

KISS
OF THE
RAVEN
WITCH

NIGHTSHADE SHIFTERS

INES GRAY

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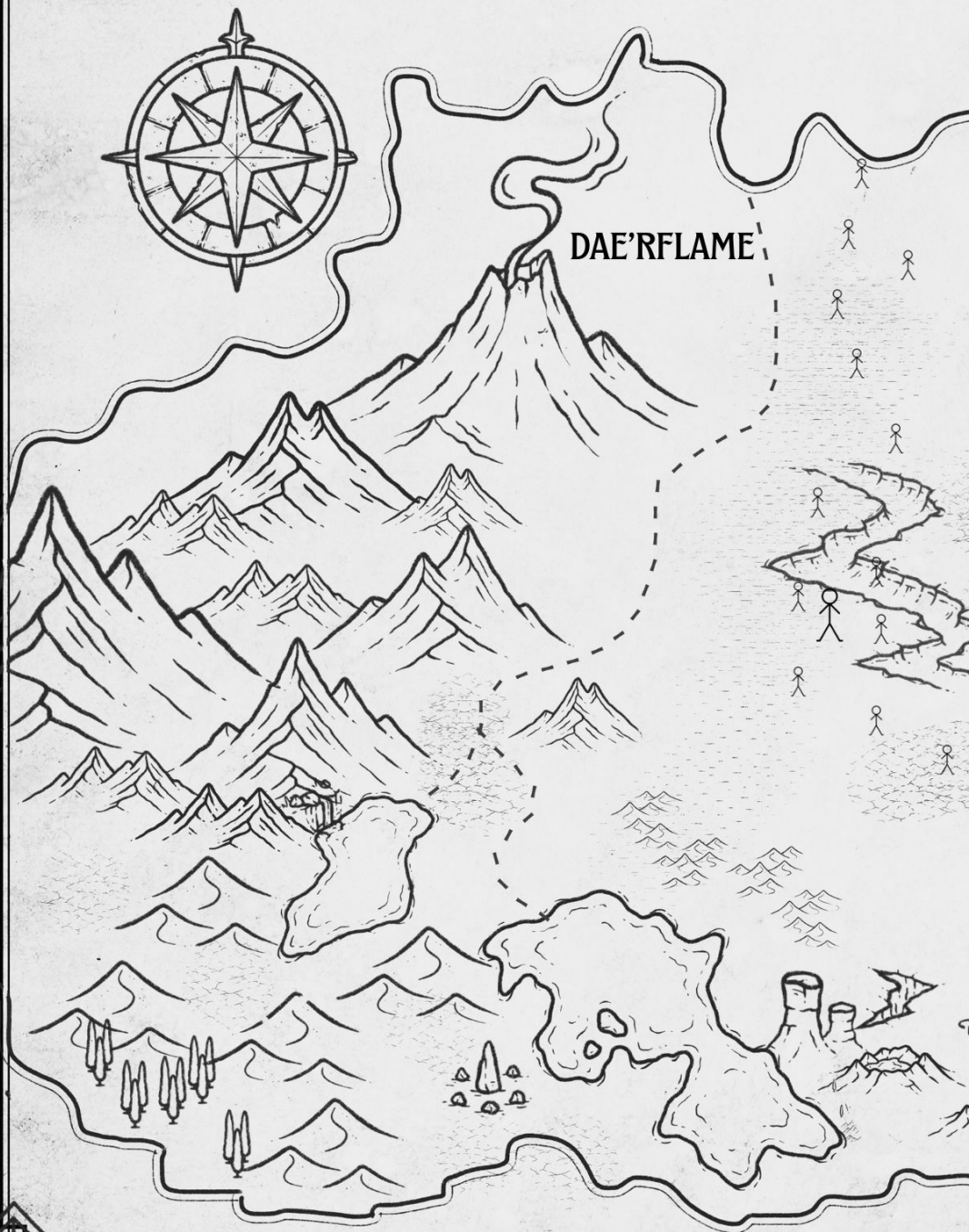
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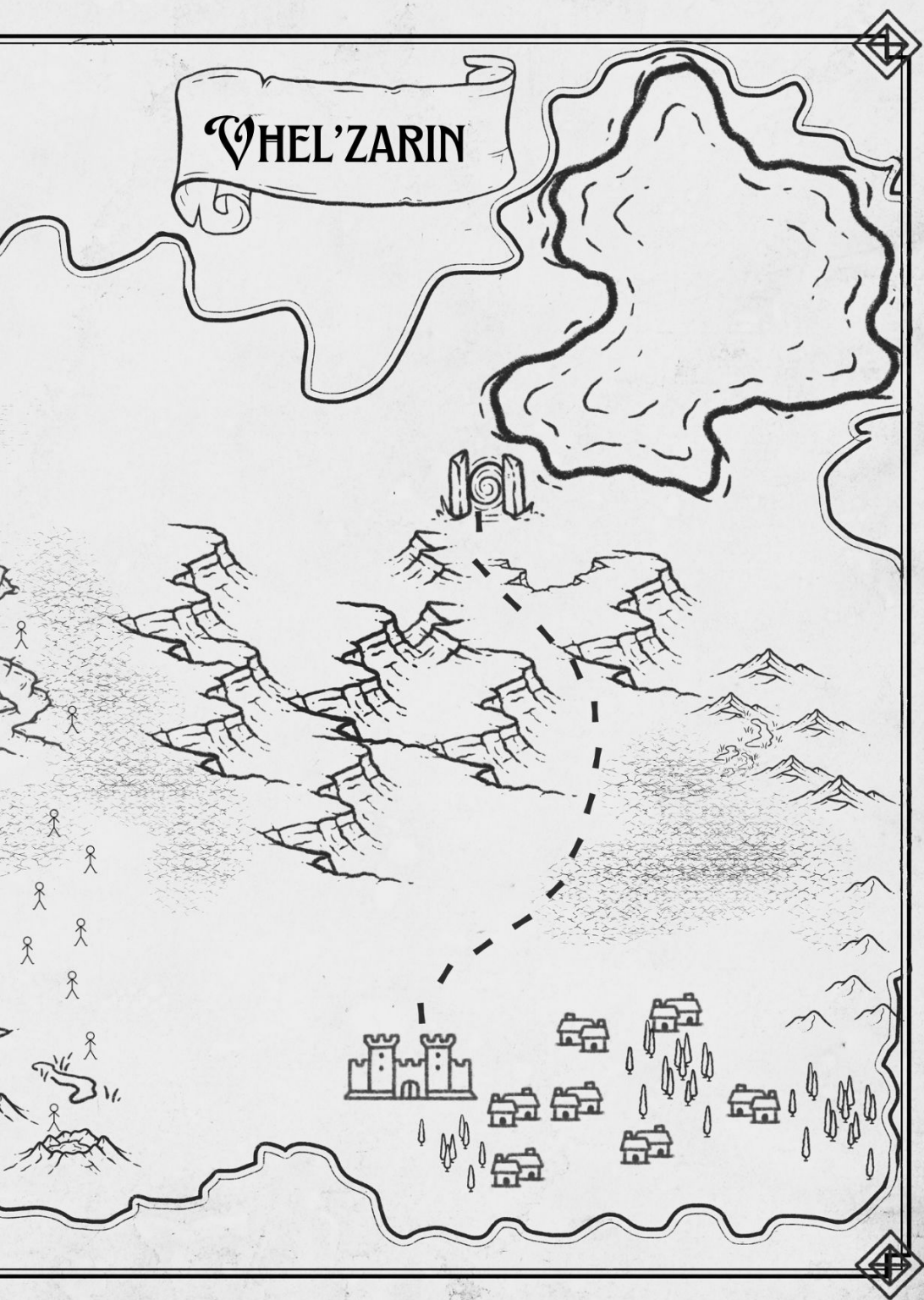
Dedication

For those who believe the most beautiful love stories are shaped by pain and fire. May you always find someone willing to become your monster ... and your sanctuary.

DAE'RFLAME



VHEL'ZARIN



Content Considerations

All content warnings can be found on the Kiss of the Raven Witch on my website. This book is a dark fantasy romance with dark themes. It contains mature content and is intended for adult readers of eighteen years or older. Some readers may find some scenes distressing or disturbing. Please visit my website for more information.

Playlist

“I Want You” — Savage Garden
“Season Of The Witch” — Lana Del Rey
“Bleed” — Mylie Taylor
“Without You” — Kid Laroi
“Animal” — Def Leppard
“You Are The Reason” — Calum Scott
“Shimmer” — Fuel
“Taste” — Ari Abdul
“Work Song” — Hozier
“Lose Control” — Teddy Swims
“For Tonight”—GIVEON
“Heavy Is The Crown” — Linkin Park
“Brother” — NEEDTOBREATHE
“I Found” — Amber Run
“Play With Fire” — Sam Tinnesz
Theme Song: “Power Over Me” — Dermot Kennedy



CHAPTER ONE



BREEZY ROCKED HER HIPS back and forth to the beat of an '80s tune. Thick unbraided curls swooshed against her back. Her eyelids fluttered shut as she surrendered to the music and lifted her arms above her head.

Tonight's band had a clear love affair with retro tunes. The crowd loved it, too, if the sea of writhing bodies was any indication. Immortals dressed to the nines squeezed onto the dance floor. They ground together, getting *jiggy with it*.

Breezy sucked in the surrounding air, letting the smell of joy and happiness saturate her senses. Tiny sparks lit her up from the inside out. Most assumed the two emotions were synonymous, but Breezy knew different. Each had a unique scent.

Of course, they were similar. Both were sweet. Both citrusy.

But where joy carried hints of oranges dusted in sugar, happiness took it a step further, smelling of clementines soaked in rich, golden honey.

The combination sent effervescent bubbles fizzing through Breezy's bloodstream. The corners of her lips lifted, and an involuntary *whoop* burst free.

"What do you think of the party?" Zue's question interrupted Breezy's musings. She slid her eyes open, catching

sight of the Szendori mid-twirl. The skirt of Zue's peasant dress billowed out.

Breezy raised her voice to be heard over the beats of electronic synthesizers and drum machines. "It's fantastic, Zue. I'm having so much fun." She dipped sideways into a triple shoulder roll, winked, then gave the mystical human a hip bump. Laughter bubbled up as Breezy's bare feet stomped in time with the vibrant bass. "Kyle hasn't given me a day off in forever. I can finally let my hair down." Breezy fluffed her coiffed curls.

Claire, the human she'd only met a few times, grinned, swinging her hips as she circled them. Breezy reached for Zue's hand, dizzying the Szendori into a spin. The squeal that followed shot bolts of citrusy sweetness into Breezy's body. She drank it up like a bee on a flower.

When the song ended, Claire leaned in. "I'm going to take a break to get a drink." The flaxen-haired human peeled away. A toothy white smile split her symmetrical features as she sashayed toward the fallen angel she'd arrived with.

The two had been fused at the hip all night. When their lips met in a sensual kiss, the musky scent of dark amber slammed into Breezy. A hint of rose water followed. Each time she caught a whiff of the lust and love mixture, it sent her into a lather. *Good gods*, it slid over her body like the touch of a persistent lover. And though she'd given Cruz room to glower all night, her gaze searched the crowd once again for her copilot.

There you are. The male looked like a demon of doom, perched alone on a barstool, perma-scowl affixed. When their eyes met, Cruz's dark irises flared gold. Those wide peepers jerked sideways so quickly he nearly fell off the stool. Spinning toward the bar, he flicked his wrist to send the tawny liquid in his tumbler down his gullet.

I should turn away, too. Ignore his grumpy ass.

But Breezy couldn't, because soft waves of cedarwood and old parchment flitted through the air. The familiar scent of longing dissipated so fast that Breezy couldn't be sure who emanated the emotion. And though Cruz's twisted expression hadn't faltered, that flare of gold in his irises suggested it could have been him. A foolish hope? Maybe. With so many bodies packed into the warehouse party, she couldn't be sure. It was nearly impossible to pin down the source. The endless space allowed emotions to blend and fade so fast. Unless someone was within a few feet, the scents evaporated before Breezy could locate the source. But she could fantasize it was Cruz, couldn't she?

Again, a wave of amber musk nearly took Breezy to her knees. *Oh my.* It threaded through her senses, clouding all logic. Before she could ponder the source, Journey popped out of nowhere, heading for Cruz. The euphoric scent of lust faded as quickly as it had come. Breezy considered watching the coming theatrics, but then spun away. The party had only been raging for an hour, and Journey already teetered on the balls of his feet.

Not my business.

Breezy focused on the dance floor, forcing her eyes to meet Zue's, plastering a smile on her face. Her heels dug into the concrete as she tried to dance illogical hope away.

The surrounding bolts of citrusy joy lasted all of five minutes. Clashing voices rose from across the room.

Zue's gaze jerked sideways. Breezy followed that line of sight. Cruz had Journey's shirt gripped in two fists. Biting words flew between the two immortals. Tension crackled the air.

Even with Breezy's heightened hearing, the loud music and raucous partygoers drowned out most of Cruz's words. His baritone surged like a locomotive on a collision course.

"High again ... when will ... learn?"

A cocky smile lifted the corners of Journey's lips. He dragged a hand through his long sandy hair. "Not high ... three drinks ... not your problem."

Breezy recoiled. The scent of anger nearly plowed her over. It was the only emotion worse than hate. Hate often mixed with love or longing, so it wasn't entirely noxious. Anger, on the other hand, smelled toxic. She'd never found the perfect comparison. Perhaps burnt vinegar. Either way, it stung her nose now.

With an abrupt shove, Cruz released Journey and stepped back, dragging a palm down his face.

Journey staggered through the exit, tossing a middle finger over his shoulder.

Cruz's eyes dropped to the floor as he spun around and barreled toward the restrooms at the back of the cavernous space.

Breezy's pulse kicked up. She tapped Zue's elbow. "Taking a break. Be back soon."

Pushing through the crowd, Breezy slipped off the dance floor and zeroed in on the restrooms. Cold concrete chilled her feet as she moved farther away from the fun and closer to the shadows of the dock. It took some time to duck, dodge, and sidestep the towering wooden crates as she searched for a male she shouldn't chase.

More like a beast I shouldn't hunt.

And sweet gods, this decision had *Will end badly* written all over it.

But for Breezy, it was too late. Wave after wave of dark amber had burrowed beneath her skin, making the space

between her thighs ache. Like a can of shaken cola, those effervescent bubbles hummed through her veins. And at this point, the end result didn't matter. Not if she could get Cruz alone. Besides, she had to find out why he kept throwing those uncensored looks all night.

An eerie stillness surrounded the storage area. Darkness, thick as black fog, shrouded the shipments. Breezy eyed the large rolling doors, noting they were secured with a massive padlock and chain. Emergency lights cast ominous red hues across the floor, highlighting yellow forklift lines and the silhouette of a caged pen.

Within minutes, the buoyant feeling in Breezy's chest deflated.

Dammit. Where are you?

Her shoulders slumped, and she admitted defeat, turning on a heel. She'd take five steps when something in the air made her freeze. The hair on her arms stood up ... and then ... the faint hint of woody vetiver drifted to her nose.

Out of nowhere, strong fingers pinched Breezy's nape. A yelp burst free as she was spun around. Cold concrete smacked her spine. Hissing, Breezy's inner animal surfaced until warm fingers tightened around her throat, pinning her in place.

A low growl grazed Breezy's ear. "Are you following me, *muñequita*?"

Shivers racked her body. The cold warehouse wall seeped through the thin fabric of her boho sheath. Cool air feathered her exposed shoulder, triggering goose bumps to rise.

Or perhaps it was the sweltering shifter holding her captive that caused the hypersensitivity.

Cruz pressed closer until only a thread of air separated them. The cruel sneer twisting his face probably would have

sent another female screaming. Her? Nope. Arousal soaked her panties.

Cruz's pearly white canines shot down, and the gold in his irises turned iridescent.

His inner beast was on edge. Or wait ... was he aroused?

"Answer me, Breezy. Are you following me?" Once again, the words came out as a snarl.

She swallowed to wet her dry throat. Another '80s tune thumped in the background. The drumbeat pitter-pattered in perfect time with her pulse. In the moment of silence that passed, burnt vinegar gave way to dark amber musk.

Breezy's body slackened. How could this be?

Feeling dumbstruck yet emboldened by the heady scent, she summoned a courage she didn't quite feel. Lifting a shaky finger, Breezy used the tip of one golden nail to trace the curve of Cruz's jaw. "Yes. I came looking for you. Please don't be angry and don't push me away. I'm worried. I saw the argument."

The harsh lines of Cruz's features smoothed, followed by a flutter of dark lashes and the slow close of his eyes. The rise and fall of his chest slowed. Warm breath, smelling of Flamethrower, feathered Breezy's lips.

Sweet gods, if her heart could beat any faster, she'd pass out.

Was this real? Was Cruz, in fact, inebriated enough to drop his icy walls?

With a tenderness that confused the hell out of her, Cruz nuzzled her palm. A soft keening hummed from his lips, and his nose skimmed the slope of her shoulder. It sounded like an engine sparked to life in his chest. The smooth purr confirmed her suspicions.

He's a feline shifter.

Caught in both disbelief and desire, Breezy dared not move. A second wet rush surged from her core, and her nipples puckered. *Oh gods.* She squeezed her knees together in a futile attempt to hide the arousal. *So useless.* He'd probably already caught the scent.

The motor-like rumble grew louder.

Nearby hinges creaked, breaking their hypnotic moment. Breezy slid her hand up, instinctively covering Cruz's mouth. "Shh." Somehow, a spell had been wrapped around her copilot. And despite his earlier agitation, Breezy needed to know where this charged electricity was going.

To her left, Claire exited the restroom, weaving side to side around the towering boxes to make her way back to the party. Something damp dragged across Breezy's palm, sliding up her index finger.

She gasped, her attention snapping back to Cruz.

The delicious warmth ceased. *Was that his tongue?*

Beneath her breastbone, her heart ricocheted like a bullet off metal. Gaping, she dropped her hand. Surely Cruz hadn't just shown affection. He barely tolerated her. Well, downright hated her was more like it. Then again ... was she wrong?

Reality returned, and the excitement faded. Breezy closed her gaping maw, then lifted her chin. "Journey's trouble. I don't trust him." Rolling her bottom lip between her teeth, she waited for the defensive response she knew was coming.

"You don't know Journey, or me, for that matter. Just stay out of it."

Breezy's heart sank. How could he say that? Six months of flying together. Countless hours crammed into a cockpit. Sure, Cruz spoke more in grunts and growls, but she'd learned to interpret every clipped sound and drawn-out

sigh. Even the way his fingers flexed over the yoke. She probably knew him better than he knew himself.

Fuck it. She straightened, daring to push further. What did she have to lose? Could this male hate her any more? She slid the flats of her palms up Cruz's chest. *Oh wow!* She'd never dared touch him before. Firm muscles twitched beneath the silky green button-down, a color that accentuated the shifter gold in his irises. The combination reminded her of nature.

Rays of dusk spilling through Eucalyptus leaves.

Sweet hell, this male was devastating, from his short-cropped dark waves to the golden skin stretched over his chiseled frame. Breezy knew her eyes lingered far too long on his full pink lips before she met that predatory glare.

Somewhere along the line, she'd fallen for her partner. Though she'd sworn never to do it, she'd broken the golden rule: *Don't shit where you eat.* And yep, here she was, tangled up with a coworker who kept his emotions locked down tighter than a cockpit in a storm. If she didn't have the unique ability to scent emotions, she never would have approached Cruz tonight. That cocktail of dark amber still left her dizzy, and she was sure a hint of it mixed with Cruz's natural vetiver scent now.

Breezy dragged the pad of her finger over Cruz's bottom lip. "Forget about Journey. You can't leave a party meant for all the pilots. It's rude. Kyle and Horus put a lot of money and time into this." She paused as the far-off beat of a new song thumped in the background. "Stay." Daring to push further, Breezy curled her fingers around the base of Cruz's skull, locking her eyes on his.

Kiss me already. "Come back to the party. Dance with me."

Beneath her palm, Cruz's muscles tensed. The subsequent growl came out as a rasp. "I don't dance." His accent

flowed over her skin like water, making her feminine parts crazed with need. And the words might have been rough, but the smoldering gaze that lingered on her mouth told a different story. The peaks and valleys of his hard body pressed closer. The grip around her throat tightened. A stunning hardness prodded her belly, making her eyelids flutter.

Cruz's hips rolled, even as his upper lip curled. "I fight, fly, and *fuck*. Nothing more."

Breezy swayed. Was the warehouse tilting?

Her copilot was such a contradiction. A walking wall of bristling anger, but in this moment, his body betrayed him.

Oh sure, Cruz's rugged good looks would make any woman swoon, but it was his heart that snared Breezy months ago.

This pull in her chest had begun in Mexico City when they'd gotten stranded together. She'd been ransacking the plane's cabinets for mustard when a blur of Cruz outside caught her attention. He'd been shirtless, grinning, and tossing a football with the village kids — like he actually knew the definition of fun. She'd nearly choked on her whole wheat wedge of meat and cheese. Then, when his big hand had ruffled one kid's hair? She'd had to Heimlich herself on the back of a passenger seat just to breathe.

It had been ... heart-stopping. Well, air-stopping, really.

And *sweet gods*, she'd kept that shit to herself. If he knew she'd seen him? Her grumpy copilot would bare his canines, beat on his chest like a gorilla, and tell her she was blind as a cuegle demon.

It was the spark that lit a flame.

And yet, *that* had been nothing.

Her roaming palms reached Cruz's shoulders. Red light glinted off the bracelet circling her wrist. The jewelry had materialized in her locker two weeks ago, on her twen-

ty-sixth birthday. She'd been struck stupid at the sight of the gift, wrapped in red gauze, sitting pretty on her locker shelf. The metal bangle was so intricately designed that it had to be handmade. Yet when she'd asked her coworkers, no one knew anything about it. Until Journey mentioned that Cruz had a forge.

Talk about disbelief.

When she'd finally mustered the backbone to ask Cruz, he'd responded with a deadpan look, a grunt, and a shrug. In truth, that quiet anonymity struck her deeper than any confession. The bracelet was now a permanent fixture on her wrist. Yet to this day, Breezy had no idea what it meant. Why give her something so precious if he hated her? The mixed signals left her reeling.

She peered into those golden eyes now, light catching on the bracelet, her body kicking into overdrive at the feel of his hard chest.

Words clogged her throat. "I don't have a problem with fighting, flying, or ..." She paused, letting her tone drop to a husky rasp. "*Fucking.*" Tilting her chin up, Breezy brought her lips to a hair's breadth away from his.

Cruz's nostrils flared. His breaths shortened, and a heavy-lidded gaze swept over her filmy sheath. Dark amber choked the air.

Breezy's knees wobbled. Holy gods, was this really happening? Cruz always kept her at arm's length. Paid her little attention. What was different? Too much Flamethrower? Each stolen glance through the night had sparked a new warmth in Breezy's chest. Especially when she'd watched that perma-scowl deepen as she danced with Tripp. More than once, she'd caught Cruz's sexy golden eyes staring at the slit in her dress, her bare legs, or the sparkly polish on her toenails before his gaze jerked sideways.

And now, something simmered, threatening to boil over. Cruz's head dipped. His bottom lip brushed hers. The scent of cedarwood, parchment, and amber tightened around her chest like a band threatening to cut off oxygen. *Oh yes.*

Seconds before the kiss could land, Cruz jerked back. His palms slapped the concrete on each side of her temples.

Breezy flinched.

His head shook back and forth. "*Madre de los dioses*, I don't want to dance with you." Cruz's body flew backward, leaving her cold. His sharp canines flashed as he growled like a feral animal. "We're *copilotos*. That's all. Get it through your thick skull."

Okay. Ow. But Breezy shoved the harsh words aside. "Cruz, please stop pushing me away." She twisted her fingers into the fabric of his shirt, yanking him closer. "Just promise you won't do something stupid. Please? The others are whispering. They think Journey relapsed. Kyle suspended his flights." Breezy knew her high-pitched tone revealed too much. But fear writhed like a living creature beneath her skin. Fear that Cruz would storm after Journey, trying to rein in their reckless coworker, who seemed caught in the eye of a storm.

She didn't know Cruz and Journey's whole story. Kyle forbade his pilots from sharing details about their pasts. It was the only way to protect the reasons they were in his witness protection. But through snippets of conversation, she'd pieced together that Cruz and Journey had worked undercover. They'd risked their lives to take down some kingpin.

Whatever had happened, it had carved trenches into Cruz's soul.

He pushed off the wall. Muscles rippled beneath her fingers as he freed himself. His gaze hardened, and his inner

asshole rose to the surface. "Sorry. I don't make promises." Enamel clacked with a hard snap. "I'm leaving. Stop worrying about me. I'm nothing to you, Breezy." Spinning away, Cruz bolted for the exit like she'd asked him to put a diamond ring on her finger.

Two feet from the door, he stopped with his hand hovering over the handle. The broad line of his shoulders slumped. For a moment, Breezy thought he might turn back. Instead, Cruz's voice lowered to a hoarse rasp, but with her supernatural hearing, she caught every word. "Trust me. You don't want me. It's for the best. Go back to the party and dance with Tripp."

The door groaned as Cruz pushed through, revealing the city lights of Luxor. With his hands shoved into his pockets, he disappeared behind a dense wall of darkness, and the heavy door slammed shut.

For the longest time, Breezy stood rooted to the floor, staring at the empty space. In her chest, something shattered like glass.

Feeling as though she trudged through quicksand, Breezy returned to the party and managed to force herself through all the social graces. With a fake-ass smile plastered to her face, she danced, laughed, and kept her chin up. But no matter how fast the music played, how much joy hung in the air, and how brightly the string lights twinkled, she couldn't ignore the hole behind her sternum.

Cruz had taken a piece of her heart when he ran. A piece she feared she'd never get back.



CHAPTER TWO

Three Months Later

Cruz kept his head on a swivel as he slinked through the darkness of Nightshade's fixed base operations. With a tap on his phone, the screen's glow pulled up the roster, confirming what he already knew.

Hell, how could he forget?

The flight schedule was burned into his brain. Paranoia had him checking it on repeat. Four times at his apartment, once behind the wheel of his Denali, and again in the parking lot.

Still no change.

For thirty more minutes, he'd have the airfield to himself. Just enough time to get in, grab his jacket, and get ghost. Oh, and steal the jet meant for the Venezuela run.

Okay, so technically, it wasn't theft, just an assignment switch, but he wasn't going to risk running into anyone before pissing off his boss. So yeah, he had just enough time to make what might be the dumbest decision of his life.

Still, he didn't stop. With any luck, he'd be in and out before the sun cleared the hangar.

And thank fuck he'd banked enough leave to disappear for a while. Maybe he'd been a little gruff with Kyle, but that wasn't new.

Slipping through the locker room door, Cruz beelined it for his locker. The mistake hit him halfway there. Running water sounded in the far shower stall. Then the scent hit.

Sonofabitch.

The paranoia and anxiety must have clouded his spot-on senses. Breaking into a near run, Cruz slid up to his locker, grabbed the handle, and damn near ripped the thing off its hinges. If he were a smart male, he'd turn away now, but he couldn't leave his lucky bomber jacket behind. No, he needed it for this flight, more so than any other in his life.

The shower cut off.

Sweat beaded along his upper lip.

Come on. Come on.

The leather sleeve slipped from his shaky fingers. Moving fast on a curse, he bent forward, swiped it back up, and smacked his forehead on the metal shelf, damn near knocking himself out. Stars swirled in his periphery as he snatched up his Danner boots.

Tucking the gear under an armpit and pressing a palm to the spot above his left eyebrow, Cruz slammed the locker door shut and blew out air on a string of expletives. *Get the hell out, and for fuck's sake, don't turn around.* He made it ten steps.

"Cruz?"

An involuntary shiver swept through him. Every time his name slipped from Breezy's lips, a foreign sensation hijacked his body. It started in his toes, spread upward through his groin, then splintered through his chest and shot a feral rush into his brain.

What the hell was she doing here?

Since Luxor, he'd avoided Breezy at all costs. When she walked into a room, he walked out. Any excuse to avoid that pull he'd felt at the party. *Dangerous.* Even during missions,

he'd been tight-lipped and strictly professional — more so than usual.

And *sweet gods!* What had he been thinking? He'd nearly kissed his copilot in Egypt. His cock had taken over all thought. But *godsdamn* that dress. The sheer fabric had revealed *so much*. Seriously, what had happened? His eyes had been metal, and Breezy a magnet, that's what.

Yep, if anything, the experience had only solidified why this hard line had to be drawn. Why he barely looked her way.

With his eyes glued to the red glow of the exit sign above the door, he ground his teeth together. "Didn't know anyone else was here."

Breezy's melodious words swept over him like the glide of soft fingertips. The context didn't matter. She could be cursing like a sailor, and still, his body would respond.

"The plumbing at my place is on the fritz." She sighed, her voice pitching up as wet feet slapped the tile, moving closer.

His own feet responded, stepping closer to the exit.

Don't look. Don't look. Don't— He looked.

Wrapped in a towel, soaked dark curls dripped down Breezy's shoulders. Steam billowed around her curvy body, her silhouette backlit by fluorescent lighting.

Air wrenched from Cruz's lungs.

She's naked beneath that towel.

His entire body hardened.

Why? He had no idea. Since first meeting Breezy, he'd kept his walls up. Sure, she'd tried to break through over and over, her incessant chatter and questions filling the cockpit during missions. But he'd succeeded in giving her nothing. Kept it professional. Answered only those questions that weren't personal. Yet somehow, that soft voice had gotten

under his skin, and a few fissures had begun to spread upward through the foundation. Visions of the past assaulted his mind, seeping through the cracks.

Breezy padded closer. Light glinted off the bracelet circling her wrist. Proof the cracks were spreading too quickly. Proof every fucking one needed to be superglued back together.

Cruz gave a mental shake, faced the door again, and forced his feet to move.

“Where are you going?” Breezy’s quizzical tone spurred him on.

Sweet gods, it seemed he was always running from this female. *No more questions*. No way in hell would he tell her he was picking up Ash and taking the Venezuela run alone. Swinging open the door, he stopped at the threshold. “None of your business, Breezy. I’m leaving for a few days.”

And with that, he left her in the middle of the room, wet and dripping, no doubt a look of defeat plastered on her face.



From the pilot’s seat, Cruz eyed the churning storm ahead. *Rain. Just rain. Should be fine*. He’d flown through worse. No need to spook Ash, who already wore a twisted mask of worry.

The fallen angel’s baritone cut through the cab. “Cruz, man, is this storm safe to fly through?”

Keeping both eyes glued to the windshield, Cruz pushed his aviator glasses up. “It’s rain.” His shoulders flexed beneath the well-loved bomber jacket. “Relax. Providing we don’t get lightning or ice, we’re good. Besides, if it gets bad, I’ll just divert us.”

Ash's wide-eyed gaze ping-ponged around the cabin. And shit, the cowboy looked like a virgin about to pop his cherry. Cruz chuckled at the big, bad Watcher's nerves.

Ash's tone pitched up. "This plane's smaller than your usual," he said. "Is *it* safe?"

Cruz snorted, unable to hold back a chuckle. "What's the matter, Watcher? Afraid of flying?"

Ash shot Cruz a one-hundred-watt smile. One full of dimples and swagger. No doubt, it was the one he reserved for all the ladies he was rumored to bed.

Maybe I should feel special.

"Nah, flying's cool." Ash drawled, his words smooth despite the unease written on his face. "It's the *crashing* part I don't like."

Still chuckling, Cruz flipped a rocker switch. "Aren't you a regenerative being? I thought angels had wings."

Pulling back his shoulders, Ash thumped his chest. "Half-human, half-fallen angel. Daddy lost his wings when he fell, and humans never had them to begin with." He shook his shoulders in an exaggerated display. "No wings. And yeah, I regenerate, but I wouldn't want to scar this pretty face." With his chin gripped between a thumb and forefinger, Ash wiggled his jaw. "Besides, I might end up decapitated. Heads don't grow back, you know."

Cruz shook his *cabeza* and laughed. "The way I see it, I'm transporting precious cargo on this plane — *me*. So I won't be taking any chances. I don't regenerate as quickly as angels. And unlike you, my limbs don't grow back." Cruz threw Ash an *I got this* look and tightened his grip over the yoke. "The craft's safe."

Ash's palms lifted. "I'll take your word for it." The Watcher's tone turned serious. "Where's Breezy? I thought Nightshade's pilots always flew in twos."

The mention of his copilot triggered unwanted emotion to snake through Cruz's chest. Lying to Kyle had been a necessity. But lying to Breezy? Nah, that had been an asshole move on his part, plain and simple.

Annnnd that was probably why Ash's innocent question triggered a godsdamn fire to burn through his veins.

He didn't like it.

But sweet hell, why did he care about lying to Breezy? For the past three months, he'd succeeded in ignoring her. It wasn't like they had a relationship.

And no way in hell would he examine why that made him feel worse than the lie.

Thankfully, Breezy had taken the hint. That bright light of hers had eventually dimmed. And *good gods!* Could somebody please tell him what in the fuck this ache in his chest was? No way in hell was it guilt. He'd gotten his wish, right? He'd crushed that puppy-dog look right out of her.

So, why does it feel like poison is eating away at my veins?

It didn't take a genius to figure it out. He shouldn't have lied. He was out here alone, cock-and-balls swinging. Flying against orders with no backup. And right now, his conscience was throwing a left hook. *Fuck, I should have followed the rules.* But Journey was out here alone, *dammit.* And if Perez had him ... Cruz ground down on his molars, shaking his head. No, honesty was out of the question. He couldn't allow Breezy to get caught up in the mess of his past.

Clearing his throat, Cruz answered Ash with a scowl. "The jet's small enough to handle solo." He swallowed, forcing down emotion. "I don't *need Breezy.* For *flying.*" The last two words sputtered from his lips. *Fuck's sake.* No doubt, Ash already saw too much.

Thankfully, the Watcher took the hint and changed the subject. "What do you know about Perez?" he asked. "I could use more intel before we land."

Cruz pressed his lips together. The skeletons of his old life just wouldn't die, would they? Shoving the flashbacks aside, he focused on the facts. "He was Pedro Garcia's second when Journey and I worked undercover. A real jackass. I'm pretty sure he always had his eye on taking over the cartel. Journey and I inadvertently cleared a path when we testified against Garcia, solidifying the drug czar's prison sentence." Cruz wrinkled his brow, eyeing the storm ahead. "I'm going to divert us around the rain. I see lightning ahead."

The sky turned a dark indigo. Cruz adjusted course. The instruments flickered. Lightning forked, followed by an eerie pulse of purple light. Electricity shot through Cruz's bones, as if the jolt had burrowed beneath his skin. His inner beast stirred.

Air burst from Ash's mouth. "Whoa. *Tell me* you felt that."

Cruz leaned closer to the glass. "Hell yeah, I felt it." His grip tightened over the yoke as he fought to keep his breaths even. *Shit!* Could Perez have teamed up with a supernatural?

Anxiety bled from Ash's tone. "What was it?"

Cruz scanned for a barrier. "I think we just passed through a conjuring wall."

"A spell?"

He ignored Ash's question, flicked on the wipers, and pressed a finger to his headpiece, activating the comm. The radio crackled. "Cruz to Roam, over."

Roam's shrill cry stabbed his eardrum like a hot poker. "Cruz! Thank the gods! Where the hell are you? Kyle's spitting mad. He's taking it out on every —"

He cut Nightshade's only comm operator off midsentence. "Listen, Roam, I might only have a few minutes before we lose transmission. I'm with Ash, en route to Caracas."

Roam shrieked. Cruz winced. The high-pitched wail might as well have been a dog whistle. "Are you crazy? You must be if — oh shit — here comes Kyle. It's been nice knowing you."

Static crackled through the earpiece as if Roam's headset was ripped from her skull. When a furious Aussie growl replaced the static, Cruz braced for an explosion.

"Cruz, I swear to the gods, if you're where I think you are, you'd better hope those drug-dealing bastards get hold of you before I do. Tell me you are not on your way to find Journey."

Cruz blew out a heavy sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I *wish* I could tell you that, boss."

"Godsdamn it!" Something crashed in the background. "How can I run a witness protection program if nobody follows the damn rules? You cannot waltz into the belly of the beast, willy-nilly, and expect to fly under the radar. You're going to get yourself killed."

"Just *listen*, Kyle." Cruz swallowed down emotion. "I'm with Ash. We're en route to Caracas. I was *only* going to nose around, see if I could find out who nabbed Journey, but all that's moot right now. We just passed through a conjuring wall, and I don't have much time before the transmission cuts out. I need you to pass on a message —" Static swallowed the call.

Cruz gritted his teeth. "Kyle! You still there?" More static. "*Shit!*" Cruz ripped off the headset and flung it to the floor. The aviators followed, along with a litany of curses.

The heat of a glare scorched the side of his face.

Ash cleared his throat.

Cruz shot him a sideways glance. "What?"

"Oh, I don't know." The angel motioned toward the black and amethyst clouds consuming the sky. "Care to explain what the hell is going on? I'd just like to know before I meet my makers." The Watcher's hands flitted over his torso, checking the strength of the seat belt. "I get that you disobeyed a direct order from your boss, but what does that have to do with this storm?"

Feeling like a cornered animal, Cruz sighed and admitted defeat. He dragged a palm down his face. "Shit." His brows knitted. "I'm sorry, Ash. I took this transport without permission. Kyle explicitly forbade me and Journey from setting foot in South America. He said it was too dangerous. But Journey disappeared a few days ago." He wiped perspiration from his brow. "I think Perez has him." Ice began to hammer the windshield.

"Are you saying this storm is for you? That Perez is trying to kill you?" Ash's words held an incredulous tone.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Cruz muttered, more to himself than to Ash. Perez was ruthless, but magic like this? Someone powerful was in play. The surrounding air turned darker. The plane rattled and pitched. Cruz flipped on all exterior lights. "As far as I know, Perez is human. But he could have aligned with a supernatural friend. Wouldn't be the first time someone in his line of work did." He glanced out the side window. "I'll do my best to get us out of this. Maybe I can punch back through the wall. Get us back in the clear blue." His teeth clacked. "Hang on."

In the blink of an eye, the entire sky turned pitch-black. Inky clouds surrounded the jet. The instrument panel flickered. Cruz let his inner beast surface to sharpen his vision.

Glistening beads of sweat gathered along Ash's forehead. He turned in his seat. "I might be hallucinating, but tell me

that cloud behind us does *not* look like a mouth about to take a bite.” Between two clouds, a spiraling black hole yawned open. The dark mass shifted into something that resembled a face.

Cruz sniffed for magic. “You’re not hallucinating.” The ice pelting the jet intensified, needling the hull like a thousand tiny daggers. With a series of rolls, he managed to maneuver the aircraft away from the gaping maw. The microjet tilted as he fought to keep it steady.

Ash visibly swallowed. “I could throw a blast of energy at it, but the power will launch us hard in the opposite direction.”

Cruz tried to relax his shoulders. “Let’s call that option number two.” He forced the craft into a nosedive to avoid a twisting cloud ahead. Ash’s head knocked against the side window. He blew out a curse. To their left, the edge of the spell came into focus. A clear line emerged between the storm and the pristine blue. “There!” Cruz pointed. Hope surged. “That’s the boundary. If I can punch us through —”

A sharp crack split the air. Ash twisted in his seat and froze. “Make it quick.” Tension strained the Watcher’s tone. The spiraling mass of clouds behind them split into two enormous tornadoes, growing larger and churning with malevolent energy. Cruz bit the inside of his cheek, guiding the plane toward the invisible wall. The wing skimmed the edge. The jet shuddered. They flung back like a leaf caught in a hurricane. A string of curses spat from Cruz’s lips. Thunder cracked through the sky. Ice slammed the exterior. He banked hard again, aiming for the line where the dark barrier met a clear sky. A gust of wind sideswiped the microjet. It shuddered and bucked.

Popping off his seat belt, Ash shot to his feet, gripping the cabin’s overhead panel. He spread his arms wide and bowed

his head. “I think” — he inhaled a breath, then blew it out in a rush — “it’s time for option two.” Ash’s entire body shook.

With his eyes glued to the turbulent tornado rounding the plane, Cruz braced himself for what would come next. A blast of concussive energy shot from Ash, tearing through both cyclones. Twisting his fist, he fired a second blast through the passenger side window. The plane launched sideways. They hurtled through the spell’s barrier. The moment Cruz’s body relaxed, one of the tornadoes clipped the tail fin. The plane spiraled.

Metal screeched. Cruz’s grip over the yoke tightened as it shook in his fists. *“I can’t straighten her out! She’s outta control. We’re going down!”*

Cruz’s skull slammed into the window. A spiderweb of cracks spread through the thick glass. Alarm bells wailed. Roared curses bounced around the cockpit as Ash was tossed like a rag doll inside the twisting cab. They tumbled end over end, metal screeching, until something cracked so hard against Cruz’s skull that it sent him spinning into a black void.



Sonofabitch. Something speared Cruz’s oblique. His head rang like a bell. Blinking through a blurry haze, muffled words pierced the roar in his ears. “Cruz! Can you hear me?” Something pinged off his arm.

Cruz moaned and struggled to focus. Ash’s pinched features swam into view. A guttural growl slithered through the air. *What the —?*

“Wake the fuck up!” Ash rasped. Beneath the fog, a surge of malevolent energy crashed into Cruz. The angel’s harsh

tone snapped him into reality. “We got company. Unfriendly, if the aggression soaking the air is any indication.”

Cruz lifted his head, groaning. Warm liquid rushed into his eye, nearly blinding him. His beast awakened, clawing beneath his skin, desperate to shift. Outside the wreckage, a dark shape with glowing golden eyes slithered around the hull.

Ash sucked in a breath, lowering his voice to a whisper. “Cruz, dammit. We got trouble outside, and my fucking leg’s broken.”

Cruz’s nostrils flared. He snapped his head around, the scents of wolf and leopard shifters flooding his senses. A raspy whisper scraped his throat. “*No.*” Perez had to be behind the conjuring wall. Somehow, Cruz knew these fuckers were here for him.

Metal screeched. Something sharp raked through the fuselage. A massive weight slammed into the damaged door. What was left of the frame sputtered.

Injured and weak, Cruz knew fighting was futile. Death was imminent.

A tidal wave of regret crashed down.

Godsdamn it! I’ll never get a chance.

For this very reason, he’d kept Breezy at arm’s length. The chains of his past had kept him shackled, which meant he’d never be free. It was why he’d been such an ass to everyone.

Especially to Breezy.

Cruz squeezed his eyelids shut and groaned. *Sweet, sweet Breezy. I’ll never see her again.* The female was a beam of golden light. And now, she’d never know how desperately he longed to bask in her warmth. Cruz hadn’t missed the stolen glances. He knew what that look in a female’s eyes meant. But she deserved so much more than a male haunted by ghosts.

He'd nearly lost himself to desire that night in Luxor. The scent of Breezy's arousal had been an overpowering force. Hell, it was still permanently etched into his brain. He used it and her image to sate himself constantly. Gods, they'd been a hair's breadth away from more. But somehow, at the last moment, he did what he did best. Shut down, shut her out, and pushed her into the arms of another male. *Fuck*, that had nearly shattered his soul.

But what did it matter? Even if he'd been able to admit the truth to Breezy, it wasn't like he could do anything about it. Not with the weight of his past hanging over his head. Not when Garcia and Perez had him in this godsdamn chokehold. The proof breathed down his neck now, in the form of a leopard shifter.

Cruz lifted his chin to meet Ash's worried gaze. "Tell Breezy ... I'm sorry."

Massive paws, each the size of his head, crashed through the mangled door, piercing metal like paper. Serrated claws plunged into Cruz's abdomen, shredding his skin. He cried out. White-hot agony detonated inside his chest. The beast wrenched him from the cockpit, stealing him into the shadows of the Amazonian jungle. Sharp razors continued to rake his flesh. The wolf howled.

So much for my lucky jacket.

A cry of pain bellowed from Cruz's throat.

The last thing he heard before darkness swallowed him again was his name tearing from Ash's throat.



CHAPTER THREE



CRACKING ONE EYE OPEN, Cruz groaned. Pain sang through his body like a tuning fork. Each breath felt like sandpaper grating on his esophagus. Somehow, he shifted positions and pushed upright. A hard surface bit into his back. Concrete walls and a barred door swam into focus.

That stabbing returned to his oblique. *Fuck!* He winced. Using a light touch, his fingertips grazed the swell of three cracked ribs. An irritating clink of metal sounded with each move. He glanced down, seeing manacles encasing his wrists and ankles. Embedded chains slithered like serpents from the wall at his back to each cuff. He gave one a hard tug ... and was rewarded with more pain. “Sonofabitch!”

Slumping, Cruz’s eyes lifted to a small window. Dust motes spiraled through the narrowly spaced bars. The angle of the sun suggested he’d been unconscious for several hours.

Memories buoyed to the surface. Not satisfied with claws and fangs alone, the two assholes who’d abducted him had shifted back to their human forms. They’d hammered him with fists and feet, too.

Cruz took inventory of all injuries, running a hand over his body. Luckily, nothing else was broken. Well, aside from his nose.

He lifted his chin and sniffed. *Ouch*. Latching onto the scents of other prisoners, he filtered through the cocktail of blood, sweat, and fear. With his nose twitching, he finally caught a whiff of his old partner.

A heavy sigh rolled from his lips. "At least half the mission's done." *Found Journey*.

Too bad it had landed him in a cage.

Cruz dragged his aching body toward the wall of bars, scanning the dimly-lit corridor. Stone walls melted into dark shadows, punctuated by the occasional flicker of torchlight. Guttural groans reached his ears. A sudden shriek sliced the air, followed by a sickening *thwap* of something solid hitting flesh. "Shut the fuck up!"

Bone cracked.

Someone screamed.

Sweat trickled down Cruz's temple.

Hot, sticky air seeped through the window and clung to his skin. He used a forearm to wipe away the sticky beads of sweat forming on his forehead. "Journey. You there? Can you hear me?" The words came out hoarse, followed by a coughing fit that caused pain to radiate through Cruz's cracked ribs. *Godsdamn it!*

Searching the cell, he spotted a shallow bowl of murky water in the corner. The setup reminded him of an animal's feeding trough. *Not far from the truth*. He grabbed it, brought it to his lips, and emptied the dish in three gulps. The taste of dirt and rust lingered on his tongue.

Returning to the door, he called out for Journey again.

Silence.

Movement caught in his peripheral vision. A gaunt figure, two cells away, dragged itself forward. A male who looked more like a skeleton slid up to the iron. He nodded. "Name's Soran. What kind of shifter are you looking for?"

Cruz shoved his nose through the bars. "Panther. Have you seen him?"

A slow shake tilted Soran's head. "Ain't seen him, but I heard whispers. Word is, there's a panther here, but he's deteriorating."

Cruz pinched his brows together. "Deteriorating how?"

Soran's eyes narrowed to slits. "Not regenerating right."

Ice slid down Cruz's spine. "Like he's mortal?"

"Yeah." Soran nodded. "None of us are healing like we should. But the panther?" Soran's head shook back and forth. "Heard they pitted him against an Andean bear. Got tore up real bad. He hasn't bounced back."

Cruz gripped the bars. Whatever the hell was happening, it was worse than he'd thought.

The clack of hard-soled shoes echoed down the hall. Soran's irises flickered gold. One finger lifted in warning. His voice dropped to a whisper. "For your own sake, get away from the bars." The other shifter disappeared, melting into the shadows of his cell.

Cruz exhaled, forcing his body to move. He pushed off the bars and retreated to a filthy mattress shoved in the corner. Easing down, he rested both arms over bent knees, staring at the pockmarked wall.

The footsteps ceased outside Cruz's cell. A familiar scent slithered into the cramped space. One he'd always associated with corruption. Manuel Perez peered through the iron. His chin bobbed once. "Cougar." The name dripped like venom from his lips. "How nice of you to return."

Cruz heaved a sigh, keeping his eyes glued to the wall. "Who created the conjuring wall, Perez? I know it wasn't you. Though I'm sure you baited the trap."

Arrogance rolled off the drug czar as he dismissed the question. "You always were smart. Too bad intelligence

couldn't keep you from making the same mistake over and over. Always wasting your energy to save the panther." He clicked his tongue. "You're predictable." Perez spat the words. "I knew it was only a matter of time."

Cruz rolled his gaze to the ceiling, then faced Perez. The asshole hadn't changed. Not a single dark hair out of place. "Let's cut with the bullshit. What do you want from us?"

The drug czar's head tilted. A disturbing, platinum-white smile made the corners of his lips twitch. "You betrayed the organization —" Abruptly, his lips pursed. "What do you go by now, Dante? I'm sure you have a shiny new name."

No point in hiding it. Dante had never been his real name, anyway. And Cruz hadn't spoken his birth name in over thirty years. Letting his lips curve into a humorless smile, Cruz met the human male's eyes, matching that penetrating stare. "Cruz."

Perez's sinister grin widened as he rolled the name over his tongue. "*Cruz* ... Well then." He made a show of inspecting his manicured nails. "I want what any self-respecting drug czar wants when betrayed." His gaze flicked sideways. "Retribution."

Cruz shifted, trying to get comfortable against the wall, and kept his expression neutral. "Meaning?"

Perez dusted lint from his sleeve. "I've started shifter fighting pits. Punishment for those who cross me." He shrugged. "Entertainment for those who enjoy wagering. It's proven quite lucrative." One arm swung out wide, no doubt for dramatic effect. "In a few hours, you'll get the honor of being paired with my best fighter." The drug czar's lips twisted. His eyes danced over Cruz's injuries. A grating laugh escaped the human. "The real fun will begin soon. So, I suggest you heal up. The only alternative to winning is dying."



Hours later, Cruz shuffled forward, one awkward step at a time. The manacles clamped to his ankles, linked by a chain, gouged his flesh, slowing him down. The curved corridor smelled of damp earth, sweat, piss, and coppery rust. Now and then, red puddles that held broken teeth, splintered bone, or a hunk of flesh stained the dirt.

A sharp jab to Cruz's kidney made his teeth clack. "Pick up the pace!" The guard at his back struck again with the club.

Cruz snapped his head around, growling and baring his canines. "Want me to move faster? Take off the ankle cuffs." He rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Fucking *pendejo*!" Cruz ignored the idiot and continued to scan for an escape route. Shadows stretched up the ancient stone walls. They looked like the rotting arms of corpses, hell-bent on escaping their graves.

A meaty hand snatched his scruff, jerking him to a stop in front of two iron doors. Soldiers flooded the corridor, pressing their shoulders into the gargantuan metal slabs. Ancient hinges groaned. Neck muscles corded. The heavy doors swung open.

Sunlight blinded Cruz. He barely squinted before the fuckwad at his back struck again. "Move it."

Stumbling from the pull of the chain, Cruz's bare feet skidded over hot, gritty sand. He blinked, clearing white light from his vision, then realized he stood in the middle of what looked like a miniature colosseum.

The riotous roar of a crowd rolled through the air like a malevolent wave. Cheers, jeers, and bloodlust intertwined. Cruz scanned the elevated seats, ignoring the soldier bending to unshackle his ankles. The clink of chains hitting the

ground barely registered. His focus zeroed in on Perez sitting at the center of the stadium. Among the two men flanking him, Cruz recognized only one — the militia leader who'd been prowling the pits for the past thirty minutes.

The second male? *No idea*. But something about the pale stranger made the hair on the back of Cruz's neck stand up. He wore a purple, pansy-ass cape, and his blond hair had been pulled into a bun. Before Cruz could ponder why the unknown male triggered his hackles, a freight train crashed into him. Something shattered his nose with enough force to make his vision swim. Blood poured into his mouth and down his chin. Sharp teeth sank into his shoulder.

Cruz staggered back and shoved the weight of a body off. Somehow, he regained footing.

In front of him, another shifter bounced on the balls of his feet, looking wild-eyed. Crazed, in fact. Cruz's life force dripped from the other male's canines. "Prepare to die!" he roared, flashing a Hannibal Lecter grin. "I'm the best fighter here, and I'll be reaping the rewards of this match."

Rewards? Cruz spat copper liquid into the dirt. Nothing good ever came from being forced to fight for entertainment. The sick thrill of the crowd made his stomach roil. "Oh yeah?" Cruz rasped. He circled the other shifter, keeping his weight balanced. "I don't want to fight you, but attack me again, and you'll leave me no choice."

"Hate to be the bearer of bad news, but neither of us has a choice. It's kill or be killed here." The other fighter raised his fists and shrugged. "Nothing personal, but prepare to meet your makers."

No way out, then?

Sometimes the best defense was an all-out, balls-to-the-wall offense. Cruz lunged and swung. The other male ducked. Cruz's arm swept empty air. Sand kicked up as

the other fighter brought down one hell of a hammer fist into Cruz's side. Those newly healed ribs screamed, shattering again.

Damn, the other shifter was fast, but Cruz and high stakes were old friends. When the next strike came, he caught his opponent's wrist. Twisting, he drove an elbow into a wall of abs. The shifter grunted and doubled over. Seizing the opportunity, Cruz snagged a fistful of hair and, with a hard yank, brought his knee up to meet the other male's nose.

The crowd erupted.

Sick fucks.

"That's your warning. Back off now," Cruz growled, shoving the gasping male away.

Those crazy eyes widened to saucers as his opponent spat blood into the sand. "I'll tear your throat out!"

"Why would you fight for this fucker?" Cruz yelled over the roaring spectators. He adjusted his stance and raised both fists. "Are you enjoying this shit?"

"Enjoy?" The other fighter barked out a sarcastic laugh. "Not even close. Like I said, there's no choice here. It's either be predator or prey." On the last word, he dropped to all fours. Muscles stretched, bones cracked, and skin rippled. Dark fur erupted along his body. His face elongated. Flat incisors sharpened to fangs. "So, predator it is." Shifting into a massive hyena, the last words contorted into a snarl. Saliva dripped from a gaping maw.

Cruz had no choice but to shift. He couldn't fight an unnaturally large hyena in his current state. The rush of transformation hit. His body bowed under the pressure. Claws burst from his knuckles. Bones bent and realigned. Thick golden fur sprouted. Letting out a growl, he dropped to his knees.

His cougar burst forth.

The hyena circled him, snapping powerful jaws and sending sand flying with each step. Cruz prowled sideways. In a blur of fangs and claws, the hyena attacked. Cruz leaped, feeling rancid breath graze his ear. Claws shredded his back at the same time his own raked through the hyena's flank.

The beast yelped. Spinning, he launched again without pause.

Meeting him head-on, Cruz pounced. Silt clouded the air. Cruz clamped down onto the hyena's shoulder. Thick, coppery liquid coated his tongue. The other beast roared, twisted, and slammed Cruz against the arena wall.

Pain flared through Cruz, but he held on. Locking his jaw in place, he used his back claws to shred the hyena's hide, kicking with powerful hind legs until his opponent managed to wrench free.

The crowd erupted in a gruesome bid for more blood.

Hot on the hyena's haunches, Cruz followed, not willing to give a reprieve. He slammed into the shifter with all his weight. They tumbled, head over paws, in a whirlwind of snarls. Sand filled Cruz's mouth and nose. The hyena twisted, trying to latch onto Cruz's throat. He rolled away at the last minute.

When the hyena pounced again, Cruz leaped as only a cat could. On the downward trajectory, he sank his claws into the other animal's back, swung around, and went for its jugular. A gut-wrenching yowl surged from his mouth. His jaws clamped onto ropey neck muscles. The beast flailed and thrashed. Cruz held firm, putting pressure on his windpipe, crushing down until vertebrae snapped between his fangs.

The hyena fell to the sand, convulsing.

With heavy breaths, Cruz backed away. Blood and saliva dripped from his panting mouth. Cheers rose in the background. Summoning the last of his strength, he shifted back

to his human form and collapsed to his knees. Although his bones had healed with the change, the blood and wounds remained.

Ignoring the sick laudation, Cruz zeroed in on Perez. A sinister smile split the drug czar's lips. The blond-haired stranger leaned forward, locking an intense, multicolored gaze on Cruz that was, to say the least, unsettling.

Perez stood. His voice cut through the din. "Finish it, cougar, or we will finish you."

Cruz eyed the hyena shifter, who had transitioned back into his human form. Blood bubbled from the other male's lips. In Cruz's peripheral vision, a guard hovered with a drawn sword, threatening decapitation.

Cruz shoved down bile. Pushing to his feet, he stepped forward and gripped the fallen shifter's head between two palms. With a reluctant twist, he yanked hard. A sickening squelch echoed through the now silent stadium. Cruz tossed the other male's head aside and sent up a silent prayer for his soul.

When his gaze shifted back to Perez, the mysterious man dressed in purple had risen. His chin dipped once on a nod. A cold shiver ran the length of Cruz's spine. Whoever the male was, he hadn't come for a simple show of blood.

Somehow, Cruz knew. *He's here for me.*