

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

CONNECTED BY INK

Nicole Dennis

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

CONNECTED BY INK

By Nicole Dennis

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two men stand in different positions in separate pictures. Both are covered in beautiful ink. One has a tattoo of a gun on his hip.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

What you see is more than mere ink. Any tattoo has the power that comes from significance, but none have what ours do—the ability to grant power. He gave us the first of our marks when he claimed us as his Heartless, you see. Betrayed by love and left to die by the ones we most trusted—but still unwilling to die.

It's a strange life, if 'life' is the right term. We walk in the dark, see what humans do not see, and wield awesome powers, protecting humans from what they do not even know exists. It's not without its perks, of course. We are allowed pleasure, companionship and wealth. There is only one rule, and that easily kept. We know the anguish of heartache too well. Why fall in love?

No, my problem is more—peculiar. One of my tattoos has gone—missing. It seems to have transferred itself to the charming young man who entertained me last night. An absolutely unheard of event. I would find it fascinating—if it wasn't happening to me. Now I have to find him before he attracts unwanted attention with his new powers and find a way to get my tattoo back.

Sincerely,

Gillian

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, post-apocalyptic

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Chapter 1

Crouched on top of a building and near the edge in order to oversee multiple connecting streets below this expanded compound in the southern territory, a Heartless kept watch and searched the shadows. This world didn't resemble the previous society in any form or fashion. Earlier society had indulged and abused Earth, and finally, nature revolted with the additional supernatural push of shadows and unknown entities.

The dangers started light and inconsequential. Everyone took them as part of living on a volatile Earth since they had all ignored the warning signs of global climate change. Carbon dioxide emissions rose until they peaked. Afterwards, what humans had known about their world was lost. Natural groundwater resources reduced while flooding happened throughout the world. Temperatures increased everywhere, causing issues with food scarcity and production. These various issues affected the world, population control, and culture itself.

After the chaos, civilization survived in prepared bunkers and underground cities. Instead of scattering, people kept close in these pockets of communities. Once laughed at for stockpiling everything imaginable, doomsday preppers became leaders of the new world, and many flocked to them. Thanks to their preparations, they pulled together the fragments. Coalitions formed between these areas, but society remained closer to the time of the ancient Dark Ages. Some things remained and continued to thrive: self-indulgence, sex, and alcohol. Bars and clubs thrived with all forms of "entertainment."

Along with the chaos, there came the rise of psionic gifts and the appearance of demons. Children continued to be born, and Malachai Donovan had been one of those gifted. It wasn't an easy life for anyone, even those who built the coalitions. Raiding groups fought to collect resources for their own and to remove any opposition.

During one such attack, Malachai hid from the thugs and then raced away, leaving his home. Traveling for seasons, he discovered a bunch of lost youth chasing around a community, laughing, playing, and enjoying life. Entering the compound, he met the man who had created this safe haven, another prepper like his father. This man seemed to have all the answers. He learned about Malachai's natural gifts and changed the direction of his life forever. Until the

prepper turned into a cruel master and abused his privilege and position by creating shadow warriors used to hunt the demons that appeared after the collapse of the global environment. When Malachai came of age, the master put him through the torture of having his entire upper body covered in tattoos.

Shaking away the ancient memories, Malachai pulled off his sunglasses and rubbed his eyes with his fingers. A soft whisper of wings alerted him to his owl's presence. Replacing the glasses, Malachai rose from his crouch as a glorious great horned owl came to perch upon his shoulder. Owl hooted and rubbed his feathery cheek against Malachai's face.

"Hello, my beauty, did you find who we're looking for?" Malachai spoke to his totem, his Owl. From a small bag, he pulled out bits of meat and fed them to Owl, the powerful beak nipping the meat from his fingers with a delicate touch. He rubbed his fingers through its feathers. "Tell me what you found, my beauty."

With a hoot, Owl vanished to become an image upon Malachai's left ribcage, merging with the massive tree tattoo that stretched along the length of his left arm, and then from his armpit to his hip. Thanks to the bastard who had altered the landscape of his body with inked images, Malachai's gifts expanded and caused the tattoos to come alive or enhance his abilities. Over the years, Owl had become his favorite, a constant companion. He studied everything Owl had found during his evening flight, searching for the one Malachai had spent an enjoyable evening with—despite the unusual complications that had developed.

Though he enjoyed wealth and the companionship of other Heartless, Malachai didn't search for pleasure as often as the others. He kept to himself, the cruelty of his one-time master destroying anything good inside him. He didn't want to feel the heartache ever again during his extended lifetime. Still, his body craved things he couldn't always satisfy.

The previous evening, he'd ventured into the compound. Preferring the lean, hard body of another male, Malachai found those catering to his choices. Similar-minded men gathered in those dark, sweaty buildings filled with throbbing music and dancing bodies.

Drawn to a golden-haired dancer during a choreographed dance show, Malachai learned the dancer's name, Lucky Luc Ruskie. Covered in simpler tattoos of images and classic poetry, a magnetic quality enhanced the dancer's charisma. He moved with an unforced ability across the stage. His dancing was

filled with rare natural grace and talent. His lean body was honed to a sophisticated shape, completing the effortless elegance.

His choice made, Malachai got the entertainer's attention. Dressed in second-skin leather pants, soft shoes, and no shirt, the dancer crooked a finger to get him to follow to a private area.

With no names exchanged and even fewer words spoken, they "entertained" one another for the rest of the night. When the dawn's first rays poked around the room's curtains, Malachai pulled away from the lovely dancer. He drew his fingers through the golden hair and down the decorated spine. The dancer murmured and shifted on the thin mattress, sliding deeper into sleep. Dressing, leaving a packet of currency, generous after a pleasurable evening, Malachai grabbed his backpack and slipped out of the building.

Traveling back to his hidden home across the outer lands was a couple of days' ride by motorcycle. Upon arriving, it was only when he stripped to take a shower that he discovered his peculiar problem. No other Heartless had encountered this unusual predicament after an evening with a companion. One of his tattoos had disappeared. Before, over a dozen ravens rose and circled around his Tree of Life tattoo. Now, half that number, in various sizes, had disappeared from the flock, leaving faded images.

Malachai couldn't figure out how it could have happened. The ravens gave him one of his greatest abilities, to peer through the shadows and view the hidden realities and the demons that moved within human skin. The Heartless walked through the darkness, protecting the humans from dangers unseen to them. Most had no idea of the hidden dangers amongst them.

Half of his ravens were missing.

Only one person could have his ravens. The golden entertainer. The dancer he'd touched skin to skin.

If the ravens had attached themselves to him, their ability would scare the shit out of him, could cause him to freak out amongst the wrong people. It would put his life in danger. For what? A night spent in a stranger's arms.

Sickened at the thoughts, Malachai rushed back to the compound, releasing Owl, his finest silent spy, into the night to find the dancer.

Tonight, through his owl's connection, Malachai watched the dancer stretching behind the thick curtain covering the stage. Dressed in different colored pants and soft shoes, he warmed his muscles to prepare for the

evening's entertainment. A change in angle revealed the six missing ravens curled along the dancer's lower back and near an inked forest highlighted with raindrops and a few lines of a poem. It looked like they had appeared with ease and melted into the scene already inked on the dancer's body. The dancer seemed to have no idea they had attached themselves.

With this knowledge, Malachai broke the connection. He needed to do something to repair this problem, but not here within the expanded compound. The hidden demons would feel the open boundaries of power and be attracted to it. They could influence the dancer, taunting and teasing him to the darker edges.

Returning to the club, Malachai made note of multiple demon targets hidden within their human "hosts" who were milling about in the crowd. He would need to reduce those minions to ash and free their hosts. He drew his thumb under his waistband and close to his hip where multiple types of weapons were inked into his skin. He could call any one of them to his hand with a touch.

As the gaslights flashed to announce the show, Malachai made his way to a corner table. Drawing closer, he noticed two fellow Heartless sitting there, backs to the wall and eyes upon the crowd. The larger of the two dared to sip a clear liquid. They were part of the Lost Boys, the survivors of the initial group of Heartless. After a while, one of them had come up with the nickname of Lost Boys and it stuck.

"Cyrus, Harland, didn't expect to see either one of you this evening. I thought you were patrolling further south," Malachai said as he chose the last chair.

"We cleansed the area and returned back here to get in touch with you and the others. I spotted your owl in flight," Cyrus said, his voice lowered to their private levels of communication, a gift of the ink upon their skin.

"Same here," Harland said, wincing as he tossed back the last shot of the liquid. "Noticed how you missed a few minions. Need a hand?"

"I didn't miss them. I know where they are."

Always the first one to get into a fight or cause one, Harland palmed his waistband, and a specialized sai blade appeared. He used the longest of three points to clean under his fingernails as he leaned the chair on its back legs. "Getting sloppy, Malachai, an entire nest lurking within these walls."

“A different situation engaged my attention.” Hearing the notes of the violin, piano, and guitar, Malachai kept his gaze upon the stage. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Cyrus and Harland checking him out.

“What type of situation?” Cyrus asked.

“Is it a two legs and a dick type of problem?” Harland spun the sai lazily around his fingers.

“Watch for the center dancer.”

“Did you enjoy him one night?”

Turning his attention from the stage, Malachai met Harland’s taunts with a glacial glare.

“I apologize for my crudeness.” Harland nodded in respect to Malachai, one of the oldest and strongest of the Lost Boys.

“What’s his name, Malachai?” Cyrus asked.

“His entertainer name is Lucky Luc Ruskie.”

Harland snorted and pressed a hand against his mouth. “What? You can’t blame me. Lucky Luc got lucky with Malachai.”

Cyrus smacked Harland’s shoulder. “I’ll never understand the reasoning behind why he chose you.”

“To balance out the rest of you. Lucky for me,” Harland said.

Malachai returned his attention to the stage as the curtain opened. The choreography was different, the entrances altered. He wondered if it was to make the show new and inviting every night—to entice customers to return. Following the power and sway of the music, his dancer swirled. He was dressed in skin-tight pants so thin and faded that his legs and package were on similar display as his naked upper body.

Remaining the calm logical one, Cyrus asked, “What are we looking for?”

“You’ll see it.” Malachai lowered his elbows on his knees to watch Luc closer. It helped to conceal his body’s blatant reaction to the dancer. He widened his legs, shifting to give his cock additional room.

Luc leaped as if he were poetry or music in motion. Each step perfect. Every turn tight and on point. His jumps appeared effortless, as if he floated through the air, landing lightly on his feet and automatically moving into the

next combination. As the music reached a crescendo, he flew higher, freed from the darkness, valiant in his effort to survive. In those last few moments, he drew closer to the edge of the stage for the final combinations, swept high, low, and graceful. When the dance finished, the stage darkened, and the crowd erupted with applause.

Lucky Luc rose from his final position as the lights came back up. He waved and turned to face another section of the audience for a bow.

Cyrus whispered a word. An invisible cloud surrounded the three of them, allowing them to speak without anyone overhearing the conversation. At the same time, they kept an eye on the dancer and the multiple minion targets.

Leaning his head back, Malachai let out a long grumble of frustration. He didn't want to talk to them. All he wanted was to snag Luc in his arms and drag him someplace where they could be alone for hours.

"How in the name of darkness did some of your ravens attach themselves to him?" Cyrus demanded.

Figuring out this damn problem will be the death of me. Malachai circled his thumb around one temple. "I have no idea. I told you it was unusual."

"When did all this happen?"

"We spent a night together several days ago, no words exchanged. He was charming."

Cyrus lifted an eyebrow as he rested an elbow on the table. "Charming?"

"Damn the darkness, I was tired of being alone. I came here for a night of pleasure."

"And look what happened! A naive innocent has magical tattoos upon his skin. If they react to the demons or wiggle under his skin, he'll be in a crap load of danger."

"I know what it means for a noninitiate to adjust to their ink."

"Only he isn't a Heartless," Cyrus snapped. "Have they reacted? Do you know if he has seen anything?"

"This is the first time I've seen him, since the last time I was here. I haven't had a chance to speak with him. Reading minds isn't one of my gifts," Malachai snapped back.

"Umm, boys, you may want to back down a bit. Trouble is brewing," Harland said.

Cyrus glared at him. “What could be more trouble than an innocent with ravens?”

“The tattoos becoming alert and reactive to the incoming minions would be a bit more trouble,” Harland said in a droll tone. “The dancer left the stage and is beelining over here. I’m sure he’s interested in meeting Malachai again.”

“Remove the cloud,” Malachai said.

“What? We need to discuss this,” Cyrus said.

“Discuss what? I haven’t had a chance to learn anything.”

Cyrus opened his mouth, but Malachai’s hand slashing through the air stopped him.

“I don’t know how this happened or why the ravens chose to move to him. This has never happened to any of us prior to this incident. I’ll try to retrieve them.”

“What if you can’t?”

“Then I’ll teach him how to use and control them.”

“You can’t bring him into our world. He’s a dancer, not a fighter.”

“We were innocent children once bound to the light. Why not him?”

Cyrus mumbled dire threats under his breath, but removed the cloud.

Chapter 2

Rising from the chair, Malachai adjusted the dark duster he was wearing and smiled at Lucky Luc, who paused in front of him. Luc had pulled on a loose white shirt another boy held out to him but never exchanged the sheer pants and dancing shoes.

“Good evening. I didn’t expect to see you again, but I’m happy to spot you.” Luc lifted his gaze to adjust for their height difference. The gaslights revealed the elegant golden-hazel eyes surrounded by darker lashes. He glanced to take in the other Heartless. “Welcome to The Club.”

“You’re a marvelous dancer,” Harland said with a slight bow. “How long have you been dancing?”

Luc’s face lit up with a smile. “I’ve danced since I was a boy, a gift of sorts according to one of my teachers.”

“A gift? Interesting,” Harland said as he glanced at Malachai.

Malachai swiveled and stared at Harland. He raised an eyebrow.

“What? He’s beautiful, and the thought of it being a gift is too,” Harland said.

“Would you stop interfering?” Cyrus smacked him in the back of the head to shut him up. He tilted his head toward Luc. “Excuse him. He has no filter.”

Luc chuckled. “It’s okay. He has better manners than others who come here.”

Grumbling under his breath, Malachai placed his hand on Luc’s waist and propelled him away. “Do your jobs, please,” he muttered at the other Heartless, emphasizing the words. Stepping further away, he lowered his hand, though he wanted to touch his missing ravens on the dancer’s back.

“You left without a word or note. I was rather disappointed we couldn’t continue our... entertainment.”

“Yes, well, our evening was over, and with daylight filtering through, I figured staying wouldn’t be appropriate.”

Luc tilted his head and looked at him. “I didn’t even learn your name. We didn’t speak much, and it rather disappointed me. I still want to know more

about you, my handsome stranger. Our night together—” He flushed a little. “It was like nothing I’ve ever experienced. I don’t give myself away lightly to any of the normal clientele. I’m not that type of entertainer.”

“I’m one of the shadows. No one remembers me.” Malachai placed his fingers on Luc’s lips. “There’s no need to explain. I never questioned your past or what you do here.”

Luc pressed a kiss to Malachai’s fingers. He placed his hand on Malachai’s chest. “Anyone would be completely blind to not remember you. I remember you. I doubt our night will ever leave my memory.”

“Malachai. Malachai Donovan.”

“Malachai. It suits you. It’s as mysterious as your appearance into my life. You’re not a local to the compound.” Luc stepped back and held out his hand. “I’m Lucius Killian.”

“Lucius?”

“I know. It’s horrible. Luscious Lucius and all that mess,” Luc said with a wry grin. “I prefer Luc. Ruskie is a twist on prominent dancers from the country called Russia. I read about them in a book.”

“It’s an elegant name for a beautiful dancer,” Malachai said, his voice deepening around the name. He brushed his fingers against Luc’s cheek.

“Ouch, sorry, but—” Luc winced as he stepped away. He pressed a hand to his lower back.

Malachai widened his gaze at the obvious attempt to move away from his touch. He retreated until he hit the wall behind him.

Luc held out his other hand and shook his head. “No. No. Sweet darkness, I’m sorry. This wasn’t about your touch. I enjoy it, I do.” He pressed both of his hands to his lower back and stretched. “My back has been bothering me off and on, like a permanent itch or something moving under my skin. It’s not a pain, but quite strange. It wasn’t your touch, I promise. I think I strained it or something.”

Malachai realized what was twitching under Luc’s skin. His stolen ravens sensed the roaming demons hidden within human skin. A glance over his shoulder, and he saw Cyrus motioning. “Perhaps you need a night off to relax.”

“There’s no way I’m allowed to miss a performance. It would be my hide.”

Interrupting them as they rushed over, Cyrus started, “There’s a problem. The minions honed in on the magical tone radiating from him—”

“Holy sweet darkness!” Luc grabbed handfuls of Malachai’s coat.

“—from the missing ravens, and they’ve activated,” Cyrus finished after Luc’s outcry. He studied the interior of The Club.

“What is that?” Luc blinked several times, knuckled his eyes, and stared again. “What are they?”

“Yeah, that would be another issue,” Harland said in a dry tone.

“Lucius, I need you to trust me and close your eyes! Now!” Malachai tugged Luc close and felt him shiver.

“They’re coming closer. What are they?” Luc wiggled to look across the room.

“We have incoming, surrounding our positions. Either we fight back or scramble,” Cyrus said.

“I never back down from a fight.” Harland slapped his hands together and rubbed them, anticipating the battle. “Get him out of the compound until you figure out how to remove the damn ravens.”

“Where am I supposed to take him?”

“Home. Take him there, but by the extended route to keep them off your tail,” Cyrus suggested. “We’ll handle the others and clean things up around this place. It stinks of minions.”

Harland moved his fingers over his hips where his duo sai blades waited—inked there for all Heartless to use to fight and destroy minions. With a touch, they appeared within his palms. He spun them around his fingers with perfect precision and control.

“Strength, honor, and darkness.” Malachai spoke the Lost Boys’ protocol of principles they’d created, learned, and followed. He held out one hand.

Swapping the blade to the other hand, Cyrus clasped Malachai’s arm just below the elbow and Malachai did the same. He repeated the words: “Strength, honor, and darkness. We’ll find you at the rally point.”

“If we’re lucky to get out of here.” Malachai looked between his compatriots, a frightened Luc, and the enclosing minions. They didn’t have

much time. He presented Lucius his back. “Jump on my back and wrap your legs around me.”

Luc obeyed the command and then pressed his face against Malachai’s neck, clutching his coat.

Adjusting the dancer to a better position, Malachai kept both hands free. He brushed his fingers across his right hip and a single sai blade appeared in his hand. Shouldering one of the minions’ hosts, he shoved them against the closest wall. He ghosted his blade through the shadows and sliced at the internal minion.

Rushing through the back door of the club, Malachai followed the dingy hallway, back to the bedroom they’d used the previous evening. He couldn’t bring Luc through the outer lands dressed in his current apparel. Checking the corners, he kicked Lucius’s door open.

“Unwind and drop down.” Malachai tilted to the side to encourage Luc.

“What in the name of darkness is happening?” Luc retreated, wrapping his arms around his slender waist.

“I can’t explain here. You need to dress for travel through the outer lands.”

“I’m not going to the outer lands. I must stay here.”

“You stay and you’ll die from those shadows. They scented your magical tones.”

“What magic? I have no gifts other than dancing.”

“I’ll explain later. Change your clothes. Pack a bag. We’re leaving.”

“I’m indebted to the owner. If I leave, he’ll destroy me.”

“We’re getting out—” Malachai stopped. There’s no way he heard what he thought he did. He studied his dancer. “What did you say?”

“I’m indebted to the owner. He rescued me when I was a child and brought me here. To repay the debt, I dance every night and bring in whatever other currency I can.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Since I was a boy.”

“How much more do you owe him?”

“His life,” another male said, his voice sinister.

“Sweet darkness.” Luc backed away, stumbled, and fell on his ass against the simple mattress. “He—No, this is not possible. He—”

The remaining ravens altered Malachai’s perception. He discovered the minion inside the master and figured the demon would be behind the unending servitude. The minion must be feeding upon Luc’s fear and the endless torture of never being free. “Are you the master of The Club and of this dancer?” He hid the sai against his thigh and in the folds of his duster.

“He belongs to me, body, heart, and soul. He dances for me. Exclusively. I control whom he can have in his bed. I didn’t approve you,” the master said as the minion laughed within him, enjoying its power and the smell of fear rising from Luc.

“Lucius’s debt is paid in full by me.” Malachai ghosted the dagger and plunged it into the master’s heart.

Luc screamed, only seeing Malachai strike at the master. He shoved his hands against his mouth.

Malachai twisted the blade as the minion screamed. Pulling the blade back, he watched the minion turn into dust and float away from the human host. Dust appeared scattered around on the floor. In shock from losing the parasite, the master slid down the wall and collapsed onto the floor.

“You killed him. You killed the master,” Luc said, his voice shaky.

“No, I killed the parasite within him. The master was its host and is fine, in shock and unconscious as his body recovers.”

“I don’t—” Luc licked his lips. “I don’t understand.”

“I know, and I will explain all when we’re safe.” Malachai sent the dagger back to his skin. He held out his hands to calm Luc. Stepping back from the fallen master, he took Luc’s hands within his larger ones, pulling him from the bed, and lifted them to his lips. He kissed both in a tender fashion, a distinct difference from the earlier violence. “Please, Luc, I must take you from the compound.”

Licking his lower lip, Luc calmed with the tender moment. He kissed Malachai. Tilting his head, he deepened the kiss until they both moaned lightly from the power and arousal zinging between them. “Why am I so pulled to you?” he whispered against Malachai’s lips.

“I’m not sure, and I wish to explore it. But—”

“Not here. I understand,” Luc interrupted. His gaze drifted back to the unconscious master, and he trembled hard.

“Change your clothes into something sturdier. Do you have a bag?”

Looking like he wasn’t sure what he should do, Luc released his grip upon Malachai’s coat and listened. Even with the kiss, he remained a little shocky, not used to the violence. He pointed to a curtain pulled over the corner of the room.

Malachai pushed the curtain out of his way and discovered a chest containing the sparse clothing and personal items behind it. A large backpack hung from a hook. After choosing clothes suited to protect for the journey, he tossed them toward Luc.

“Change into those. I’ll add the clothes you’re wearing to the bag.” Bending down, Malachai found a pair of thin leather boots. They weren’t the best, but all Luc had. He tossed them to the dancer. “Wear those too.” He yanked the backpack off the hook and felt there was some weight on the bottom. Opening the main zipper, he saw a cloth-covered package on the bottom. Figuring that whatever Luc had hidden there meant a lot to him, he couldn’t toss it out. Instead, he shoved the remaining clothes in the bag. Crouching on the floor, he gathered some other personal things. Looking around the room, he saw a couple of grooming items, and added them.

While Malachai packed his belongings, Luc managed to tug off the dancing outfit and pull on the heavier outer clothes. Malachai crouched to gather the outfit for the backpack. When he saw Luc’s fingers shaking, Malachai helped him into the boots and tied the laces.

“Be calm. I’ll let nothing hurt you,” he reassured Luc. “Is there anything else you require?”

On shaky legs, Luc shuffled to the curtained corner. He knelt and tugged on a floorboard. In his state, he couldn’t pull it up.

Following Luc, Malachai gently pushed him to the side and yanked on the loose board. Hidden within the tiny space was a tin box. Not bothering to open it, he shoved the box into the backpack.

“Is that it?”

Luc nodded and stared at Malachai. His pupils were wide with shock, his skin pale, and his fingers still shaking.

Malachai stroked Luc's cheek with his thumb. "I'm not leaving you alone. I'll help and protect you." Rising, he took hold of Luc's hand and tugged him to his feet. He slung Luc's backpack over a shoulder. At the door, he listened to the sounds of the continuing battle. Not knowing who had the upper hand and wishing he could be with his compatriots, Malachai headed to the back door he'd discovered the previous time he was in Luc's room. Cursing, he returned to the room.

Still shaky, Luc licked his lower lip. "What? What happened?"

"Escape isn't going to be easy. Stay here."

"Not moving," Luc promised.

With a wink of reassurance, Malachai released the dual guns from his hips. They appeared in each palm, loaded with the necessary bullets to destroy the minions and drop the hosts. He wrapped his hands around the handles, his fingers on the trigger guards. He heard Luc's muffled shout at the guns' appearance, but he didn't say a word. Blowing out a long breath, he altered his vision and stepped around to the door.

With the hallway too narrow to release one of his other familiars, Cheetah or Wolf, Malachai sent Luc back inside his room to get out of harm's way. Staying within a few feet of Luc's door, he raised both guns. Using his altered vision, he fired into the mass of minions' hosts. He aimed each shot to destroy the minion and knock the host unconscious.

When the current leader of the minions spoke in their ancient language, cursing at him to release Luc, Malachai spit back in the same language, firing multiple times.

At the same time, he was cautious not to fire upon the regular humans in the mix. They were only following orders, not knowing there were demons hiding within the skins of their bosses. It was part of the Lost Boys' code not to harm innocents. Using his martial arts skills, he disarmed and knocked them out of his way. Spinning away from the club's back entrance, he fired from both outstretched hands.

"Malachai, duck!"

Dropping on command, Malachai watched a set of arrows fly into others who tried to get around his blind side. He glanced behind him to find Cyrus

standing at the entrance to the club. He must have joined the fight at some point. Instead of guns, Cyrus held his bow, the quiver across his shoulder.

“Why aren’t you gone from here?” Cyrus called.

“I tried to clear a path but didn’t make much progress. I can only clear a couple of feet from either side of Luc’s room. We’re surrounded.”

“Where is he?”

Stepping back to cover Luc’s room, Malachai nodded behind him. “I sent him back inside his room. It’s the only place where I can cover him. No one can get around me.”

“You can’t stay here.”

“No shit. What the hell happened out there?”

“It seems an all-call went out. I think there’s more to this compound than any of us suspected.”

“I’m on the same track as you.” Ducking, Malachai kicked out and fired into another attacker. “Dumb idiots don’t know when to turn tail” —pausing, he spun and kicked another minion—“and run.” Leaning far back at the close call of several shots, he then went upright, firing the entire time. He flicked his fingers against his hip to reload both guns. “Harland?”

“Dealing with another mess inside the main clubroom. He sent me to check if you’d left.” Cyrus spun and faced opposite Malachai. He released more arrows.

Spinning and kicking, Malachai punched another assailant and sent him crashing into a group of minions. “This is getting us nowhere.”

“I think it’s Dragon time.”

Checking to see where Luc was, Malachai looked over his shoulder to find him crouched just inside the door. He sent a gun back to his hip and then pointed to the curtain in the back corner. “Luc, I need you to hunker down by the chest. Don’t come out until I call you. Understand?”

Nodding, Luc raced across the room and dropped to the floor behind the empty chest, pulled his knees close, and yanked the tattered curtain closed.

Closing his eyes, Malachai pushed extra power to the massive tattoo stretched across his back. He felt Dragon awaken and manifest within the hallway. Timbers and masonry cracked as Dragon flicked his tail and fluffed

his wings. Exhausted from the burst of energy it took to summon Dragon, Malachai dropped to one knee and pulled his duster around him. He heard Cyrus yell out to Harland in the main room to take cover before he ducked under his protective coat.

A powerful wall-rattling roar filled the area before a pissed-off Dragon turned his head and spewed fire down to the far end of the hallway that led to an exit on the street. With a puff of smoke, Dragon lumbered toward the main clubroom. He sent another spray of fire through the minions, assisting Harland in the fight. Dragon flicked his tail and smashed the stage and a nearby wall. He squeezed back through the opening in the wall and altered his shape as he returned to Malachai's back.

Groaning as the massive beast moved around under his skin to find a comfortable position, Malachai clenched one fist against the pain. There were multiple reasons why he didn't call upon Dragon as often as his other familiars. Once Dragon settled, Malachai pulled himself back up to his feet and felt Cyrus assist him with a hand under his elbow. He returned his second gun to his hip.

"I'm sort of glad I don't have one of those," Cyrus said.

"What in the name of darkness? I was doing fine out there," Harland complained as he batted at a smoldering spot on his coat. "You didn't have to send that annoying beast. I swear he spits fire on me on purpose. He hates me."

"He didn't touch me," Cyrus said.

"He thinks you're cute," Harland teased and muttered, "stupid annoying beast."

Malachai felt Dragon move around his shoulders, ready to spit again at Harland. "Shut up. He's alert and ready to chomp."

The skin around Harland's mouth whitened. "No thanks. Don't wanna be lunch."

Malachai grinned while Dragon settled again.

"Malachai? Is it safe? What is happening? What was that roaring sound?"

Hearing Luc's soft tone, Malachai realized he would have to explain Dragon's appearance. He glanced into the bedroom and saw Luc peek around the curtain. "All is cleared out."

Grabbing his backpack, Luc moved to take Malachai's hand. He looked at the others and pointed to Harland. "Umm, your coat is on fire."

“What?” Harland pulled and checked at his coat. “Damn freaking dragon!” He pressed himself against the wall to smother the flames.

“Quiet, or you’ll get roasted,” Malachai said.

Studying all of them, Luc asked, “Dragon?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“I’m getting rather pissed at that answer.”

“It’s all I can give you. We can’t risk speaking out in the open. The demons have eyes and ears everywhere,” Malachai said, giving a simple explanation.

“We can’t stay here, and it’s too risky chancing the flatlands with everyone on high alert. Where can we hunker down for a day?” Cyrus asked.

Malachai pushed energy to call on his navigation compass. He added a request to reveal a 3-D map of the entire compound and outlying areas. He made sure it was visible to all of them so they could consider their options and contemplate a strategy to get out of this mess. “I didn’t know the compound was this large. One of the biggest I’ve seen outside a coalition center.”

“It is expanded every other year as resources are gathered,” Luc said.

“Do they want to create a coalition here?”

“Don’t know. I’m on the low end of the populace around here.”

Malachai ordered the compass to add red dots or coloring to signal demon locations. It ended up having most of the map glowing red.

“Sweet darkness, do all of you see this? They’re all over the compound.” Cyrus shook his head with a low whistle. “It would take a battalion of us to cleanse this place. Where the hell is the law around here?”

“There is none. The thugs control everything,” Luc said.

“The coalitions would have sent additional troops of peacekeepers in to retake the compound.”

“Not if the thugs respond to all correspondence with the same wording as the previous justice folks.”

“How long have they been in charge?”

“Five years, maybe longer,” Luc said.

Cyrus rubbed the back of his neck as he studied the glowing map hovering above Malachai’s hands. “Can you find a clear spot? Anywhere?”

Keeping quiet, Malachai sent a request to spin and angle the compound map to check different angles.

“The northwest corner is dark, and there are multiple buildings behind another wall and some gates.” Cyrus focused on Luc. “Do you know anything about that corner?”

“It’s where some of the former peacekeepers lived. It’s cleared out and deserted. No one is allowed to venture there,” Luc said.

“Sounds like the perfect spot for us to hide.” Malachai memorized multiple routes to the corner and closed the map. “Time to get out of here. I’ll lead the way. Cyrus, bring the shadows around us and protect Luc at all costs. Harland, cover our asses.”

“Time to move out.” Harland exchanged the double sai for guns. He popped and checked the clips for both and loaded them, slotting a bullet in place.

Malachai led them to the back door. He waited as several groups passed them performing routine checks and investigations. He held up a hand to stop the others and pointed to Cyrus to create the shadow bubble. When things darkened a bit around them, he stepped into the street with Luc behind him, then Cyrus, and Harland at the end.

Chapter 3

Taking a few detours to avoid the wandering patrols, they made it to an interior wall encircling the peacekeepers' corner. Locating the gate, they slipped past the creaky doors and studied the interior of the enclosure. Harland closed the gates behind them. They all winced when they squeaked. Not wasting time, they continued toward the far northwest corner. After doing a bit of recon, they chose one of the buildings hidden by other structures so they could use some light, but not much. Malachai tugged a lockpicking set from an inside pocket and worked on the lock. It released under his touch.

“Still don't know why we didn't get something to help with the damn locks,” Harland muttered as he let the others slip through before him. He checked the street and closed the door.

As the others searched the first floor, Harland fiddled with the lock and shoved a thick board between it and the floor as a brace.

Cyrus bounded up the stairs and checked the upper levels. He returned with a shrug. “About eight bedrooms, four on each floor, and four bathrooms are up there. There are a few decent mattresses we can double up to get some sleep.”

“There's a kitchen filled with left-behind utensils and gear, but no food. There's a pump by the sink for water. A couple of fireplaces are located on the first floor,” Malachai said as he returned from his reconnaissance.

While the others searched, Luc sat on the end of a sofa in the central room. He sneezed as dust flew up, and he waved his hand to clear it away. He kept his backpack in his arms and pulled his feet up to sit cross-legged.

Malachai checked him out, crouching down in front of him. “How are you holding up?”

“Don't really know,” Luc said, dropping his face in his hands. “How long are we here for?”

“At least until the high alert drops. Meanwhile, we need to figure out supplies and a plan of escape. I'll get you out, I promise.”

“Out from what?”

“Danger, Luc. Danger from the demons you saw us battle earlier. The shadowy minion you saw inside the master of The Club was a demon from the

depths of hell. The climatic upheaval released them, and they continue to pour into this world, bringing death, anger, and fear. They hide within hosts like a parasite.” Malachai glanced over his shoulder. “Fighters, like my friends and I, have the ability to seek them out and destroy them with specialized weapons and gifts.”

“I’ve never seen them. Why did I this time?”

“That’s something we’ll need to explain further.”

“But not here.”

“No. This place is far from secure to take time for such a discussion. I need you to hang in there a little longer. You can trust us.”

“I’ll try.”

“Best I can ask for in this situation.” Malachai pushed back to his feet and went to meet the others.

Cyrus waved a hand to create a protective shield around the entire building. “What’s the plan?”

“Since I didn’t expect to be stuck here for any length of time, I left my supplies in the saddlebags on my motorcycle,” Malachai said.

“Motorcycle? Is that a bicycle?” Luc asked from his spot on the couch.

Glancing back, Malachai grinned. “It’s old technology from the previous society. I found it where I live and managed to convert the gas system to accept an alternate fuel. It’s a faster way to travel than pedaling a bike. You’ll see soon. We’ll use it to get back to my home.”

“Great, another adventure. Can’t wait,” Luc said, all excitement gone from his tone after his harrowing experiences.

“You’ll enjoy this one, I promise. Hang in there a little longer.” Malachai returned his attention to his brothers-in-arms. “Did you find my cycle?”

“We did. We parked ours where we found yours stashed away and left our gear there too.” Cyrus gazed at Harland. “Guess this is up to you. Do you know where we left them?”

“I remember the location. I can ghost there and back,” Harland said.

“Are you sure you want to risk the trip?”

“It’s an easy trip. I’ve done worse.” Harland moved to the windows facing the outside perimeter wall. “Drop the shield, Cy.”

Cyrus waved a hand. Harland winked and vanished out of sight.

“Holy darkness,” Luc said.

“One of his specialized gifts, Luc. It’s nothing dangerous,” Malachai said. “He’s retrieving some bags of supplies so we can survive.”

“Aren’t we staying here?”

“No, I prefer not to stay behind these walls. The demon activity is unlike anything we’ve seen in previous compounds.” Malachai tugged off the long duster and draped it over the back of the couch. Sliding fingers through his hair, he glanced over at Cyrus. “What do you think?”

“It might be best if Harland and I remain here to do some investigating into this issue,” Cyrus said.

“Do you think we should bring in the rest of the Lost Boys?”

“Once we get all the information, I think so. Damn, I wish there was a CB radio relay around here,” Cyrus said. “Which building used to be the peacekeepers’ headquarters?”

Malachai recalled his compass and zoomed into a detailed map of their section. “Head five buildings over and two forward.” He manipulated the view until it revealed the underground information. He let out a low whistle. “They were rather ingenious.”

“How?”

“There’s an underground pathway connecting all of these buildings.”

“Is it under the entire compound?”

“No, just the peacekeepers’ buildings and center are connected, but the path to the justice building collapsed. Perhaps by the fleeing peacekeepers to protect whatever they had left behind.” Malachai looked carefully and pointed to a large opening underground. “There. They have an underground room. You can get around the collapse this way.”

“Hmm.” Cyrus studied the map, figuring out the directions. He headed down the hallway and found a closet. “Let’s see what’s behind door number one.”

Malachai and a seemingly curious Luc followed him.

Cyrus banged on and kicked at the door, but the frame was swollen from disuse and moisture. He checked the lock and cursed. Pulling out his own set of lockpicks, he worked on the lock. “What is the point of a locked closet?”

“Could it be to hide something from invaders?” Luc asked.

“Smart dancer.” Cyrus grinned when the lock clicked. He opened the door and banged around on the inside of the closet. “Malachai, do you see a hidden entrance or something on your map?”

Malachai created a detailed vision of the building. “Left corner, there’s an opening and staircase down.”

“Right.” Cyrus thumped the panels. “Aha. Found you.” He pressed his fingers into a disguised notch. The panel swung open. He snapped his fingers, creating a few light balls that floated around him.

“Don’t get lost,” Malachai warned.

“I’ll keep track of where I’m going. I’ll be back in a few, hopefully with some good news.”

They watched as Cyrus disappeared through the hidden doorway, and the panel closed behind him.

“This is turning out to be an interesting side trip,” Malachai said, leading Luc back to the main room.

They were in time to see a shimmering as Harland reappeared, laden with multiple saddlebags. Malachai helped him unload and explained where Cyrus had disappeared to.

“Why did he go without me? I wanted to explore,” Harland said with a playful frown.

“What did you see out there?”

“A ton of patrols filled with demon-hosts and normals. They’re arming the guards on the walls and others on the ground. They have orders to fire upon anyone or anything strange. Seems they’re expecting a war against us, so I placed a quick security line around us on my way back, but I need to strengthen it. I’m going to take a walk around. I’ll leave my familiar to guard the perimeters for us until I pick up the first watch later tonight.” Harland swung a pair of bags onto a shoulder and jogged up the stairs.

“Shall we check out what room we want?” Malachai pulled out a couple of smaller pouches and set them on a dusty table. He lifted the remaining saddlebags onto his shoulder.

“A room? Single?”

“Unless you want to sleep alone.”

“Sweet darkness, no, not here.” Lucius jogged to the sofa, grabbed his pack, and returned to Malachai’s side.

Together, they climbed the stairs. Malachai let Luc choose the room for them.

After entering the chosen bedroom, Luc looked around. “What are we going to do to pass all the time we’re stuck here?” He placed his pack on a dusty dresser. He kicked the edge of the stuffed mattress lying on a small platform in the corner. “We should turn this over. It could be less nasty on the other side.”

Silently agreeing, Malachai lowered his saddlebags to the same dresser. He took up another position, away from Luc on the other side of the mattress, and together they lifted, flipped, and dropped it onto the platform.

“I wonder if there are linens around here.”

“Either they’re dusty, moldy, or rotten by now, but you can look around. We’ll scavenge whatever we can around here. Depending on what Cyrus discovers, we’ll check the other buildings too.”

Studying the room, Luc opened the closet and let out a soft gasp.

“What? What is it?” Malachai rushed over. He raised an eyebrow at the chest inside. “It’s a box.”

“No, it’s an old-fashioned hope chest.” Luc dropped to the floor next to the chest. “These are a rare find. It’s made out of pure cedarwood. The tree no longer exists because of the climatic change. How it’s even sitting here amazes me. I read about these in books. Long ago, brides would pack their most precious belongings inside it before marrying.” He brushed his fingers along the lid of the carved chest and took a deep breath. “Ahh, the scent is still there.”

“Can we open it and see what’s inside?”

“Sure. It’ll be a shame to leave this beauty behind. Perhaps one of the preppers kept this and handed it down to his child.” Almost reverently, Luc lifted the lid of the chest. The rich cedar scent reached both of them. He pulled back the covering layer to reveal the inner contents. “There’s a patchwork quilt, a knit blanket, and a set of sheets. Oh...” He lifted a uniform jacket of a peacekeeper.

“You’re right about this belonging to a peacekeeper. It’s the dress uniform, not the everyday one.”

“Oh, look at this,” Luc said as he lifted a square object protected in a cotton bag. He opened it to pull out a picture frame. The picture was of a peacekeeper in uniform with his arms around another young man. They were both smiling toward the camera. Behind the frame, he discovered a ribbon-tied package of five diaries. “He loved another man and was loved in return. These also belonged to the peacekeeper.”

Reaching around him, Malachai gathered the sheets, blanket, and quilt in his arms. “I hope he wouldn’t mind us using these items.”

Luc lifted his gaze, his eyes shining with tears. “No. No, I don’t think so. Can I keep looking through this?”

“Sure. I’ll set up the bed.” Malachai returned to the bed and shook out the sheets. A glance over his shoulder showed Luc continuing to dig deeper into the chest.

Knocking on the door, Harland poked his head around the frame. “Hey, the perimeter is set up and I thought I should let you know, Cyrus is back with news. What? How did you manage to score sheets and a blanket?”

“Luc found them in a special type of chest kept from the previous society.” Malachai tilted his head to point towards the closet.

“Lucky brat for scoring the best room,” Harland teased.

“Luc, do you want to stick around up here?”

Turning from the chest, Luc moved his gaze to Malachai. “I’m kinda hungry.”

“We have some food downstairs. Not the best, but it’s decent considering the situation. I’ll create a late meal as Cyrus fills us in on what he found.”

Luc closed the lid with care, scooping up the diaries as he tagged along.

Malachai gathered the various pouches he’d left downstairs. They continued until they found Cyrus sitting in the kitchen area.

Cyrus was fiddling with some CB radio equipment. “I found this beauty and a lot more, but I think the peacekeepers used them to communicate with other compounds and coalitions. It’s a freaking maze down there. One wrong turn, and you’d be lost for hours. What are all of you trooping in here for?”

“Food.” Malachai set his bags on the table and unloaded the simplified camping equipment and packets of dehydrated meals.

“Oh, can you believe the dancer here managed to find blankets and sheets? Of course, they’re only for him and Malachai. We’ll be lucky to find a single sheet,” Harland said in a grumpy tone as he dropped in a chair.

“You’ll have to wrap yourself in your coat again.” Cyrus glanced over at Luc. “Where did you find the linens?”

Luc explained his findings while Malachai pumped water, purified it, and used the small stove to heat it. He opened several packets. When the water boiled, he poured some into each packet, closed them, and let them sit. After some time, he placed a pouch in front of each of them with a utensil.

Malachai scooped out some of the stew. “Explain what you discovered in the passageways. Do they lead out under the wall?”

“No, but they branch out to all the buildings within this sectioned-off area as we suspected.” Cyrus continued to explain about the passages as they enjoyed the simple meal.

“So we’re out of luck finding decent linens,” Harland mumbled.

“I’d prefer a bar of soap so I wouldn’t have to smell you,” Cyrus said as the others laughed.

With the meal finished, Malachai cleaned up and packed everything away. He gathered the empty packets and squeezed them into a bag he’d incinerate. They would leave no trace of their inhabitation in the compound.

“Would you mind if I returned upstairs to read the diaries?” Luc held up one of the leather-bound books.

“Not at all. We’ll figure out watches and settle in. Hopefully we can leave around dawn and continue our journey,” Malachai said.

Cyrus cupped his hand and a bubble of light appeared. He blew it over to Luc. “Bring this with you so you can read without straining your eyes. When you’re finished, tap it twice and it’ll disappear.”

“Thank you,” Luc said as the bubble floated to him and rested in his palm. He glanced at all of them, lingering longer on Malachai, and went upstairs.

“Hmm, someone wants another night,” Harland said when Luc disappeared.

Malachai turned his attention from Luc’s leaving and back to cleaning up their meal. He didn’t want to give Harland another opportunity to nag him. “Your point?”

“What are you still doing down here?”

“Cleaning and getting ready to take watch. We can’t drop our guard.”

“Relax. I left Fox on the outer perimeter, and Cougar prowls the closer one. Once we're done with food, I'll pick up first watch with them. Until then, you know my familiars will alert me if anything comes near.”

“How did you get the Cougar and not me?” Malachai asked.

“Who knows what the master was thinking when he did all this to us,” Harland said. “He gave the freaking Tiger to Cyrus.”

“Are you still complaining about my Tiger? Unbelievable. Can we get back to why we are here, please?” Cyrus interrupted.

Harland stuck his tongue out at Cyrus in a childish reply.

Malachai sighed and waved a hand. “Where are the perimeters?”

“One follows the interior wall, and the second is moved two rows in so we’d have time to move. I suggest we go into the passageways and get into another building to make our escape.”

“Good idea. I don’t believe any of the locals or demons know about the underground network. Otherwise most of it would have either been destroyed or expanded,” Cyrus said.

“It’s feasible,” Malachai said.

“For once, let go of your control over everything and enjoy yourself,” Harland said.

“What if he acquires another tattoo of mine?”

“Perhaps he’s destined to wear them since he carries gifts within his blood or is connected to you,” Cyrus said. “No matter what happens, I believe this meeting and occurrence is fated. It’s how we all came to be here.” Lifting his gaze from the radio, he contemplated Malachai. “Go upstairs and enjoy what happiness enters your life, my friend.”

Unable to argue with their logic, Malachai placed the bags in a corner cabinet. He clapped a hand on each of their shoulders and squeezed in thanks. Heading toward the stairs, he stopped to grab his coat and climbed with soft steps.

Entering the room with quiet steps, Malachai partially closed the door in case they needed to escape quickly. He stopped to study Luc sitting cross-legged on a corner of the mattress. The light bubble hovered by his shoulder, and one of the bound diaries was opened upon his lap. Focused on his reading, Luc didn't hear him as he dropped his coat across their bags. He crouched and unlaced his heavy boots, stepping out of them. Walking closer, he tugged the layered shirts over his head and tossed them in the direction of his coat.

Lowering himself, Malachai crawled across the bed and stretched out on his side. Catching sight of a bare strip of skin between Luc's shirt and pants, he grinned and traced his finger along the naked flesh.

Luc jumped and squeaked in surprise. He twisted around. "Malachai!" He smacked playfully at Malachai's hands.

"Your back was beckoning to me to touch it. It was quite tempting, and I couldn't resist," he said in a silky tone as he captured Luc's hand and drew it to his lips to kiss the palm.

"What are you doing up here?"

"What does it look like?"

Both of Luc's eyebrows went straight up in surprise.

"That is, if you still want me after all the chaos you've dealt with today and learning what you did. I'd understand if you wanted nothing to do with me," Malachai said, lowering his gaze to the quilt. He moved to turn away to slink downstairs in defeat. It wouldn't be the first time a potential companion turned away from him.

When Luc placed his hand on Malachai's shoulder, tugging him back, he turned his head to meet Luc's gaze.

"I wasn't saying no," Luc said with a gentle smile. He set aside the closed diary and pushed the bubble closer to them. He crawled closer, and pushing Malachai to his back, he draped his lean figure against him. His fingers drifted through Malachai's dark hair.

"Take off your shirt," Malachai said.

With another smile, this one sultrier, Luc sat up, grabbed his shirt by the back collar, and tugged it over his head. He tossed it toward the end of the bed.

Together, they kicked down the quilt, not wanting to mess up the priceless possession. Their lips met as Luc rested upon Malachai's larger body. With a

little shifting to align their chests, hips, and erect cocks, they tangled their legs together. Together, they rubbed against each other. Their hands ghosted down one another's skin to find those sensitive points as they continued to kiss. Using the friction of their pants to increase the sensations, Malachai rolled them onto their sides.

Luc lifted one long leg around Malachai's waist, and they moaned as their groins pressed even tighter.

Pulling back his head to breathe, Malachai stared into Luc's eyes as he rolled and rocked his hips against Luc's pelvis. He drifted his hand between them, undoing the buttons on their pants. With Luc's help, they tugged their cocks out.

Luc lifted Malachai's hand, opened the fingers, and licked his palm several times. Malachai felt arousal rush through him at the sensual touch. He let Luc lower and wrapped his fingers around their erect silken shafts. Luc placed his palm on Malachai's cheek, gazing into his eyes as Malachai stroked their cocks together. The sensation increased for both of them, drops leaking from both slits.

This... This is what Malachai dreamed about and craved. Being next to one man, one companion, and diving deep inside him to feel every emotion. To bring his heart back.

"Right there... Just like that, Mal," Luc whispered as he sank his teeth into his lower lip to hold back a desperate cry.

Continuing the same twisting movements, rubbing his thumb around the crowns, Malachai pressed light kisses around Luc's face. "This good?"

"Yeah. Faster. Please..."

Malachai tilted his head to nibble on Luc's earlobe, sucking it into his mouth.

Luc moaned, higher and sharper. His breathing altered to a rapid pace as he seemed overcome with sensation. Malachai felt the same happening within himself. The tingling raced down his spine, overwhelming his hips as his balls tightened.

Releasing the fleshy earlobe, he captured Luc's lips as he quickened the strokes to drive them over. Luc screamed his release as his cock spurted several ropes of creamy cum onto Malachai's belly and hand. Groaning harshly as his body tightened and exploded, Malachai added his cum to the mess between

them. He continued to jack their sensitive cocks, prolonging the pleasure for both of them. Luc screamed again with another orgasm deep inside him, but it was a dry one.

“No more... Please...” Luc pleaded.

Releasing their cocks, Malachai watched Luc flop onto his back, closing his eyes, his chest sweaty and heaving to pull in the needed breaths. He saw the glistening cum on his hand and his lower belly.

“Whatever shall I do with this mess?” Malachai teased.

Opening his eyes, Luc grinned. He rolled faster than Malachai thought possible and pushed him onto his back. Straddling his knees, Luc bent over and licked Malachai’s belly, swirling around his inner belly button and teasing the outer edge of the tight curls cradling his limp cock. “I’ll clean you up,” Luc whispered and got to his work.

Moaning at the experience, Malachai lay back and watched his every movement. There was something special about this dancer. He didn’t ever want to let Lucius leave his embrace.

Chapter 4

Curled against the warmth of another male, Malachai realized he'd never slept better. Wanting to linger and enjoy it a little longer, he closed his eyes to continue snuggling.

"Malachai! We gotta move! Wake up!"

Feeling a kick to his feet, disturbing the hell out of his peaceful sleep, Malachai opened his eyes and saw Harland standing at the edge of the mattress. "What is it?"

"We need to move. Get going," Harland said as he returned to the doorway.

Sitting up, Malachai stared at the bundle of his shirts resting on the quilt.

Harland looked back from the doorway. "Malachai, get your ass out of bed. Hell, both of you need to get out of bed. We need to get down in the passageways now. The patrols are moving closer." He rushed away from the door.

Returning to full alert, Malachai nudged and shook Lucius awake. "Get up, Luc, we need to leave."

Blinking open sleepy eyes, Luc stretched and stopped. His eyes opened wide as he registered Malachai's words. "What?"

"We need to leave. Patrols are moving in. Get dressed. Now!" Malachai rolled out of the bed, buttoned his fly, and untangled the ball of clothes. He tugged all of them over his head and shoved his feet into socks and boots and tied them.

Following Malachai's urgent movements, Luc climbed off the mattress and dressed himself.

Not wanting to leave a trace of their presence, Malachai folded the quilt and linens in a haphazard way and tucked everything back in the chest. He noticed Luc scoop up the picture and diaries and place them in his backpack.

"I wish we didn't have to leave the chest behind. Those bastards will destroy it, not understanding the legacy," Luc said as he tied his boots.

Knowing they couldn't waste time, Malachai called upon his gifts and covered the chest in overlapping, concealing layers of shadows. Finishing, he

studied his work and moved to grab his coat, saddlebags, and Luc's backpack. He paused when Luc grabbed his lower arm and kissed him.

"Thank you," Luc whispered.

"If there's a chance, we'll come back for it." Holding Luc's hand, Malachai led them out of the room, down the stairs, and to the back closet. He let Luc follow Cyrus into the darkness as he kept watch with Harland.

Harland held up the pouches Malachai had left in the kitchen. "Grabbed these for you. Sorry about missing the morning meal. There's no time to stop and heat water."

"We'll eat later." Malachai tucked them into one of the saddlebags.

As he entered the underground passageway, Harland whistled low and steady. Malachai watched Harland's animals appear and return to him. Another brush of power restored the entire building as it was before their arrival. Harland followed him into the passageway.

Cyrus let them pass before he locked the door behind them. He released a couple of bubbles and sent them ahead as pathfinders. "Follow me."

"How much time do we have before they breach your inner barrier?" Malachai asked.

"Not much. They busted open the gate and spread out like wildfires," Harland said. "It'll be a hard fight to get clear of this place."

"We'll manage it. We always do."

"Shh. These things echo. Move," Cyrus muttered, leading the way through the darkness. He seemed to know exactly where to go, following something only he knew.

Malachai lost count of how many twists and turns they made. He felt Luc brush against him, grabbing handfuls of his coat.

After some time underground, Cyrus stopped them and pointed to a single flight of stairs.

Malachai stopped to study the area. Luc did the same next to him, seeming curious about why they'd stopped.

"You two head up the stairs. This building is closest to a smaller exterior door on the backside of the compound. From the door, you'll cross the flatlands to find your hidden motorcycle. Keep low and move fast," Cyrus said.

“What are you talking about?” Malachai looked thoughtfully between his friends. “You’re both coming with us.”

“Harland and I spoke about it. We’re staying,” Cyrus said.

“Are you mad? We’re outnumbered. It’s suicide to stay here.”

“There’s no other choice. We’ll distract them as you two make your escape. Malachai, you need to get him out of here. It isn’t safe,” Cyrus said.

“Why me? I haven’t done anything,” Luc said.

“Fate and the light chose you for some purpose to meet with Malachai. We can’t lose either of you to the shadows.”

“We need to get you out safely,” Harland added.

“This is crazy. No, you can’t stay behind.” Luc lifted his gaze to plead with Malachai. “Tell them, Mal.”

“I can’t. They know what they speak about. We can’t alter their decision.” Malachai shifted the packs around and pulled out one of the food pouches. “You’ll need extra food. Take it.”

“What will you eat?” Cyrus asked as Harland accepted the offering.

“I have stashes hidden along the way. I know how to find them.”

Stepping forward, Cyrus wrapped one arm around Malachai in a thumping hard hug. After hugging him back, Malachai gave Harland a similar hug. Keeping quiet, Luc waved to the other men.

“We’ll kick in a distraction to give you time,” Cyrus said. “When the crow calls, you go.”

Malachai took hold of Luc’s hand and squeezed it. Luc returned the quiet gesture. In silent agreement, they moved up the stairs with Malachai in the lead. He worked open the lock and pushed open the squeaky hidden door. After a final glance over his shoulder at his friends, Malachai entered the empty building.

“I can carry the backpack,” Luc said as he tugged it from Malachai’s shoulder.

“Are you sure?”

“You have enough to worry about without carrying my things.” Luc slung the pack on both shoulders and locked the front clasp. He adjusted his jacket to

fall better. Shoving his hands through his hair, he tugged a band from his pocket and secured it in a low ponytail. “Okay. I’m ready.”

Reaching the front door, Malachai called his gun to his hand. He tapped his finger on the trigger guard as he opened the door and scanned around for signs of trouble. Turning, he gave soft instructions to Luc. “Follow me. Fast and quiet. Walk where I do. Stay aware of everything around you. Okay? You’re light on your feet when you dance, and I need you to do the same thing now.”

Malachai held out his free hand, and Luc took hold, lacing their fingers together. Studying their location, Malachai headed toward the wall and exterior door. At times, he would press them into a corner, calling the shadows around them to protect Lucius. Reaching the door, he tucked his gun within the waist of his pants to secure it for a moment. It took seconds as he manipulated a pair of picks to open the ancient lock. Hearing it click, he placed everything away, clasped his gun, and opened the door. With his gifts, he checked around the compound from the wall, across the vast landscape, and to the hidden location of his transportation, a modified motorcycle.

“We must run across the borderland to the forest line. Do you see it?” Malachai leaned to the side so Lucius could see their intended direction.

“It’s too far. They’ll see us. Even with the distraction, not all of them will look away. The guards on top have guns. Big ones. They’ll shoot anything they feel is a danger, especially someone sneaking away.”

“No, we’ll make it. I promise. Fast and quiet.”

Nibbling on his lower lip, Lucius nodded and secured another strap around his belly. He adjusted the pack so it wouldn’t bounce around and create noise.

Hearing the cry of a crow, Cyrus’s main bird, Malachai knew it was the signal. He kissed Luc’s knuckles. “On three—” He counted slowly and easily before they darted into action.

Powerful searchlights flickered across the grounds. Guards scrambled on the wall as they shouted, “You there! Stop, or we’ll shoot! Stop—” Frantic shots pierced the darkness and quiet.

“Malachai!”

Malachai’s gun fired back upon their attackers, bright spots of light through the darkness. “Lucius! Run!”

After the entire snafu of an escape, Malachai extended the trip by a couple extra days. He didn't want to take any chances with their lives. He went with Cyrus's advice and took the longest route. Traveling by motorcycle during the day, he continued to use alternate trails. Before the evening shadows lengthened across the land, he located their hiding spots early to avoid detection. Thanks to the series of previously hidden resources, he managed to create simple camps within the natural caverns.

During their traveling, Malachai could tell his body wasn't happy because of the multiple bullet wounds he had taken—he hadn't escaped the few grazing shots. His wounds felt like balls of fire, and driving over coarse, bumpy ground didn't help. With a call of his gifts, he activated the healing tattoos to work their magic upon his body.

At the same time, he checked over Luc. Luckily, he discovered Luc's backpack managed to deflect most of the bullets. Luc had ended up receiving a few flesh wounds that Malachi managed to clean and dress during a brief stop.

At the third sunset, Malachai located another known spot where they could rest. He parked the motorcycle behind a clutch of boulders that spread out to a simple campsite. They both dismounted.

Exhausted from the long hours of riding and the beating heat of traveling through the deserted wasteland, Luc flopped across a sleeping pad that he'd unfolded on the ground. He stretched out all his limbs, groaning as he did so. "How much longer are we staying out here?"

"Not too much longer. I'm making sure no one can follow our trail." Malachai walked to a grouping of boulders and rocks. Crouching down, he shifted a boulder out of the way. Reaching into the cooler cavern, he pulled out a plastic container. He selected several packets of dehydrated meals, a small canister of fuel, and bottles of filtered water, and returned the container to the hiding spot. Resetting the boulder, he carried the items back to where Luc rested.

"Whatcha got?"

"Supplies, as I promised." Malachai revealed what he'd gathered. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore. Hurt," Luc grumbled. "This is worse than dancing for twelve hours solid."

"I'm sorry about making you uncomfortable. It wasn't my intention." Malachai twisted the top on a smaller bottle. "Here. Sip some water. You need to keep hydrated out here." He held out the bottle and waited for Luc to sit up.

Luc sipped slowly and steadily. He moaned in pleasure this time. “This place is so dry. Why are we traveling during the hottest time of the day? Shouldn’t it be the opposite?”

“The demons are active during the evening hours, and I’d rather stay in one place to guard my back against a possible attack. Unless they’re tethered to a human host, they can’t venture into the daylight. Most humans avoid traveling during the day for the reason you mentioned. It’s why we can travel faster.”

“I understand the reasoning, but it still sucks.”

“I know. Of course, I’m more accustomed to this type of travel than you.”

“I can’t believe how desolate it is out here. I thought nature would reclaim this land.”

“I’m sure nature is trying, but without much rainfall, things can’t take root and grow. I believe this was one of those places ravaged by multiple tornadoes and other climate changes. It used to be farms and ranches filled with lush pastures and rich dirt covered in crops.”

“Rather hard to see this place lush and gorgeous.” Luc continued to sip from the bottle. “What can I do to help?”

“Pick out what food you want and cut open the top. I’ll eat whatever you choose. The names are on the tags.” Malachai screwed the fuel canister into the base of the small stove. He poured a larger bottle of water into the connected pot and turned it on to boil. “Okay, when the water boils, turn this knob to simmer. Pop out these handles and pour the water into the packets. Close and let them sit for a few minutes.”

“Where are you going?”

“I need to do a perimeter check and lay a warning signal.”

“No one has followed us.”

“Out here, things act and behave differently. You can never let your guard down when traveling through the badlands. I want you to stay here.”

Unable to argue, Luc folded his legs into a sitting position, bracing his elbow on one and his head on the raised palm. He watched over the simmering stove.

Malachai leaned over and pressed his lips to Luc’s temple. He didn’t want to leave Luc, but he had to concentrate on walking a security border. Forced to leave Lucius behind with the motorcycle, watching over their dinner, he moved around the perimeter of the campsite, enlarging it with each pass.

On his way back, he stumbled upon a hidden nest of demons.

“Sweet darkness, no,” he whispered. He couldn’t leave this nest alive, especially when they were untethered and loose demons. Letting the long coat flare out, he activated his guns with the specialized bullets used to destroy demons, turning them into dust. Powerful guns in hands, he raced toward the nest, his vision altering to catch sight of them.

As the evil beings saw him, they hissed and attacked.

Guns blaring, Malachai spun, twisted, tumbled, and fired.

“Malachai! What’s happening?”

Ignoring Luc’s screams, Malachai returned the guns to his skin when he ran out of ammunition. While he pulled the twin sai blades, he called on Wolf and Cheetah. Ordering them to attack the outlying members of the nest who were trying to escape, he concentrated on the remaining bulk of them. He wouldn’t let any of them remain alive. He would make sure every one of them turned to dust. He dropped, slashed, and cut his way through the horde. Twisting, he screamed for power as he thrust a sai in one direction and then the other blade behind him. His gaze moved to capture Lucius clutching a large rock, keeping himself out of sight. Reassured that Luc remained out of the way, Malachai jabbed the sai as the demons dusted around him.

Spinning on his heel, using ancient fighting arts his body had learned through the ink, Malachai destroyed the remaining minions. He heard Wolf howl in triumph and return to his side. Cheetah circled around them, muzzle and paws covered with the dust of defeated foes, and his long, spotted tail flicking to show his unease about the situation.

Dropping low, legs crossed in a final fighting position, Malachai concentrated on his breathing. With a whistle, he called Wolf and Cheetah to his back. Cleaning the blades, he stood and stared around the nest. Piles of dust scattered about him, floating away when different trails of wind lifted them in a swirl.

Turning, he returned to a worried Lucius. He sent the sai back to his skin and adjusted the long coat.

“What was going on? What happened?” Lucius twisted around to follow Malachai’s return.

“Stumbled upon a nest of demons, and I had to remove them. I couldn’t take the chance of them following us or heading to the compound.”

Lucius lifted a hand and brushed his thumb against Malachai's cheek. He lowered it to reveal a smudge of dust.

"Demon dust. It's what happens when I destroy them."

"They're what I saw in the compound."

"Yes, but these demons haven't found a host and were free-floating."

"Sweet darkness, you could have been killed." Luc draped himself against Malachai. He crushed their lips together in a desperate kiss celebrating that they were still alive.

Swept up in Luc's passion, Malachai returned and gentled the kiss. He slid his arms around Luc's waist to take on his weight. He broke away from their kiss, brushing his fingers against Luc's golden hair. "I know what I'm doing against them. It's all right."

Leaning against him, Luc pressed his face against Malachai's chest. He kept his arms tight around Malachai as he nuzzled him.

Confused by the touches, Malachai tilted his head to look down at his dancer. "Luc?"

"Hold me, please. I never saw such a fight," Luc said. "It scared the hell out of me. You move like you're a trained dancer."

"I've done this for a long time." Malachai moved his arms to hold Luc close. He pressed his lips to Luc's hair, kissing him. "How's dinner?"

"Umm." Luc leaned back and looked at the stove. "I think everything is ready for us, but it could be a little overwatered."

"Nah, I'm sure it'll be fine." Malachai led Luc back and settled on the pad. He dug out a simplified utensil for each of them and opened the packets. "Smells delicious. Eat up. I want to make good time."

"Where are we?"

"We're a little beyond halfway. This sidelined us for a bit. I may take an alternate route."

Luc poked into the bag, testing the contents, and took a couple of bites. "I'm tired of traveling. Why can't we go directly and deal with them later?"

"I'd rather not lead them to my doorstep."

The rest of the meal and the cleanup passed in silence.

Malachai moved to set out another sleeping pad and bag against the rocks. His energy level was low from multiple pulls of the ink.

Stretching out on his pad, Luc lifted his hand toward him. “I don’t want to sleep alone. Please. Rest with me.”

Rising, Malachai gathered his sleeping gear and moved back to Luc, who shifted so the pads lined up. He pulled off his coat and slid behind Luc, bracing his legs on either side of him. Waiting as Luc adjusted position, he cradled Luc’s body and then covered them with the coat. Brushing his fingers through Luc’s soft hair, he nuzzled him.

“Shh, sleep. I’ll keep you safe.”

Another mumble, and Luc settled closer to him and slid into sleep.

Malachai let out a sigh. Though needing sleep, he needed to protect them. He released Owl from his skin and sent him on a scouting vigil in the darkening skies. He let Fox out to scent around the ground and keep watch. Either Fox or Owl would alert him of danger. With his guardians in place, he curled closer to Luc and followed him into a light restorative sleep.

Malachai pushed hard for another day, traveling farther and longer to reach the safety of the bunker he was seeking out. When he had first arrived in this area, Malachai had scouted around for a semi-permanent place to stay—away from the multiple compounds. To his surprise, he discovered an abandoned prepper’s bunker. It was loaded with everything he needed to survive, so he moved in and made himself at home. Most of the Lost Boys who ventured into the area ended up staying with him.

When the sky started to darken, he drove them without another stop, pushing both of them to their limits. The sun had dipped under the far horizon by the time Malachai made it to the bunker and parked the motorcycle in the covered aboveground spot.

“Oh no, not another stop,” Luc said in a whiny tone. “You’re cutting it a little close tonight.”

“It was worth the extra traveling time because this is the best stop. We’re at my home,” Malachai said, and nudged Luc to climb off.

Luc placed his hands on his lower back and stretched. He shook his legs and did several more twists and stretches. “Looks like every other place. A bunch of rocks.”

“I promise. The entrance is nearby,” Malachai said as he lifted the saddlebags to his shoulder. He held out the backpack to Luc who swung it over his shoulders. “Follow me.”

Malachai led him over to the covered entrance. He shifted a hidden lever to open the door disguised as another boulder. He grinned at Luc’s gasp of surprise. “Not too bad, huh?”

“You’d never know this was here,” Luc said.

“That’s the whole point.” Malachai closed the door with another lever and opened the gates immediately in front of it to reveal a lift. He escorted Luc inside, closed and locked the gates, and pressed a button to lower the lift to the heart of the deep underground compound.

“How did you find this?” Luc asked as they descended.

Malachai explained how he had stumbled across the entrance to the bunker during one of his long searches. Once his gifts had searched the interior, he figured out the lift and dropped into what he’d guessed was a prepper’s hideout during the climatic chaos. He explained about the multiple levels: security, a gymnasium, sleeping, living and bathing areas. The lower levels held a storage area, an unusual thriving garden, and a small farm of chickens, goats, and tanks of fish.

“Who fed the animals while you were gone? I’m sure they’re starving, the poor things,” Luc interrupted.

“It’s an automatic system with timers and everything. I made sure to fill the hoppers with food and the basins with water for them to work. I wouldn’t leave them to starve.”

“Okay. Good to know. Sheesh, thought for a minute you were turning into some monster,” Luc teased with a tired grin.

Malachai bumped their shoulders to acknowledge the teasing.

“What’s left in this joint?”

“Just the lowest levels, and they hold the powerhouse workers of water filtration, energy connectors, and an incinerator.”

“You have a little bit of everything in one spot. Not bad.”

“It works for me. Here we are,” Malachai said when the lift stopped by the medical area. He opened the gates and led Luc around a circular path. Sensors turned on the lights at his entrance.

“Take off your outer layer of clothes.” He tugged off his long duster coat and tossed it aside. Rolling his shoulder, he let the saddlebags fall on a nearby gurney. Accepting the backpack from Luc, he discovered a rip on the side. “Sweet darkness, this is what I mentioned after our first stop. Check it out.” He revealed the tear to Luc. “This saved your life by altering the bullet’s paths to only graze you.”

“Why do you want me to strip?”

“I want to make sure your wounds are cleansed and healing.”

“Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Yes. Now, strip,” Malachai said.

Luc stripped off the tattered, dirty clothing and tossed them in a chute at Malachai’s direction. “What’s down there?”

“It leads to the incinerator where I burn all the garbage to remove any trace of it. I’ll do the same with all the leftovers we gathered during the trip.” Malachai patted the edge of a gurney to encourage Luc to sit.

Stepping away, he rummaged through some supplies. He gathered everything upon a tray and rolled it back to the gurney. Returning to the sink, he rolled back his sleeves and thoroughly soaped, scrubbed, and rinsed multiple times from his elbows down. He’d learned the importance of keeping everything as hygienic as possible when performing any type of medical procedure. Drying his hands with paper towels, he tugged on a pair of gloves.

“Let me see what we’re dealing with,” Malachai said as he checked out an almost naked Luc lying on the gurney. He pulled away the temporary bandaging. Along with the brilliant ink and pale skin, he concentrated on the angry lines of red slicing Luc’s side. Snatching a couple of folded blankets on another gurney, he shoved them under Luc’s hip and back to prop him in place. “Not bad. They’re deeper than I first expected, but no bullets are left behind.”

“Before you cause any pain—” Lucius answered, nibbling on his lower lip. “Kiss me.”

Malachai kissed him with gentle, light presses of their lips. “I’ll take care of you. I promise.” Pulling on the gifts of his caduceus tattoo, he pushed some numbing and sleep sensations into Luc while he cleansed and bandaged the wounds with care.

Though seemingly reluctant to close his eyes, Lucius fell asleep during the procedures.

With Lucius sleeping comfortably, Malachai took advantage to concentrate upon the ravens resting on Lucius's back. He brushed his fingers against the birds, feeling the softness of the feathers as they moved.

"What are you doing here? You don't belong to him. He has nothing to do with the Heartless or the minions. You need to return to me," he said to the birds. He tugged his arm out of his shirt and held it near the tattoo. "Return to me."

As expected, the birds didn't move. They settled deeper into Lucius's skin and made themselves comfortable.

"Damn the darkness," Malachai muttered.

Walking away to let Luc rest, he kept up his meticulous nature and cleaned the medical area. He brushed off both of their bags and carried them up the stairs to the sleeping quarters. After a quick cold shower and change of clothes, he checked the rest of the bunker. Finishing, he returned to the infirmary and found Luc wiggling on the gurney.

Luc's eyes opened, blinked, and focused upon Malachai. A smile tugged at his lips. "Hello."

"Hello. Welcome back." Malachai drew his fingers through the soft golden locks covering half of Lucius's face. He tucked them behind one ear. Bending over, he kissed Luc's lips, lingering for a few seconds, keeping things tender. Lifting his hand, he wound his finger around a lock once more. "How are you feeling?"

Lucius moved carefully and tested his limbs. "Not bad. Better than the road rash I felt earlier. Will any of this hurt my dancing?"

"No, I don't expect it would, but you should take a couple of days of rest." Malachai allowed his fingers to linger around the soft lock of hair. "Give yourself time to heal, stretch, and you'll return to where you were."

"If I couldn't dance, I don't know what else I would do. I have no other skills, and I will not sell myself to multiple men every night." Luc pushed up from the pillow and shook his head. "I can't degrade myself to that point. It's pure misery."

"Shh. Shh. Calm down," Malachai said as he pressed Luc back to the bed. "You're not returning to the compound or The Club. No one can own another person. When the coalitions came together, slavery remained illegal in all forms."

“The law isn’t present within the compound.”

“What?”

“The group after us overran the jurisdiction and killed them. It’s why all the peacekeepers were missing from those buildings. To keep up the pretense, they continued to send missives to the coalition. It’s why my servitude to The Club is inescapable.”

“You’re not there now,” Malachai said.

“I can’t stay here. I’m a dancer. It’s my life, my light, and if I can’t dance, I’d rather die.”

“Dance for yourself.” Malachai cupped Luc’s face, tilting to meet the worried look in those golden-hazel eyes. “If you wish, you can visit other compounds for performances, for which you’d be handsomely compensated. You wouldn’t be trapped in some dark sex-based club for drunk clients.”

“This couldn’t possibly work. It’s an impossibility.”

“Perhaps, but you could be the first to make it come true.” Malachai shrugged. “Together, we’ll figure out what’s best for you. First, let’s get you out of the infirmary and moving around.”

Luc gestured to his mostly naked body under the sheet. “You took away my clothes.”

“Right. Sorry. First, you’re a hot mess, and you need a shower. The dressings are waterproof.”

“Shower?”

“Through here,” Malachai said and helped Lucius slide off the gurney, still naked. He took him into the adjacent bathroom and worked the controls. “Step inside and wash up. I’ll leave a towel and some clothes on the counter.”

“Oh, sweet darkness, this is so much better than a bucket,” Luc said as he stepped under the falling water, lifting his face up. Shaking his head, he laughed and enthusiastically started bathing his body.

Chuckling at Luc’s pleasure of a simple thing, Malachai gathered a towel along with some soft cotton pants, a shirt, and a pair of socks that were stored in one of the cabinets. Returning, he dropped them on the counter. “Doing okay in there?”

“Yes, this is wonderful.” Luc figured out how to shut off the water and stepped out of the basin. He grabbed the towel and dried himself. “Thanks.

Where's my bag?" He dressed in the soft clothes, tying off the pants' drawstrings. He held up the towel and asked, "Where do you want this?"

"I brought it up to the sleeping quarters." Malachai pointed to a basket. "Drop the towel in there. I'll go around and gather laundry later."

"Great," Luc said, and tossed the towel. He stretched and twisted his body. "The shower helped, but I need to move around before my muscles cramp."

"What do you want to do?"

"Show me your home. Then I'll be ready to take a nap."

Shaking his head, Malachai took Luc on a simple tour of the bunker, showing him what he'd explained earlier. He smiled when Luc cooed at the chickens and let the goats nudge his fingers and accept treats. It seemed to be the highlight of their tour. When they finished, he brought Luc to the kitchen, fed him a simple meal, and showed him to the bedroom he had prepared. Malachai left him to sleep.

Chapter 5

The next morning, they settled in the kitchen area where Malachai pulled together a simple morning meal for them to share. He decided to use fresh eggs he'd gathered earlier from the chickens, the goats' milk, and the fresh vegetables and herbs he'd harvested from the garden to create thick omelets. As he whipped them together, he waited for Luc to start with his questions.

Luc cleared his throat as he sipped the hot coffee. It took him by surprise when Malachai offered it, not realizing he had it in stock. "You told me how you found this place, but what do you use it for? You call this home."

"In a way, it's the only true home I've had since I was a child. I use this as my base when patrolling the area and visiting various compounds. It's a central location near multiple compounds and coalition bases so it's convenient. There's room for the others, like Cyrus and Harland, to stop in and stay a while."

"Are you some kind of law enforcement?"

"In a fashion," Malachai said as he carried two plates to the table. He set one in front of Lucius. "Enjoy." He settled in a chair next to Luc and ate a few bites.

"I can't—" Lucius moved the plate away.

Disappointed, Malachai looked at his plate and wondered if he'd done something wrong.

"I can't make light easy talk. Not knowing... I need answers."

"So it isn't my cooking," Malachai said, trying to lighten the mood. It was his first attempt and a bad one according to Luc's expression.

Lucius dragged fingers through his hair. "What in the name of darkness were those things? How the hell were you fighting them? What is happening to me?"

"I'm not sure how to explain."

"Why?"

"No others on the outside enter my world other than those I hunt and kill. By 'others' I mean those who I spend any time with longer than a single encounter." Malachai lifted his gaze and saw Lucius staring at him.

“You left and wouldn’t have returned.”

“Not to seek out spending another night with you, no, but I would have continued to watch you dance from the shadows. We’re not supposed to reveal ourselves for more than one night to a chosen companion. It’s an unspoken rule amongst my brethren.”

“What are you?”

“Heartless.”

Lucius snorted. “If you were that, I would be dead on the field or locked in The Club.”

Malachai shook his head. “I’m not that kind of heartless.”

To his surprise, Luc twisted to press a hand against Malachai’s chest, above his heart. “I feel your heart beat.” He lifted his fingers to Malachai’s lips. “Your lips are warm and moist. I feel the breath leaving your lungs. How are you heartless?” He lowered his hand to cover Malachai’s fingers.

“My heart remains there to keep me alive and pump blood. Any emotions or feelings have been long burnt out and destroyed. I am one of the Heartless.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You live in the light, Lucius. I reside in the shadows and darkness of the world around you. During all the natural upheaval from the climatic changes, something else climbed out of the depths of the earth, the seas, and the cold. Something no one could have imagined existed.” Malachai pushed away his half-empty plate. His thumb drew circles on the table. “I’m not sure how to explain.”

“You said that before. Just tell me. What did I see?”

“Demons. You saw the demons from the depths. These demons are shades of themselves and can’t exist within our world unless they are protected from the sunlight and UV rays. If sunlight hits one of them, they become dust. To protect themselves, they learned how to hunt the most evil of humankind and enter their souls, their very minds and bodies. They become similar to a parasite, living within their chosen host.”

“Do I have one?”

“No. Your natural eyesight shifted so you could peer within the shadows and see the demons or minions.”

“Oh, sweet darkness. What happened to the master?”

“He carried a minion within him. It emphasized his viciousness, anger, and controlling passions to a deeper degree. I destroyed the demon, but not the host.”

“With the blade you carried. But I don’t see a scabbard or anything upon you.”

Knowing this would go against every code within the Lost Boys and Heartless, Malachai lifted his hand from the table. He brushed his fingers against his side and called the sai blade to his hand.

Lucius let out a sharp gasp and pushed away. “That’s way different than what I saw earlier. I thought I was seeing something crazy, but it’s real. No. No.” He shook his head and held up his hands. “You pulled that out of your side.”

“Breathe, Luc, please. I can explain.”

“Do it fast...”

Malachai laid the blade upon the table. “No, I made it appear with my gifts. Magic.”

“Magic?”

“During the climatic upheaval, something altered within the atmosphere and our genetic make-up. Certain children born after the upheaval were gifted, magical, while others were normal or some were even deformed. I was one of the gifted born, but encouraged to not use my gifts for most of my early childhood.”

“What happened in your later childhood?”

“Thugs raided my family’s compound located outside of the Northern Coalition. My family—” Malachai swallowed down the pain, lingering even after all these years. “They were murdered in front of me. My mother forced me to hide, and when it was safe, I ran from the danger. I had a go-bag with me, and it was all I had.” Rubbing his hands together, he kept his gaze down. “My parents were leaders and part of the Northern Coalition. They taught me, as I grew older, to never go anywhere without having a go-bag packed and ready.

“I traveled around alone as a boy, learning to take care of myself. I continued to head further north and finally stumbled upon an isolated

compound filled with children under the care of a prepper. He became father to all of us while teaching us survival skills, basic education, and other things. In time, he selected some of the older boys and moved us away from the majority of the group. Those chosen were gifted in one form or another.” Malachai clenched his fist. “What he did to us teenaged boys was unthinkable, but it happened. He destroyed us from the inside and rebuilt us in the image he wanted—that of a hunter, an assassin, and a fighter against the darkness. He shaped us into the Heartless.”

“What happened?”

“I will not speak of it. To speak of it will make it happen again, and we all vowed never to give him the power. We are who we are now. We’ve accepted the changes to our realities.”

“I understand.” Luc wrapped his fingers around Malachai’s forearm and pointed with his other hand to the blade. “How did you make this appear?”

“Promise not to leave when I reveal everything.”

“I couldn’t get far if I tried.” Luc gave him a half smile. “No matter what, I realize I’m safer with you than anyone or anywhere else. I’m staying.”

Pushing the chair back, Malachai dislodged Luc’s touch as he rose. He unbuttoned his shirt and let the cloth fall from his shoulders and arms. He tossed it onto the chair and stood, bare-chested, in front of Lucius.

“This is incredible ink. The beauty and lines...” Luc said, leaning forward to touch the enormous Tree of Life tattoo covering Malachai’s entire left side. He traced his fingers around the branches spread out around his ribcage, the side of his belly, his shoulder and entire arm, and a bit around his chest. Returning his fingers to Malachai’s shoulder, he brushed around the hidden owl. He stopped and stared when Malachai’s owl blinked back. “It—The owl—No way!”

With a soft whisper from Malachai, the great horned owl animated and stretched around his hiding place. His powerful talons gripped a branch as he stretched his wings. With a soft hoot and call, Owl pulled away from Malachai’s skin, and with a flap of wings, he encircled the space above them and landed upon Malachai’s shoulder. Tilting his head, Owl brushed his soft facial feathers against Malachai’s cheek. Another soft hoot, and he blinked great yellow eyes at Lucius.

“Oh, sweet darkness. It’s—” Lucius swallowed. “It’s real. Don’t those talons hurt you? They must be knife sharp.”

“Owl is as real as anything once he leaves my skin, like Wolf and Cheetah who assisted me during the battle against the nest. I’m immune to the pain of his talons because he comes from me. Unlike your ink, mine grants me additional gifts, powers, and abilities to fight against the demons or survive. Certain items can, in a specific manner I don’t completely understand, manifest into reality. Owl is one of them. He’s a true friend, a brilliant spy, and a top-notch scout. When he returns to me, I can replay all he sees through his keen eyesight.” Lifting his fingers, Malachai rubbed them against the soft chest feathers as Owl hooted softly.

Watching them interact with wide eyes, Lucius scooted his chair back. “May I touch him?”

“Of course Let him initiate the first touch.” Malachai encouraged Owl to fly down from his shoulder to wrap his claws around the back of the chair.

Owl checked Luc out and rubbed his cheek against Luc’s raised hand.

“So soft...”

“Hmm, but he’s smart and powerful.”

“What else can you manifest?”

“All of these weapons,” Malachai said as he twisted to reveal the guns, daggers, bow and a quiver of arrows decorating his right hip. He turned to reveal the ink across his entire back, dipping down to the tailbone. “Fox, Wolf, and Cheetah appear as well when I have need of them. Fox is an excellent spy and thief. He often takes over a night watch of sorts when I’m out or need to rest. Cheetah and Wolf assist with taking down demons or thugs, which you saw during the battle. Dragon has a tendency to stay asleep upon my back, gifting me with strength and power. Only during dire circumstances will he appear and take control.”

“Is that what I heard at The Club? All that roaring and screaming? It came from you releasing Dragon?”

“Yes. We were a bit overwhelmed by the numbers and needed to get you out of there. Dragon has the same type of power as my sai and guns. He can destroy the demons, but not the hosts.”

“What about the bird stretched across your shoulders?”

“That’s a phoenix, and he’s a little more than a regular bird. Phoenix activates only when I’m near death or dead, and he’ll revive me. Once he does, he’ll fade across my shoulders and rebuild his strength before he can save me again.”

“Has that happened? Has your phoenix ever activated?”

“Twice since I left my creator’s control, but that was when I was young, stupid, and too full of myself to stop and study the situation,” Malachai said.

“What are the others?”

“The lines of text and runes allow me to read, decipher, and speak multiple languages. The medical caduceus gives me medical knowledge and healing powers. The stars help illuminate the darkness, additional strength comes from the chains, the infinity symbol is the extension of my natural life, and the nautical compass makes sure I’m never lost. The Tree and pair of koi balance all of the abilities and help me use them. The dream catcher allows me to delve into dreams and access the memories of all the animals, like Owl.”

“What about the ravens?”

“Yes, the ravens,” Malachai said as he retrieved something from a drawer and set it on the table. He sat in the chair and glared at the flock stretched across his chest and shoulder. “They allow me to peer through the darkness, the shadows, and locate all minions.”

“Peer through... Like what happened to me?”

“This is where our problem originates, and it’s a puzzling and peculiar one. It’s something that has never happened to another Heartless.”

Lowering his head against his hands, Luc rubbed and massaged his head. His breathing quickened. Lifting his face a bit, he stared at Malachai.

From the wide-eyed gaze and pale skin, Malachai figured a minor panic attack was taking hold within Luc. Malachai thought Luc was overdue for one, considering what he’d told him. They hadn’t even gotten to the main point of the entire conversation.

“The demons are bad, not good, and they need to be killed... You patrol and destroy them. Got it. Your ink helps you with this, though you never wanted the ink or the powers.” Luc rubbed his hands together. “How does all this apply to me? Why did you bring me here with you? Why am I not dancing, thinking everything is fine in my little corner of the world? What? What is happening to me?”

Malachai lowered his gaze this time. Here came the difficult part of their talk. “Do you remember what is on your lower back, above your ass?”

“It’s the image of a forest with raindrops falling upon it, and a saying: *Memory and desire, stirring/ Dull roots with spring rain*. Melding with it is a tiger with a paw outstretched, claws digging through my skin. Another part of a saying is close to the tail.”

“What’s the saying for the tiger?”

“It’s from an old poem and starts with *Tiger, tiger, burning bright*.”

“Where did you learn these sayings?”

“I found an old tattered book of sayings and poems from the years prior to the upheaval. It was in a ramshackle building called a Library. There were books all over the place. I kept that one and a few others because they spoke to me, in a way. They’re in my backpack. I hid them in the bottom, knowing the master never looked through it. Why are you asking about my tattoos?”

“You have a recent addition to the forest tattoo thanks to our night together. This wasn’t done on purpose. Please believe me. Please stand up and raise your shirt so I can show you.”

While Luc rose from his chair, Malachai lifted a pair of mirrors he’d gotten from a drawer and gave Lucius one. With the other one, he reached around to capture the image upon Lucius’s back.

Lucius stared at the six ravens swirling through the rain above the forest inked on his back. The largest of the birds moved its head, tilted it as if peering back at him, and returned to its previous position. Luc wiggled in response to the raven’s movements. “That’s why my back has been bugging me.”

“Hmm, the ravens move at times. Those movements cause the twitchy feeling.”

“Where did they come from?” Lucius looked over at Owl, who was preening his feathers.

“No, Owl has nothing to do with them. These types of tattoos can only be applied and can only react to one who is gifted since birth.” He twisted to tap his biceps and ribs. “Those ravens were originally here upon my skin. You can see the faint imprint and shadows they left behind.”

“Why are they upon my skin?”

“That’s the unusual problem. I don’t understand why they attached themselves to you. My guess is they sensed something inside you, hidden gifts, and wished to help you. Whether or not you have gifts remains to be seen. Cyrus mentioned the same thing in the passageway. It’s fated for you to have them.”

“Only, I’m seeing the dangerous side of your life.” A little shaky from the revelation, Luc let his shirt fall, and he sat back down again.

“And you’re attracting those minions to you. They sense our power and abilities. If I activate a tattoo amongst them, it draws them closer. When the ravens revealed what hides within the shadows to you, it kicked off the mess that happened.”

Tapping his fingers on the table as he processed the rest of the information, Luc stopped and narrowed his gaze for a moment. “Wait a moment. Back at the club...” He waved a hand between them. “Your friends have the same kind of ink. It’s why Cyrus could make those bubbles of light and how Harland could disappear before our eyes.”

“Correct. Most of it is the same, in different positions, but they have ones unique to them.”

“Do you know if they’re safe?”

“Not since we left them, but I’m waiting to hear from one of them.”

Lucius reached back to touch the ravens resting upon his back. “How could this happen?”

“I’m not sure, and it’s why I searched for you. Unless those birds return to me, I’ll have to teach you how to live in the darkness and survive the minions.”

“No matter what, my life is changed.”

“From this point forward, yes.” Malachai pulled his shirt on and buttoned it halfway up. “I apologize. It’s not what one expects after a single night of entertainment.” Gathering his plate, he tossed the leftovers in the composting pail and the plate in the sink. “I’ll give you time to think upon what happened.”

“Think? Yes, sweet darkness, I need to see if I can figure out everything you’ve told me. If I hadn’t seen your owl with my own eyes, I wouldn’t...” Luc shook his head and swallowed hard.

“Understandable. You’d have thought I was completely insane, and I wouldn’t have blamed you for thinking that way. It’s why we usually keep our world and existence a secret.”

“This is why you wouldn’t have sought me out for another night.”

“Yes, I couldn’t risk putting you in jeopardy for a little pleasure.”

“Perhaps I should be grateful your ravens chose me, so I could speak to you again,” Luc said, lifting his gaze to stare at Malachai.

Reaching behind him to grip the counter with both hands, Malachai felt the ache in his knuckles from the increased pressure. He wanted to scoop Luc into his arms at those words. Instead, he forced himself to remain in place on his side of the room. “I’m not sure it would be called gratitude or anything. If you have more questions, don’t hesitate to ask. Please, try and eat something.”

Luc’s eyes widened. “Wait? Are you leaving? Where are you going?”

“The security level. I need to figure out if my friends have contacted me.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Please, don’t leave the bunker. It isn’t safe out there, even with the sunlight. I’ll leave Owl with you. He’ll keep you company.”

Owl hooted and flapped his wings, but stayed on his perch.

Lucius looked from Owl to Malachai. “I’m not planning on going anywhere.”

“As we both mentioned, I threw a lot at you. It’s best for you to consider everything on your own. Though it would be best for you not to leave, I would understand and accept your decision to be taken to another compound of your choice. Once we deal with the issue of the ravens and how to protect you from the demons, that is.”

“You would let me leave. After all this...”

“I could never keep you caged and bound to one place. It would be cruel. I’ve been there and wouldn’t wish it upon anyone. If you choose to leave once it’s safe, I will not stand in your way.” Malachai hated to say those words. Everything within him wanted to keep Luc for his own, but it was wrong. He walked past the table and stopped when Luc grabbed his shirt. The dancer stared at him. The tints of gold mixed within the hazel color of his eyes entranced him, drawing him deeper into Luc’s gaze. “Yes?”

“One thing...”

“What is it?”

Lucius rose to place one hand on Malachai’s shoulder and the other around the back of his head. “This. I want to know if this attraction remains since our

hurried experience in the peacekeeper's room," he whispered before he pressed their lips together.

Wrapping his arms around Lucius, Malachai returned the kiss, deepening it. He lifted and adjusted into a different position, slipping his tongue in to play with Lucius. Their kisses filled with passion as they lengthened, increased, and heated. When they finished, he stepped back.

"Yeah, still there," Lucius murmured, placing fingers against his swollen lips.

Stumbling away, shocked by his deep attraction for the dancer, Malachai rushed to the stairs and pounded up them to the gymnasium. He went straight to a shelving unit. He grabbed a double roll of hand wraps. Securing a loop around one thumb, he wrapped the bandage in multiple figure eights around his fingers, down around his hand, and around his wrists. He repeated the process on the other hand. No matter how much he desired punching something, he needed to protect his knuckles and wrists. He secured the wrap with layers of tape around the edges. Yanking off his shirt, he kicked off his shoes. Stalking to the heavy punching bag dangling from a huge hook in the ceiling, he moved into position. Taking a few short quick jabs, he danced around the bag increasing the power and speed.

Chapter 6

Several days passed after Malachai explained everything to Luc. He continued to visit the gymnasium, beating the hell out of the bag, and then taking a cold shower to wash away the sweat and fatigue.

After one such workout, he gazed around the gymnasium. Studying the half wall of mirrors, he wondered if there was a barre hiding somewhere in the vast storage area that he could install for Luc's workouts and training. It would be a big change for Luc to live within a quiet bunker hidden deep in the ground instead of a tiny room in the back of a busy, noisy nightclub. Heading into the storage area, he managed to locate everything he required and concentrated on setting it in place.

Making sure he had secured everything, Malachai climbed the stairs to the security level and settled in front of the bank of monitors that only showed current conditions outside the bunker. There wasn't a way to record the video for later use. Due to that reason, within a week of moving into the bunker, he'd placed additional perimeter sensors and alarms.

Since returning from the compound, he'd also tried to contact his friends every day on the radio waves. Minutes after he settled in the chair, a crackling noise rose from the speaker.

"Breaker, breaker. This is LB-Cy calling LB-Base. You there?"

Pushing his chair across to the CB radio, Malachai clicked the button. "LB-Base, about damn time you checked your sorry ass in."

"Aw. Were you worried?"

"Yes. It's good to hear from you. How is the recon going?"

"Coming along. Managed to clean out one den. Back in peace territory."

"Are you both in one piece?"

"All good. We heard gunfire. Guess distraction didn't work."

"Not all the guards looked away. One let loose fire. Took a little longer to get safe."

"What happened en route?"

"Took a roundabout. Found and destroyed a nest."

“Status?”

“It’s cleaned.”

“Wounded?”

“From the gunfire, but we’re both healed.”

“Status of lost flock?”

“Still lost. Explained all to Dancer.”

There was a long pause from Cyrus, but Malachai didn’t give a shit. Luc needed to know about the danger he faced. Not to mention, there was the intense attraction between them. Malachai felt it was time to change the damn rules. Why should he remain alone if his lover knew what he did? Especially if his lover lived here with him. Who could Luc tell, living alone with him in the bunker? Who would believe the crazy-ass story about the Lost Boys and demons?

“Come back, LB-Cy.”

“Are you sure?”

“Flipping the rules. Creator can go to hell. You told me fate was involved in this. I went with it.”

“Agreed. How did he handle it?”

“Minor panic attack. Owl helped.”

“Right. Status?”

“Considering his options. Alone.”

“How long since discussion?”

“Four day cycles and still waiting for answer.”

“Right. Sorry to hear.”

“Handling it.”

“Take care of Dancer.”

“I will. How long for recon?”

“Not sure. Will contact again at dusk.”

“Agreed. LB-Base out.” Malachai pushed back the microphone and dragged fingers through his hair.

Grateful to hear from his friends, he lifted his head when he heard something drifting up through the stairwell. Rising, he jogged down the stairs until he got closer and recognized the noise was music. He entered the gymnasium. Across the circular room where a curve of mirrors hugged the wall, and where Malachai had secured the barre, stood Lucius. Nearby, Owl perched on a piece of gym equipment, enjoying being free to fly around for the last few days. Dressed in faded cotton pants that hugged his legs, and with soft dancing shoes on his feet, Luc rested his fingers on the barre.

Malachai held still as he watched Luc stretch, dip, and bend his legs in an unbelievable fashion, obviously moving through some age-old routine and pattern. As Luc lifted gracefully onto his toes, balancing perfectly, Malachai held his breath at the grace in the lean form.

Luc lowered and lifted his left leg and balanced on his right, lifting high onto his toes, the hip held firm. Spinning in place, Luc faced the opposite direction and repeated the same pattern of movements. He kept in time to the simple piano music playing from the ancient radio. He spun again and stopped. Sweat dripped around his forehead, and his golden curls, darkened with moisture, were pulled back with a band. His skin looked warmed and flushed from the exercise. “Hello, Malachai.”

“Hello. How are you holding up?”

“I’m doing well.” Grabbing a towel, Lucius wiped the sweat from his face. He waved a hand around. “This is a wonderful setup. Thank you for putting this barre in place for me. Could you believe I found this old radio, and different types of music are on these strange silver discs? How is all this possible?”

“There are things hidden in here. The discs were from the previous society, as you said, a form of listening to music without the instrument itself. I’m still discovering all kinds of things.” Malachai almost found it hard to follow the drastic change of topic. “Some distance from here, I located a windmill farm and multiple solar arrays. They generate the power that travels along cables to the silo. On the lowest floor, there’s a system in place to receive and spread the power throughout this place. I’m not sure how it works, but it does. Additional batteries store power for those days without wind or sun, and during the night. Again, it was all the prepper’s work. I’ve learned how to maintain it over the years. It seemed this guy figured out everything one would need to live for decades down here, perhaps longer if conserved and maintained.”

“This place is amazing.”

“I enjoy living here even with the chores and maintenance.”

“Oh, damn the darkness, I’m sorry.” Luc slapped his fingers on the barre. “I should have offered to assist you. I don’t want to be another burden.”

“I’ll show you around for the evening chores. You can figure out which ones you prefer.”

“I like the goats and chickens.”

“You can learn how to care for them and how to maintain the different machines and pens.”

“What about the garden? Could you teach me how to cook?”

“I can teach you whatever you want to learn.”

“I always wanted to learn how to craft meals. Although, I kept to a specific regimen to keep up my dancing.”

“We’ll adjust what we create as needed. I know there are multiple drawers filled with seeds of different vegetables, fruits, and herbs. If there are other items you wish to enjoy, we could plant them and see what sprouts.”

Luc flexed and bent one of his feet, lifting to his toes and back down again. “There were few gardens in the compound. Others traded with outside areas.”

“There’s plenty of fresh food here in spite of living deep underground.” Malachai moved closer to Luc.

Luc lifted his gaze to study Malachai. “Do you dance?”

“Dance? Umm. No.”

“You can move. I’ve seen you fight.”

“It’s a different style altogether from what you do on the stage. Mine is designed to position my body and save myself from danger when possible.” Malachai stared at the floor. “Does this mean you want to stay here with me?” He lifted his gaze slowly to find Luc watching him.

Luc kept his fingers resting on the barre— what seemed to be his safe place. “Whatever you need from me, I’ll do it. I’ll stay here and learn from you. I’m safer with you than anywhere else.”

“Are you sure about this?”

Luc nodded. “You’re right. There’s nothing for me at The Club other than pain and fear. If I could dance other places, I would love to do that. No matter

what, we're in this together. Whatever we face, I want to make sure we'll do it together."

"Understood, and I didn't want you to leave—"

"One more thing, and it's my standing point. If I'm going to stay here, forget about the separate rooms. I'm staying with you, sleeping with you, and being your only lover. If we do this, we do it all the way. I want to explore it further with you."

"Granted," Malachai said as he walked over to Luc, wrapping his arms around him.

"Wait, I'm all sweaty..."

"I don't care." Lowering his head, he kissed his dancer. Lifting him off his feet, Malachai twirled them around.

Luc laughed.

"Welcome to my life. I'm so happy you're here to shine a little light in it. Come on, there's lots to do." Malachai whistled to Owl, who flew over and landed on his shoulder. Keeping his arm around Luc's waist, he revealed the rest of his life to his dancer.

The End

Author Bio

A quiet one growing up, Nicole Dennis left reality for the comfort of books, filling a personal library over the years. Characters started talking to her about their own stories. Writing them down, whether during or after class, she continues to this day. She lets others meet her characters, walk through her worlds, and sigh as a romance overcomes all obstacles. All of her romances include delightful twists of GLBT, paranormal, fantasy, and erotica, and always have their Happily Ever Afters.

She lives and works in central Florida. Thanks to a quiet working environment, she can escape into her stories. A semi-demon tortie calico, affectionately known as Fat Cat on social media, rules their home.

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