

Elliot immediately heads to his desk where he sets his laptop down and opens it. I stand in the doorway for a moment, the realization that I have absolutely no belongings to keep me entertained falling over me like a blanket. I sigh and walk over to the couch. This will be the place I'll spend my days most of the time, I guess. Flipper jumps up on the couch beside me and sniffs Ash's jacket. I shrug it off of my shoulders and lay it in my lap, smoothing out the rippling wrinkles. The orange fabric is well worn, and the embroidered words on the back aren't yet threadbare. I wonder if Ash got it from one of his guys. Maybe he bought himself. It's always a mystery with him. That's my favorite part about him. When his dad told Max, Ibe-san, and I about his past, I didn't know what to think. How could a boy, so battered and broken, still be as sane as he is? His whole life was full of adversity, yet he carries on with his life like any average person would. He asked if he scared me. Why did he ask that? Was it because of the blood on his hands? Was it the wild, untamed fury that he's had to keep bottled up that had him scared of losing my trust? Because none of it scares me. He does not scare me.

Ash has suffered unspeakable things for so long. It's been drilled into his brain, branded there with a hot iron, that he should be viewed with apprehension. So how did he feel knowing that there was one person in the world that wasn't scared of him? How did one word change his perspective?

I trace my finger absentmindedly along the wings stitched on the back of the jacket. Shorter once compared Ash to an angel. His beauty is far from human, he'd said. He was right. And it was Ash's ruination, his destruction. Ash's life was sundered because of the gift of beauty. It's the entity everyone yearns for, but when someone is bestowed with it, society rips them to shreds. Beauty shouldn't be an aspiration, a dream. It's a target, and the arrows never miss the center.

A tear streaks down my cheek before I even realize that I'm crying. I wipe it away, but that doesn't stop more from overflowing. Flipper looks up at me, her head tilted to the side with a sort of curiosity. I try to distract myself by petting her, letting my fingers track a course through her long black fur.

The quiet sound of Elliot's typing falls silent. "You okay?"

I look over at him and nod. "Sorry. Just thinking."

His fingers twitch on the keyboard and I can almost feel his ache to get back to work. But they stay still, then lift off and settle into his jacket pockets.

"You want to talk about it?" He asks, tone strangely wary, like he's been snapped at for asking this same question before.

I look back down at the jacket. I stay quiet for a moment, thinking through how I should reply.

"Do you ever wonder why beauty is forced into society as something that we all need, but once we achieve it in some approved form, everyone wants to hunt you down?"

Elliot nods.

"Ash is the best example of that," I say. "Do you know what happened? Was it on his records?"

His eyes fall from my face down to the ground in front of him. I take it as a yes, knowing I won't get a straight answer from him, and wipe more tears from my face.

"It really ruined him, I think. He just doesn't want to show vulnerability by letting it affect him. I honestly don't know how he does it." I lean back into the leather cushions and inhale the odd mix of scents coating Elliot's apartment. "When Dino's gone, I want him to go to Japan with me. He wants to be able to live without a gun acting as an extra limb, and that's possible in Japan.

But will he really be able to escape inevitability? No matter where he is, he'll remain a victim to those who seek the rarities of the world."

Elliot is silent for a moment, considering the words I let spill. When he finally speaks, it's hushed, a tone wavering under the soft sounds of the road beneath us. "It's different."

My hand pauses on Flipper's back and she looks over at me expectantly, hopeful that I'll continue to fondle her. "What do you mean?"

He watches my hand on her back. "Golzine wanted revenge. Wanted command over what happened to him. It's specific. Everywhere else it's just about clinging to power, feeling in control. Ash can handle that."

After a beat, I start to pet Flipper again, who settles her head on my leg, covering up the words on the jacket. "Yeah. I guess I'm just scared for him, that's all."

Elliot nods. He opens his mouth as if wanting to speak, but then his eyebrows furrow and he closes it. His gaze falls from me and back onto his computer, a quiet kind of retreat from the conversation. The clicking of his keyboard adds to the ambient noise once again.