think so."

He bit down on his plump lower lip, drawing my attention.

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Goodness, those were totally kissable lips. Not that I was thinking about kissing him or anything; it was just a pure, clinical observation that anybody in my situation would make.

"You don't sound very convincing. You actually look like you would rather be anyplace but here," he continued, those heavy lashes lowering once more. "So, what are you doing here?"

His question jolted me.

"Your friend comes here a lot. She fits in. Has fun. You have never come here." Those lashes lifted and his odd eyes latched on to mine. "And I would know if you had been here before."

I stiffened. How in the world did he know this was my first time here? There had to be at least a hundred people here, and all of them blended together.

"You stand by the dance floor all by yourself. You don't have fun and . . ." His stare dropped, coasting over the front of my dress. Without looking, I knew he was staring at the water stain. "You don't fit in here."

Okay. Wow. That was blunt, and I finally found my voice. "This is my first time here—"

"I already knew that." He paused. "Obviously. Because I just said that."

Irritation chipped away at the unease and confusion. Luxen or not, I didn't know who in the hell this guy thought he was. He was rude, and I was not going to sit here and let someone talk to me like that. "I'm sorry. Who are you again?"

That half smile spread an inch. "My name is Luc."

Was his name supposed to hold the answers to the universe? "And?"

"And I want to know why you're here."

Frustration pricked at my skin. "Are you like the official club greeter or something?"

"Something like that." He kicked a booted foot up onto the square glass table in front of him as he leaned toward me. The distance between us evaporated. His eyes met and held mine. "I'm going to be blunt with you."

I barked out a harsh laugh. "You haven't been blunt already?"

He ignored that comment and didn't look away, not once. "You shouldn't be here. Like, of all the places for *you* to be, this is the last place. Isn't that right, Grayson?"

"Beyond right," answered the blond Luxen.

Warmth burst open in my chest, burning up my throat. Sucking in a sharp breath, I willed my face to remain emotionless even though what he said stung for reasons it shouldn't. It didn't matter if he was human or not or that I'd never seen this guy before and probably would never see him again once I walked out of this stupid club. Having someone tell you that you didn't fit in didn't feel good. Ever.

No way was I letting him, a complete stranger—an *alien*—get the better of me. At the end of the day, he was a jerk-face, and I wasn't going to allow him to hurt my feelings. Absolutely no way.

Holding his gaze, I summoned a little of my mom—scary mom. "I didn't realize I needed your permission to be here, *Luc*."

"Well," he drawled, his broad shoulders tensing, "now you do."

I drew back. "Are you serious?" A shocked laugh escaped me. "You don't own this place. You're just some—" I cut myself off before I said something incredibly ignorant. "You're just some guy."

Tipping his head back, he chuckled deeply. "Now, I know that's not what you were about to say or what you're really thinking." His fingers tapped along the back of the couch, and I wanted to reach over and smack my hand down on them. "Tell me what I really am. I *cannot* wait to hear it."

"Whatever." I glanced over at the dance floor, unable to see Heidi, since it appeared the crowd had tripled all of a sudden. Dammit. "I came here to hang out with my friend. That's all I'm doing. It has nothing to do with you."

"Everything has to do with me."

I blinked once and then twice, waiting for him to laugh, but when he didn't, I realized I'd officially met the most arrogant being on this planet.

"By the way, you're not hanging out with your friend. Like I pointed out earlier, you were standing by the dance floor . . . just standing there, all by yourself." His eerie eyes tracked over my face

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with such intensity that the tips of my ears started to burn. “Is that what you normally do when you hang out with your friend? Stand by yourself, drinking water?”

My mouth moved, but there were no words. He was absolutely the most antagonistic thing I’d ever met.

The one side of his lips tipped up even farther. “You’re not even old enough to be in here.”

I was willing to bet he wasn’t either. “I’m old enough.”

“Really?”

“Your big burly friend checked my ID and let me in. Ask him.”

Luc’s chest rose deeply. The breadth of his shoulders stretched the worn gray cotton. His shirt read NO DRAMA LLAMA. That shirt was a lie. This boy was all about the drama llama. “Let me see your ID.”

I scowled. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re some rando dude in a club. I’m not going to show you my ID.”

That gaze slid back to mine. Challenge was etched into every striking feature. “Or maybe you don’t want to show me your ID because it proves you’re not twenty-one.”

I said nothing.

One eyebrow rose. “Or is it because you think I’m a Luxen?”

“Now *that* sounds like the real issue,” Grayson chimed in, and my gaze darted to him. He’d finally put his phone down. Unfortunately. “That’s probably also why she’s not comfortable. I bet she’s one of those people.”

“Those people?” I repeated.

Grayson’s ultra-blue eyes met mine. “The kind scared of the Luxen.”

I shook my head as the music and the club seemed to fade into the background. It was then when I realized no one, not a single person in here, approached this area. Everyone gave this alcove a wide berth.

Luc made a noise under his breath. “Does being around Luxen like this, out of the public eye, bother you? Scare you?”

“No. It doesn’t.” That wasn’t exactly true, because come on, I wasn’t part of the Hate All Luxen train roaring through every city and small town, but they were scary. You had to have absolutely no common sense if you didn’t fear them a little. They’d killed millions of people. Maybe these two guys hadn’t, but they weren’t wearing Disablers. They could kill me before I even saw it coming.

But the urge to prove that I didn’t care if they were Luxen or not rode me hard. My ID wasn’t real. It didn’t have my address or real name on it. Showing it to him wouldn’t endanger me. I sat my drink down on the table and pulled the ID out of the thin slot.

“Here you go,” I chirped, forcing as much brightness into my voice as possible.

Luc lifted his hand off the back of the couch and took the card. His fingers brushed over mine in the process. Static crackled, sending a tiny jolt up my arm. Gasping, I pulled my arm back.

His smile kicked up a notch, and my stomach pitched. Had he done that purpose? Shocked me? His lashes lowered. “Nola Peters?”

“Yes. That’s my name.” That was so not my name. It was a combination of two cities I’d never visited—New Orleans and St. Petersburg.

“It says you’re twenty-two.” He lowered his hand as he looked at me. “You’re not twenty-two. I bet you’re barely seventeen.”

I inhaled deeply through my nose. I was not “barely” seventeen. In six months I’d be eighteen. “You know, you don’t look like you’re twenty-one.”

“Looks can be deceiving.” He moved the card over his fingers, flipping it back and forth. “I have a baby face.”

“Doubtful.”

“I like to think I’m going to age gracefully. People will think I’ve found the fountain of youth.”

“Okay,” I said, drawing the word out. “Look, it’s hasn’t been nice talking to you, so I have to go. I need to find my friend—”

“Your friend is busy, you know, having fun.” His grin spread into a cheeky smile that would’ve been endearing if I didn’t want to straight up punch him in the face. “Unlike you. You are *not* having fun.”

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“You’re right. I’m not.” My eyes narrowed, and I resisted the near primal urge to pick up my water and throw it on him. “I was actually trying to be polite—”

“Quaint,” he murmured.

Oh my God, this guy was going to make my head spin right off my shoulders. “But truth time? I really don’t want to spend another minute in your presence.” I started to get up. “You’re a dick and I don’t know you. I don’t want to get to know you. Peace out, home skillet.”

“But I know who you are.” He paused. “I know who you really are, Evelyn.”

### 3

He knew my name. Not my fake ID name, but my real name. It felt like the entire building was moving even though nothing had. My spine turned to steel as an icy sensation drenched my skin. I stared at him for several moments. “How do you know my name?”

He looked up at me through his lashes as he moved both arms to the back of the couch. “I know a lot of things.”

“Okay. You just took creepy to a creepastic level of unknown proportions.” It was time to find Heidi and get the hell out of here.

Luc chuckled again, and the sound would’ve been nice, attractive even, coming from anyone else. “I’ve been told that a time or two in my life.”

“Why am I not surprised? Don’t answer that question,” I said when he opened his mouth. “Can I have my ID back?”

He shifted suddenly, dropping his feet to the floor. Without warning, our faces were inches apart. As close as we were, it was hard not to get a little lost in the beauty of his features. And as close as we were, it was also hard not to get really freaked out. “What if I told you a truth? Would you tell me one in return?”

I clamped my mouth shut so hard, my jaw ached.

“You were right earlier. I’m not twenty-one,” he said, the gleam in his eyes now dancing. “I’m eighteen.” There was a short pause. “*Almost* nineteen. My birthday is December twenty-fourth. I’m a Christmas miracle. Now it’s your turn.”

“You’re creepy,” I replied. “That’s a truth I will tell.”

Luc was silent for a moment and then he laughed—laughed long

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and hard, surprising me. “Now, that is not how you play this game, *Evie*.”

I sucked in another sharp breath.

Suddenly the overhead lights came on, flooding the entire club in a harsh white glare. I squinted, momentarily confused. The music cut off, causing shouts of dismay. Those on the stage froze. People on the dance floor slowed and then stopped, exchanging bewildered looks as they panted.

“Damn.” Luc sighed. “This is going to be inconvenient.”

Someone darted past the alcove, heading toward the bar area. Forgetting about the stupid ID, I twisted in my seat and watched the guy disappear down a narrow hall.

“Hell.” Luc shot to his feet as fast as a strike of lightning. And holy canola oil, he was *tall*, and if I had been standing, he would have towered over my five-foot-five-inch frame. “Here we go again.” Sounding bored, he looked to Grayson. “You know what to do. Move them out.”

Grayson slipped his phone into his pocket and stood. Then he was gone, moving so fast he was nothing but a blur. If he’d been wearing a Disabler, he wouldn’t have been able to move like that.

“You’re coming with me,” Luc announced.

“What?” I squeaked. “I’m not going anywhere with you. Like, I wouldn’t even walk from here to the dance floor with you.”

“Well, that’s kind of offensive, but we’re about to be raided and not in the fun way.”

There was a fun way of getting raided?

Luc reached down, wrapping his hand around mine. A charge of static passed through me again, duller than before. He pulled me the rest of the way up. “And hey, you’re underage. Don’t think you want to get busted, right?”

I didn’t, but that didn’t mean I was going anywhere with him.

“I need to find Heidi. She’s—”

“She’s with Emery.” Luc pulled me around the low glass table.

“She’ll be fine.”

“And I’m supposed to trust you?”

He looked over his shoulder at me. “I didn’t ask you to trust me.”

That was about as reassuring as a loaded gun pointed at my head, but the door up front burst open and the RAC—Retinal Alien Check—drones entered the club.

A shudder rocked me.

I hated those drones.

They hovered about five feet off the floor, all black with the exception of a white light in the center of the top. RAC drones became a thing about two years ago. There was something about Luxen pupils that the RAC registered as nonhuman. Mom once tried to explain the science behind it, but I’d checked out when she’d gotten to the part about rods and cones doing something with infrared light. All I knew was that it picked up on alien DNA.

And if they were here, that meant they were searching for unregistered Luxen—aliens like Luc and Grayson, ones without Disablers.

Those drones weren’t here alone. Pouring into the group like a horde of white insects were the Alien Response Task Force—ART—officers, and they were decked out to take care of business. Dressed in all white, their faces shielded by shiny helmets. Two had normal-looking assault rifles. Another two carried the heavier, thicker version—a rifle that was an electronic pulse weapon. One hit with that and a Luxen was done for.

Luc pulled me between the couch and a chair, tugging me toward the bar. I started to dig my feet in, because I’d rather be busted being underage in a club than get caught with a potentially unregistered alien.

That wasn’t a fine.

That was immediate jail time for harboring and abetting and a ton of other fancy criminal words. I tried to pull my hand free as Luc started dragging me along. “Let go!”

“Everyone, down!” one of the officers shouted.

Chaos erupted.

People ran in every direction, scattering like roaches when the

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lights were flipped on. Bodies crashed into me. I yelped as my heels slipped on the wet floor. I lost my footing. Fear exploded like buckshot, shooting out darts of panic. I started to fall.

“Oh no, you don’t.” Luc’s grip on my hand tightened, and he yanked me up. One heel came off my foot and then the other as he dashed behind the bar, pulling me along with him.

My bare feet slipped in pools of liquid I didn’t even want to think about. A guy vaulted over the bar, landing in a crouch. Another came over, slipping on the spilled drinks. He went down, smacking into the floor, immediately followed by yet another person falling right behind him.

Everything was happening too fast.

A rapid firing—*pop, pop, pop*—commenced. Screams rose over the commotion, and my heart leapt in my throat as I tried to see over the stage. What was happening? I couldn’t see, and I had no idea where Heidi was in this mess.

Luc dipped down, sliding under the bar and blocking people from entering. I followed as several bottles flew off the wall. Glass and liquid exploded, flying everywhere.

“Such a damn mess,” Luc muttered, his jaw locked in disgust.

The mess was the last thing I was worried about as we suddenly raced down a dark hallway, blowing past others who were scrambling to get out of the way. Cutting to the right, he pushed open a door.

A black void enveloped us as the door swung shut behind me. Terror rose as I threw up my free hand. “I can’t—I can’t see anything.”

“You’re fine.”

Luc charged ahead, walking at a fast clip I struggled to keep up with. There was a distinctive smell of laundry detergent. He reached another door and we slipped through it just as the door behind us exploded open.

“Stop!” a man yelled.

My heart was going to launch itself out of my chest. We darted into a dimly lit hallway. Luc twisted suddenly, grabbing me around the waist. I shrieked as he lifted me up.

“You’re too slow,” he complained.

Luc picked up speed, moving so fast the hall was nothing but a blur of hair and walls. He hung a sharp left and then I was sliding off him, down his side. I staggered back as he placed a hand on what appeared to be just a wall. A second later a door appeared, sliding open.

“What the . . . ?” I stared in shock. There were hidden rooms here? Why would they have hidden rooms? Only serial killers had hidden rooms!

Luc shushed me—he actually *shushed* me as he yanked me forward. I skidded into the dark room. He let go, and I stumbled, bumping into the wall. I whipped around. This wasn’t a room. It was the size of a closet! Barely big enough for one person, and he was sliding the hidden door to the right until the tiny sliver of light disappeared, pitching us into darkness.

Holy crapola . . .

I pressed against the wall. My pulse pounded so fast, it felt like an ocean roaring in my ears as I strained to see anything in the small space. There was nothing but darkness and Luc.

And Luc was practically on top of me.

His back was against my front, and no amount of trying to climb into the wall was going to help me put space between us. The piney scent from earlier was definitely coming from him. It was all I could smell. How in the world did I end up here? What series of really bad life choices had I made that led me to this very moment?

I could be at home, snapping pretty pictures with my phone or separating knee-high socks from the crew-cut ones—

Something slammed out in the hallway. I jumped, knocking into Luc. I reached out, my hands landing on his back. He shifted suddenly, and every muscle in my body locked up. My hands were suddenly flattened against his chest, and that wasn’t just a chest. Those were pecs—pecs as hard as the wall behind me.

I started to yank my hands away, but even in the complete darkness, he caught them, keeping them right where they were. I started to protest, but whatever I was about to say died on the tip of my tongue as I felt his breath skate over my forehead.

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We were close, way too close.

"They have to be back here," a disgruntled voice boomed from the hall. Static crackled over a radio. "I've checked the other rooms."

My breath caught. What would happen if they came in here? Would they shoot first and ask questions later?

A heartbeat passed, and then the hair around my ear stirred as Luc whispered, "I hope you're not claustrophobic."

I turned my head, tensing as my nose grazed his cheek. "It's a little late for that."

"True." He shifted again, and I felt his leg brush mine. I shivered. "We just need to play it cool in here for a little bit and then they'll be gone."

A little bit? We'd already been in here for far too long, but I could hear the guy out there, pacing back and forth. "Does this happen often?"

"About once a week."

"Lovely," I muttered, and I thought maybe he chuckled under his breath. I was going to smack Heidi for coming here, to a club that got raided once a week. "What are you guys doing here to get raided?"

"Why do you think we have to be doing something?"

"Because you're getting *raided*," I whispered-yelled back.

Luc's fingers moved, and I felt his thumb smooth over mine, sending another acute shiver through me. "Do you really think they need a reason to come in here, search for people? To hurt people?"

I knew who "they" were without asking. The ART Force answered to our government. "Are you registered?"

"I already told you." His breath now coasted over my cheek. "I'm not a Luxen." There was another pause. "You . . . you smell."

"Excuse me?"

"You smell like . . . peaches."

"It's my lotion." I closed my hands into fists as frustration mingled with fear and something . . . something *heavy*. "I don't want to talk to you anymore."

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“Good.” There was a pause. “I can think of a lot more interesting things to do in a tiny, dark space that would pass the time.”

My muscles locked up. “You try something and you will regret it.”

Now I heard him chuckle quietly. “Calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down,” I snapped, so furious I wanted nothing more than to scream. “I’m not who those men are looking for. I have no reason to stay quiet.”

“Oh, you do.” His thumb glided over my palm.

“Stop that.”

“Stop what?” His low voice dripped innocence as his thumb dragged over the center of my hand again.

“*That.*” With my heart thumping, I tried again to free my hands. “And come to think of it, how do you—”

The shrill ring of a phone silenced me.

Where was that—*Oh no.*

It was my phone, ringing from my wristlet.

“Well, that’s truly inconvenient timing.” Luc sighed, dropping my hands.

I felt around until I was able to open the wristlet and pull my phone out. I quickly silenced it, but it was too late.

A shout from the hallway sent a bolt of fear through me as I felt . . .

Luc’s cool hand suddenly curve around the nape of my neck. What the—

His nose suddenly touched mine and when he spoke, I could *feel* his words on my lips. “When I open this door, you’re going to run to your left. There’s a bathroom. Inside said bathroom is a window you can climb out of. Do it fast.”

A fist or a boot slammed into the hidden door.

“Are you kidding me?” I demanded, in disbelief. “We could’ve just run outside through the bathroom?”

He slid his hand off my neck. “But then we wouldn’t have had these precious moments alone.”

My mouth dropped open. “You are—”

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Luc *kissed* me.

One moment I was a heartbeat away from cursing him out with an impressive display of f-bombs, and then his mouth was just *there*, on mine. His head tilted just the slightest. I drew in a startled breath and my fingers spasmed. The phone slipped out of my hand, thudding softly on the floor. Just the tip of his tongue touched mine, sending little shivers of pleasure and bitter panic through me, and then he shifted his head, slightly pulling back.

“A Luxen didn’t kiss you, Evie.” His lips brushed mine. “But neither did a human.”

“What?” I said breathlessly, my heart lodged somewhere in my throat.

Luc’s hand slipped off my neck, and I fell back against the wall. He pivoted. “Get ready.”

My thoughts were completely scattered. Oh God, I wasn’t ready for this. “But—”

Luc slid the hidden door open. The light from outside was blinding, and it took a terse second for my eyes to adjust. The first thing I saw was one of those EMP guns pointed directly at Luc. He stepped forward, throwing his hand out.

He caught the officer in the chest, grabbing a fistful of white material. Lifting the man up off his feet, Luc tossed the officer across the hall. The man slammed into the wall, cracking the plaster. He fell forward onto the floor, out cold.

“Holy crap.” I stared down at the prone man. That kind of strength . . .

Static crackled from a radio hooked to the man’s chest, and a voice echoed from it. Backup was coming.

“Go,” Luc ordered, his pupils constricting and churning with inner white light, a sure sign that a Luxen was about to slip into their true form. “I’ll see you later.”

## 4

Heidi flopped onto her back, sprawling across the center of her bed. “That was *wild*. We so need to go again.”

Sitting on the floor of her bedroom, I stared up at her. “No. No, we do not need to go again. Ever. Again.”

She laughed, and I shook my head as I dragged my hands down my freshly scrubbed face. Climbing through that bathroom window in a dress and dropping down into an alley had not left me in pristine condition. The first thing I’d done when we got back to Heidi’s place was shower, rinsing off the grime from the bottom of my feet. I’d also smelled like I’d robbed a liquor store and then rolled around in all the alcohol I’d stolen.

It had been Heidi calling me while Luc and I were hiding in our own Room of Requirement. She’d gotten outside somehow and was panicked, but she had been smart and gone straight to her car, where I found her waiting for me.

“We were almost busted. Could you imagine what my mom would’ve done? She would’ve flipped,” I said from behind my hands. “Not only that, I was so worried you’d been trampled to death or something.”

“Girl, I freaked out too. I had no idea where you were until Emery said you were with Luc.”

Ugh.

If I never heard his name again, I’d die happy. Not only was he an unbelievable jerk, he had kissed me—actually kissed me.

*A Luxen didn’t kiss you, Evie. But neither did a human.*

What was that supposed to mean? There were only Luxen and humans. Unless he considered himself in a league of his own, which

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wouldn't be surprising. After just a short time with him, I knew there were very few beings in this universe who had an ego as massive as his.

"I cannot believe you were hiding with him in a hall closet or whatever," she went on. On the drive back to her place, I'd filled her in on most of what had happened. "I can't believe you didn't take advantage of that."

I made a face against my hands. I hadn't told Heidi that Luc had kissed me. I probably wouldn't even tell Zoe, because both she and Heidi would have questions, tons of questions. Ones I couldn't answer, because when he'd kissed me, I . . . I didn't even know what I felt. Panic? Yes. Pleasure? Oh God, yes, I'd felt that, too, and that made no sense. I was not attracted to any guy, no matter their species, if they were a jerk who thought they could just randomly kiss someone.

Besides, it hadn't even felt like a real kiss, and I had been *really* kissed before. Brandon and I had kissed. A lot. What had gone down in that hidden room was barely a kiss—

Why was I even thinking about this? There were so many more important things to focus on, like, for example, the fact that we both could be sitting in jail at the moment.

"Luc is hot, Evie." Apparently, Heidi hadn't gotten the memo to move the conversation along.

"He's a legit alien," I muttered.

"So? From what I hear, they have all the working parts necessary. Not that I know from personal experience, but that's what I've heard."

"Glad to hear that they have the working parts." That was a phrase I'd never thought I'd ever say in my entire life. I didn't want to think about Luc and his working parts. "And side note, the last time I checked, you don't know anything about working parts."

She giggled. "Just because I'm still part of the purity parade doesn't mean I haven't done a lot of research or used the internet for nefarious purposes."

I smiled as I dropped my hands. "He was a jerk, Heidi. If he talked to you like he did me, you would've punched him in the face."

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“Was he really that bad?” She threw up her hands, extending her middle fingers. “Like on the scale of one”—she wiggled the middle finger on her left hand—“to ten middle fingers, how bad was he really?”

“Fifty.” I paused. “Fifty times a million middle fingers.”

She laughed as she rolled onto her belly. “Then I probably would’ve punched him in the nuts.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s a shame.” She sighed. “When someone has the physical thing working out for them, it really sucks when the inner part is as ugly as a skinless rat.”

Skinless rat? Ew. “It was so weird. He was just so rude. He kept demanding to know why I was there, like I had the audacity to walk into that stupid club.” On a roll now, I wanted to start punching things. “Who is he? I mean, obviously, he’s an alien named Luc, but . . .”

Heidi sat up, dangling her pajama-clad legs over the edge of the bed. Her hair was twisted up in a messy bun that had flopped to one side. “But what?”

Pressing my lips together, I shook my head. There was something else I hadn’t told her. “He . . . he knew my name, Heidi.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

I nodded. “How is that possible? He said he knew who I was and he knew that I’d never been there before.” Uneasy, I folded my arms over my waist. “That’s really freaky, right?”

“Yeah, it is.” She slipped off the bed and came to her knees in front of me. “I don’t know if I said something to Emery when I was there before. It’s possible I mentioned your name to her. I mean, I know I’ve talked about you.”

“That . . . that would make sense.” Relief seeped into me. That made so much sense, but . . . but why would Emery be talking to Luc about me?

“It has to be that. There really is no other way he would’ve known you. He doesn’t go to our school. None of them do.”

Exhaling roughly, I nodded again. I didn’t want to think about Luc anymore. “Promise me you won’t go back there.”

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Her gaze drifted over my shoulder. “Well . . .”

“Heidi!” Leaning forward, I smacked her arm. “The place gets raided for unregistered aliens. Those ART officers had the kind of guns that also kill humans. That place is not safe.”

Heidi let out a heavy, loud breath. “That’s never happened before.”

“Luc said it happens, like, once a week,” I told her. “And even if he was just being dumb, once is still enough. So many bad things could’ve happened tonight.”

Biting down on her lip, she sat back on her butt. “I know. You’re right.” She peeked up at me through her lashes. “But guess what?”

“What?” I wasn’t sure if I believed her or not when it came to her going back to that club.

A small smile appeared. “I got Emery’s phone number.”

“Really?” Seeing the excitement on her pretty face was a nice distraction from what had happened. “Well, if you have her number, there really is no reason for you ever to step foot in that club again.”

“Right.” Her smile spread. “She was so excited to meet you tonight. I was super-bummed that you didn’t get the chance.”

“Me too, but if you got her number, then maybe that will lead to hanging out, and I can third wheel it?”

“There’s no better third wheel than you.”

My nose wrinkled. “Thanks? I guess.”

Heidi snuck downstairs after that and stole the box of cupcakes. We gorged ourselves on the chocolate-goodness-topped-with-peanut-butter-frosting heaven while she gave me all the details on Emery. Heidi fell asleep pretty quickly, but what felt like hours passed before I could relax enough to even stop staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars dangling from the ceiling above Heidi’s bed.

Tonight was wild and it was scary and it could’ve ended so badly. That knowledge was hard to shake, to let go. Heidi could’ve been hurt. I could’ve been hurt. The dangers we all faced after the invasion hadn’t really gone away. They’d just *changed*.

As soon as my thoughts started to drift, they found their way to Luc. Heidi had to be right. She must’ve mentioned me before

and somehow I came up in random conversation with Emery, and Luc had capitalized on that.

But I still couldn't figure out why he'd lie about being a Luxen.

It didn't matter, though, because I was never going back to Foretoken and no matter what he'd said to me, I was never going to see him again.

Thank the Lord and baby Jesus—

Oh my God.

Sitting straight up in bed, my eyes went wide as I cursed. *My phone*. Where was my phone? I threw the covers off and scampered from the bed. I found my clutch near my book bag. I grabbed it, peeled it open, and felt around, confirming what I already knew.

I'd left my phone in that damn club.

I clenched the steering wheel as I stared at the red doors of Foretoken. Part of me had expected to find it roped off with police tape since it had been raided just last night.

But it wasn't.

"You don't have to go in with me," I said. It was about thirty minutes after I'd left Heidi's house, and cars streamed up and down the street outside of the club. In the daylight, it didn't look so intimidating. Kind of. "You can just stay here and if I don't come out in, like, ten minutes—"

"Call the police?" James Davis laughed as I looked at him. "I'm not going to call the police and tell them my underage friend just walked into a club looking for her missing phone and hasn't come back out yet. I'm going in with you."

Relief left me feeling dizzy. I really hadn't wanted to go back in there by myself, and honestly, I should've known that James wouldn't let me go in there alone.

As corny as it sounded, James was the epitome of the boy next door, and he got away with so much because of it. Brown hair, warm brown eyes, and as big and cuddly as a teddy bear, all he had to do was flash those dimples, and parents around the world just

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opened the door for him. Even my mom. She didn't have any problem with James hanging out in my bedroom with the door closed.

But because he was big and often unintentionally intimidating, I recruited him this morning by showing up at his house and promising him breakfast afterward. James was always swayed by food.

My knuckles were starting to ache. "I need to get my phone back. Mom will kill me if I lost it. Do you know how much that thing costs?"

"Your mom will kill you for being here."

"True, but she's never going to find out, especially if I get my phone back," I reasoned. "If you lost your phone here, what would you do?"

"I wouldn't be here to lose my phone, but whatever." He turned to the window. The Baltimore Orioles baseball cap he almost always wore shielded the upper half of his face. "I know why you asked me to do this and not Zoe."

"Because you gave me a fake ID that enabled me to be a complete idiot and come here in the first place?"

He snorted. "Uh, no."

"Because you think Zoe would've smacked me upside the head if I asked her?" When he nodded, I smiled. "Then you're right. I knew you'd go with me and you wouldn't smack me."

At least I had a plan. Not the greatest, but someone had to be there during the day. Well, unless everyone got arrested, but hopefully someone was there, and I was prepared to beg and plead to be allowed to check out the room I'd dropped my phone in.

"You think anyone is going to answer?" he asked.

I exhaled loudly, let go of the steering wheel, and turned off the car. I hadn't told him about the raid last night, which probably made me a bad person. "I don't even know if anyone is in there." Truth was, after the raid, Luc and everyone could've cleared out. "You sure you want to come in?"

He slowly turned his head toward me. "I know what kind of place this is, so if I stay behind in this car, I'm pretty sure I'm violating some kind of friend code."

“Probably,” I agreed, and reached over, tweaking the bill of his cap.

He opened the passenger door. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

I lifted my brows. There was, like, a metric crap ton of things that could happen, but I didn’t point that out. I grabbed my purse off the backseat and then climbed out of the car to join James. Once there was a break in traffic, we hurried across the street, narrowly avoiding getting run over by a speeding taxi that seemed to come out of nowhere.

I hopped up on the curb and stepped around a man dropping coins into a parking meter. Without warning, my heart started thumping heavily against my ribs as I walked under the awning.

A tremor coursed down my arm as I stopped a good foot in front of the doors, the red paint reminding me of fresh blood. Being here felt . . . It felt *final* somehow, like once I walked through these doors again, there was no going back. I didn’t even fully understand that sensation or where it truly came from. It was overdramatic, because all I was doing was coming back to get my stupid phone, but the feeling of dread was filling my pores and seeping through my skin.

Instinct roared to the surface, forcing me to take a step back, and my shoulder bumped into James’s chest. Something primal inside me demanded I turn around and get the hell out of there.

Tiny hairs all over my body rose. Air hitched in my throat and pressed down on my chest. The tips of my fingers started to tingle.

Fear.

I was feeling *fear*.

The dark and cold kind that rose from a deep well. I could taste it in the back of my mouth. *Bitter*. The last time I’d felt this kind of bone-chilling fear that bordered on panic was . . . It had to have been during the invasion. Those moments were vague and a blur, but it would’ve been that kind of fear.

Mr. Mercier, high school counselor extraordinaire, would say what I was feeling right now was just a symptom of living through

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the invasion. Post-traumatic stress. That was what I kept telling myself as a shiver curled its way down my spine.

The feeling didn't go away.

*Get away*, whispered a voice that sounded like mine. It came from the recesses of my mind, an inherent, elemental part of me that I wasn't even sure I recognized.

I had no idea why I felt this way or why, with every second, the sensation of going *too far* increased. My heart rate skyrocketed into cardiac arrest territory. I opened my mouth, but I couldn't get my tongue to work.

James reached around me for the handle, but the door swung open before he could even touch the tarnished metal, and I knew right then.

It was too late.

# 5

The bouncer named Clyde blocked the entryway, one muscular arm bracing the door open, the other lifted to the top of the door, showing off a bicep that was about the size of a tree trunk. A gray shirt stretched across his broad chest and shoulders. Was that unicorn on his shirt spewing . . . *rainbows out of its mouth?*

Yep.

That was definitely a unicorn shooting rainbows out of its mouth.

The razor-edge panic and biting fear receded as quickly as it had swept over me. Gone so fast, it was like it had been a figment of my imagination.

“Whoa,” James murmured, dropping his hand to his side.

Maybe I should’ve warned him about Clyde.

Sunlight glinted off the numerous piercings in Clyde’s face as I snapped out of whatever stupor I was in. “I don’t know if you remember—”

“I remember you,” he said, and I was sure that wasn’t a good thing. He fixed his gaze on James. “But I don’t remember you.”

James was apparently struck silent.

“We’re not here to, um, go clubbing or whatever,” I tried again. “I was here last night.” I winced. “You already know that. I lost my phone.”

Clyde turned that huge bald head toward me. “And you came here because . . . ?”

I thought it was pretty obvious, but I went ahead and explained.

“I lost my phone when I was with . . . Luc.”

“Luc?” murmured James.

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I'd also left out the part about Luc when I'd talked to James.

Clyde didn't blink. Not once. "So you're here to see Luc?"

"Not necessarily." I really didn't want to see him. "We were in a room last night, and I just need to check out that room for my phone."

"You were in a room with some dude named Luc?" James repeated. Then he said under his breath with a grin, "You hussy."

I ignored him.

One pierced brow rose. "Are you here to see Luc or not?"

Every muscle in my body tensed. For some reason, I didn't want to say that I was, but if that was the only way I was going to be able to get into the club, I would. I gritted out, "Yes."

Saying nothing, Clyde stepped back as he held the door open. Relief smacked into me. He was letting us in. I exchanged a quick look with James as a horn blew from a car passing by. I stepped forward. James didn't. I grabbed his arm and pulled him through, squeezing past Clyde. The door swung close behind us, shutting out the sunlight and sealing us inside. I let go of James's arm.

I ignored the bubbling nervousness as Clyde shuffled around us in the small space. He opened the door to the club. I hesitated for a moment and then followed him. What I saw was nothing like last night. The lights over the dance floor were on, pressing the shadows back to the bar and the alcoves. Most of the chairs were off the floor, placed upside down on the round tables. Only a few tables remained set. There were two people at the bar, but they stood half in the shadows, and I couldn't make out who they were.

Gone was the scent of overpowering perfume and bitter liquor. The place smelled like someone had recently scrubbed down every surface with a lemony disinfectant.

There were no signs of the raid. All the bottles behind the bar had been replaced. It was as if it hadn't happened.

"I can just go look in the room. I remember—"

"Sit." Clyde gestured at one of the tables that had the chairs down, and kept walking, disappearing past the bar and into a narrow hall to the right, one I hadn't been down before.

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James dropped onto a stool. “That is the biggest dude I’ve ever seen in real life.”

“Right?” Too nervous to sit, I stood behind the stool.

Dragging the bill of his cap around so it was on backward, he then lowered his hand to the smooth surface of the table as he looked around the club. “Interesting place.”

I eyed the hall Clyde had gone down. Was he going to find my phone or, God forbid, find Luc? My stomach knotted. I really didn’t want to see Luc again.

“So, you told me you came here last night with Heidi,” James said, cocking his head to the side. “But you didn’t tell me about being in some random room with some random guy.”

My cheeks heated. “It’s not like that. At all. It’s, well, it’s a long story.”

“We have time—wait. Hold that thought.” James leaned in, squinting as he stared across the club. “Don’t we go to school with him?”

“Who?”

He jerked his chin toward the bar, and I turned. The two people who’d been standing there had moved farther into the light, and I immediately recognized one of them. The dark-haired Luxen. His name was Connor. No idea what his last name was. Surprise flickered through me. “Yeah. We do.”

“Wonder what he’s doing here?”

Before I could answer, Grayson appeared from across the club, walking from where the shadows clung to the walls as if he had been conjured out of thin air. I stiffened, wondering if the Luxen had that kind of ability and we just didn’t know about it.

“Oh hell,” James muttered, apparently realizing in that moment that Grayson was a Luxen and wasn’t wearing a Disabler.

A smirk tipped up the corner of Grayson’s mouth as he stopped in front of our table. He passed a dismissive glance over James, and then those ultra-bright blue eyes landed on me. “I’m told that you’re looking for your phone?”

“Yes. It’s a slim black—”

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"I know what a phone looks like," he replied. "I don't have it."

"Okay." I didn't think he did. "I just need to check a room. I dropped it in there and—"

"You can't check the room."

Irritation swelled. "Why not?"

He simply shook his head.

"Look, I'm not trying to be a pain, but I really just need to find my phone. That's all. So, if you'd—"

"Your phone isn't in that room," he cut me off.

I frowned. "How would you know?"

"Because I know what room you're talking about, and there's no phone in there."

"But—"

"I do know where your phone is." Grayson focused on James like I imagined a lion did when it spotted a limping three-legged gazelle. "Do you like horror movies?" he asked James, pulling what appeared to be a Blow Pop out of the pocket of his jeans.

James looked over at me nervously. "Yeah, uh, I guess so?"

The Luxen's smile was like a razor as he unwrapped the lollipop. It was green—sour apple. "My favorite is an older movie. *Hostel*. There's this young, witless guy who basically stumbles into a den of freaks who take great pleasure in torturing and murdering people." He shoved the Blow Pop into his mouth and spoke around the thin white stick. "Have you seen that one?"

James lifted his brows. "I've . . . Yeah, I've seen it."

"You kind of remind me of that guy. You know. The young, witless one."

Well, that was super-creepy.

Grayson's gaze slid to mine. "Luc has your phone. It's his new treasured possession."

Dammit. "Can you get it from Luc?"

"Nope."

The urge to scream hit me hard. I had no other choice. "Then I want to see Luc."

He tilted his head to the side. "Luc is unavailable."

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“Then make him available.” My hand tightened around the edge of the table.

Grayson’s smirk turned into a full-blown smile. “Obviously, you don’t know Luc if you think I can simply make him available.”

“I don’t care if I know him or not; I’m not leaving here without my phone.”

James looked a little pale. “Maybe we can buy you a new one.”

Buy me a new phone? With what? Monopoly money? I didn’t even have any of that.

“That would be wise,” Grayson commented.

“No.” I glanced down the hall Clyde had disappeared into. “If you won’t go get Luc, then I will.”

The older Luxen tilted his head to the side. “Is that so?”

“Evie,” James said. “I really think we should leave.”

Grayson smile reminded me of barbwire. “For once, I actually agree with a *human*.”

This was ridiculous. All I was asking for was my phone, not the secrets to the alien race. Angry, I twisted toward James. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

“Stop,” Grayson called out flatly. “Don’t.” There was a pause. “Definitely don’t take the door at the end, on your right, to the stairwell.”

I halted.

“Or go onto the second floor,” he continued in the same monotone voice. “Luc would be *very* unhappy about that.”

What in the world? I looked over my shoulder at him and saw that he was now sitting across from a very, very uncomfortable-looking James. I had no idea why he’d possibly tell me where Luc would be if Luc was so unavailable, but it didn’t matter.

I hurried down the hall, passing several doors. Two led to bathrooms, and another one had an EMPLOYEES ONLY plaque on the door, but half the words had Xs over them, leaving the word *ploy* behind, which was . . . notably odd.

Really odd.

I scanned the narrow hall and found the door to the staircase.

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I threw it open and started up the flight of steps, not giving myself time to think about what I was doing. And maybe that was stupid.

Or maybe it was brave.

I could see my mom doing something like this. Definitely my dad, and they *were* brave. Obviously. So maybe sometimes it took a little stupidity to be brave.

Rounding the landing to the second floor, I entered the dimly lit hallway and saw several windowless doors. It kind of reminded me of an apartment building. Except, there were no peepholes.

Sighing in frustration, I bit down on my lower lip. Luc could be in any number of these rooms and there were a lot. I was literally going to have to check each one. Or I could just start screaming his name until he came out.

I walked down the hall, my steps slowing when I heard what sounded like whispers coming from the right. I stopped and saw that one of the doors was cracked open.

I went to it, placing my hand on the cool surface. Pushing it all the way open, I stepped inside and saw *nothing*. The room inside was pitch black, as if heavy curtains had been hung, blocking out all possible light.

"Hello?" I called out.

*Thump.*

I jumped as something moved or fell over in the room. Scanning the darkness, I tried to see something—anything—but it was useless. My ears strained to hear another sound, but there was nothing. It was quite possibly a good time to get the hell out of this room.

I took a step back.

Air stirred around me, lifting the hair around my face. My breath caught as instinct flared to life. I so wasn't alone in this room. I moved to get the hell out—

A hand gripped my arm, jerking me forward. A scream rose, abruptly cut off as I was shoved. Hard. My back hit the wall, knocking the breath out of me and shooting pain up my spine, where it exploded along the base of my skull.

Before I could move or make a sound, the same hand—a cold hand—closed around my throat, tight enough just to let the tiniest

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bit of air wheeze in. My hands flailed until I found it—*his* arm in the darkness. Digging my fingers in, I tried to pry the hand away from my throat as adrenaline pumped through my veins. My heart slammed against my ribs as bitter tendrils of panic burrowed deep into my stomach.

Oh God. Oh God—

I *felt* him lean in. I *felt* his breath ghost over my cheek as I was lifted up onto my toes. I *felt* his words all the way to the marrow. “You shouldn’t be here.”

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Who are you?" the man demanded.

I opened my mouth to respond, but since he was half strangling me, I couldn't get a single word out.

"Why are you here?" he demanded, and his grip tightened. My feet left the floor, forcing out a raspy gasp. Fear dug in with razor-sharp claws.

In the darkness, two bright white pinpricks of light appeared, casting a luminous glow. Pupils. They were *pupils*. This man was so not human. My fingernails scraped over his skin. Oh God, I was going to be choked to death all over a damn phone—

The door swung open. "Let go of her *now*."

At the sound of the familiar voice, the hand around my throat disappeared. I fell forward, throwing my arms out into the empty space around me. A scream built in my throat—

An arm circled my waist. For a second I was hanging in the air, arms and legs flailing by a steely arm. Without warning, I was suddenly upright, on my feet, my back pressed against a very solid chest—*Luc's* chest. I inhaled sharply, surrounded by that all-too-familiar woody scent of his.

This wasn't any better than being choked.

I jerked forward, but the arm around my waist was like a steel band. I made it about an inch and then was hauled back.

"Stay still," Luc warned directly into my ear.

Every muscle in my body locked up. About to inform him he could not tell me what to do, I winced as light suddenly flooded the room. My vision adjusted, and I saw an older man—an older *Luxen*—standing a few feet in front of us.

And then I saw what—who—was behind him.

There was a woman holding a small child, maybe a toddler. The little girl with curly pigtails had her face buried in the woman's shoulder. Her tiny body was trembling so badly, she was shaking the woman cradling her. Real primitive fear was etched into the beautiful woman's face as she stared at us with wide, terror-filled eyes.

Luc was as still as a statue behind me. "Explain yourself."

"You told me we were safe here," the Luxen male said, nostrils flared. "You swore that to us."

Shocked that this adult Luxen would answer to Luc's somewhat arrogant demand, let alone listen to him, I was struck silent.

"You are safe here," Luc replied.

"She walked into this room. A *human*." His hands opened and closed at his sides. "What was I supposed to think?"

"You should've thought, *Wow, she's an idiot and therefore harmless*," Luc retorted, and my mouth dropped open. "Throwing her against a wall wasn't exactly necessary."

Did he seriously just call me an idiot?

The Luxen male's lips thinned and then he shocked me even more by saying, "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

I felt Luc nod behind me and then he said, "And *this*"—his arm tightened even more, and a tiny squeak escaped me—"won't happen again."

The male didn't respond, nor did he take his eyes off us as he backed up, keeping himself firmly planted between us and the others.

Understanding flared to life, and I probably would've seen it earlier if I hadn't been so wrapped up in almost being *choked to death*.

The Luxen was protecting the woman and child from—from *me*. I was so dumbfounded by the realization, I didn't protest when Luc removed his arm from my waist and then wrapped his fingers around mine, pulling me out of the room. The door closed behind us, but I swore no one had touched it.

Once we were in the hall, I tried to tug my hand free. "You called me an idiot in there."

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"And I'm wrong?" He kept walking, the muscles along his back tense. "Because I really don't think so."

"Yeah, you're as wrong as—"

Luc spun, and without any warning, I was once again pressed against a wall. He towered over me, keeping our joined hands between us. When he spoke, his voice was incredibly soft. "When I said I'd be seeing you again, I hadn't meant today. Not that I'm complaining, but I'm kind of busy. But I guess you missed me already?"

Missed him? Ha. No. My throat dried as I stared up and into those odd amethyst eyes. The color seemed to . . . churn restlessly. "I didn't plan on coming here—"

"But you're here."

"Yes. I have a reason, a good one—"

"There are no good reasons for you to be here today."

"I'm looking—"

"For me?" His brows lifted, disappearing into the wavy locks of brown hair. He stepped in, and I imagined I could feel the heat coming off his body. Maybe it wasn't my imagination, because he was close enough that if I shifted one way or another, my legs would brush his.

"Do you have to talk to me like you have no idea what personal space is?" I demanded. "And *no*, I'm not here for you."

"I don't have to talk to you like this, but I want to. I like it." One side of his lips kicked up when my eyes narrowed. "And *yes*, I have a sinking suspicion that you are here, in fact, for me."

My jaw locked down. "I need to find my cell phone—"

"And you thought you'd find it in a room full of Luxen?"

If he interrupted me one more time, I was going to scream my throat raw. "It would be nice if I could finish a sentence. Then I would be able to tell you why I'm here."

He tilted his head to the side, staring at me like he'd been hanging around for an hour. "I'm waiting."

I pulled on my hand again. He held on. "Who were they?" I demanded. "Those Luxen in there?"

"That's why you're here? To ask about them?"

It wasn't, and their presence wasn't any of my business, but it

didn't take a rocket scientist to know that they were hiding in here. I thought about last night's raid. The ART officers were looking for unregistered aliens. Luc had them here.

Hell, he obviously was one.

And apparently, the ART officers weren't very good at their jobs, because Luc, and what I was guessing was a family, were still here.

Luc's gaze dropped to my mouth, and I drew in an unsteady breath. A muscle flexed along his jaw. "How did you even get up here? I told Clyde to send you away."

"Grayson . . ." I stilled.

Wait. Had Grayson set me up? He told me to come up here; he had to know that family was hidden in one of the rooms.

Luc's gaze lifted to mine. "Grayson sent you up here?"

"Kind of," I gritted out, holding his stare. "Can you back off?"

There was a moment of silence. "I feel like we're having déjà vu."

"Probably because you have no respect for personal space."

His lips pursed. "Sounds about right."

I stared at him.

Luc dropped my hand and took a step back. His gaze flickered over my face. "Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

His question sort of surprised me. "No. He didn't hurt me."

"He was choking you."

"Yeah, he was doing that, but I'm . . . I'm okay."

He watched me a moment, shook his head, and then pivoted. He started stalking down the hall, and it was then that I realized he was carrying something in his other hand. A cloth—a washcloth.

I peeled myself off the wall and hurried after him. "I need—"

"Your phone," he interrupted. "I know."

"Okay." I struggled to keep up. His long-legged pace was impressive . . . and annoying. "Can I have it?"

"No."

"What? Why not?"

"You don't need it."

"I need it—I totally need my phone. It belongs to me."

Luc kept walking, and I just—I just lost it.

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Leftover adrenaline from being thrown against a wall mingled with the frustration burning at my skin like a swarm of fire ants. Snapping forward, I grabbed his arm and stopped him. In the distant part of my mind I knew that he had allowed me to do that. That if he had wanted to keep walking, he would've and then simply dragged me behind him. But I didn't care that he could throw me down the hall with a flick of his wrist if he wanted to.

"I'm not leaving here until I have my phone."

A smile played at his mouth as he glanced down at my hand and then back up. "Really?"

"Why are you being so difficult? Just give me my phone and you'll never have to see me again."

His thick lashes lowered, shielding his eyes as he reached down and pried my fingers off his arm. He did so gently, as if he were well aware of his strength and thought my fingers could snap like dried twigs. "But what if I want to see you again?"

I swallowed as my eyes narrowed. "But I don't want to see your face ever again."

The almost teasing smile began to fade. "Well, that's rude."

The irritation gave way to reckless fury. "If you don't give me my damn phone right now, I will call the police." I glanced down at the leather cuff he wore before meeting his gaze head-on. I hated saying what I did next, because I would never do what I was about to threaten, but I was willing to say just about anything to get my phone so I could leave and forget all about Luc and this damn place. "I doubt the Luxen back in that room would want that to happen, would they?"

Luc's eyes widened slightly as he faced me. A measure of surprise splashed across his striking features, parting his full lips. "Are you actually threatening me?"

I had the common sense to recognize I was treading on thin ice with lead boots. Like the kind of thin ice that was already cracking under my feet. "It's not a threat." I managed to keep my voice level. "It's a warning."

"That's the same thing, *Evie*." Luc stepped toward me, the pupils of his eyes seeming to expand. "It's a threat."

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The air stalled in my lungs and my body moved without thought. I took a step back, but he came forward once more. I kept going until I was against a damn wall again.

“No one has even the tiniest inclination to threaten me,” he said, the pupils of his eyes starting to turn white. An icy chill ran down my spine. “Because they know better.”

My chest rose sharply.

“They especially know better than to threaten what I’m trying to do here.” His chin dipped, and he was right back in my space, eye to eye. Several seconds passed, and the stupidest, absolute dumbest thoughts occurred. I thought about that meaningless kiss that wasn’t even a kiss—about how those full lips had felt.

How they were soft yet hard, and I—

What in the world was wrong with me? Had I hit my head and damaged my brain earlier? The answer was yes, a resounding *yes*.

“Dammit,” he growled, and then he did the strangest thing—stranger than me thinking about kissing him, which was next-level bizarre.

He dropped his forehead to mine as he breathed in deeply. “Peaches. I am really beginning to have a thing for peaches.”

I tensed as my eyes widened. What was happening? And why was I standing here? At this point I probably shouldn’t even be trusted to own a phone. “It’s j-just lotion.”

A breath shuddered through Luc. “You were never supposed to be here. Do you understand that? That was the *deal*.”

My heart lurched in my chest. “What are you talking about?”

The tips of his fingers brushed my cheek, and my entire body jolted as if I’d touched a live wire. He pulled back. A stark intensity filled his stare, and I thought maybe his gaze dropped again, to my mouth. He tilted his head to the side, almost like he was lining up his mouth with mine, and whispered, “The deal was I would stay away . . .” He paused, the brilliant light of his pupils increasing. “If *you* stayed away.”

“What?” I said breathlessly.

Tension filled the air, popping and sparking around us. Static

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cracked, and the overhead lights flickered, dimming briefly before roaring back to life, becoming ultra bright.

I sucked in a sharp gasp.

Luc smiled.

Just a few feet away, the door at the end of the hall opened. The lights in the hall returned to normal. The acute pressure and edginess seeped slowly out of the hall, but my pulse was pounding so fast, I felt like I'd run up five flights of stairs. I broke eye contact with Luc and saw the blue-haired guy standing in the doorway. His name was Ken or Kent.

He checked out Luc and then me. "I was wondering what was taking so long."

Luc took a step back, but even though I wasn't looking at him, I could feel the intensity of his stare still focused on me. "What's up, Kent?"

"He's getting worse," he replied.

Swearing under his breath, Luc stalked off. For a moment I didn't move—I *couldn't*. I was stuck to the wall. What had just happened there? And what deal was he talking about? None of that made sense.

And none of that mattered.

All I needed—all I wanted—was my phone and then to be out of here.

I sprung off the wall, hurrying to catch up to Luc as Kent stepped aside. He held the door open. I half expected both of them to shut the door in my face, but Kent just arched a reddish-brown brow at me as Luc prowled into the room.

It wasn't empty.

There was a guy standing in the corner, and it took me a moment to recognize him. I'd seen him last night with Luc. It was the guy with the military haircut who had sat down next to Luc.

He turned toward me, and the first thing I noticed was his eyes. They were just like Luc's. An extraordinarily violet color, and those eyes widened. "What the—"

"Don't," Luc warned.

The man twisted toward him. "Don't what?"

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"You know exactly what I'm telling you not to do." Luc kept his back to the man as he sat down on the edge of what appeared to be a narrow bed.

I had no idea what was going on as the stranger faced me once more. "I have so many questions," he said, looking at me in a way that made me feel like I was under a microscope.

Kent snorted. "Don't we all?"

"She is no one you need to worry about, Archer."

Archer? What kind of name was that?

"Huh," Archer murmured, and then gave a little shake of his head. "Anyway, you think it's wise that she's here? Now?"

"No," Luc replied.

My brows shot up, and I opened my mouth to speak, but Luc leaned back, and I got an eyeful of who was lying on the bed. Gasping, my hand flew to my mouth. "Oh my God . . ."

A man lay on his back. At least, I was guessing it was a man. His brown hair was matted, coated in sweat and . . . and blood. His face was a mess of angry, purplish bruises. Eyes swollen shut, lips puffy and torn. The man's chest barely moved.

"What . . . what happened to him?" I asked.

Luc's gaze drifted to me and he sighed. When he spoke, he sounded way older than eighteen. "Good question. I'm not quite sure." He folded the washcloth in half. "I was about to find out, but I was interrupted."

Me. He was talking about me.

Archer crossed his arms. "I found him like that, outside by the dumpsters in the alley."

A shiver danced over my shoulders. I knew what dumpsters he was talking about. The window I climbed out last night emptied right into the alley beside those dumpsters.

"I don't know who he is," Archer continued, glancing over at me. A strange look crossed his handsome face. "Or what he was doing out there."

"That's Chas." Kent sat in a small, metal chair. "He . . . helps out around here."

It was like Luc forgot I existed as he leaned over the man,

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carefully dabbing the washcloth along the man's forehead. The man named Chas shuddered, and the very edges of his body blurred. His bloody skin lost some of the color, becoming . . . translucent. Another gasp parted my lips as I lowered my hand.

The man was a Luxen, a very badly injured Luxen.

I saw the bluish veins in Chas's still arms for only a brief second before his human form took hold again. I saw no sign of a Disabler. Based on only the injuries I could see, I had a feeling that if he were human, he wouldn't be breathing.

"When was the last time you saw him?" Luc asked.

"Last night." Kent rubbed the heel of his palm along his chest. "After the raid."

Archer's jaw locked. "You think the ART officers did this?"

My stomach tumbled at the thought. The man looked like he was near death. Why would the officers do that?

"No," answered Luc. "If it were them, they would've taken Chas into custody. They wouldn't have left him lying out there."

"Had to be another Luxen to get the upper hand on Chas." Kent glanced over at Archer. "Especially considering those types of injuries. Chas knows how to defend himself."

Feeling like I shouldn't be here for this conversation, that I was hearing things I shouldn't, I started to back up. I only made it about a foot.

"Stay put, Evie," Luc said softly, and I stopped, wondering if he had eyes in back of his head. "Just for a few more moments."

I stopped, not even sure why. I wanted my phone, but I could wait out in the hallway until he was done in here. I glanced around the room. "Shouldn't . . . shouldn't he be in a hospital?"

"A hospital isn't going to help him," Luc answered, his voice stoic, and I wondered if that was because Chas might be unregistered.

Archer was staring at me again, his expression curious. I folded my arms over my chest and looked away. "So, Evie," he said, and I tensed. "How do you know Luc?"

"I don't know him," I said, and Luc's shoulders stiffened.

"That's interesting," Archer began. "I wonder if—" A phone rang from his pocket and he pulled it out, a soft smile forming on his lips

as he answered. “Hey, babe. Give me a sec, okay?” He lowered the phone as he pushed away from where he was standing, starting for the door. “It’s Dee,” he said to Luc’s back. “I’ll tell her you said hi.”

Luc didn’t respond, and that seemed normal to Archer, because he walked out of the room, glancing in my direction. The man on the bed moaned again as a shudder rocked his entire body.

“You’ve got to let go,” Luc said to Chas as his arm moved, blocking his face. “It’s the only way you’re going to heal. You’re safe here. Just let go.”

I bit down on my lip as Luc leaned back, turning the cloth over. I saw streaks of red staining it. Luc was cleaning his face, wiping away the streaks of blood.

The man’s body shook once more and then I saw him slip into his true form. Part of me thought I should look away, but I couldn’t as a flickering white light encased Chas’s entire body. Within seconds, the human façade slipped away. My lips parted, but there were no words as I took in the luminous skin and the intricate veins appearing beneath it. This was the first time I’d seen beyond the light of a Luxen, and it was . . . it was strangely beautiful. Mom had been right, in a way. Their skin was like a jellyfish’s.

Luc twisted, facing me. “You brought someone with you?”

I frowned, unable to take my eyes off Chas. He’d stopped moaning and appeared to have settled down. Or he’d passed out. “Yes. He’s downstairs.”

“Boyfriend?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Figured. If he was a boyfriend, you’d need a new one. Well, he’s obviously not a good friend either if he didn’t insist on coming up here with you.”

My spine stiffened. “I can take care of myself, thank you very much.”

“Did I suggest you couldn’t?” Luc folded up the stained cloth and tossed it to the left without looking. It landed in a small trash can as he turned back to Chas. “Take care of the *friend* downstairs, Kent,” he said. “Make sure he gets home safely but fully understands that he was never here.”

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I almost stopped breathing. “Wait. James rode with me.”

Kent stood, sending a half smile in my direction as he walked past me, toward the door.

Luc dropped his hands to his thighs, his back still to me. “James might’ve ridden with you, but you are not leaving with him.” There was a pause that felt like an eternity. “Actually, you’re not leaving at all.”

Every part of my being stilled. There was no way I’d heard him right. No way at all. “You . . . can’t be serious.”

Slowly, Luc rose and turned to me. “Oh, I’m as serious as heart attack. Cliché saying, I know, but you came here and you’ve seen things you shouldn’t have. Multiple things. Things I don’t want you repeating, especially to that mother of yours.”

I gasped. Why was he bringing her up? Did he know her?

That wolfish grin returned, turning the almost angelic beauty of his face to something darker, crueler. “Then you threaten me and what I’m doing here, and if you haven’t quite figured it out yet, that really doesn’t sit well with me. But most important?” Drawing his bottom lip between his lips through his teeth, he inched closer. “You broke the deal. You’re not leaving.”

Aw, hell no.

Fear pinged around inside me, but anger was like battery acid in my veins. Luc was out of his freaking mind.

"I don't think so," I said, backing up toward the door. "You can't keep me here."

"Really?" He tilted his head to the side. "Is that a challenge? Because I love challenges. I find them a fun way to pass the time."

Finding my phone *was* my top priority, and I would do some insane level of stupid to get it back, but *this* was going too far.

"It's not a challenge." I backed into the hallway, discovering it was empty. No Archer. No Kent. The only exit was at the end of the hall, feeling like a mile away. "It's a statement."

Luc smiled, and it was so misleading. It was the kind of smile a predator showed off as it sized up its next meal.

Not wanting to take my eyes off him until the very last second, I headed to the right. My plan was pretty much to run—run as fast as I ever had in my entire life. I lost sight of Luc. Pressure clamped down on my chest.

I spun around and took off, arms pumping at my sides as my flats slipped over the carpeted floor. I didn't even make it to the halfway point when something rushed past me, blowing my hair around my face. Inherently I knew it was Luc. The Luxen were fast, mind-bendingly so.

And I was correct.

Luc appeared in front of me.

I shrieked as I slid to a halt, almost losing my balance but

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catching myself at the last moment. Breathing heavily, I straightened. "That's not fair."

"Never said it would be." He came forward. "There's no place in here for you to run. This building, all of it, belongs to me."

"That's impossible. You're only eighteen. You can't own this building or a club."

"Nothing is impossible . . . when you're me."

"Wow. You're so special." Dismay rose as I looked behind me. I was trapped. There was no stairwell behind me, only rooms, and I knew I wasn't going to get past Luc.

Luc prowled forward, and I panicked. With my heart in my throat, I darted to the left and grabbed a handle. The door opened about an inch, but then slammed shut as if a gale-force wind had pushed it. Fear and anger swirled inside me as I whirled around.

Luc arched a brow. "Not sure where you think you're going."

I rushed to the left, a scream of frustration building inside me. "You need to let me leave."

"But I thought you weren't leaving until you got what you wanted," he mocked. "Your phone."

"You're not going to help me." I pressed against the wall, inching sideways toward the stairwell. "You're—you're trying to kidnap me."

"Hmm." He turned slowly so he was facing me. "I wouldn't say I'm trying to kidnap you. I would say that I'm actively offering you a place to stay for an undetermined amount of time."

My jaw hit the floor. "That's just a really nice way of saying you're kidnapping me!"

"You say kidnap; I say offering you an all-inclusive vacation."

"I don't want an all-inclusive vacation!"

"Well, it's a break-it-you-buy-it kind of thing."

"I didn't break anything," I seethed, putting a decent amount of distance between us. "If I don't go home—"

"People will come looking for you." He rolled his eyes. "Blah, blah. This sounds like a boring version of *Taken*, and how do you make—"

Launching off the wall, I took off running. Part of me knew it

was pointless, and it was. A rage-filled scream erupted from me as Luc suddenly appeared in front of me.

I didn't get a chance to turn around. He shot forward and dipped low. I screeched as he scooped me up, tossing me over his shoulder like I was nothing more than a sack of potatoes.

"Put me down!" I shouted, my chest smacking off his back as he turned.

"I really don't feel like chasing you around, so sorry, that's not happening."

"Oh my God." Completely forgetting what he was, I pounded my fists into his back. "Put me down, you son of a—"

"Ouch." He bounced, causing my stomach to come down on his shoulder. "Hitting is not nice."

I guessed he was also going to have a problem with kicking as I swung my knee into his stomach.

"Jesus," he said, and grunted, clamping his arm over the backs of my legs. "You do realize I could easily pitch you out of a window, right?"

"Then do it," I spat back, digging my elbow into him. "I'd like to see you try explaining my splattered body on the sidewalk to the authorities."

Luc snorted. "That sounded really dramatic."

Fury burned my skin as he prowled down the hall. "My mother—"

"Your mother isn't going to do anything. You know why?" Luc shifted swiftly, and for a second I thought I was going to slide right off his shoulder. "Because your mother knows better."

I hit him again. "Let me go, Luc."

He stopped, and I felt his cheek press into my hip. "If I do, do you promise not to run off?"

My face wrinkled. "Yes."

"You're a liar, liar." The door in front of him opened. "The moment I put you down, you're going to run. Probably end up hurting yourself."

Groaning, I jabbed my fist into his lower back and was rewarded with another grunt. "I'm going to hurt you!"

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Luc chuckled.

He actually *chuckled* as he walked into a room.

I swore to God and the Holy Ghost, I was going to ninja kick him in the face.

Luc stopped in the dark room, and I was suddenly sliding down him—down his entire front. The contact was like a brush burn, frying out my nerve endings. The moment my feet hit the floor, I swayed unsteadily as I reached out, finding nothing around me but him. I kept moving until the backs of my thighs hit something soft, and I plopped down.

The overhead light flipped on, and my wild gaze darted around. It was a small windowless room with narrow beds pushed against the wall. It reminded me of a cell. Panic took root in my chest and blossomed.

*This isn't happening.*

His expression was as hard and cold as a sheet of ice. “Stay,” Luc ordered, backing up.

*Stay? Like a dog?*

I sprang up from the narrow bed and darted to the side. Luc’s sigh could’ve rattled the walls as he snagged me with one arm like I was an errant child running amuck in the frozen food section of a grocery store.

Tucking me against his side, he walked me back to the bed and deposited me there. “We can keep doing this all day if you want.” He let go, folding his arms across his chest. “But I really hope you don’t, because I have things to do. I’m kind of a busy guy.”

“Then let me go,” I reasoned, clenching the edge of the mattress. “And you can get back to being the busiest guy in the world.”

He arched a brow. “If I let you go, I have a feeling I’m going to be even busier.”

I started to stand, but Luc lifted his arm. My hair blew back from my face. I sucked in a sharp breath as I tried to straighten out, but it was like there was hands on my shoulders, pushing me back down. Within a heartbeat, I was on my butt and I wasn’t getting back up.

Luc wasn’t even touching me.

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No one was.

He was just standing there, staring down at me with a raised brow. He even lowered his hand, but I couldn't . . . I couldn't stand up. A shiver danced over me as my heartbeat stuttered.

*Holy crap.*

I stared at him with wide eyes. *This* was how powerful he was, and it was terrifying.

And it was also infuriating.

I didn't like to be told what to do or forced to do anything, and I sure as hell didn't like feeling afraid.

Sweat broke out across my forehead as I fought the unseen weight bearing down on me. Arms trembling, I managed to lift my hands from the mattress as fury poured through me.

Luc closed his eyes, brows pinching as his shoulders tensed. It was almost like he was in pain—like he was the one struggling to stand. “You’re still so incredibly stubborn.”

“You . . . don’t know me,” I gritted out.

He didn't respond, and I honestly didn't care what he was talking about at the moment. I couldn't move any farther against the force pushing on me. Desperation trickled in. I would wear myself out in minutes, getting nowhere while he just stood there, and then what? He was going to keep me here, against my will?

“You’re hurting me!” I shouted even though it wasn't true. I didn't feel any pain.

Luc moved so fast, I couldn't track him. In a second he was crouched in front of me, eye to eye. The pressure was gone, but before I could move, he clasped my cheeks in an oddly gentle grasp.

His stare met and latched on to mine. His pupils were black against the purple, the irises fuzzy. “I could do a lot of things. I *have* done a lot of things, and sometimes, I do hurt people,” he said quietly, softly. “But I could never hurt you.”

I didn't want to believe him, because it didn't make sense. He could easily hurt me, but he sounded so incredibly genuine. Like he was speaking the only truth he knew. I couldn't look away, even though I wanted to. An odd sensation washed over me. A sense of . . . a sense of *awareness* seeped in. Luc inhaled sharply as his eyes

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took on a hooded quality, as if he were suddenly half asleep. My heart stuttered and then sped up.

“Luc,” a male’s voice came from the door.

A muscle flexed along Luc’s jaw. “You couldn’t have worse timing.”

“I like to think I have the best timing,” was the reply. “But obviously, I’m interrupting.”

“And you’re still standing there because?” Luc’s eyes closed.

“Because I’m nosy.” There was a pause. “And I have nothing better to do at the moment.”

Luc swore under his breath, and his hands left my cheeks in a slow, dragging way that caused my skin to tingle. He rose, and I saw the tall man who stood in the doorway.

He was . . . Wow, he was gorgeous.

The stranger’s hair was dark and wavy, brushing his temples. His eyes were the color of polished emeralds, bright and shiny. The eyes were a dead giveaway. Luxen. But so was his chiseled, sculpted face, because it was almost too perfect, like Luc’s. As if there were no flaws to be found in how he was pieced together, and all humans had flaws.

This guy appeared to be college aged, maybe a little older, and he seemed familiar, but I would’ve remembered him. I know I would’ve. No one could forget the name that belonged to a face like that.

“What are you doing, anyway? Archer and I—” The man’s dark brows lowered and then his eyes shot wide open. “Holy shi—”

“Don’t.” Luc turned to the man. “Don’t say what I know you’re going to say.”

The corners of my lips turned down. Archer had had the same reaction to me. Was it so shocking that I was human?

The Luxen snapped his mouth shut and blinked. “Now I know why you don’t visit anymore. Never call to chat with us. You’ve been keeping secrets, Luc.”

“You know why I don’t come, Daemon.”

A shadow crossed over the man’s face and then smoothed out, disappearing. “True.”

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Luc exhaled heavily. “Don’t you have something you should be doing right now?”

“I do,” Daemon replied. “I’m here for the . . .” Those stunning eyes glanced off me. “Just getting things ready for the . . . package, but I heard a ruckus. Thought I’d check it out.”

“A *ruckus*?” Luc repeated. “Have you been watching TV from the fifties?”

“Well, you know how deprived Archer is. He’s on this *Happy Days* kick recently. Freaking annoying as hell. Every time we get out of the city, he’s watching it on the damn tablet. Then we get back, Kat wants a damn breakdown of every episode. It’s driving me insane.”

“Good to know.” Luc sounded impatient. “Would love to chat more about Archer’s TV obsessions, but I’m kind of busy right now.”

“Yeah, you’re busy with . . . ?”

“*Evie*,” Luc said. “This is *Evie*.”

Daemon’s brows lifted. “*Evie*.” That eerie gaze settled on me again. “Hi, *Evie*.”

I had no idea what was going on, but I was no longer frozen by super-special Luxen power or my own stupidity. I lurched to my feet and blurted out, “He’s trying to kidnap me.”

“Is that so?” The brilliant green gaze slid to Luc. “I didn’t know you were into that kind of stuff. Freaky.”

Luc rolled his eyes.

“I’m being serious.” I took a step forward and then stopped when Luc shifted toward me. “See! If I walk toward that door, he’s not going to let me leave.”

“Well, Luc, you know that’s illegal, right?”

“No shit.”

“It’s totally illegal, but he’s trying to say he’s offering me a vacation—an all-exclusive vacation! In other words, he’s trying to kidnap me.”

Daemon drifted into the room. “And why is he doing that?”

“Seriously. You do have things to do, Daemon. Go do them.”

The man pouted—actually plumped out his lips and pouted. “But this is really more interesting.”

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"He took my phone and won't give it back."

Daemon cocked his head to the side. "I wasn't expecting that."

"No. You don't understand. I left my phone here last night and I came back to get it, because you know how expensive those things are," I tried again, my heart thumping.

"Uh-huh," Daemon murmured.

"That's all, and everything has completely gotten out of hand. He sent my friend home with some blue-haired dude who looks a little serial killer-ish. I've seen a guy who I'm pretty sure is half dead," I rushed on. "I've been picked up, carried around, and *choked*. And all I want is my damn phone and I've yet to see it—"

"I have your phone." Luc reached around, patting his back pocket. "I was going to give it back you."

Slowly, I turned to him. I couldn't think of anything to say as I stared at him for what felt like an eternity. "You've had my phone in your pocket this whole time?"

Luc lifted a hand, knocking a wavy tumble of hair off his forehead. A second later it fell back in place. "I have."

"In your back pocket?"

"Yes."

My mouth dropped open. "And why haven't you just given it to me?"

His lips pursed. "I was planning to, but then I got distracted when you almost got yourself choked to death."

"That wasn't my fault!" I shouted.

"We're going to have to disagree on that."

"Then why didn't you give it to me afterward?" I demanded.

A smirk formed. "Well, I was just messing with you then."

"Oh my God." I shook my head, glancing over at Daemon. "Are you hearing this?"

He held up his hand. "I'm just an innocent, enraptured viewer of this."

A lot of help he was.

"But then you threatened to call the police and run your mouth,"

Luc added, the smirk fading. Daemon's gaze seemed to sharpen.

"And that changed everything."

I stepped toward him, hands shaking. “I wouldn’t have threatened you if you had just given me the stupid cell phone!”

“I have to say, Luc, that sounds reasonable.” Daemon leaned against the wall, idly crossing his arms. “You could just—”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion.” Luc turned to him. “And why are you still standing there?”

Daemon lifted a shoulder. “This is so much more entertaining than hanging around Archer and Grayson.”

Violet eyes narrowed. “Daemon, if you don’t leave, I’m going to help you leave.”

“Damn,” Daemon drawled. “Someone’s in a bad mood.” He backed up, a look of amusement settling into his features. “Talk to you later, *Evie*.”

Wait. He was leaving me? Here? With the guy I just said was trying to kidnap me? What was wrong with these people? “But—”

Daemon pivoted and was gone in the blink of an eye. I was left here, with Luc. Drawing in a deep breath, I faced him once more. “I wasn’t really going to call the police. I wouldn’t do that.”

Luc pulled his gaze away from the now empty doorway. “Then why did you threaten that?” He moved toward me, stopping when I stiffened. “Do you know how serious that is?”

“I just need my phone back. That’s all. I wasn’t going to breathe a word of this to anyone. I swear.”

His jaw worked as he stared at me. A moment passed. “You know what the big problem is here?”

I glanced around the otherwise empty room. “You trying to kidnap me?”

“No,” he replied. “You know nothing about anything, and that makes you so incredibly dangerous.”

I glared at him. “That makes no sense.”

“It makes perfect sense.” He leaned against the bare white wall. “There are things you have no clue about—things that a lot of people have died to keep secret. What’s stopping you from running back to your friends—to the guy you brought with you?”

“What would I tell them?” I threw up my hands, exasperated with him—with *everything*. “I’m not going to tell anyone about . . .

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about those Luxen. Just please give me my phone and I will be gone from your life. Forever.”

An odd look flickered across Luc’s face, and then he reached around, pulling something out of his pocket. He opened his hand, and in his palm was my phone. My phone! “Here it is.”

I almost fell over in a rush to snatch my phone, but I held back, staring at him warily. “So, I . . . I can have my phone and leave?”

Luc nodded.

Drawing in a shallow breath, I extended my hand and he dropped the phone in my palm. I started to pull my hand back, but he closed his fingers around mine.

A slight shock of electricity traveled from his hand up my arm as he tugged me forward, into his side. Luc lowered his head to my ear. “You speak a word about what you saw today to anyone, you’ll be endangering innocent people—friends, family, strangers,” he whispered. “I won’t hurt you. Ever. The rest won’t be so lucky.”

I was still in shock as I drove home. Part of me couldn’t believe I’d walked out of that club and was in my car, but Luc had given me back my phone and hadn’t stopped me from leaving.

The first thing I did when I got in my car was call James. He was fine and had just been dropped off at his house. Of course, he had a thousand questions, but I made him promise that he wouldn’t tell anyone about the trip to Foretoken.

I knew I’d never see Luc again, but I didn’t want to tempt it by either of us blabbing anything to anyone.

But what had Luc meant about the deal? About him staying away if I stayed away? That made utterly no sense. I didn’t know him. Last night was the first time I’d ever seen him.

“I doesn’t matter,” I said out loud. And it didn’t, because obviously there was something very weird and wrong with Luc, and whatever he’d meant by that was irrelevant.

I just wanted to forget about this weekend, and I would. Heidi had reassured me that she wouldn’t step foot in Foretoken again, and I was convinced that I wouldn’t immediately blab the truth

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about last night and today to Mom the moment I saw her and she gave me that look.

That *Colonel* Sylvia Dasher look.

Luckily, I knew Mom was going to be at work and probably wouldn't be home until late tonight. I had all day to not succumb to that look and confess every dumb thing I'd done in the last twenty-four hours.

I couldn't remember if Dad had ever mastered that look or not. Mom had always handled the discipline. Then again, I didn't remember much about my dad anymore and that was *sad*.

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. This car, an older Lexus, sometimes felt like the only thing I had left of Dad's. I didn't look like him. I took after Mom, so when I looked in the mirror I didn't see him, and with each passing year, it was getting harder to remember what he looked like.

My dad—Sergeant Jason Dasher—had died in the war against the Luxen. His service to our country, to mankind had been posthumously awarded.

He'd been given the Medal of Honor.

The thing was, when I thought about Dad, it wasn't just hard to see him, but also to *hear* him. Before the war, he hadn't been home often. His job had him all over the States, but now I wished there had been more time, more memories to fall back on. Something more than a car, because when I thought about Dad, I had trouble piecing his face together in my memories and there weren't any photos. All of that had been left in the house we discarded during the invasion.

But I still had my mom. Not a lot of people could say that after the war, and she was a damn good mom.

So much had been lost, but Columbia was one of those cities that had been lucky. For the most part, it was virtually untouched by the invasion. Only some of the buildings had been damaged, mostly due to random fires that broke out, and I heard that there'd been riots here, but there had been riots everywhere.

Mom and I hadn't been so lucky. We'd originally lived outside of Hagerstown, another city in Maryland, and nearly all the cities

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along the I-81 corridor had been damaged during combat. There'd been ground fighting and airstrikes.

And there were other cities that had had it so much worse.

Some had been completely overrun by the Luxen, and those cities where the Luxen had rapidly assimilated the DNA of humans, basically replacing them, had been total losses. Alexandria. Houston. Los Angeles and Chicago. Nonnuclear electromagnetic pulse bombs had been dropped on those cities, effectively killing every Luxen while also rendering *every* piece of technology useless.

The newly formed Department of Restoration said that it would take decades to repair those cities, now referred to as zones. They were walled wastelands, empty of life and power. No one lived there. No one went there.

It was hard not to think of them when I looked in the rearview mirror and saw the skyscrapers stretching into the sky like steel fingers. It was hard to not think of those days and weeks after the invasion.

It was even harder for me to really process how it only had been four years and everything was almost normal. Mom had gone back to work at the United States Army Medical Research and Material Compound at Fort Detrick in Frederick the moment it was okay to return to the area. Around two years ago, movies had started getting made again and TV stations stopped showing reruns. New episodes of my favorite shows started airing with some new cast members, and one day, life was just back to the way it was before.

At school, we'd just started meeting with college advisors on Tuesday. I was planning to apply to the University of Maryland next fall and would hopefully get into their nursing program, because even though I loved taking pictures, I knew I wasn't good enough to make a career out of that. Though, after my reaction to the guy Luc was helping, I wondered if nursing was the right fit for me.

Anyway, life was happening again.

Some days it was like everyone made a conscious decision to

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move on from the war and all the death, from the knowledge we weren't alone in this universe or on this planet. The world had exhausted itself on fear, and then said, *Nope, no more.*

Maybe that was for the better, because how could we keep living if all we feared was what the next second or minute would bring?

I didn't have an answer for that.

My phone rang, pulling me out of my thoughts. I glanced at the screen and saw April's name pop up. Did I want to answer the phone? It felt like it was too early to deal with her. Immediately, guilt churned. I hit the accept call button on the steering wheel. "Hey!"

"What are you doing right now?" she asked, her voice carrying through the speakers.

"Um . . . driving past Walkers." My stomach grumbled. I could practically taste the greasy amazingness. "I really would love a burger right now."

"It's, like, eleven in the morning."

"So? There is no bad time for a hamburger."

"Well, maybe add some bacon and eggs to it, and you could call it breakfast."

My stomach rumbled even louder. "God, now I'm really hungry."

"You're always hungry," she commented. "Better keep an eye on that. Metabolism slows down as you get older."

Rolling my eyes, I then scowled. "Thanks for the info, Dr. April."

"You're welcome," she chirped back.

I stopped at a red light. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing really, but have you been online today?"

"No." I tapped my fingers along the wheel. "Am I missing drama?"

"There is always drama online, no matter the time or day, whether it's a holiday or an apocalypse," she replied dryly. "But yeah, there's drama online. Except it's the real deal. Oh wait. Is Heidi with you?"

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“No. I’m heading home. Does this have to do with her?” Knowing April, if something horrible was circulating about Heidi online, April’s first call would be to everyone and anyone other than Heidi. Wasn’t anything personal. She’d do the same thing to any of us.

Sometimes I wondered why I was friends with April, but she was like two different people. There were times when she was the sweetest person, and then there was this other side of her that could be downright nasty. Then again, we weren’t exactly that close. She usually only called me when she had something she wanted to gossip about or needed a favor. Like now.

“It has nothing to do with Heidi,” she replied.

The light flipped green and I hit the gas pedal. “What’s going on?”

“You know Colleen Shultz, right? She was in our English class last year.”

As I slowed down to approach yet another stoplight, my stomach tumbled. Holy crap, I’d forgotten all about seeing Colleen at the club last night. “Yeah. What about her?”

“She’s missing.”

“What?” I slammed on the brakes, causing the seat belt to choke me. My gaze flew to the rearview mirror. Thank God no one was behind me. “What do you mean?”

“Supposedly she went out last night with some friends and they got separated. Doesn’t sound like a big deal, right?”

My grip tightened on the steering wheel. “Right.”

“Once everyone found each other later, Colleen never showed up. They went looking for her and ended up finding her purse and her *shoes* in this alley. Like you and I both know, that isn’t a good sign.” April’s voice heightened with excitement, because apparently there nothing was more exciting than a missing classmate. “But here’s the scandalicious part of it. Colleen was at that club last night. You know the one where supposedly all the aliens hang out? She was at Foretoken.”

## 8

Colleen's disappearance was all I could think about the rest of the day, shoving aside everything that had happened with Luc and my stupid phone.

I knew why Colleen had gotten separated from her friends. Obviously. It must've happened during the raid, and I was pretty sure I knew what alley April was talking about. The same one I'd nearly face-planted into after scrambling out of the window. I hadn't seen a purse or shoes, but I also hadn't been paying attention to anything other than getting away from that club and finding Heidi.

April had insisted that Colleen's friends had gone to her house and her parents hadn't seen or heard from her either. It may be too soon to say she was truly missing, but no one knew where she was and April had been right about one thing, though. A purse and shoes left behind in an alley? That was bad news.

When people disappeared under those circumstances, their stories rarely had a happy ending.

But wasn't that Luxen found in the same alley? The one who was horrifically beaten? That was what Archer had said. He'd found Chas by the dumpster. And how coincidental was that? Colleen's belongings were found in the same alley where Chas had been nearly beaten to death?

That was what woke me up Sunday morning and stopped me from going back to sleep. Had Colleen seen something at the club Friday night, something like what I'd seen? Luc had said . . . God, hadn't he basically told me that people got hurt when they saw things they shouldn't? Maybe not in those words exactly, but that

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was how they'd come across. And he was definitely hiding Luxen at Foretoken—*unregistered* Luxen.

Did that happen to Colleen? She saw them or something, and now she was simply *gone*? Did it have something to do with what had happened to Chas? Maybe he knew something, and when he woke up, if he woke up, he'd be able to tell someone.

Then again, Chas was unregistered. Who could he tell who wouldn't jeopardize his safety?

A shudder rocked me as I flipped onto my side. I wasn't close to Colleen at all. With the exception of briefly speaking to her Friday night, we'd maybe exchanged a handful of sentences. Despite that and because of the reality of the situation, I really hoped she showed up.

As I sat up and threw my legs off the bed, I couldn't stop a horrible thought from forming. If something did happen to her, it could've . . . it could've happened to Heidi or me. I'd been in that dank, dark alley on Friday night.

I'd fallen into it, actually.

It could've happened to me when I went back to the club to get my phone. It felt like I'd tempted fate twice.

And who knew where Heidi had been until she made it to the car to wait for me? Another shudder rolled over me. That was scary to think about.

"That club is such bad news," I muttered as I made my way to the bathroom.

Colleen would probably show up to school Monday morning. The days of people simply vanishing without a trace were long over. People just didn't go missing like that. Not anymore.

I kept telling myself that the whole time I was in the bathroom and while I changed into a pair of leggings and a long shirt. Hopefully the power of positive thinking was a real thing.

I snatched my poor cell phone off the nightstand and then made my way downstairs. Mom was already awake, in the kitchen, wearing a cream-colored robe and fuzzy kitten slippers that I swore were the size of her head.

Despite her poor clothing choices, Mom was gorgeous. Her

short, sleek blond hair never looked frizzy like mine. She was tall and slender, carrying an innate gracefulness even when she wore giant kitten heads as slippers that I figured hadn't been passed down to me yet.

I had a bad habit of comparing myself to Mom.

She was like fine vintage wine, and I was the watered-down stuff that came in boxes and was sold at pharmacies.

"There you are." She held a monster-sized coffee cup between her palms as she leaned against the kitchen island. "I was wondering if you were ever going to get up."

Grinning, I shuffled into the kitchen. "It's not that late."

"I was lonely."

"Uh-huh." Walking over to her, I stopped and stretched up, kissing her cheek. "How long have you been awake?"

"I've been up since seven." She turned, watching me walk to the fridge. "Figured I'd spend Sunday in my pajamas. You know, not wash my hair or brush my teeth."

Laughing, I pulled out a bottle of apple juice. "That's hot, Mom. Definitely the not-brushing-your-teeth part."

"That's what I thought," she replied. "We didn't get a chance to chat last night. You were already asleep when I got home. You girls get into anything fun Friday night?"

Making a face, I kept my back to her as I grabbed a glass. "Nothing really. We just watched movies and ate cupcakes. Lots of cupcakes."

"Sounds like my kind of Friday night."

As I poured the apple juice, I smoothed out my expression before turning to her. "I ate so many cupcakes." Which was completely true. I probably gained five pounds on Friday night. I headed into the living room and plopped down on the couch, setting my glass on a coaster on the coffee table. Then I checked my phone. Zoe and James both had texted already. They wanted to grab lunch, but after Friday night and Saturday morning, I kind of wanted to hibernate safely in my house.

For about a month.

"You're heading to Frederick today? Right?" I asked as I walked

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into the living room. Even though it was Sunday, Mom worked a lot. There were some days I didn't even see her, but before she got married and decided to become a mom, she traveled to places all over the world, investigating outbreaks of diseases. Now she did more research type work, overseeing a group of medical researchers in the infectious diseases part of the medical compound.

Her job was kind of gross.

The things I'd sometimes heard her talking about gave me nightmares. Boils and pustules. Vessels hemorrhaging all over the place, eyes bleeding and bursting. Intense fevers that killed people in hours.

Yuck.

"I brought some paperwork home to get caught up on, but I don't have any plans to head out today."

"Damn," I said, picking up the remote and clicking on the TV. "I was planning to throw a party. A massive one. With drugs. Lots of drugs."

Mom snorted as she sat perched on the edge of the chair, placing her mug on another coaster. Mom was big on coasters. They were everywhere in the house.

She asked me about school as I flipped through the channels. There wasn't much to tell her as I mindlessly continued to scroll, stopping when I saw the president was on one of the news channels.

"What's he doing on TV? It's Sunday." That was kind of a dumb question. The president, fair-haired and somewhat young—at least compared to other presidents—seemed to always be on television, giving press conference after press conference or addressing the people.

"I think that's a speech from Friday."

"Oh." I started to turn the channel, but I noticed the banner along the bottom of the screen: PRESIDENT MCHUGH DISCUSSES BILL TO CHANGE ARP POLICIES.

ARP stood for Alien Registration Program, a system that required all Luxen who stayed behind after the war to be identified and monitored. There were even websites dedicated to informing

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people if a Luxen was registered as living in a neighborhood or working at a certain business.

I had never actually checked out one of those websites.

“What is this about?”

Mom lifted a shoulder. “There’s talk about changing some of the laws surrounding the registration.”

“I figured that,” I replied dryly.

When President McHugh spoke, he did so staring directly into the camera, and no matter what he said, there was always a slight tilt to his lips, like he was a few muscle twitches away from actually smiling but never fully committing. I always found that a bit unnerving, but everyone seemed to love him. I imagined his age helped, as did his appearance. I guessed he was handsome, in a rugged sort of way. Coming from a military background, he was elected in a landslide the past year, campaigning on the promise to make our country safe for all Americans.

I had a feeling he didn’t include the Luxen in the whole “all Americans” pitch.

Flipping the remote in my hand, I asked, “Any details on the changes?”

She sighed. “There’s a push for more separation, moving the Luxen to communities where they will be safer, which, of course, is safer for us.” She paused. “Also cracking down on unregistered Luxen. They have to pass the changes to existing laws to implement some of the programs he’s wanting to do.”

I thought about the raid at the club and the Luxen hidden in the room—the Luxen who’d seemed terrified of me. I promptly changed the channel, settling on a show about people who hoard all kinds of things in their home.

“I cannot watch this.” Mom shook her head. “It makes me want to start organizing things.”

Rolling my eyes, I looked around our living room—at our painfully organized living room. Everything had a place, which usually involved a basket—a white or gray basket. The entire house was that way, so how could Mom organize more? Baskets by size? Color?

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But Mom was totally going to watch this. Just like me. We couldn't help ourselves. These kinds of shows were like crack.

Picking up my drink, I stilled when I heard a weird sound, something I couldn't quite place. I put my juice aside, looking over my shoulder and into the foyer. The whole bottom floor was open, one room flowing into another with the exception of Mom's office, which was a closed door accessed from the entryway. Sunlight filtered in through the narrow windowpanes on either side of the front door.

Not seeing anything, I started to face the TV again when I thought I saw a shadow move in front of a window. I frowned. "Hey, Mom?"

"What, hon?"

The shadow by the window appeared again. "I think . . . someone is at the door."

"Huh." She rose. "We shouldn't be getting a delivery. . . ." She trailed off as the handle turned left and then right, as if someone were trying to open the door.

What the . . . ?

My gaze shot to the security keypad on the foyer wall, confirming what I already knew. The alarm wasn't set. It rarely was during the day, but the door was locked—

The bottom lock turned, unlocking as if someone had used a key.

"Mom?" I whispered, unsure if I was seeing what I was seeing.

"Evie, I need you to get up." Her voice was surprisingly flat and calm. "Now."

I'd never moved faster in my life. Backing up, I bumped into the gray ottoman as Mom quickly stepped around me. I expected her to go to the door, but she moved to where I'd been sitting. She yanked one of the pillows off the back of the couch and then pulled a cushion up.

Mom took out a gun—a freaking *shotgun*—from underneath the couch cushion. My mouth dropped open. I knew we had guns in the house. Mom was in the military. Duh. But hidden under a couch cushion where I sat and napped and ate cheesy puffs?

"Stand behind me," she ordered.

“Oh my God, *Mom!*” I stared at her. “I’ve been sitting on a shotgun this entire time? Do you know how dangerous that is? I can’t—”

The deadbolt unlocked, the click echoing like thunder. I took another step back. How . . . how was that possible? No one could unlock the deadbolt from the outside. *That* could only be unlocked from inside.

Mom lifted the shotgun, aiming straight at the door. “Evelyn,” she barked out. “Get behind me *now*.”

I darted around the couch, moving to stand behind her. On second thought, I whipped around and grabbed a candleholder—the new wooden gray-and-white one I’d wanted to take pictures of later. Not sure exactly what I was going to do with said candleholder, but gripping it like a baseball bat sure made me feel better. “If someone is breaking in, shouldn’t we call the police? I mean, that seems like the nonviolent way of dealing with this, and the police can help—”

The front door then swung open and someone tall and broad stepped inside, their features and form blurred out by the sun for a moment. Then the door swung close, slamming shut without anyone touching it, and the glow from the sun was gone.

I almost dropped the candleholder.

It was *him*.

Luc stood in my foyer, smiling like my mother wasn’t aiming a shotgun at his face—his pretty face. He didn’t glance at me. Not once as he inclined his head. “Hey, Sylvia. Long time no see.”

My heart pounded erratically as my gaze bounced between the two. He knew my mom? Where I lived?

Mom lifted her chin. “Hello, Luc.”