

Chapter Four: A Mother's Failing

Sora didn't move to a seat as she appraised the waiting pair, Wendy and Fen behind her. All of the magical items and constant humming weaves of otherworldly forces pulsing around her were distracting, but she kept her focus aimed at the two doctors.

"Nice try pivoting from the real issue. We're not going to do anything until you answer my questions."

Ferdinand's smile faltered as he sighed and folded his fingers in his lap. "I can totally understand that you're not in the most trusting mood since being essentially kidnapped and transported to the moon. Let's try to remain calm."

"Hahaha!" Sora flashed her teeth in a pointed way. "That's an understatement. Let's not include stealing a bunch of my stuff and acting like I've moved into space. Creepy much? I've heard that everyone is okay, but I want to see it for myself."

Diane's casual cadence didn't slip as she held up a finger and slid it across the golden rim of the marble table. It glowed before a hologram materialized, and she pressed a few icons while speaking, maintaining eye contact.

"Let's not be childish, Lady Sora. Take a seat, and we can discuss this civilly. If you want to see live feeds of those we've taken into custody, then by all means, we can do that. *But* do not think that crimes will not go unpunished. Be rational and not an angsty teen."

A rock dropped into her gut at the statement, and the woman's associate jumped in to play good cop.

"Diane, the Executive Chamberlain Council, and the Ethics Bureau agreed on not trying to strong-arm anything. We are guests in Sora's mother's territory. By virtue of birthright, haha, we all might as well be in her doll house."

The dark-haired woman smirked and pulled up a live feed of her father before flicking it across the table; it swapped between cameras to show other individuals. Some she knew, some she didn't.

"I am under no illusion of anything otherwise, Dr. Ferdinand. Councilor Raven made it very clear what Lady Mia expected from us, and placating or coddling her daughter was not on the agenda. If I were in her shoes, I'd want us to be blunt and to the point. What is the point? The situation is complicated and not a one-sided, tantrum-ridden demand-fest."

"Talk about me like I'm not here," Sora growled. "What do you mean, 'crimes will not go unpunished'? Who are you talking about? And I am civil. I haven't tried to manipulate you with magic yet, have I? Dad..."

She jogged forward to stand beside the chair to check on her dad's condition; it split into new windows when she tapped it, maintaining the ones she selected. Mary was among them, but she couldn't find Eyia, Jin, or Kari, yet Aiden eventually cycled through the strangers. Fen and Wendy gingerly kept pace with her and stuck close by while she identified the people she knew. Her father seemed to be in an advanced-looking medical ward, the same as the others; the bed he was in showed a light blue glow around its edges, and a tablet in a nurse's hands showed a hologram of his vitals and other information.

Across the table, the well-dressed man's lips became a line as he took a disapproving tone with his colleague. "Then I object to how you are presenting our attitude, Dr. Diane. Please, Lady Sora, go through and find everyone you are concerned about, and we can sort all of this out. Fen, would you please wait outside?"

Sora's eyes tightened as her tail flicked with agitation, vision rising to glare at the man. "No. Fen will be staying here, and before I sit, I want to make it clear that *we* are going back to Miami. Not next week. Not tomorrow. Today. I'm not going to get distracted by your fancy moon base and get caught up in some random shadow organization plot."

She could practically feel Fen on the verge of fainting with her sharp tone and demand, yet Ferdinand held up his hands defensively and nodded as she returned to her hunt for Eyia and Jin.

"If that is what you want when we're done here, then I can see about arranging it. However, your mother told us that we are to do things in a *particular* order, and... I am not trying to be mean, but your mother's demands are... supreme. I'm sure you can understand that."

Not sensing any lies in his completely open aura, Sora grunted and scooted out the seat to drop into it; the chair adjusted to her size, and the back magically cut out to allow her tail room to swing. Wendy and Fen carefully did the same.

"Just because you were *told* to do something by your superiors doesn't mean *all* of those orders came from my mom. I'm not stupid. Plenty of interpretations there," she snarled, looking past the hologram and gesturing at Diane. "Like I said, I'm not going to get distracted by this 'Fae Academy' crap without dealing with the other stuff. First, I have some of my own demands... Where are Eyia and Jin?"

Diane reached to the side to pick up a cup of what smelled like coffee. Sipping at it, she snorted through her nose with an entertained smirk, "Okay. Let us hear your demands, Princess, and if they are not on that list, then they have been taken to a more secure holding area due to them being deemed dangerous or other factors, such as grave crimes that require extradition to other realms."

The nickname and fear of her friends getting deported caused her tail to flash with fire, but she took a few deep breaths to calm herself. "What about a tall blonde Nordic girl and a small Korean girl?"

The man rubbed his chin while looking at a few digital reports. "If you are talking about the two powerful creatures your mother singled out, then they are in their own section awaiting the conclusion to this meeting."

"Good," Sora breathed, relief coming over her as she felt her emotions flaring again. "Also, I *am* a princess, and don't forget it. I rule this doll house," she laughed back at the black-haired doctor, throwing the man's statement in the woman's face.

"My first demand? I want Jian and, umm, Aiden here," she concluded, figuring he'd be a good ally to help her through this negotiation. Her earlier comment about punishments also made her worry about him and Kari. "If you're going to do some kind of trial on the monsters in Miami, or whatever, then you don't have the facts. Eric's the real ring leader."

Diane's smirk lifted a tad as she lazily pulled up more windows to tap her manicured fingernails across the hologram. "Oh, we know more than you can fathom, Princess. Also, when I am referring to punishment and a trial, I am not entirely speaking to Eric's position since he was acting in *semi-compliance* with the Foundation."

A shiver ran down Sora's spine at the woman's admission, and a closer scan of her magical presence revealed something chilling. "You... were working with Eric? No, that's... You created the cursed item that the Homeland agent and... and Jenny were using? You collected child murderer wraths and forced them into becoming a power source?"

Diane's finger paused over her screen, a frown creasing her eyes. "Jenny's father was a part of the program. She inherited it from him, and Eric... Hmm. Eric is a special case. As for Homeland? You'll have to forgive me; it's too low on the ladder for me to bother commenting on my memory."

Sora hugged herself as this group took a darker turn than she'd expected. The agent had been worried about either having her memory wiped, killed, or her team being forcefully brought into this organization. Aiden and Sela didn't know about this institution from what she'd gathered; they were this *new* group that had started to make waves, causing trouble for Yez'ela and likely taking out Sela's network.

Ferdinand sighed and began playing with his own hologram window that popped up, reading through reports as he tried to clarify.

"The Foundation has protected this world for quite some time, and our goal has been the stability of humanity... Yes, our primary objective is the protection of humanity, not the monster or alien communities. However, that does not mean we have no feelings or moral obligations regarding the ethical treatment of diverse communities. One such instance is Avalon, as has been mentioned."

He motioned to Fen, making the three-tailed vulpes go stiff as a board. "You must understand that it can be difficult to handle things on a global scale when creatures spontaneously slip into our world through dimensional and alternate reality portals, such as Ms. Fen here. There are also much more... influential figures that require more... creative ways to contain and not have humanity destroyed. Eric happens to fall into that category for certain reasons."

Fen forced a laugh, looking down at her lap as she mumbled, "Do you think humanity deserves such high protection with how weak they are?"

"Weak?" Diane cooed, holding her belly as she shook with laughter and seemed to complete some report on one of her windows. "The Foundation is a *human-based* organization, Fen, and so by your logic, the weak, like you and every other monster we've subjugated, should have no issue with being annihilated. Yet, humanity has a more... refined sense of morality."

She swiped over a window for Sora to see a massive, futuristic cell block of some sort, where hundreds of people and monsters were laid on medical beds. Force fields sealed them into their individual units, and with a few taps from Diane's fingers on her window, it zoomed in to show two men being transported out to join them—Aiden was one of them.

"No, The Foundation may be *cold*, but we are not genocidal. That being said, there are other organizations that we fight against that do have such lofty ideals. Luckily, we are the sole superpower on this planet, keeping stability through an iron fist. Now, why don't we get to a few facts *you* seem to be missing, Princess."

Sora's fingernails pressed into her sides as the window expanded, showing drone footage of a rural area. It had been sectioned off by Homeland vehicles, with agents standing around, waiting for something. A large ripple in space weaved at its center, where a dark-haired, three-tailed vulpes exited with a giant tiger more than 3 meters tall behind her. Fen's face became ashen.

"No, I, umm, I had just left Lady Inari's gathering," the fox stammered. "I thought they were hostile..."

"Hehehe. Hostile? Are we not to believe our eyes? Sora has experienced the 'hostility' of Homeland. How hostile were they, Princess?"

"They were nice," she hoarsely replied.

“Quite pushovers with the typical monsters they deal with since we handle the *actual* threats,” the woman liltingly hummed while pulling up their hallway conversation. “You confessed to Sora about eating souls to survive... but does this look like a desperate, starving girl seeking a meal before death?”

Diane zoomed in, showing a curious, playful smirk lift the Huli Jing’s mouth as the Homeland agents spoke on megaphones, asking for her to remain calm and open up a dialogue. Fen lifted her hand, where a bright blue orb appeared, and after a flash of light, everyone present turned on each other, gunfire ripping into their fellow agents as they were stirred into a maddening frenzy, the woman laughing and playing with them like puppets.

Resisting the urge to brush the window away, Sora fought down her squirming gut; her mother’s warning about Huli Jing resurfaced as she twisted her nose and condensed some ground. “I... know that was wrong... horrible. I can see that Fen needs to answer for things like that, but I also think she can become better, and Jian didn’t hurt anyone.”

“He... would have,” Ferdinand carefully articulated. “The Foundation is more than adequately equipped to handle monsters on their level, which is why they surrendered without a fight once our local force mobilized. If Jian knew he could free Fen without her being harmed, he has stated he would.”

Fen locked her jaw, a low growl in her throat that said the tiger was stupid. Sora still wanted to see if Fen could be rehabilitated, though. Her death wouldn’t solve anything.

“Sure. Let’s say all of that is true,” she argued, “I still have ways of doing things that typically can’t be done since I’m a Founder. I can fix her need for feeding and other problems. So, unless you’re saying all Huli Jing are fundamentally evil, then there can be a way for her to co-exist with others. It’s not all black and white.”

The man’s frown became a smile, and he nodded. “I can agree with you there, Sora. It is something the Ethics Bureau has argued for.”

“Pfft.” Diane rolled her eyes, making Fen glare at her. “Sure, it’s easy to want to save one life—even a monster—but how many others are you willing to risk for your lofty ideals and pride? Maybe she only kills five people every six months instead of a hundred. Oops. It was just a slip. She’s on track to getting better! Maybe another fifteen sacrifices, and we can get her down to once a year!”

Ferdinand shot a scowl at the woman’s caustic responses. “Don’t pretend you care about sacrifices, Diane. You used to work for the Occult World Order. You have no morals. Your only goal is to win whatever argument you’re in favor of. You had no issue using Fen to get further information on Sora or in the field.”

“When did I say I was arguing my position?” the woman chortled, leaning over the table and smiling at her. “If you want to play dress-up with the Huli Jing, I’m not against it. Make no mistake that others will pose these arguments. Will you also wish for the Unseelie queen to be pardoned for her crimes against the fae?”

Sora’s heart almost stopped at the question, hand rising to press against her chest, attempting to feel for Sela’s contract; her mother had purged it, though. A lump formed in her throat as her mind processed the news, yet Diane just sighed and skipped by the subject as if it bored her.

“Why don’t we get to what you should really be concerned about, Sora?”

She caught Fen’s flash of hatred and murderous intent aimed at the blunt and unapologetic witch. Yet, who Diane was now looking at put a vice around Sora’s heart, and her best friend sank lower in her chair, trying to evade eye contact.

“Why... are you looking at Wendy like that?”

“Ferdinand,” the dark-haired woman laughed, rising to her feet to move to the door, “why don’t you handle this... delicate situation while I deal with a few other things? I’ll return when it is less... emotional. Besides, I’m sure Sora is sick of my candid approach and wants sweet words to honey her ears instead of brutal honesty... à tout à l’heure,” she said, placing a tablet in front of Wendy and swapping to French as she left.

The well-dressed man streamed out a sad sigh while running his fingers through his hair. “Apologies, Sora, Wendy; she’s upset that our superiors shot some of her suggestions down. And, Fen...”

“My ears are up,” the black-furred vulpes mumbled, trying to remain meek. “I’m not looking for pity.”

“Haha.” He leaned back and shook his head. “No, you’re looking for a way to keep your tails from being chopped off. And you may not like it, but you’ll take pity if it means you’ll live. Your life literally rests on Sora’s word, so I’d think long and hard on that.”

“Umm. Excuse me...” Their attention shifted to the teenage brunette as she pushed herself up, the tablet held in her hand. “Why... is there an adoption sheet with my name on it here?”

“What?” Sora leaned over to scan over the tablet data as Wendy pressed the video icon on the side, which played a high-quality recording. “Is that your mom’s signature at the...”

She trailed off as it activated, and Ferdinand leaned against the table, rubbing his forehead with the back of his fingers. Jane’s slightly obese figure came on the display, red-faced, rum bottle in her hand, and much of her front living room absolutely thrashed by Jenny’s werewolves. It looked like much of the apartment had been totaled by their attack to kidnap Wendy, which was super unnecessary, but it probably was to make a point to Wendy.

Jane didn’t sound all that drunk as she spoke, but her tone was as nasty as ever while speaking to the two female businesswomen who stood nearby. “You’re with some kind of government monster organization? Shit! Why didn’t you grab Sora’s monster ass sooner before her gang of wolves trashed my apartment? I want to press charges!”

A band clamped around Sora’s heart when the mother didn’t even mention the part about her daughter getting taken. Instead, she just kept on with her one-sided rant, swinging her bottle around threateningly as the two agents listened, holding tablets against their chests and waiting for her to finish.

“Sora ruined my life! She made my daughter a rebellious monster and used mind control on me—do you know how much these damages are going to cost me? Dammit! No wonder her good-for-nothing, absent father was so rich and successful. The bitch used mind control to get all their wealth. Take that shit and give it to people who need it, like me! What the hell’s this—some kind of hush contract or something...”

The woman calmly handed her the tablet with a business-like, understanding smile. “I’m sure you had quite the horrific night, Ms. Elise, and we are here to help. We do require you to sign an acceptance form to have your memories erased of the horrific events, which I am sure you would be happy to forego with... compensation. Below are some of the Foundation’s compensation packages.”

Jane’s mood instantly changed as she sat a little straighter and set her bottle on the ground to scroll down the options. “Hold up... you’re serious? All I gotta do is forget about this monster shit, and you’ll give me one of these deals? Damn... 50k a year for life, no job, top

medical insurance, and two full-expense vacations a year with housing options across the world...”

“That’s just one of the more popular options, but given your circumstances, there are other, more exclusive offers that can be offered to you. All you need to do is... tap that back button, and you’ll see the extended options,” the second woman stated. “As you can see...”

“Wait! Wait! Wait!” Jane threw up a hand, tapping something on the device. “What are these... Adoption options?”

Sora reached over to grab Wendy’s hand as a tear fell down her cheek.

“No... Mom, what are you doing?”

The video kept going, and Sora looked up to glare at the somber Ethics Bureau man, but his aura showed he was 100% sympathetic and disgusted.

“Ah,” the woman that handed the alcoholic her tablet faltered slightly, “that is primarily for families that have monster children that are less... capable of handling a public life without incident and usually for those of eight or younger.”

A small smile lifted Jane’s lips as she read through the options. “It’s an option that’s open, though—it shows on the screen—” she argued, pointing at the highlighted sections. “Why’s that?”

The agent’s partner jumped in to explain. “Due to the unique circumstances surrounding Sora Moore and your daughter’s attachment to her, it could be challenging for Sora’s behavioral stability if Wendy, as her perceived best friend, were to be separated from her. It was one of the concerns drawn up by the Ethics Bureau’s Chairman, yet it seems likely that she will return to Miami.”

“Humph.” Jane shifted in her chair with a scowl, scratching her belly and looking over the data again. “If that’s the case, I don’t want to be anywhere near Florida. I *hate* that half-Jap rich girl... Huh. It says here in the adoption profile that I could get 90k a year, some... 5-year youth injections. Yes! I’m with that if it comes with all the benefits in the other package. Plus, my child will get the best development plan customized to her unique experience. Hah. I think that’s a pretty sweet deal.”

Wendy shook her head, sniffing, cheeks red and eyes becoming puffy. “It’s a lie...”

The two agents looked at one another, likely just trying to close whatever deal they could with the alcoholic woman. “Are... you sure, Ma’am? There are larger packages available. For instance, the 250k package... with so much more—a 12-year youth injection and youth supplement plan—that keeps your daughter and you together while near Sora.”

Jane shoved the tablet back into the woman’s hands. “Look, I’ve chosen already, bitch. I told you I want *nothing* to do with that monster. Hey, throw in that youth supplement plan, too, and you’ve got a deal because you could give me a *million* dollars a day, and I’d tell you the same.”

Sora could feel Wendy’s world collapsing around her with the memories of the fight she had with her mother before skipping school. Yet, Jane’s cold-hearted laugh continued, stabbing into her daughter’s vulnerable chest.

“Heh, besides, Wendy always liked Sora and her dad better than me anyway. She *never* wanted to be home growing up. Yeah, I wonder why, and now that *thing* has you assholes dancing to her strings, so I want to be cut out of that fox bitch’s life. Wendy can have her ritzy, cartoon dream—anime, or whatever she calls it, fantasy life. I’m *done* with this bullshit. Hey, in fact, can you even make me forget about my—”

Wendy threw the tablet against the wall, shattering the screen and making the video die. “It’s a lie!” she cried. “Sora, they... they had to manipulate it—AI or something—it’s not real! My mom wouldn’t... she wouldn’t abandon me—sell me off to some weird organization *that* fast? She’s my... She’s my mom...”

Sora’s thick throat wouldn’t let her speak as she leaned over to hug her best friend, truly unsure if she could trust anything as her whole world fell apart. Sora knew the truth; she’d felt her alcoholic, abusive mom’s raw emotions first-hand.

“I’m sorry, Wendy... I’m sorry.” It took some time before Wendy’s hiccups and trembles ceased, but she was far from stable. “Wendy?”

She gulped, using magic to clean the brunette’s face as emptiness and darkness clouded her thoughts and heart.

“I... want to talk to her.”

Ferdinand sighed, rubbing between his eyes. “Unfortunately... she’s already signed all the documentation as your legal guardian... and went through the process yesterday. The video goes on to show her waving any desire to be in your life or—”

“It’s a lie!” Wendy choked. “No, she... we fought, b-but all moms and daughters fight... She loved me. She used to treat me after... after I got a good grade when I was a kid, and we’d talk... even if we didn’t have enough money... I tried... I tried *sooo* hard...”

Her voice cracked, and she broke away from Sora’s grip to stand, hugging herself.

“Wendy? What can I do?” Sora pleaded as she rubbed her wet cheeks again and blinked her puffy eyes. “What do you want me to do?”

“I... “ Wendy shook her head, hugging herself. “I just need some time to think... I just need to be... to be alone for a while. Sorry, Sora...”

Rubbing her nose, she walked out and went into the next room to curl up on what sounded like a sofa.

Sora turned her glare to the man across the table. “That... was so horrible! Why show her Jane’s true feelings like that?! It’s cruel!”

Fen huffed, looking away and not particularly moved by the scene. “My family life was far worse. She’s better off alone.”

“Ahem.” Ferdinand gave her a sober stare. “I agree that there was probably a better way to handle that. Sadly, I doubt it would have softened the blow all the same. You don’t seem particularly surprised about her mother giving her up. I can say that the Foundation is primed and ready to transfer parental custody over to your father; all documents can be officialized by the time you’re back in Miami.”

“That’s... not the point,” Sora mumbled, gripping her arm and glancing over at the destroyed tablet. Of course, she wanted Wendy to become her sister, but not like this. Leaning forward to rub her forehead, she groaned, “Why does everything around me fall apart?! It was supposed to get better.”

“Isn’t it?”

Sora frowned, looking through her teary eyes at the soft-spoken, typically sarcastic Huli Jing beside her, who shifted uncomfortably in her seat; her aura presented itself as genuine.

“Your friend had a toxic mother, who seemed to not give a damn about her, and she was delusional regarding her contempt for caring for her. Clearly, she had no maternal bonds and only saw her daughter as a parasite, leeching off of her. Yes, it may hurt for a short time... I was in pain for weeks after my mother and sisters abandoned me to fend for myself, yet... Jian helped me through it.”

Sitting back, Sora fidgeted with her dress as she contended with the swirl of disgust, hate, and disbelief that had come from Jane. Sure, she was a horrible mom—nothing new to Sora—but to actually so candidly give up *and* forget about her daughter? Yeah, that was even a new low for the abusive mother. No, she couldn't even call herself a mother anymore; she'd *willingly* given up that right.

"It's not right," she whispered, wanting to punch the woman in the face for hurting her best friend. "None of this is right... Why is my family coming together and everyone else's falling apart?"

The door opened, and Diane entered the room again nonchalantly as a male nurse pushed a bed with Aiden in it while a giant, black-haired man stood beside her. "Who's family is falling apart, Sora?" the witch asked, dropping the lady and princess bit.

"Jian!" Fen cried, lurching out of her chair to run into the giant man's arms.

Diane huffed and took a seat, pulling up more windows to swipe between several dozen active feeds at once. "Yes, yes, your father figure has returned. I don't need to tell you that he's accepted a death curse into his Core that will activate if he falls out of line. Take your seats, 3rd wheels. Now, have we gotten past the drama and can get down to business?"

"You're a bitch," Sora snarled, glowering at the unbothered doctor. "What did you even want from me that made you this crabby?"

"Mmm-hehehe. Personally," the woman scoffed, taking note of Jian and Fen sitting next to each other, the vulpes' shaky hand holding his, "I prefer the insult 'witch' since it is far more appropriate. As for what I want... I am sure I will get it in time. After all, the Moon Wizard will want to speak to you eventually, and I will be accompanying you to meet his royal excellency."

She made a dismissive gesture to the sleeping firebird. "As for what to expect moving forward? Why don't we answer your big questions regarding what will happen moving forward? Mind waking up Aiden?" Her teeth flashed as she promptly dismissed the holograms to lean forward. "He's going to be needed as we move to the next stage."

Sora carefully got up and placed her palms on the table, leering at the witch. "Okay, Diane, let's cut the bullshit attitude then and get real."

Fen pulled Jian's hand to her lap, glancing between them as Ferdinand crossed his arms to listen to her. Diane, on the other hand, only smiled at her, anticipation rising within the witch's projected aura.

"My mom is coming home. Apparently, she wants me to go to some fae school. Cool. I'm totally fine with that. In fact, it sounds fun. Let me be crystal clear, though. I'm done with this whole shady organization vibe you have going on. My best friend is in trouble, so I'm going to go and be with her. In the meantime, I'm going to leave Aiden in control to figure out what the hell is going on. So please, *please*, hehe, keep pushing me because I'm not in a good mood!"

"Finally," Diane chuckled, eyes narrowing with a thrilled expression. "So, I was right. Your mother is returning. Excellent. Get pushy, Sora. Show an attitude. You and Aiden are going to fill in the vacuum as the new bosses of Florida that keep all the little monster communities in check because... if you don't, then we'll have to step in, and that could get ugly."

Ferdinand sat a little straighter.

Sora didn't blink, green eyes drilling into the woman's deep brown; in essence, she was threatening to lock up every monster in Florida, and after a few seconds, she grunted and turned to wake Aiden. "What about Eric?"

“Eric? Well, he and his sister are off in a very, *very* deep hole. We have to give your mother her dues for containing them because, heh, while Eric is far from the most destructive creature, he is practically impossible to contain. We’ve even theorized throwing him into the sun since volcanoes didn’t do the job.”

Her fingernails extended to bite into the marble table, vision falling to her claws. “I... want Kari to be brought back to Miami with me. Aiden won’t settle for anything else. It’s unconditional,” she firmly stated, shocking herself at the admission.

Diane’s eyebrows drew together for the first time, confused eyes snapping to an open window by her side, and Sora noticed it was the video she’d sent to the police of Kari’s gang shaving her hair. “Why... would you want the bully that has been picking on you for years to return to Miami?”

“Are you serious?” Ferdinand asked as she went to shake Aiden’s shoulder and snap her mother’s magic keeping him in suspended animation. “You want Eric to return, as well? When is your mother actually coming to this planet?”

Sora huffed, recalling everything he’d done to his little sister. “No. Eric can rot for all I care, and you can let Aiden know my feelings on that if you want. Kari deserves... a chance to become who she wants to be. Now, I’m going to go comfort my friend.”

Aiden stirred as she touched him, and he cracked open an eye, a small, confused smile lifting his mouth. He groggily pushed himself up, running his hand through his messy blond hair. “Well, I guess I’m waking up in vulpes heaven... And then reality hits,” he sighed with disappointment upon spotting the others in the room. “Haaa. Shame. What’d I miss?”

Offering him an encouraging thumbs up, she said, “I’ll be in the next room over listening. Ready for the insanity?”

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, adjusting his frumpy hospital gown, and brushing back his bangs, he flashed a smile. “Lay it on me, girl. I feel the downer vibes, so how can I help—need a spark of hope?” he offered, soothing rainbow flames igniting down his left arm. “It’s addicting!”

Relief flooded Sora’s veins at the handsome boy’s jokes and offers of support; it was nice having someone who could actually take some of the load off of her. “Save it for my friend. Short version: we’re on the moon, a shady organization Yez’ela was on about, they’ll do basically whatever I say because my mom’s scary as all crap, and I’m going to run damage control on my best friend’s broken heart. Got my back?”

Aiden’s mouth pulled together as he scanned the eyes on him before offering her a two-fingered salute. “Roger that, Lt. Fluffy Tail. Operation: Get Answers and Find Solutions is underway... Let me know if you need any help,” he whispered as he pushed himself up. “How’s Kari?”

“Ask them,” she sighed, heading for the door. “I might not like her, but I’m open for things to change. Eric...” She shook her head while backing out of the door, leaving the firebird to sigh and rub the back of his neck with all eyes on him.

Making it into the hallway, she closed the door, leaning against it and breathing out her stress. Maybe she was being a bit too confrontational and emotional. What did they expect, though? She’d woken up on the freaking moon!

Sora rubbed her face and tried to let go of the heat in her chest before trying to comfort Wendy. Yet just before reaching the room that her bestie was in, a sharp bell made her freeze, and a cat’s meow came from inside. Gingerly opening the door, Sora felt as if hands were enclosed around her throat.

Wendy lay on a couch, fighting depression with a two-tailed cat on her best friend's stomach; the brunette stroked the purring creature, not a clue as to who was on her belly. Nilly was back and on the moon.