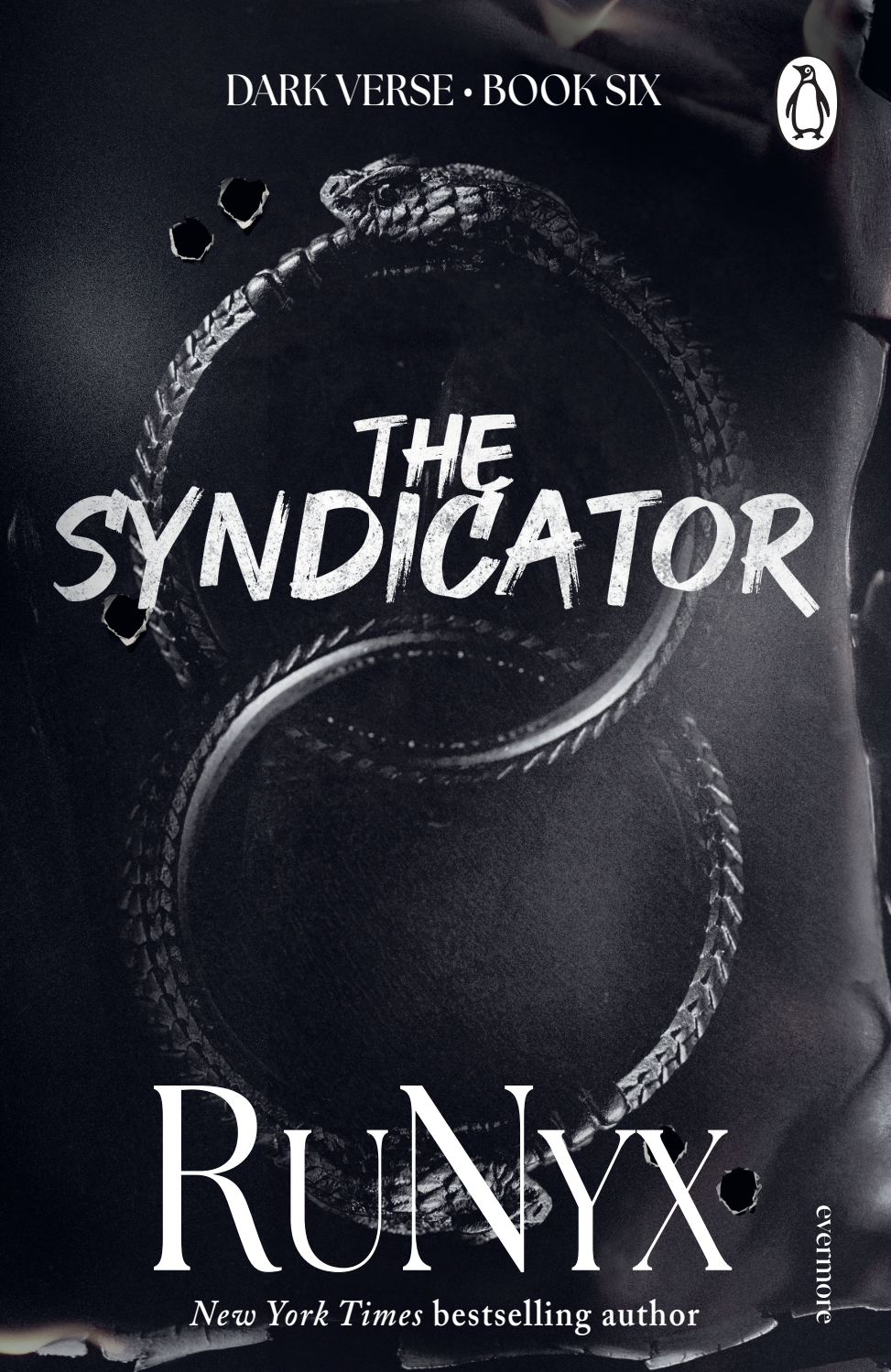

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RuNyx is a *New York Times*, *USA Today* and international bestselling author of romance. Her stories range across subgenres from dark contemporary to gothic to historical to fantasy and more, and are currently being translated into over 10 languages.

Her pen name has a very special meaning to her. When she's not writing, she's reading, traveling, meditating, daydreaming, and most of all, procrastinating.

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To the readers who have been with me –
Through the ups and downs, the thicks and thins,
the beginnings and the ends. I wouldn't be here without you.
Thank you for an extraordinary journey.



For my mom. The best mother I could've dreamed of,
the best friend I could've had, and the best woman I knew.
You were there when I started this journey but not when
I completed it. Not a day goes by that I don't miss you, mama

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Author's Note

Dear reader,

If you're here, I hope it's after being on the ride with these characters for so many books.

Please note that this is the sixth book in a continuous series and absolutely ***cannot be read as a standalone.*** There are characters and couples who already have entire stories and arcs, so their construction isn't the focus of this book; it's their conclusion. For the best reading experience, I suggest starting the series with *The Predator* and continuing through the next five books before picking up *The Syndicater.* Without context and preestablished foundations, many characters, couples, interpersonal dynamics, and plotlines will not make sense. This is only intended for readers who have read *all* five books.

This is the last and final book of the *Dark Verse* series and is the darkest of them all thematically. Morality is void, and humanity is vile. As such, there are dark themes in the content, and I'm listing them in detail below so you can decide if you're comfortable continuing:

18+ explicit scenes, graphic sexual content, graphic violence, blood, death, grief, murder, torture, mentions of suicide, mentions of suicidal ideation, human trafficking, sexual slavery, mentions of sexual assault, pregnancy complications, postpartum, mentions

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of the loss of a child/miscarriage, mentions of the loss of a parent, mentions of loss of a sibling, amnesia, consensual non-consent, consensual somnophilia, consensual choking, mentions of breeding and breast-feeding, arson, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, mentions of panic attacks.

Your mental health matters <3

If you choose to read, I hope you enjoy this last journey through the *Dark Verse* with me.

Love,
RuNyx

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Book Playlist

The Syndicater playlist is too long to list here.
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"No tree, it is said, can grow to heaven unless its roots reach down to hell."

—Carl Jung

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AND SO IT BEGINS

Unknown, Tenebrae City, 1985

On a cold, dark night in winter, with the wind howling and the skies crying in sleet, two men from the Tenebrae Outfit met the two men from Shadow Port in the middle of nowhere.

He stood there too, a fifth man, a negotiator, unsmiling, unpleasant, unhappy—a representative of an organization most didn't know about. It hadn't been on his list of priorities to attend this meeting, especially when his bones were freezing, but becoming a god had its price. He was rising in the ranks and almost at the top, climbing on the backs of greedy, hungry bastards like the ones he was meeting with. Such smart businessmen who became bumbling idiots at the first glimpse of true power. They had tasted but a drop and already acted drunk. *Fools.*

He scoffed internally, feeling an odd kind of detachment settling in. He couldn't figure out what more he was supposed to achieve in

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life as he waited for the cars to reach him. He had it all—money, power, influence. He had a family where he was devoted and a place where he was deviant. He was both men—the faithful husband and the uncontrolled fiend, the doting father and the inhuman demon. But it all got old too fast. Lately, there had been a lull, a lethargy of sorts settling inside him, as though no matter what he did, what he partook, it would leave him incomplete. He fed and fed and fed and yet stayed hungry, and as of late, he wondered what would be the thing to break it.

Ennui was the end for everyone.

That would have scared anyone else, but not him. He thought differently. The lethargy with life was an opportunity for something new, a chance to shake things up and show their world something never seen before. Leaning against his car, as a cold wind jostled him, he watched the two cars come to a stop. The men who thought of themselves as the organization's allies got out. *Idiots*. They should know there were no allies in this trade.

Lately, there were no enemies either. It was all too easy.

Maybe that was the reason for his boredom. He needed a worthy adversary. But there were none.

Maybe he could create one.

As the thought took root in his mind, rolling around, growing into an ugly, twisted idea.

He greeted them with a smile.

The ennui cracked.

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PART 1

FOUNTAINHEAD

"This thing of darkness, I acknowledge mine."

—William Shakespeare

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CHAPTER 1

DAINN, GLADESTONE

Darkness felt like home.

No, he corrected himself. Darkness felt like a house he had lived in for many years, the rooms and nooks and crannies of which he was utterly familiar with, so much so that he could navigate it with his eyes closed. Home, home was *her*—a small, petite woman with flame hair and rare laughs and moonlit soul that made him believe in things he had only known about conceptually, things he knew but did not understand, not until her.

"That's cheating!" she exclaimed, giving him a glare that had killed lesser men, her verdant gaze glimmering with the life he felt proud to have resuscitated in her. He wondered when he would see it shining the same again, something in his chest tightening with each passing second that he knew their time was limited. He wondered, as he watched the tiny furrow of concentration between her brows, her lips turned down in the corners as she focused on her cards, how things

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were going to change. Because change they would. The moment he told her what was to come, the moment her world expanded to include other people who were going to become important to her, and in extension to him, things would change.

Dainn didn't like changes where it concerned her, especially the ones beyond his control.

Yet, for her, he had to sacrifice something without sacrificing her. That was her definition of love, wasn't it?

He had to tell her. But knowing her, how her mind worked, how her anxieties ate her from the insides, he knew he had to wait until the last moment or she would spend the entire time overthinking to the point of getting dysfunctional, possibly sick. His little *flamma* had strength even she couldn't see, but she was fragile right now. Her heart—the tiny organ under her delectable breasts—was too large, felt too much, and beat too fast, and yet, if it ceased to do any of those things exactly as it did, he didn't know who he would become. She was his north star, the only thing constant, bright in his tenebrous world.

"Not cheating," he told her, quietly etching this moment into his memory to relive during the time he wouldn't have her. "You have to learn how to bluff better."

Her lips moved into a pout, pillowing in a way that reminded him of small, harmless creatures the world called cute.

Fuck, she was cute when she was like this. Not a word he ever thought he'd think about anyone. Babies and puppies and kittens were cute enough, but they didn't make him warm on the inside as she did, as though the cold could never touch his bones again as long as she flickered within him.

She threw the cards down on the table, sighing loudly with exaggerated exasperation that amused him. She was a grump when she didn't get her way. *Adorable.*

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A light wind caressed her open locks, moving them lazily like flames in a hearth as they sat outside on the balcony of their hotel suite high up. It was late, and if it were up to him, he would have simply kept her in bed the whole time, devouring her, defiling her, destroying her in ways he would be etched into her bones, so nothing and no one could take him out of her being. But she, unaware of what was about to happen and to distract herself from the revelations thrust upon her in the last twenty-four hours, had wanted to do something normal, something benign, something ridiculously regular. And so, he was teaching her how to play cards, which, much to his amusement, she was failing at miserably. His *flamma* was many things, but a mathematical card-counting bluff master, she was absolutely not.

She stared out at the darkness of Gladestone. The view was nothing noteworthy. The city wasn't either. It was a dark concrete jungle of shiny veneer polished with desperation and destitution. Building after building, street after street, alley after alley—corporate and manufacturing hubs that hid hideous horrors underneath. But it was the fact that the view was now laid out for her, right at her feet, ready for her to stomp and smash it. It seemed almost poetic in a way, the things she was going to do by his side, watching over everything that had used and abused her, deliberately and unknowingly. And she was sitting at the top with him, looking down at the very city that had chewed and spit her out, one amongst the many faceless humans. But the faceless weren't his. *She* was.

The soft, pondering energy engulfed her frame as she pulled her feet up on the chair and wrapped her arms around her knees, resting her head on them, gazing out. He marveled for a moment at her ability to do that—fold herself and make herself so small she could hide on the furniture. He wondered if it had been something she had learned over the years and did so unconsciously now when she felt anxious. He placed his cards down on the table and gazed at her,

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taking in his fill. She looked ethereal, unreal, almost like a magical little waif who would disappear if he blinked.

She would.

It was almost twenty-four hours since he had sent his text to Morana. The clock was ticking. His time with her like this, when their world was just the two of them, existing purely with the other, was coming to an end soon. She was going to have others who would love her, want her, protect her, and he would be alone again, existing in the shadows while she did in the light.

Something tight sat in his chest.

"Dainn?"

Her voice brought his focus singularly back to her, the sound of his name making a familiar rush of sweetness explode on his tongue. Fuck, he would miss the physical sensation of hearing her talk, of feeling her close, of her just being. It was incredible how she could make him the calmest he had ever been yet the craziest, how she could inspire both his chaos and his cool to the same degree.

He reached out, tugging a strand of her hair, feeling the softness on his fingers. "Hmm?"

"What do we do now?" she asked him finally. He knew it had taken her a while to process everything, and he had been giving her time. With Lyla, he had learned patience was the key. She was like the black roses he liked to grow for gifting to her. She needed the right soil, the right amount of sun and water and nourishment, the right amount of care and patience to blossom. Most importantly, just like the rose, she needed someone willing to take the thorns, someone willing to bleed for her bloom.

"What do you want to do?" he asked. Though he had sent the message out, knowing instinctively it was what she needed. But if she said the word, he would disappear with her in a heartbeat until she felt ready. Deep down, the selfish part of him hoped she wasn't

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ready. But the part that remembered her definition of love, of what she needed, and that part knew that she needed nourishment outside of what he could provide. And though sacrificing his selfish desires was never something he had thought to do, was never something he would do, she was the only exception.

For her, he would do anything.

But he would hate every second of it.

Lyla turned her neck and brought her eyes to him, her gaze knocking something within his ribs, the life, the vulnerability, the *trust* shining in her eyes shooting straight up his veins.

"I don't know," she whispered, the words almost tentative, afraid. She had nothing to be afraid of, not as long as he lived, and he planned to live a long life with her.

"Trust me still?" he asked, the hunger in his heart for her trust never satiated. He didn't understand what it was about it—the way she trusted—that had become both the elixir and the kryptonite of his entire being.

She nodded.

A wild rush of energy burst inside him with that one simple nod. His earlier despondency about their separation disappeared. It was temporary, anyway. As long as he had her trust, he could do everything.

He pushed the table to the side with one hand, grabbing her waist with the other and pulling her close. Her breathing escalated as he brought her over him, her weight more than what it had been when he'd found her, her curves filled out over the months under his care and her cooking but still slight. Her hands went to his bare shoulders as she straddled him, settling over his lap; his t-shirt—one of the many she had stolen from his side of the closet—ruched up around her hips, giving him an unrestricted view of her bare pussy over his groin, separated only by the fabric of his sweatpants.

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Her small, soft hands moved over his shoulders, the side of his neck, her touch sure, almost proprietary, and he reveled in it—in both her possession and her quiet confidence in him.

"I don't know why you get so turned on every time," she huffed quietly, a soft smile on her face, shaking her head as if he were being ridiculous.

He tugged her closer, his hands spanning her small waist, locking their gazes. "I told you. Your trust is my high."

She just shook her head again as if the concept felt too foreign to grasp. Maybe it was. His brain was different, his thought process different, so maybe his attachment to it felt different to her too. She may not grasp it, but she accepted it, accepted him, just as he was. *Now that was a foreign concept.*

"Your brother and his friends are going find you," he told her, simply laying out the truth for her. Though he had no principles, no morality, no conscience as much, he didn't lie to her. It was simply a way to make her feel like the exception she was, so she would know that while he was a liar to the rest of the world, she was the only exception, the only special clause, the only one he was *real* with.

Home. That was why she felt like the home he had never had.

The tightening of her grip on his shoulders was the first sign of her rising panic. Her face—her beautiful face that hid nothing from anyone willing to look, an open book in all languages known to humankind—fell. "What do you mean? Find me how?"

He kept his hold on her hips firm, staying steady as he revealed the facts. "Morana, your brother's girl, is a hacker. She's smart and she has been scouring the online spaces for any traces of you for a while now. I just sent her a big crumb last night."

He watched as her eyes widened, her nails digging into his muscles in a way that reminded him of sex, especially when he pushed his

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cock into her, that first sensation of his piercings in her pussy making her clench around him.

"Dainn." Her whisper of his name was pure panic, her emotion leaving a sour taste in his mouth. As much as he liked her tinge of fear, especially in their sexual situations, he didn't really like the taste it left him with when it was emotional terror. There was only one effective way he knew how to change her fear into something more palatable, a way that had worked in calming her every time.

He moved his neck and sucked her nipple into his mouth over the t-shirt, dampening the fabric as the bud hardened, relishing her gasp as her hands tightened on him in that familiar way.

"We need to discuss this," she stated, pushing him back. Or rather, trying to.

"We are discussing it," he spoke against her breast, biting the side. Her hips tried to move, but he held it still, feeling moisture over his sweatpants where she was spread open. He moved his fingers down, feeling her juices on his skin, her essence the only one he enjoyed on himself. His digits pried her flesh open, teasing her edges but never touching her throbbing clit, never sinking inside her. A sound akin to a mewl left her throat, and he felt his lips twitch against her breast. He loved that sound, the one she made in desire and frustration when he teased her. It was a demand and a complaint mixed with lust so potent he felt high when he heard it. But this was a distraction from her fear; the conversation was something they still needed to have.

He teased the edges of her clit some more, enjoying her noises but keeping his mind on track. "The message I sent will be tracked by tomorrow," he told her, moving to her neck, knowing that the spot right under her ear sent arousal flooding in her body when stimulated. He had learned her body like his personal sacred text, worshipping at her altar every day, reciting her verses every chance he could. He

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knew exactly where to kiss gently to make her melt and where to bite hard to make her wet; he knew where to push, to pull, to pillage on his knees, waiting for her to bless his existence.

"Why did you do that?" she managed to get out right before a moan, drenching his fingers as he licked the spot under her ear, the scent of her skin of flowers and fire filling him.

"Because," he nuzzled her, "you want it."

"And you give me what I want? As long as it's with you?"

She knew the depths of his possessiveness well. "Yes."

She moved her hands away from his shoulders and down to his sweatpants, pushing them down and pulling his cock out. He moved his hand back to her hips as she settled herself on him, flesh to flesh, grinding over him, leaving the metal on him glistening, taking the pleasure she wanted from him as her right. With arousal, something like affection, adoration—he didn't know what it was, to be honest—but something softer, less harsh than his usual darkness, filled him as he watched her *take*, watched her own both him and her own sexuality so openly, knowing the depth of trauma it held for her, marveling at her resilience, letting her have it for a moment, basking in the glory of witnessing her trust take over said trauma.

"What happens after they find me?" Her question was breathless, her hips moving sinuously with an innate fluidity that was an inherent part of her.

"They will take you back with them, I believe," he stated.

His words suddenly made her stop, the glaze of desire in her eyes dimming, replaced with moisture that felt like a knife to his ribs.

"You're letting me go?" Her lips trembled. "You'll just . . . leave me? You said you *wouldn't*."

Suddenly, she was scrambling away from him, trying to get away from him with a frantic energy he knew he needed to quell immediately. He tightened his grip on her waist with one hand, gripping her

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jaw with the other so she quietened and steadied, keeping his eyes fixated on hers. A tear escaped her right eye, trailing down her cheek and disappearing into his bare palm as he held her face.

"Do you really think—" he asked her quietly, his voice coming out cold at her immediately jumping to the conclusion even after all this time "—I would? That you would ever be rid of me?"

Her eyes glistened, but she bit her lip. "No. But that's what you're telling me." It came out as a soft accusation.

He kissed her hard, pouring his determination into her, infecting her with the same obsession—or whatever the fuck it was; he didn't even recognize it anymore—that had him in its grip.

She let him, opening, unfurling, accepting it.

"We will become ashes before we are apart," he murmured against her mouth. Her breath hitched. He knew she liked his words, that she cherished them and held them close to her heart. "I will *never* let you go."

He pulled back, brushing the back of his fingers, darkened with burns and scars, over her unblemished, pale cheek. "Think of this as a temporary adventure."

Her throat worked as she swallowed. "Why?" she questioned, innocent and accusatory at the same time.

"Because you're on a journey of self-discovery, of healing and rising from your own ashes," he reminded her. "You're finding who you are, and your mind is finally ready to face your past. You are an emotional creature, *flamma*. You need all these pieces to feel whole and happy. And I happen to like it when you're happy."

Her fingers brushed over his hair idly. "But what if I'm never whole? What if, after all of it, I'm left . . . empty?"

Dainn lifted her hips and slid inside her slowly, watching her eyes roll back and feeling her nails dig into his muscles, her walls weeping around him. Even after all this time, it took her a bit to adjust to his

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presence inside her, his piercings and his length and his girth, filling her to the brim in a way he knew she had become addicted to.

"Do you feel empty?" he asked her, watching her face closely for her reactions.

Her mouth trembled, her eyes half-lidded. "Not with you."

"Never with me. No matter what happens, you'll never be empty with me."

It was she who kissed him this time, knowing his words meant more than just the physical, leaning forward and capturing his lips with hers.

"I love you," she told him, and the words, her voice, her presence, became another core memory that etched itself deep in his brain, firing his synapses, flooding his neurons with chemicals that made him feel invincible, forcing the organ in his ribs to beat extra hard with the closest thing to the emotion she called love he could feel, love like she had described it to him.

"I know," he told her as he always did, holding her close and knowing she understood his flawed being, understood that it was who he was, and yet she loved him anyway.

Then he began to move in her, deepening their kiss, savoring both her taste and her memory, knowing their time together was dwindling down.

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CHAPTER 2

AMARA, TENEBRAE CITY

Being a mother was exhausting. Being a mother while being a mob wife was extra *exhausting*.

Tempest, the light of her life, the joy of her heart, the strength of her soul, had the lungs of a beast. Amara loved her, but good god, Tempest was living up to her name, and she was only just about a year old. Lord save them when she was older. She and Dante were both tired for reasons beyond their first child's teething and keeping them up at all hours.

Amara cracked her neck as she walked into the new rehabilitation center, thanking her common sense that morning for having worn flats instead of heels. Honestly, she didn't have the strength to even get out of bed these days. Thanks to her husband, her wonderful, thoughtful husband, who let her sleep for a few extra precious minutes while taking care of their baby, and thanks to her mother, who

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was truly an expert when it came to managing her grandchild, Amara felt a bit relaxed leaving the house for the first time in a week.

The weather had slowly started to change in the city, the lush green hills turning more rust and orange as the cooler season breezed in. Wrapping her chic blazer around her—one of the new ones that fit her more voluptuous, post-pregnancy body better than her older clothes—Amara entered the large new compound of the rehabilitation center a few miles out of the city, not too far from the Maroni compound that she called home.

The new center—that she'd been calling New Haven in her head—had just opened a few weeks ago, just a year after starting. It was built on a large property that the Maroni family had owned—*now her family name*, she had to remind herself at times—that Dante had signed off for this project. It was a decent start to what she hoped would be something much larger one day. For now, there were three buildings manned by proper security in the compound. Two were residential for housing the children who were rescued from the clutches of the trafficking ring, most probably operated by The Syndicate. One building was for classes, food, and staff offices that included psychologists, teachers, and managers. It was comparatively a much smaller operation, but the need had been for speed, not scale, and thanks to being the wife of the Outfit boss, getting shit done on a faster timeline had been a perk.

She had personally overseen all the designs and worked with the crew that had built it from the ground up, a passion project close to her heart and the hearts of everyone she loved.

"Good morning, Dr. Maroni."

Amara paused in the lobby to see Nellie, the middle-aged woman she had personally hired as the manager of the compound, to take care of things on a day-to-day basis. Nellie, a Tenebrae native, had previously worked in the same position in an all-boys boarding school.

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Though she had a strict, disciplined air about her, Amara sensed her inner kindness immediately and realized she would be the perfect fit to foster the children who would be there, hopefully temporarily.

"Good morning, Nellie," Amara greeted her with a warm smile. "Sorry, I was away for a week. Tempest has been teething and her first birthday is coming up soon. It's been hectic, to say the least. What did I miss? Give me a run down, please."

Nellie pressed her hands over her grey shirt, something Amara had noticed she did out of habit before speaking at length. They had kept the attire for all staff casual, mainly so the children would feel more at home.

"Counting the last batch, we have a total of thirty-six boys right now, ages four to fourteen," Nellie began to talk as they walked down the lobby. "They're all meeting the three in-house therapists once a week, and all are attending different classes in groups of three to five times a week. They've been particularly happy about the movie weekends. Some of them have taken to the outdoors. The game room is also ready. We're just waiting for you to look it over once before we open it."

Amara took in all the information and walked into the large open area that led to all three buildings, looking around. Children, boys mainly, were running around playing catch. Sadly, in the year they had been looking, they hadn't found any batches of girls so far, just the boys they had rescued. Some were sitting on the grass, enjoying the sun. Some caretakers, all of whom Amara had personally hired and Dante had vetted, kept an eye out to make sure everyone stayed safe. It was a weekend, and on the weekends, there were no classes and no sessions. Just movies and letting kids be themselves. The sight warmed her heart in a way she'd never have thought of, not without the experience of being a mother herself. Loving a child and losing a child, both experiences had changed her from the inside.

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Amara breathed in the crisp air and anchored herself in the moment.

"The detective called," Nellie continued as they stood looking at the kids. Two young boys, barely five, wrestled in the grass while laughing, their sounds tinkling in the wind like beautiful chimes.

"Any updates?" Amara asked, waving at a young boy who grinned at her. The children all knew her. She was the one who talked to them first before introducing the other doctors to them. Some days, she got them sweets, and she knew that was why most of them liked her more. But she didn't care. She liked being their favorite, liked the way their eyes lit up when they saw her. It was so pure, so precious, and she couldn't wrap her head around the fact that there were monsters who had tried to tarnish and ruin that light from their eyes.

"They've tracked three of the boys' family," Nellie told her. "Two of them had filed missing reports, but one of them hadn't. The detective is investigating that one, but for now, as soon as the families are here, they will come to get the boys. Most probably tomorrow."

Amara nodded. It made her heart happy to think of the families who had lost loved ones reuniting with them. She knew firsthand how it felt to be separated from the people you loved. But worse, she knew, having witnessed it in Tristan, what it did to someone who lost their loved ones without any answers. And every time a family came to pick their baby up, it restored the faith in her heart for all of them that one day, sooner or later, they would all be reunited and restored with love, healed from the wounds inflicted by time and distance.

"Please make sure it goes smoothly," Amara replied. It was unnecessary, though. Nellie wasn't just good at her job; she was passionate and protective of these children. That was something Amara respected a lot about her. In the beginning, every time a family had come, Amara had wanted to be there. But between being a new mother and wife and getting the center up and running, it

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had begun to take a toll on her, and Nellie had stepped up. Amara knew that if Nellie felt something was off, even when the families came, she wouldn't let the child leave without calling Amara or Dante. She knew what was at stake here, and that was why Amara felt like she could trust her to run things.

"Dr. Amara!" a young boy shouted from the lawn, running towards her so fast down the slight slope of the hill that he came barreling into her with his excitement. Amara felt a breath whoosh and steadied herself, holding the seven-year-old upright before he fell down on his little butt.

"Easy, Lex," she chided him before softening. She had a soft spot for him. He was one of the first boys she had bonded with here, the only boy left there from the first batch they had found. He had been in the group with Xander, and though Xander had become more family than anything and all the other boys had eventually gone home, Lex was the only one left behind with no family. He was an orphan, his family having died in an accident. He had been raised by his grandmother, who had passed away last year, leaving him vulnerable. His story, the fact that he was the only one remaining from that very first group, and the fact that he'd seen all those other kids be picked up and left had softened Amara to him more than others. Lex was a precious child with a special heart. He knew his family was dead, that there wasn't anyone for him out there. He had suffered horrors she knew about from his sessions, and yet, the boy had the most infectious smile and the most iridescent heart on him. Amara loved him like she loved Xander.

Speaking of . . .

"Can I talk to Xander, please?" Lex asked right on cue, his dark eyes and dark hair shining with good health as he looked up at her in an endearing, beseeching way. This was something he did every time she came to visit. The kids weren't allowed to use phones, so he sought

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her out. Knowing Xander was with her friends, he asked her to call him so he could talk to his friend. It was kind of adorable.

"Since you asked so nicely," Amara smiled at him, taking out her phone and dialing a number that was on her most frequently called list thanks to this young boy.

The phone rang twice before being picked up.

"Hello," the young, quiet voice spoke. Xander was a conundrum, which wasn't something she thought she'd have said about a child. Amara had seen his psych evaluations, thanks to Tristan and Morana permitting her access to his files, and it stumped her. His past was an utter mystery, with no records of his birth or his life before he was found. They had estimated his age by guessing because they didn't know how old he was, and he never said. His intelligence was off the charts, making it more difficult to guess his age correctly, and his personality was darker, more somber than any young boy's should be. He was always quiet, always respectful, but always observant. And it wasn't just him being on the spectrum. Amara knew, her psychologist intuition telling her, that there was more to it than any of them knew. She just hoped, for all of their sakes, that it wasn't something that could bring danger to their doors.

"Hi, Xander. Amara here."

"I know," the boy said in the same monotone. "I have your contact saved."

Of course, he did. She called him thrice a week. Morana had given him a phone of his own so he could call any of them at any time. While Morana was also apprehensive about his past, she had a deep respect for his intelligence and refused to coddle him because of it. Tristan was . . . well, *Tristan* about it.

"Lex would like to speak with you," Amara started, and Lex raised his hand for the phone. Amara chuckled, handing it over to the boy and watching as he took a few steps away to the side to talk to his

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friend privately. "Hi, Xan! How are you? Did you miss me? I gotta tell you about this new . . ." his voice trailed off as he walked to the end of the clearing and sat down on the grass. This was something he did every few days, and knowing what she knew about him, Amara let him. There was something beautiful about the bond the two boys had forged in their circumstances at such a young age, and Amara wanted to foster it and hoped it grew into an organic, powerful friendship, much like Dante's and Tristan's, as time passed. Having a true friend in one's corner could make so much difference, especially during a difficult time. She knew from experience, and that was why she wished the boys could nurture it.

Her heart gave a pang at the thought of friends. Vin, one of her closest, oldest friends, had been deep undercover into The Syndicate for almost a year now. He had sent Dante updates occasionally when he could, but Amara missed him a lot, especially since he'd been quieter for a while. She just hoped he would come out of it unscathed and undamaged, but even if he did, she would help heal him as he had helped her a long time ago. The scars on her wrists, hidden underneath her bracelets, tingled with the ugly memory of her past.

Shaking it off, she watched Lex talk on the phone as he picked at the grass and asked Nellie about him. "How is he doing?"

"Surprisingly well," Nellie answered. "He's well-behaved and makes sure others around him behave too. He's become a sort of peacekeeper. He breaks up fights and keeps all the spirits high. Kids go to him when they need something."

"He's a leader," Amara mused, watching the boy talk intently.

Nellie nodded. "Dr. Armstrong thinks he's either putting up a facade or repressing, but it's too early to tell. He needs more time to give any conclusive evaluation."

Amara understood that. It could be tricky even in general, but especially with children. It was important to take time and be sure

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before any kind of diagnosis or the stakes were too great and could impact the child's whole life, or worse, add to their trauma. From her experience, she knew for a fact that any child with the experiences Lex had carried baggage in their brain, consciously or subconsciously, and without proper care, it could manifest in a multitude of ways, some extremely dangerous.

"Keep a close eye on him please," she instructed Nellie. "I want to know if there are any behavioral changes with him at all."

She hoped there wouldn't be, at least not negative. She was rooting for the little boy to do well, rooting for him to have a fabulous life filled with love and joy, and she would do everything in her power to ensure he could live it.

A few other kids greeted or waved at her too, and Amara looked at the little compound, at the little lives impacted by one singular evil entity.

They didn't know much about The Syndicate. In fact, none of them had even known about the organization until Morana had become a part of their lives. It was like a pandora's box opened up when Tristan and Morana got together, aided by The Reaper and the Shadow Man, exposing them to The Syndicate. Even though the organization had been active for decades, her own trauma incited by them and executed by her biological father who worked for them, it was only recently that they all got to know about them.

There were too many unknowns in the foray, things they didn't know anything about.

And Morana's airport guy, who they were sure was the Shadow Man, seemed to know a lot but not share a lot. Amara did wonder what his endgame was. Was he a narcissist playing with them or a vigilante working in the dark? Was it a power-hungry game or fueled by something else? Was he an enemy or an ally? What was he that an evil organization that everyone feared was terrified of him? Was he a

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bigger evil or lesser? How could he be lesser if he terrorized the monsters so? Though he was an unknown too, she had a gut feeling about him. He had aided them so far, even saved Morana's and Zephyr's life, and led them to their first group of kids. But Alpha, the only one in their group who had talked to him at length, didn't have an iota of an inkling of who he was or what he wanted. '

'Cryptic motherfucker' were the exact words her one-eyed brother-in-law had used. Amara wasn't sure what to make of him, but the more she learned, the more certain she was that he was goal-oriented. From a psychological point of view, he seemed like a fascinating study, and in a very academic way, she wished she could talk to him just to get a better understanding of his motivations and his psyche.

Lex ran back to her with her phone, breaking her thoughts.

"You have a good chat?" she asked him, taking the phone, clicking on a random email notification and realizing it was a spam link before deleting it.

"Yes," the young boy enthused. "He thinks he's getting adopted."

Amara felt her eyebrows go up. The boy was all but adopted. She knew Morana was looking into the legal paperwork, which was tricky without Xander's records. She knew it because Morana had told her about it on their group video call the other night with Zephyr. Though it was a little tense between the two women—Morana juggling through her identity and feeling guilty about Zenith's death, and Zephyr juggling through the darkness in their world and grieving the loss of her sister—Amara had begun doing the group calls every other night. Both the women needed to heal, and it wouldn't happen in isolation. They all needed each other, especially if things were going to get worse, as had been forewarned by the Shadow Man. Amara was willing to take his word for it—much to the consternation of others who were more emotional about it than logical. But he knew shit none of them did, and so far, he hadn't guided them wrong.

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So, she had made it her mission to keep the girls together. The tension would ease, but they all needed to stand up and get through it together.

But that brought her to the point, how did Xander know about the adoption thing? Because she knew Morana hadn't discussed it with him yet.

"Why does he think that?" Amara voiced the question.

Lex shrugged. "He didn't say. He's just happy about it."

Very interesting.

Another boy called for Lex, and he ran off with a "Thank you, Dr. Maroni!" thrown her way.

Amara watched him go, her mind trying to figure things out but hitting a wall every time. She wished she had all the answers. She wished she could interrogate the Shadow Man just to put an end to all the questions. She wished she could talk to Vin to understand what was going on.

Amara walked around the kids, checking up on them, and wished that one day, they could all heal. A darker part of her wished that one day, in the future, the culprits would die deserving, painful deaths.

She could only hope.

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CHAPTER 3

ALPHA, LOS FORTIS

"Hector is dead," Victor, his second-in-command, stated without an iota of remorse in his voice.

Alpha examined him from his chair in his office, looking for any cracks. His trust had been broken too deeply for him not to be wary anymore. Hector, a man he'd once thought of as a best friend and right hand, had betrayed him in the worst ways a man could be betrayed. And all for power. He knew better than most that power made monsters of men, but he'd never expected his friend to be one. Not only had he blinded and tortured him, making him lose his memory and his sense of self, but he had taken advantage of his vulnerable state and injected himself by his side for so many years. Alpha truly was partially blind because how the fuck had he never seen his true colors? Hector had not only assaulted and murdered women, the same women Alpha had dedicated his life to protect, the same kind as his

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mother had been, but he had also become a pawn for The Syndicate. The one fucking organization Alpha had heard of in passing but never wanted anything to do with, which he now had to deal with because of his little rainbow.

His little rainbow, who had lost her colors when her sister had died in her arms.

Zenith, though Zephyr's sister, had been a runaway from The Syndicate, hiding and getting adopted by the De La Vega's when she'd been younger. Having met her a few times even before finding Zephyr, thanks to her dedicated work in one of his non-profit organizations, Alpha knew she'd been an extraordinary, bright, and beautiful woman. The world was a worse place without her, and the injustice of it all chafed over him every day.

Fucking Hector.

"How?" he asked Victor, Hector's brother and possibly the only one feeling more betrayed by him than Alpha was. Both brothers had been with him for so long, and Alpha didn't want to believe Victor could be a traitor either, especially not after the way he'd seen the other man go on a hunt to find his brother. Moreover, Alpha couldn't afford to lose him too, not after culling Hector's supporters and allies within his people, down now just to a handful. He needed Victor to be true so they could rebuild and restructure the Los Fortis empire into an impenetrable fortress. He didn't have the luxury of a generational legacy like his half-brother Dante did with the Tenebrae Outfit. He had built everything that he had from the ground up, right from the soil to the sky, rising from a pauper in poverty to a potentate in power.

"Burned. Arson," Victor supplied, standing with his hands behind his back, his demeanor somber. The muted daylight coming through the glass windows showed his rigid form. Nothing, aside from the clenching of his jaw, belayed his displeasure.

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"When?" Alpha leaned back on the chair, folding his arms across his chest.

"Hard to say," Victor replied. "I'm waiting for the coroner's report. But they estimate it to be sometime in the last twenty-four hours."

"Are we sure it's him?" Alpha knew how crafty Hector could be. Now, with the connections that he had acquired in The Syndicate, faking a death would be child's play for him. Hell, Dante had faked death twice, and Hector was a lot more cunning.

Victor hesitated. "The body was completely burned. So was the warehouse he was found in. But the dental records are a match. I verified it myself."

Alpha considered him, pondering over it for a moment. "You okay with that?"

Just a clench of the jaw.

Alpha sighed. "Sit," he indicated the chair opposite him. "Talk to me."

Victor relaxed his arms, letting them come to his sides, before taking a seat. The table between them felt big, bigger than before, and Alpha truly hoped they could breach the distance one day again. The other man had always been quieter next to his brother, but now, Alpha needed to hear him and trust his mettle, not wonder about what the hell was happening in his head.

Victor was on the same page apparently, because he began to talk. "I'm pissed, to be honest. I wanted to find him myself. I wanted to question him and then kill him myself. I'm pissed someone else got to him faster. The only good thing is he was tortured for some time." He paused, letting Alpha take it all in. "Someone had kept him captive in the warehouse in Gladestone for a while, can't say exactly how long. He was tortured and was alive when the fire started. That tells me someone else wanted him more than we did. Could it be someone from The Syndicate?"

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"Maybe," Alpha mused, keeping his hunch to himself for the moment. If his gut was right, he knew it had to be the Shadow Man. He had told Alpha clearly that he'd been following and hunting Hector for a while, and though the mysterious man didn't have any particular modus operandi, he had executed arson successfully before. In fact, what little Alpha had been able to find about him, his only known point in the past was a massive fire he had started in some kind of an orphanage. There wasn't any information about the details, the information non-existent anywhere, but he had a source coming to meet him soon. Though he was indebted to the man for saving his wife, he was going to find his agenda if it was the last thing he did.

Victor stood up again, resting his arms on the desk, his dark eyes intent. "I know what my brother did will always be a scar between us. It is my burden to bear. But I promise you, Alpha," the conviction in his voice was deep, "I will die before I betray your trust. I have his debt to clear now, his name to taint my own. I will spend my life clearing it with you."

Before he could respond, a little hiccup made him look to the door blocked behind Victor's frame.

His beautiful wife stood there, dressed in dark jeans and a beige top that were *not* her, her hair the same sad blue that she never got the chance to recolor, her eyes misted, locked on Victor. Zephyr had always been a crier, tearing up at the drop of a hat, but somehow, in the last few weeks, it had gotten worse because she didn't cry much anymore. It was like something inside her had frozen the tears, making them more infrequent, and as much as he'd hated her crying, he hated her not crying even more. At least when she tore up, he knew that all was alright in the world. Nothing seemed to be okay in their world right now.

Seeing her eyes misted after so long made something in his chest

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lighter, his heart thumping and that was the only reason he didn't interrupt her.

"Oh, Victor," she whispered, walking into his office and going straight to the other man. As much as Alpha hated the bond she had with him, he couldn't deny a part of him was glad she was coming out of her shell. Victor had always been the closest to Zephyr out of all his men, directly responsible for her security, and the fact that she had been harmed and hurt under his watch, weighed heavily on him. He had been knocked out cold because he had let his guard down around his own brother.

Alpha watched Zephyr stop beside Victor, putting a hand on his arm and squeezing it. "You're not responsible for what happened, Victor. Don't take someone else's blame on your shoulders. You have enough to carry."

Alpha saw Victor's throat bob as he swallowed, possibly emotional at her forgiveness. Alpha could relate. She had forgiven him too, so easily, like lingering on mistakes wasn't something possible for her. This tiny, curvy ball of life had so much forgiveness and love in her heart that he was amazed that she didn't burst from it. Even in her grief, she knew grace. Alpha didn't think he could fall more in love with her, but she proved him wrong every day, pulling him deeper into the depths without even knowing she did.

She gave his friend another squeeze on his arm, and Alpha watched the large, lethal man soften to a degree he had not seen before.

Fuck, she was magical.

And *his*.

"Come here, rainbow," he spoke, his voice coming out huskier than intended.

Zephyr turned to him, walking around the table to plop down on his lap as had become normal for them. None of his men even bat an

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eyelash at it anymore. In fact, after the funeral, they had closed ranks around her even more protectively, somehow adopting her into their odd family. Zephyr had quit her job and stayed home, locked in with the dogs, for a few days. Her mother had wanted her to divorce him, and she had refused, causing a rift that took more toll on her. Everyone had seen her sink slowly into a depression. Alpha had tried to get her out of it, but it hadn't worked. And somehow, to his surprise, his men had stepped up. They had visited her just to check up on her and sneakily dropped the info about struggling with paperwork at the office. Hector and his allies being out had left the company in a lurch, that was true, but they could hire whatever help they needed. However, just to get her out and about, they had pretended to be helpless.

Knowing his struggle with reading, Zephyr hadn't even hesitated and began coming into the office daily.

And it had helped.

Working, getting out, interacting with others, it all had helped a little. She had taken over his entire paperwork, working with a few of his men to ensure everything ran smoothly, contacting clients and women alike, writing emails, and becoming the one all came to for trouble. He knew she was trying to distract herself with the new work, leaving her old life behind, and he didn't blame her for it. His men had moved a separate smaller desk and chair for her in the office, facing the windows and the endless vista outside. They brought her lunch from her favorite place down the street. They made sure her tumbler was always full of whatever beverage she wanted. If she wanted something, she just had to say the word, and she had it. His men, all the ones remaining out of loyalty to him, adored her. They had all suffered and seen the worst in life, and somehow, they'd collectively made it their mission to get her bright and happy again.

Alpha loved and hated it in equal measure. He loved that she was so loved and adored as she should be, but he hated all the male

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attention on her, even though they all treated her like a little sister more than anything. So, her sitting on his lap made his breathing easier.

He put a hand on her hip, caressing her softly in a way he knew she liked, feeling her relax into his body as he gentled her.

"Hector is dead," Alpha told her, feeling her stiffen. The man she had once considered a friend too had scarred her so deeply. He had made her lose the man she loved for ten years and then made her lose the sister she loved forever.

Her hazel eyes turned to him, a hardness in them he hadn't seen before. "Did he suffer?"

Alpha nodded, and she exhaled against him. "Good. Thank god for whoever killed him painfully."

The fact that she had wished a brutal death for him spoke volumes. He let her be and looked at Victor again. "Keep me updated with any new findings. I want to know everything."

Victor gave a crisp nod before spinning around and leaving the office.

Alpha relaxed slightly, focusing on the woman in his arms. "How you doing, rainbow?"

Zephyr shrugged.

"Talk to me, baby," he urged her softly, wanting her, needing her to communicate with him, to tell him what was happening because fuck, he wasn't a mind-reader, and he couldn't help her if he didn't know what was going on in her brain.

She looked down at the ring on her finger, a ring he had gotten her without much thought but had somehow been perfect for her. He looked at it as well, wondering if there were days she regretted marrying him. Though she had told him that her sister's death wasn't his fault, he knew her parents, her mother in particular, blamed him and his involvement in their lives. Zephyr had made it clear that she knew

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her past would have caught up to her sister regardless of whether Alpha was in their lives or not. And she had made it clear that she would've become involved in this dark world regardless because of her sister.

Alpha knew all that, but a part of him wondered if there was a part of her that had regrets. His presence in her life had brought her nothing but pain, not now, not ten years ago. She had mourned him first, though through no fault of his, and now she mourned a sister she had loved with all her heart. Alpha couldn't even imagine how that felt, never having had a sibling of his own. His relationship with Dante was good now, albeit a little complicated, and had happened too late for him to understand the depth of that bond growing up. But beyond that, his wife now mourned the loss of her old life and, possibly, her relationship with her parents because of her choice to be with him.

"I'll be okay," she spoke to their hands, holding his tightly, hers round, soft and small, his muscular, rough and large. Yet, she held his, squeezed it, reassuring him in a way the doubts cleared from his mind.

He watched her spin the ring idly, the different jewels casting colorful reflections on the wall with the sunlight hitting them.

She'd told him one night about how he'd promised it to her as a young man, and somehow, even without his memories, he had delivered it. Some days, he wished he could remember the large gap of nothingness. He had bits and pieces up until he was twenty-ish, but things were so fuzzy after that. What he wouldn't give to remember her, just *her*, if nothing else. He wanted to remember who he had been, what his dreams, his goals, his desires had been. He wanted to remember who he had been to her, how he had felt for her, if it had been pure with the innocence of youth or dark with the turbulence of circumstances. He wanted to remember her, how she had been, pages

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