



A Curse of Scales and Flame (Magic and Marvels)

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Description: Damien Blackthorne

Dragons were dying. All over the world, a curse was taking us out one by one, and nobody knew how to stop it.

I watched my mother burn, I watched my little brother fall sick. I didn't want to see anyone else die, I was determined to figure out how to stop the dragon fall.

That's when Robby practically falls into my lap, with his big brown eyes and charming smile and his penchant for being hunted by vampires. After saving him twice from certain death, we soon come to realize that there's a reason he's being hunted.

And that reason may be the answer to all our problems, and the start to a whole new set of them.

Robby Diaz

I liked to float through the world. I bounced off problems and tended to avoid any and all issues with a smile and a wave.

So imagine my surprise when I'm heading to a magic shop in Malibu and I'm suddenly attacked by vampires and then saved by one of the most handsome men I'd ever seen. I thought I could float away from whatever mess I stumbled into, but this problem stuck—following me all the way home.

The vampires were after me, but they didn't want me dead... they wanted me alive. Why? And what did I have to do with this dragon-killing curse? And why was I falling for the fiery hot dragon who insists on saving me over and over again?

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Damien Blackthorne Dragons were dying. All over the world, a curse was taking us out one by one, and nobody knew how to stop it. I watched my mother burn, I watched my little brother fall sick. I didn't want to see anyone else die, I was determined to figure out how to stop the dragon fall. That's when Robby practically falls into my lap, with his big brown eyes and charming smile and his penchant for being hunted by vampires. After saving him twice from certain death, we soon come to realize that there's a reason he's being hunted. And that reason may be the answer to all our problems, and the start to a whole new set of them. Robby Diaz I liked to float through the world. I bounced off problems and tended to avoid any and all issues with a smile and a wave. So imagine my surprise when I'm heading to a magic shop in Malibu and I'm suddenly attacked by vampires and then saved by one of the most handsome men I'd ever seen. I thought I could float away from whatever mess I stumbled into, but this problem stuck—following me all the way home. The vampires were after me, but they didn't want me dead... they wanted me alive. Why? And what did I have to do with this dragon-killing curse? And why was I falling for the fiery hot dragon who insists on saving me over and over again?

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Chapter 1

Ashes to Ashes, Scales to Scales

Damien

The wind beat against my face as if it were trying to stop me. The air was frigid cold. I half expected my wings to turn to solid ice, the fire in my veins keeping them

thawed. The sun burned bright in the sky, warming my back as I raced through the skies. I cut through a thick cloud. My wings slapped against the wet feeling of puffy air.

An entire Air Force squadron could have pulled up in front of me, and I would have pushed right on through. Nothing was stopping me. Not the elements, or the military, or a world-ending hurricane. Nothing. No one. I was determined to get to my mother's side.

Before it's too late.

The thought hit me like a stray lightning bolt. My heart skipped a few beats, possibly due to overexertion but more than likely due to fear.

"Damien, where are you?"

It was Xavier. My brother's voice sounded clear as day in my head. No need for cell phones when you had a telepathic connection with your blood relatives.

"I'm about ten minutes away. How is she doing?"

"Not well. Make it five."

"Shit."

I tucked my wings into my side and tipped downward, using gravity to help me slice toward the ground, accelerating with every mile I dropped.

Faster.

Faster.

I could see the cracked surface of the road rising to greet me, ready to slam into me, turn me into a mess of dust and bone and scales.

At the very last minute, I aimed back upward toward the sky, throwing my wings open and catching a particularly strong updraft. The momentum from my fall helped push me forward, making me fly even faster.

There. That should shave off at least five minutes, hopefully seven.

Underneath me was the Concrete District, a relatively quiet and sleeping California community where all the non-magic users lived, its homogenous houses holding their homogenous humans, dreaming about their silly little problems or their wildest little fantasies. How lucky they were, tucked away with their loved ones, not having to worry that the people they surrounded themselves with were dropping like flies from something no one could understand or foresee. It made me jealous. Made my anger boil inside my chest. I could open up my jaws and rain down a river of molten fire on all of these people. I could make them feel the pain that coursed through my veins, share in the trauma that came from fighting an invisible enemy.

I kept my jaws clamped shut. I'd never hurt a human, not unprovoked, no matter how angry I was with my own life. It went against a dragon's instincts to hurt a human. Not only would it break the Ivory Treaty and possibly kick off an entire world war, but it would also make me a monster, and that was something I refused to claim.

There were others in this world who held that title proudly.

It took me less than the allotted ten minutes to get to our home, although it had felt like I'd been flying for an eternity. I spread my wings as the stone and stained glass castle came into view, tucked away high on the Malibu mountains with a sweeping view of the beach just on the other side. It had been in the family for centuries, now serving as the home base for me and my five other siblings.

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And currently housing our dying mother.

I flapped my wings, catching pockets of air that slowed my descent. Spreading my taloned feet, I came to a graceful landing on the spiraling driveway. The gargoyles that watched over the property barely even acknowledged me, keeping their stony gazes turned outward.

It took me less than a couple of seconds to shift back into my human form. A swirl of blue and red mist surrounded me as the painless process magically shifted and remolded my muscles and bones and organs, turning me from a dragon with an intimidating eight-foot wing span to a grown man with a much smaller arm span, clocking out at a still-intimidating six feet and three inches in height. The same clothes I wore before the shift appeared back on my body, a white T-shirt and a pair of worn-out jeans.

The only thing denoting me from a regular human was the patches of crimson-red scales that covered part of my chest. All dragons retained some of their scales in human form, and none of us were ashamed about it. There had even been a trend (quite a dumb one, if you ask me) where regular humans would try and get scales surgically added to them in an attempt to imitate us. It resulted in their bodies rejecting the scales, some even coming down with life-threatening infections.

“Damien, hurry.” It was my youngest brother, Warrick, standing at the door with a worried expression twisting his youthful features. His thick glasses magnified the tears that welled up in his soft brown eyes. “She doesn’t have much time left.” His voice cracked with emotion, making the vise grip around my heart only that much tighter.

I braced myself for what I was about to see. I hadn't been home for months. Ever since Mom got sick, I'd made it my mission to figure out a way to save her. From meeting with the merfolk up in Alaska to flying through the Amazon Rainforest in search of a rumored dragon clan with some kind of immunity to whatever was happening. I spent my days and my nights scouring this Earth in an attempt to figure out what was happening.

Nothing. All of my leads brought me to a sequence of dead ends. Doctors, shamans, Marvels. No one could tell us what was wrong or how to fix it. There would be blank stares when the questions were asked, apologies given and hopes dashed.

Empty-handed. That's how I came back, and it made every step I took toward my mom's bedroom that much heavier, as if I were trudging through wet cement, the invisible mixture solidifying around my ankles.

"Everyone's here," Warrick said as we walked through the dim hallway. "Even Dad."

"Good," I said. I put a hand on my brother's shoulder and gave him a squeeze. He offered me a fragile smile. The green scales on his forearm glittered as he reached out for the doorknob. "Just prepare yourself."

Prepare myself? For what?

I didn't get a chance to ask the question. Warrick opened the door, revealing a scene I never wanted to see.

My mother's bedroom was suitable for a queen, with vaulted ceilings and arching windows that bathed the white-and-black marble tiles in a wash of bright sunlight. There was a large bed pushed up against the wall, surrounded by my family. The wall behind the bed was covered in delicate ivy, one of my mother's favorite flowers. It was usually an emerald-green curtain of trailing leaves, but today was different;

colorful buds bloomed all throughout the wall, pinks and blues and red, popping against the bright green.

I moved toward the bed. My sister, Dawn, and my brother Xavier both turned to look at me with a heavy sadness reflected in their similar faces. They stepped aside and made room for me at my mother's side.

Instantly, a sob wrenched its way up to my throat as I looked down at the husk that my mother had become. A woman so full of vitality and life was now staring blankly up at the ceiling with eyes that appeared to be close to falling out with how they bulged out from her taut and bony face. Memories dashed through my mind like a broken film reel: my mom taking me to the playground, my mom teaching me how to fly, my mom teaching me algebra, my mom attending my college graduation.

I was a grown man, a dragon, and seeing my mother like this made me feel like a newborn babe. Useless and broken.

"Oh, Mom..." I reached for her hand, picking it up in mine, feeling the bones of her knuckles poke at my palm. There was a scorching heat that prickled underneath her skin.

"I'm guessing you came back empty-handed?"

I looked up, staring directly into the eyes of my father, dark and storm-filled. A patch of onyx-black scales on his forehead appeared to suck in any and all of the light, exactly like his gaze.

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“I wasn’t successful in finding a cure, no.”

“I expected as much.”

It took all I had in me to not snap back. To not cut down my father with the same kind of fury and disdain he’d shown me for my entire life. My mother’s hand twitched in mine. I took a deep breath. This wasn’t about my father’s and my fucked-up relationship.

“How much longer does she have?” I asked.

“We’re not sure.” Dawn went to the bedside table and grabbed the glass of water, tilting it against our mother’s lips. The water trickled down the side of her mouth, darkening the pillow underneath her. My heart sundered in half, torn like a wet piece of paper. I’d never experienced this kind of hurt. This kind of pain.

Scales started to ripple across my mother’s skin. They were a sulfur yellow, and they were spreading down her arms and neck like a rotten disease. Her eyes snapped open, and she gasped for air. My sister shouted for someone to do something, but we all knew it was useless. No one could help; no one could save our mother.

The scales consumed her as a shout tore from her throat. I turned away, feeling like I was seconds from passing out. But I couldn’t. I was the oldest. I had to be strong.

I turned back to her. Watched as the scales turned an angry molten red. My little brother ran to the side of the room and started to throw up. She began to thrash and writhe as if she were possessed. I didn’t take my eyes off her, even though all I

wanted to do was disappear down to the center of the Earth.

A bright white light filled the room, followed by a blast of heat.

I started to cry. Couldn't hold it back. No matter how solid I was supposed to be for my family. We all did. That heat was the last we'd ever feel of our mother.

The bed was now covered in ash and scales, all that was left from the fire that tore through her from the inside out. My father didn't say a word, pushing past us and leaving the room with a slam of the door that rattled the entire castle. I grabbed my sister and brothers in a loose hug. I was the oldest son; it was my job to pull us all together and get us through this.

But I couldn't even get words to form past the thick lump of emotion swelling in my throat.

"You guys..." It was my youngest brother. He was pressed up against the wall, his face pale. Warrick's voice shook, same as his shoulders. He looked scared. No... he looked terrified.

"What? What is it?" Dawn came to his side, hand on his elbow.

"I can't sense my dragon. I can't shift."

Chapter 2

Potions, Lotions, and Magic Notions

Damien

The castle was deathly quiet. The air felt persistently heavy, like I was trudging

through thick sewage, even when I was in my dragon form, flying around the property for some sort of comfort.

I found none.

Nothing could bring me joy. Nothing could bring me happiness. I had come to accept that. How could it when I witnessed my mother turn into a pile of dust and scales weeks ago. Three weeks and four days, to be exact.

Now I had to do the same with my younger brother?

It wasn't fair. We were dragons. We should have been immune to things like viruses and diseases. We lived upward of two hundred years. My mother was only sixty-five. And my little brother? Twenty-three. A mere fraction of his full life span, and now he was fighting to reach twenty-four.

I passed by the hallway that led to his bedroom. The heavy set of wooden doors was sealed shut, an intricate carving of a peacock flaring its tail feathers underneath a moss-covered tree taking up the entire frame. It was a difficult decision, but with none of us knowing the origin of this illness, we'd decided to have Warrick quarantined while we figured out what was happening. Of course, we'd all been next to our mother when she died, so we were likely all exposed, but only Warrick was showing signs of the illness: a high fever, a lack of appetite, and an increasingly painful burning sensation. He also couldn't shift into his dragon form, which had been previously unheard of.

"Do you need anything, War?"

His answer echoed in my head, faint with exhaustion. "No, I'm okay. Thanks."

"Water? Snacks?"

“I’ve got both. Dawn brought me some Sour Patch Kids.”

“Ah, good.” I leaned my head against the door and balled my hands into tight fists, the nails digging into my palm. “I’m going to figure out how to save you, War. I will. Just hang in there, alright?”

“I’m trying, Damien. I’m trying.” His voice went dim, like a TV flickering off. I knew exhaustion was taking him, and I’d rather my little brother sleep through the pain than bear it.

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I steadied myself with a deep breath. Fire roiled in my lungs, licking at my ribs and warming the space around my heart. I stormed down the hall, past the sun-soaked library and the neon-lit workout room, going down the spiral staircase and through the domed living room. Anyone else likely would have gotten lost inside our home, but I knew this place like the back of my wings. It had been in our family for generations, ever since the first dragons arrived through the Tear all those years ago. And we had zero plans on letting it go anytime soon.

“Where you running off to?” It was Xavier, standing in the doorway to his bedroom. He wore a tank top, the golden scales on his biceps catching the multicolored light from a stained glass window, reflecting some of it back onto the smooth gray stone that made the walls of our fortress.

Xavier had the ability to control time, but only through turning it back by a couple of seconds, along with getting vague flashes of the future at random moments. And as opposed to the fire that I could breathe out in my dragon form, Xavier produced a stream of sand. Which didn’t sound all that intimidating until it was cutting into your face and filling up your lungs, crushing you under its weight, drowning you without a single drop of water.

He also had the biggest baby face out of all of us, making him seem even more harmless than he actually was, considering he worked as a personal bodyguard to the rich and famous.

“I’m grabbing something from my room and heading to Claire’s shop. I think she’s found something.”

“About the sickness?” he asked.

I nod, and Xavier’s face lit up. He pushed back a soft strand of dark curls that fell on his forehead, revealing a spackling of light birthmarks that popped against his glowing skin. “Well, then give me three minutes to put on some shoes. I’m going with you.”

“You don’t have to,” I assured him. I was close to my brothers, but we rarely worked together, and when we did, things usually went south. We just had very different ways of looking at the world, and that created challenges we weren’t always equipped to handle.

“I’m going,” Xavier insisted, his voice loud.

“Going where?”

Our other brother, Maddox, walked down the hall with a white towel around his neck and sweat beading his forehead. Icy-blue scales followed the line of his left eyebrow, more of them creeping down the side of his neck. He held a glass of water, the sides slick with condensation.

Maddox was—to no one’s surprise—an ice dragon, able to manipulate the temperature around him to suck out all warmth and replace it with a searing, bone-shaking cold. He could shoot a stream of ice from his throat, forming them into body-piercing icicles if need be. He was also the gym rat of the family, usually worried about his diet and workout more than anything else on his agenda.

It was a rare thing, having each kind of dragon represented inside a single family unit. Typically, dragon types were passed down from parent to offspring, so we should all have either been thunder dragons or onyx dragons. But—once in a dozen generations—the unexpected happened, and a rainbow flight was born, one in which

each dragon type was seen.

“Damien says he might have found something about what’s going on with the dragons. Down at Claire’s shop.”

“The Marvel girl that refuses to acknowledge I exist, even though it’s clear we’d make a perfect match together?” Maddox asked.

“That exact one,” I said with an eye roll. Claire had a magic shop on the coast, right off the Pacific Coast Highway, and she had been my best friend since we were little kids, getting bullied together on the playground. Luckily, my dragon woke up sometime around sixth grade, and the bullying immediately stopped.

A kid who could turn into a dragon the size of a Rottweiler with razor-sharp teeth and the ability to breathe fire suddenly didn’t make such an easy target. Who would have thought?

“Great. I’m going with you guys.” Maddox wiped some sweat off his brow and tucked the towel into the waistband of his black gym shorts. “Maybe I can walk out of there with a cure for War and a girlfriend for me.”

“Don’t hold your ice,” I said, turning to leave my two brothers so they could get ready and we could get down to the shop already. I wasn’t planning on turning this into a field trip, but after the events of the last few weeks, from watching my mother die to attending her funeral, which my little brother was notably absent from, I began to feel the importance of family becoming more and more prominent in my heart.

I just hoped neither of them fucked this up, as little brothers tended to do.

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The Magic Box was located right off the road that straddled the glistening Pacific Ocean. It was a small boutique that had been created to look like it was carved out of the rock that formed the cliffside leading down toward the sandy part of the beach. It had a bright blue and yellow exterior, with two large windows on either side of the door that displayed a variety of magical items, from wands to rings to potions to weird little figurines that gave me a slight case of the creeps.

I didn't really understand most of it but wasn't bothered by it either, unlike Maddox, who was looking at the door as if a tiger was going to fly through it.

Instead of a snarling tiger opening the door, we were greeted by a smiling Claire. She had on a pair of jeans and a dark red shirt that popped underneath the shimmering black robe she wore. She grabbed me and wrapped me in a hug, her familiar lavender-and-patchouli scent filling my nose, the golden rings and colorful gems in her locs clicking and clacking as she swung some over her shoulder.

"Thanks for coming so quick. How's Warrick?" she asked as she led us into her shop, the scent of burning herbs and essence only growing stronger.

"He's doing okay, but I'm not sure how much time we've got left."

Her lips went into a tight slant, her hand moving up to her chest. Her rose quartz bracelets fell nearly all the way down to her elbow. I knew she used those to enhance her magic and wondered if maybe that's what we needed. Some kind of Marvel-infused gemstone to cure whatever the hell was spreading amongst the dragons.

Claire Mallory Rose was a Marvel, one of the few humans gifted (or cursed,

depending on who you talked to) with the ability to weave and work mana—the invisible threads of magic that were categorized into three major categories. Red colored threads for physical spells, blue colored threads of mana for illusions and mind spells, and green colored threads for healing and nature manipulation.

Claire was lucky in that she was someone who was born with the power to manipulate mana—mainly red—but many humans could live the majority of their lives without that inner part of themselves awakening.

Until Pulse night, that is. An event that occurred every ten years like clockwork and could change your life on a dime. It was a night that went still as magical energy washed over the planet, originating from the Tear, the mysterious miles-long scar on the Earth's surface, cutting across the Iowa landscape. Planes were grounded, surgeries were paused, families gathered, and hugs were shared. Sometimes, tears were shed. Funerals planned. Families mourned.

Because for the majority of people, the Pulse would wash over them, and nothing would happen. They'd go on to live their regular lives, working their regular jobs, living as though nothing had changed. But around six percent of people had their inner abilities unlocked as they felt a rush that took them directly to cloud nine, the ability to see and work threads of magic around them becoming possible.

And then there was the rest. The smallest percentage of people, but the ones with the most dire consequences. For some, the magical energy unleashed inside of them was too much to bear, their bodies succumbing to the power and combusting into a ball of multicolored flame, leaving nothing behind but ash for their loved ones to remember them by.

So yeah, it wasn't exactly a night anyone looked forward to, but it was a reality everyone accepted by now. Dragons, along with other magical beings, were unaffected by the Pulse, leaving only the humans a chance to become magic-wielding

Marvels.

Which was fine by me. I could still breathe fire and fly faster than an Air Force jet; they could keep their kinetic barriers and mana weaving.

The most recent Pulse happened nearly a year ago, so there was plenty of time for the humans to relax before the next one.

Claire went to a small table in the corner of the shop and grabbed a cup of tea, bringing it back. “Sorry, I didn’t realize you were bringing your brothers.”

“I didn’t either,” I deadpanned.

“I would have brewed more.”

Maddox scoffed and waved a hand. “I’m more of a beer drinker myself.” I noticed he was puffing up his chest a little more than usual, his jaw set so that his jawline looked sharp enough to cut glass.

I wanted to roll my eyes but kept them still, watching my little brother peacock his way into the friend-zone territory.

“Yeah, I would have guessed that,” Claire said, earning an under-the-breath laugh from Xavier.

Maddox’s brows inched together. “What’s that mean?”

Claire ignored him, turning to me. “Ready? There’s a lot to discuss.”

Ah, how I loved my best friend. I smiled at her, glancing at my bewildered brother. “Yes, let’s get this started.”

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“Perfect,” she said, clapping her hands together, bracelets clicking. “Let’s go to the back.”

As we started to follow her through an arched doorway, a chime sound made us all pause. We turned back to do the door, which should have been locked. I cocked my head as my gaze fell on a messy head of light brown hair and honey-brown eyes set in a face that glowed as bright as the damn sun. The man’s clueless smile nearly knocked me off my feet.

“Uh, hi... are you open?” he asked cheerfully.

All our eyes slowly went to the large Closed sign that floated just inches from the door.

“Oh, hah, right. Sorry about that.”

But instead of turning and walking out like any normal person would do, the human took a bold step in, closing the door behind him.

“I’ll be quick.”

Chapter 3

Mayhem and Marvels in Malibu

Robby

Did someone piss in the bus again?

Was I sitting on it?

Shit, I knew I should have taken the snake-way.

I shifted over to the empty seat next to me and immediately regretted my decision as something wet soaked through my shorts. I shot up and instantly wanted to shout, “Stop! There’s been a urine-mergency!” but wondered if there was a law against doing that. Like yelling “shark” in a crowded theater or something.

That’s when I noticed the half-empty bottle of Gatorade on the seat, the orange cap nowhere in sight. I breathed a sigh of relief, deciding my cheeks didn’t exactly need the hydration, but I wouldn’t turn it away either.

I moved down the bus toward the open windows, hoping the ventilation could help speed up the drying process. It was a packed bus, which wasn’t a surprise, considering it was rush hour in Los Angeles and the streets were bumper-to-bumper with cars and buses. I probably should have chosen a different time to run my errand, but logic was never really my strong suit. I tended to float through life like a bubble, somehow managing to swerve around all the pointy objects without even really meaning to.

It’d worked out so far.

A friendly-looking fae couple entered the bus and went over to the same seat that had betrayed me moments earlier.

“Oh, hold on,” I said, catching their attention right before the jewel-eyed woman sat down on the puddle of salty water (because, let’s be real, that’s all it is). “Someone spilled their drink there.”

She looked down at the seat, then up at me. Her eyes were like two multifaceted rubies set in her face, her smile making them crinkle at the corners. Those were the only things that denoted her from a regular person—well, besides the two wings she could sprout at a moment's notice if she were so inclined to.

“Thank you,” she said, a gentle hand landing on my shoulder before the two moved further down the bus.

Fae. I never minded them, even though some people found their gaze unsettling and didn't particularly like the fact that they fed off raw human emotion. I found it quite interesting, but then again, I also wasn't about to judge anyone based off something they needed to do to survive. How messed up would that be? People should only be judged for their horrible choice in wearing socks with sandals, not for who they were.

It amazed me to think of how close-minded some people still were. Even after the world was irrevocably changed when the first Tear formed across a quiet rural city in Iowa, spitting out not only fae but a plethora of other creatures and races, along with granting certain people the ability to wield and weave mana. It had been the early 1800s when everyone's perception of reality was shattered. And of course, back then, there weren't any phones or emails to communicate with, and yet news still managed to spread like wildfire. Over the years, more Tears were formed and more beings flew out of the blue-and-purple rifts in massive numbers, with none of them having any recollection of where they came from or how they got to our planet. And since no one could successfully enter the Tears without presumably turning into ash, it remained one of the biggest mysteries in the entire universe.

Since the Tears formed, treaties between supernatural species and humans were created, wars were fought, innovations were made, and progress was equally hindered and sped up. Now, magical beings could be found all throughout the world, holding powerful positions in governments and corporations. There were some invisible levers and switches controlled by the elite that still kept the power concentrated in

human hands, but from the view of a common person like me, everyone seemed to be getting along just fine. Although even with that balance being kept, some magical beings were looked at more favorably than others: no one trusted a vampire, for example, but everyone loved a dragon. A vampire could easily manipulate you into giving them something they wanted, whether it was money or sex or blood. But a dragon's natural instinct was to protect people at all costs, and that turned them into quite the celebrities.

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And still I wouldn't judge someone if they flashed their fangs at me, unless they happened to be wearing cargo shorts and Crocs.

Then yeah, I might judge. Not even the undead should be sporting those abominations.

I looked out the window as we drove through Hollywood Boulevard, full of theaters with glowing marquees and sex shops with floating lingerie in the window. Tourists walked up and down the street, stopping at their favorite star and crouching for a photo. There were costumed figures walking around, looking for cash in exchange for a photo, although some of them had to be Marvels using an illusionment spell because they looked like the real thing. Those were the ones that had lines forming to take photos and videos of, while the one-eyed Elmo dragged his dirty red feet past them.

A seat opened up (a dry seat), and I snatched it before the next stop. I still had a long ride to go, and my legs were already hurting. I started to beat myself up for not just taking the snake-way instead but figured I might as well enjoy this ride as much as possible. So I sat back and closed my eyes, trying to think about being somewhere on the beach but instead thinking about all the things I still had to do:

Call the credit card company and ask for a delayed payment.

Figure out what the hell was going on with my health insurance.

Apply to as many jobs as I could.

Make dinner.

Take a shower.

Read a book.

Apply for more jobs before bed.

Rinse and freaking repeat. Life. Since when did it get so full of anxiety and responsibilities? I used to be the most carefree kid on the block, dancing and smiling and teasing, not having to worry about a single thing. Then, in sophomore year of high school, my mom got sick. It should have just been a cold, cured with plenty of soup and rest.

Instead, whatever it was went straight to her heart. We were in the kitchen one sunny afternoon, chatting about school, when my mom stumbled, her face turning a stark pale color. My dad rushed to her side, catching her before she hit the ground.

Thankfully, we had gotten her to the hospital with enough time to save her. A blood clot that would have killed her if we'd waited a minute longer.

Unfortunately, she wasn't fully herself when we brought her home from the hospital. She had trouble with her motor skills and needed help getting around the house. It crushed me to see her like that, but I stepped up to the plate, helping out wherever I could, however I could. She eventually started to get better, but she would never be a hundred percent.

That day my mom collapsed was the day everything shifted. Monumentally. As if another Tear had ripped through the crust of the earth directly under my feet, sucking me in and throwing me into an entirely new world. A darker one. Where struggles seemed to accumulate with the same speed as a heavy snowfall, piling up on your

shoulders until the weight was so heavy you were sure you'd snap before the day was over.

I shut my eyes, the rocking of the bus enough to let me nap. I was dreaming about a vacation in Bali when my eyes fluttered open, and I realized I was three stops away from my destination. I stood up and stretched my legs, rolling my head so that a couple of pops climbed down my neck. Bus naps were never comfortable, but sometimes they were very needed.

I bent over a mom and her kid and tapped the button above them, the light turning red. The bus's loud brakes sounded as we were all slightly pushed forward, the bus coming to a complete stop. I gently shouldered my way through the still-packed bus and stepped outside, the ocean breeze a welcome replacement for the stuffy air inside the bus. Two others followed me off, a couple, both of them wearing all black, looking like they were here to do a photoshoot on the rocks by the beach.

I didn't think much of them, turning down the road and going to the crosswalk that led toward the beach. They seemed to be going in the same direction as me, the two of them stopping a couple of feet behind me as we waited for the light to change.

The sky was a bright blue, matching the waters that I could see stretch on for what seemed to be an eternity. The light turned red, giving us the all clear. We crossed the street in our newly formed group. Was it me, or were they getting closer to me? Maybe they needed directions to somewhere?

I figured I'd let them ask if they truly needed help. I had other things to focus on.

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I went down the steps that led toward the beach, following the directions my GPS had given me. I'd never been to the Magic Box before, but the reviews online all raved about the store's inventory and most particularly about Claire, the helpful shop owner and local celebrity.

The couple was still behind me. Maybe they were going to the Magic Box too? I tried not to pay much attention to the weird feeling I was getting between my shoulders. As if their eyes were drilling a hole through my back.

I reached the shop and opened the door, quickly stepping into a cozy and well-lit store full of mahogany-and-glass display cases, a section of bookshelves catching my attention before my eyes glided over the assembled group, my attention instantly going elsewhere.

Holy shit. He's hot.

There was a man standing in the group, definitely taller than six feet, with bright green eyes and a head of light brown hair that curled in large waves, inviting a hand to go through the soft silk. He had big lips and a little dent in his chin that gave his face dimension. His jeans fit just right, his blue-and-white striped shirt French-tucked into the waistband.

Someone cleared their throat. Ah, shit, that's right, there were other people here. I snapped out of my hypnotic spell and smiled at whom I assumed was Claire.

"Uh, hi... are you open?"

All their eyes turned to my left. My eyebrows drew together as I followed their confused gazes, spotting the Closed sign on the door just a few moments too late. Shit. My mind had been elsewhere; I hadn't even realized.

"Oh, hah, right, sorry about that." I figured I couldn't just leave, not after the hours-long bus ride I'd endured to get here. "I'll be quick."

I stepped inside and shut the door. That was when I saw the visible scales on two of the other guys. Something else that completely slipped past me: I was in the room with a Marvel and a couple of dragons. Great. What the hell could go wrong?

The Marvel blinked away her shock and turned to the men. "You guys can go ahead to the back. I'll see what he needs." She turned back to me, her peaceful aura practically blanketing me as she came over, a relaxed smile on her face. She was dressed casually, with jeans and an oversized T-shirt underneath the black-and-gray filigreed robe she wore.

"I'm Claire Hills, the owner of the shop. What are you looking for, hon?"

"Well," I said, looking around her store. "I'm looking for a rose quartz pipe for my cousin's birthday. She's been eyeing one for the last year or so. She wants to get her energies right while she gets right, if you know what I mean." I put two fingers up to my lips and inhaled, chuckling.

Claire tossed me a bone and laughed at my unfiltered dad joke. She seemed like such a calm and cool person to be around. Just from this ten-second interaction, I already felt like I could trust her. Maybe she had placed some kind of soothing wards around the shop, but I doubted it. I had a feeling it had to do with her.

"Come, we've got all kinds of pipes down this way."

That's when I got another idea, stopping before we turned down a small aisle. It was likely a dumb question, especially since I hadn't come prepared whatsoever for a follow-up answer, but I decided to ask it anyway.

"Also, are you hiring by any chance?"

Chapter 4

Help Wanted

Damien

"What a sweet kid," Claire said as she walked through the shimmering crystal curtain that separated her shop from the back room. "Little odd, but sweet."

I stood up from the red velvet chair surrounded by a tower of books. Claire's back room wasn't as well organized as the front, with random piles of sealed boxes labeled "DO NOT TOUCH" across their sides blocking a window that appeared carved into the hillside itself. A sliver of light shone through, making Claire's honey-brown eyes glow like two golden orbs.

"What did he want?" Xavier asked, pushing off the wall, hands in the pockets of his khaki pants, rolled up at the ankles to make him look more like a sailor than the bodyguard he actually was.

"Looking for a birthday gift and a job."

"Did he find them?" I asked, my curiosity sparked from the moment the naive human stumbled into the store, completely oblivious to the importance of the meeting he had just walked into. There had been an ease to him and his perfectly slanted smile. His teeth were ivory white, and there was a small but visible gap in the upper row that

gave the guy a grin I could easily pluck from a crowd.

One of those faces that was difficult to forget.

“He sure did. Got his gift and his job,” Claire said, moving to her cluttered desk surrounded by empty birdcages. No, not empty—there were floating jewels in each of them, some clacking together and sounding like chirps. “Shall we get this started?”

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“Yes, let’s,” Maddox answered. He grabbed a chair and put it right at the front of her desk. I noticed Claire suppress a grin.

She cleared her throat and pulled out a thick black leather-bound book from inside her desk, setting it on the center of her table. “Just keep your voices down. I left him outside to browse around. He seemed like he needed a distraction from something.”

So that’s what I was picking up on. The lub-dub rhythm of a relaxed heart just on the other side of this wall. Dragon senses were sharp, but something about the guy’s heart sounded clearer to me than anything else. Like I already knew the rhythm as if it were my own.

“I thought you were going to need some backup out there,” Maddox said, chest puffed out.

Claire dipped her head to the side with a skeptical look. “Buddy, I am the backup.” She lifted her hand and made colorful threads of mana appear; opal pinks and teal blues shimmered and glittered around her wrist, collecting in the center of her palm.

“We’ve all got our tricks,” Maddox said with a wink before he blew out a puff of sparkly white snow.

“Alright, enough, you two.” I stepped forward. These games were cute, but the matter at hand was far more serious. As in the survival of the entire dragon race serious.

The survival of our little brother.

“What did you find, Claire?” I asked her, the gentle heartbeat still playing as a background track to my thoughts.

“This book. An old friend of mine found it in an auction. The pages were blank, and no one knew what it was even titled. She didn’t care. Bought it for three hundred bucks based off a feeling. Turns out, her feeling nabbed her a priceless artifact.”

“What is it?” I asked as we all leaned forward. The tome looked nondescript, with a title that had been rubbed off from the leather cover years ago. The pages were yellowed with age, smelling like an ancient library.

“This is a firsthand account of the first fall of the dragons.”

“What? This happened before?” Shock filtered through me. I heard a gasp from one of my brothers but wasn’t sure which one made it.

“It has.” She opened the book and set her hands over the pages. She shut her eyes and slipped into the trance all Marvels were able to achieve, seeing the otherwise invisible threads of magic that wound through the air all around us. We watched as ink seemed to spread across the pages, words taking form in an ancient and floral scrawl. Claire opened her eyes as the text filled up the entire page. “It doesn’t have much, I’ll preface with that. The rest of the book is an autobiography of a traveler from the days following the opening of the Tears. The author talks about a sequence of deaths in their family, starting with the mother and then working its way through the family lineage, jumping from youngest to oldest and ending with the father.”

That was exactly what we were observing. I could hardly believe it. This could be it. This book could be the answer to saving my little brother.

“What kind of sickness does that?” Xavier asked.

“None,” Claire said, pointing to the last sentence on the page. “It was a curse, placed on the dragons by a jilted Marvel lover. Apparently, he was so heartbroken by the betrayal of his dragon betrothed that he decided all dragons should be extinct.” Clair rolled her eyes. “Leave it to you boys, getting unhinged because someone turned down date night.”

“A curse?” That would explain why it seemed like one dragon would get sick at a time. If it was a virus, then we all would have been exposed. “How was it placed?”

“And how can it be stopped?” Maddox asked.

“The details on those two things are also slim. But I did find this. It’s a prophecy.” She handed me the book, and I read the scrawled words, ink droplets staining the thick yellow page.

When the dragons’ roars fall silent, and the curse burns through their veins,

To ash they turn, their life’s fire to wane.

Yet a glimmer of hope in the human remains,

The one who was sacrificed, yet now again regained.

Death’s icy grip shall lay claim, to undo what has been done,

One of two souls, under the waning dragon moon and sun.

The lifeblood of the one who invoked it first,

May be the lifeblood that quenches the curse’s thirst.

Claire cleared her throat, explaining the prophecy to the entire room. “Apparently, the Marvel had to sacrifice a twin under a dragon moon, when it’s bright and red in the daytime sky. But that twin also had to have been born under a dragon moon. Unfortunately, the way to break the curse was never written down.” Claire flipped through the rest of the pages, filled with random sketches and long, rambling paragraphs. “The author of the book decided to include a lot of cake recipes and mutton dinners but nothing about how they saved the dragons from becoming extinct.”

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I sat down on the chair across from Claire. “Still, this is big. At least we know now that this is a curse. And curses can always be broken.”

“But who the hell put it on us in the first place?” Xavier asked, rubbing at the back of his neck.

“Good question,” Claire said. I noticed her attention linger on my little brother. “With an answer I don’t actually have for you. It would have to be someone with a lot of power and a lot of investment in seeing dragons falling from the sky and burning to ash. I don’t think this is because of an overly emotional ex.”

I rolled my head back, cracking some of the bones in my neck with audible pops. “How are we going to stop this if we don’t even know who’s causing it?”

“We just have to riddle it out,” Xavier said. “Who do we know that hates dragons more than anything in this world?”

“Helstriva.” The answer had come from all of us at the same time. The Matriarch of the vampires, recently having come into power after the previous one was suspiciously assassinated (which was an incredibly hard thing to do to an immortal and all-powerful vampire queen). Vampires and dragons never got along, but there had always been an unspoken agreement of peace between us. Even though deadly fights weren’t all that uncommon when paths crossed and tempers flared, it never amounted to anything more than a street brawl.

Still, tensions were always high. Especially since dragons were the only reason the vamps hadn’t made a bolder move at gaining power outside of the Obsidian District.

Marvels, shifters, fae—they all had difficulty taking them out. But an all-out assault from the dragons would decimate the vampires, although the fight would undoubtedly be drawn out and bloody.

It also gave plenty of reason for why they would want us gone. With dragons out of the picture, the humans were ripe for the picking. They'd have them all enslaved before the end of the year, working on fields and being locked up in blood banks.

A draft kicked up. A scent smacked into me.

No fucking way.

Coppery and muddy, like bloody dirt that had been recently rained on. I heard the jingle of the store door closing, and the scent lessened.

Vampire.

“You picked up on that too, didn't you?” Maddox was looking at me, thick brows pushing together, scar on the left one cutting a thick slash.

“I did.”

“What?” Claire asked. “None of my wards have been tripped.”

“I just got a strong smell of vampire,” I explained before I threw a glance over my shoulder at the shimmering curtain that hid the rest of the store from view.

“Ugh, I've been getting some loiterers recently. I don't know why. Maybe that's them?”

“Maybe.” I pulled my focus back to the book, to the curse. “When was the last

dragon moon?”

Claire looked at the calendar hanging on the wall. A picture of a cat with bat wings, sitting on a boulder, smiled at us. “Approximately three weeks and four days ago.”

“Exactly when Mom couldn’t shift into her dragon form,” Xavier said. He’d always been good with dates, but that day was especially memorable. I’d never forget the fear in my mom’s face when she realized she couldn’t access her dragon form, something that came so naturally to all of us. It must have been like waking up and finding all her limbs had been removed in her sleep. A gut-wrenching nightmare.

And it only grew worse.

I swallowed a lump of emotion, bottling it all up. I didn’t know how to deal with this. How was I expected to face the suffering and untimely death of my own mother? How could I stare into the dark empty space that was left in my chest? It was a constant ache. A constant wishing, wanting, willing.

And nothing happening. Nothing was bringing her back.

“Let’s find out where Helstriva was on that day, then,” Maddox said. “She had to have something to do wi—”

“Help! Help!”

A crash and a yelp immediately followed the sudden cries. All four of us were on our feet and running to the front of the store. That’s where the guy from earlier was being cornered by a group of tall and lithe vampires, all three of them baring their fangs, one of them holding a serrated blade that already seemed to be crusted with blood.

They were about to kill him.

And I wasn't about to let that happen.

A roar ripped through my throat as I launched forward, my brothers right behind me, fire swirling inside me.

Chapter 5

Introductions

Robby

I should have known those three from the bus were sketch. I should have turned and walked the other way, but that would have taken me away from the snake-way. I wasn't taking that damn bus again and these three weren't going to stop—

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“Yeah, he’s the one from the picture,” one of them said, his words sounding like a hiss, stopping me in my tracks.

“The picture? What picture?” I dumbly asked.

They answered my question by snarling and exposing their sharp fangs, all three lurching toward me.

I stumbled backward and ran into the shop, throwing the door open and shouting for help, certain that the last thing I should do was take these guys on by myself. I may have been ill-equipped to confront a group of vampires, but a Marvel and her dragon friends were likely overequipped to deal with them.

The four of them came bursting out of the back room just as one of the vampires—the one closest to me with tan skin that made his white fangs gleam—pulled out a nasty-looking dagger. They moved like the wind, swifter, stronger than a gale force. I was in striking distance. It would take nothing for him to stick that dagger straight through my rib cage.

I couldn’t even shout, my throat having tightened with fear. I move backward, hitting the counter, my hands gripping it so that when my knees gave out, I wouldn’t instantly crumple to the floor.

The vampire with the dagger was the first to get tackled. I ran further into the store as the man who did the tackling stood back up, ducking from a clawed swipe of another vampire. He threw a flame-covered fist upward, hitting the vamp square in the chest with a force that audibly cracked a rib and sent embers flying. The vampire went

down to his knees, clutching at his broken side. The white fabric of his shirt burnt straight through.

The dragon didn't have time to celebrate. Another vampire was seconds from sinking his fangs into the man's neck.

And he would have, if the vampire didn't suddenly reverse in slow motion, as if someone had pressed rewind on the tape. I blinked, wondering if someone had knocked me on the head. One of the guys, the youngest-looking one with golden scales climbing down his biceps, appeared in front of the vampire, smiling as he threw a fistful of gleaming gold sand directly into the vamp's shocked face. The vampire clawed at his eyes, never seeing the direct punch to the head that knocked him clean out.

There was one vampire left, and he seemed to be the strongest. He dodged a fire-covered fist from one of the dragons with the grace of a trained dancer, picking up the dagger in the process. He struck at the brick wall of a man, cutting a slash across his T-shirt and revealing a chest of ruby-red scales. The dragon dodged another swipe, and another. They were getting pushed back, knocking over a display case full of different crystals and gems.

They both moved so incredibly fast. It was dizzying to watch, almost hypnotic.

A loud crack sounded as the dragon took a blow to the chin from the vampire's elbow.

The dragon had gone from offense to defense. Not good. I looked around, wondering if there was something I could do, some way I could help. But what the hell was I supposed to contribute? It was like watching a fight between gods, and I was a tiny ant at their feet.

That's when the floor became slick with ice, directly underneath the vampire. I looked to see one of the dragons holding out a hand and directing a stream of frigid ice through the air. It was enough to throw the vamp off, allowing the red dragon to fight back.

He struck with flame-covered fists, using his forearms to block what would have otherwise been lethal blows, the dagger stopping inches away from his eye.

But that put the vampire just as close. The dragon smirked and grabbed the vampire by the neck, his hand still consumed in flames.

I turned away from the sight as my stomach twisted in knots. The smell was enough to make that tangle even tighter.

"What in the actual fuck," Claire said. She stepped out from behind the desk and raised her hand up. I watched as tendrils of dark red mana slithered through the air, wrapping around the one vampire who was still conscious. She lifted him in the air, walking toward him, the other dragons joining her at her side.

This was insane. I had thought the wildest part of my day would be sitting in a puddle of suspicious liquid on the bus. I never would have imagined I'd be watching a Marvel and a trio of heroic dragons taking down a group of vamps... who were after me. Couldn't look over that part.

"Explain why I have a fried vamp on the floor and about five hundred dollars' worth of damage to my store? Quickly." She clenched her hand, and the threads got tighter, the vampire struggling as his feet came off the air, the black leather of his shoes shining from the blood that dripped down his nose.

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“The prophecy must be kept safe.” It came out in a strangled hiss.

“What prophecy?”

The vampire on the floor twitched. My eyes went to his left hand, which was twisted underneath him so that it disappeared under the white jacket he wore. He twitched again.

“Uh, guys.” I tried to warn them, but I’d been too late. The vampire grabbed whatever was in his pocket and launched to his feet, moving with the swiftness of a hunting panther. He launched the black ball down by Claire’s feet.

“Shut your eyes and nose!” she shouted just as the ball exploded, throwing out a plume of thick, black dust. I did as she said, snapping my nose shut with my fingers and closing my eyes just as the cloud rolled over me, like a ghost coming to consume me.

It hit me with a physical force that nearly knocked me over... no. That wasn’t the dust. Something had actually hit me, or someone? There were arms wrapped around me. Strong and firm. I maybe should have struggled, fought back, but it didn’t feel like I was in danger. These weren’t the same arms that had tried to snatch me up outside the store.

The dust dispersed moments later. I opened my eyes and looked up, directly into those emerald-green orbs I had been so drawn by earlier. My hand pressed up against the man’s bare chest, some of his scales under my fingertips. Soft, like the finest and rarest of silk, and warm, like the ground after a hot summer’s day, baked under the

bright sun.

“Are you okay?” he asked, opening his arms.

“I, uhm, yeah, I’m good.” My heart raced, although now I couldn’t quite pinpoint why.

“I didn’t want the vampires grabbing you. They can see through the onyx ash.”

“The what?” I rub a hand over my face. “Actually, more importantly: why the hell were those vampires after me in the first place?”

“That’s a very good question,” the dragon said. He held out a hand, and it took me a quick second to realize he meant for me to do the same. I returned his handshake, trying hard not to notice how firm his grip was and how warm his palm was and how smooth his fingers felt around mine.

Which, of course, was the only thing I could think about until he released his grip.

“I’m Damien,” he said. “Blackthorne.”

“Robby... Diaz,” I say in a feeble way of imitating his impressively dramatic sounding last name. He chuckled and I found myself staring at his lips a little too hard.

“Maddox,” one of the others said with a casual head nod, saving me from my self-induced man trance.

“I’m Xavier,” the youngest-looking one said, coming over to give me a friendly and slightly surprising hug. My hand brushed against the golden scales on his bicep, feeling that same velvety, smooth texture. “You’re safe with us.”

“Thank you,” I said. My mind whirled but at least my legs were still pretty steady.

Claire began to pick some things up, using her magic to push all the glass and broken items to the side of the room in a neat pile while she worked to reorganize a shelf. I couldn’t always make out the threads of magical energy Marvels used to manipulate this world—it depended on how much force the Marvel was using to weave the threads of mana—but I could see a slight shimmer of pink and red surrounding the glass shards. Like a brief hallucination in the middle of a dry desert, the air glittering just above the ground.

Maybe it was partly the shock making me look for distractions, but I got down on my hands and knees to help gather whatever I could. After all, I was a new employee.

“He mentioned a prophecy,” Claire said as she reorganized a knocked-over display of jewel-encrusted amulets. “Could it have to do with the same one that’s behind the dragon fall?”

“Could be,” Damien said. I looked at the gathered group of handsome men (and gorgeous woman), realizing I didn’t belong here. This wasn’t my place. These were beings with immense and immeasurable power, holding an equal amount of respect—from most people, at least. I was just a regular guy buried under debt and worry, and now I was apparently the target of some wild vampire coven.

No. I didn’t belong here at all. I had to go, had to get back home. It would be a long trek at this time, anyway, especially since I was now going to be looking over my shoulder every other minute.

I scooped up a couple of leather notebooks and set them on the carved wooden desk, where other books were stacked in messy columns.

I really feel like I just need to lay down,” I announced to no one in particular. I

looked to Claire, hoping she didn't regret giving me a job now that I appeared to be attracting vamps the same way my bare ankles attracted swarms of mosquitos. "Sorry about all of this. If you want to dock any of my paychecks, I totally understand."

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“No need for that,” Claire said, flicking her hand, the broken shards of glass lifting up and falling into an open trash bin. “This wasn’t your fault.”

I started toward the door when the taller dragon with the full head of dark brown hair and proud stance stepped in front of me. His figure wasn’t exactly imposing, but his presence was. Like there was an invisible aura around him that pushed outward, demanding attention and respect. He was the kind of guy you didn’t say no to. The one who could likely use his charm to get what he wanted, but force wasn’t out of the question either.

I swallowed. “Yes?”

“Aren’t you curious as to why those vampires were after you?” His voice had a subtle gravel to it, like the sound of a very distant landslide.

“I’m thinking it was a common case of wrong place, wrong time. Happens to me quite a lot, actually.”

He glared at me, wrinkles forming between thick, dark brows. Why did I want to simultaneously shrink back and push forward?

“It seemed pretty targeted to me,” he rebutted, crossing his arms. Great, so he was gorgeous and annoying, the worst kind of combination.

Frankly, I didn’t want to think about it. I wanted to do the same thing I did with all my other problems: run from them. It was likely a one-off thing, and if it wasn’t, then I’d deal with it later. But for now, I had a few episodes of Survivor and a whole

bunch of leftovers waiting for me back at home. It was the first time they'd allowed Marvels to compete, so it really wasn't a season I wanted to miss.

"If anything happens again, I'll reach out, how about that?" I grabbed my phone. He cocked his head, studying me for a moment before doing the same. We exchanged numbers, and I somehow resisted the temptation of putting a dragon and heart-eye emojis next to his name.

"Are you sure?" he asked as he slipped his phone back into his jeans. "If you feel unsafe, you can come with my brothers and I to our home. You'll be protected around the clock until we can figure this out."

I paused, my mind clicking into high gear. His proposition sounded seriously tempting. Being around a bunch of powerful dragons while they kept me safe was much more appealing than going home and lying around in my boxers, picking cookie crumbs off my chest.

Plus, I could spend a little more time with this red-scaled god. Definitely a perk.

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"No," I answered, the decision quickening itself like cement in my gut. Leaving with Damien and his brothers would be acknowledging that something was actually up. That this wasn't just down to me walking under a ladder or breaking a mirror or having my Mercury be locked in a permanent retrograde. "I can't. I don't want to get involved in any of this. I really should be heading home. Thank you, though."

Damien, to his credit, took my no and simply stepped aside. There was a slight set to his jaw, but it didn't appear like he was going to put up a fight. I briefly wondered how many other people had said "no" to him before. Could probably count them on one hand.

And with that, I left, stepping out to a beautiful fiery red sun setting across the Pacific Ocean, painting it like an orange-and-red inferno lapping up onto shore, ready to turn us all to ash.

Chapter 6

Sibling Rivalries

Damien

The family gathered in the living room. The last rays of light cast fractured orange-and-red beams through the tall windows that were cut into the smooth stone walls like the gills of a fish. Xavier paced over the thick white rug, leaving a trail of darker-colored threads in his wake. He drank his wine and shook his head.

"A fucking curse. How the hell are we going to handle this?"

"By breaking the curse, duh," my sister answered as if it were the most logical thing in the world.

And to her credit, it was.

Xavier rolled his eyes. "You know what I meant. How are we going to break the curse?"

Dawn flipped through the ancient-looking tome she had on her lap. "That's actually

what I'm working on right now. And what are you working on, little brother? Drawing crop circles into the rug?"

He rolled his eyes—again. "You all know I'm not great under stress."

"You're a bodyguard for rich Marvels. How the hell are you not great under stress?" Maddox asked, setting down the sandwich he was biting into, crumbs falling onto his blue shorts. He brushed them off onto the floor, which nearly made me light his feet on fire.

Xavier huffed. "Because I'm not stressed when I work. I'm in the zone. But knowing that Warrick is dying from a possibly unbreakable curse in the bedroom upstairs from me is stressful. Sorry if that upsets me." His nostrils flared. He stared daggers at Maddox.

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“Enough,” I cut in. The word flew from my lips like a fireball. “Now’s not the time to be bickering.”

Both Maddox and Xavier appeared to pick up on the frustration and anger rising inside me. They were never ones to push back at me.

“Dawn is right. We need to put our heads together on this, or we’ll run out of time,” Xavier said.

Maddox rose from the leather couch with a huff, padding barefoot across the polished wooden floors. The streak of icy-blue scales above his eyebrow glittered under the warm light from the chandelier.

“Where are you going?” I asked, blocking the hall. “We all need to be working on this.”

“Damien, move.”

I flashed back to being a child. To watching over my brothers and sister, playing with them in the yard, and protecting them at school. Being frustrated when they’d excluded me from things, being elated when they succeeded at things. I was there when Maddox turned into his dragon for the first time, a small but snappy thing with frost forming everywhere he stepped.

My mother had been so proud, beaming with joy. It was the moment she realized we would be a rainbow flight—a dragon family with one of every subtype. She took us to our favorite diner that night, where we scarfed down greasy burgers and crispy

fries.

“We’ve lost our mother. We’re about to lose our brother. Don’t make me angry, Maddox.”

Dawn took a step toward us. Xavier watched from the other side of the cavernous room, back against the stone wall.

“I’m the one getting angry.” Maddox moved to push past me, but I knocked him back with a shoulder. His eyelids narrowed to slits. “This is just like you. Always thinking you have it all handled. Like you need to take the lead, even when you don’t know shit. How long were you gone flying around the world, huh? Wasted all that time. And you came back empty-taloned.”

Rage bubbled up inside me. My brother knew exactly which wounds to prod at to get a reaction. Always did. My fists balled, and my body filled with heat. If I had to turn into my dragon and tear this entire castle apart, then so be it, as long as Maddox learned his lesson.

Always respect me.

“Boys.” Dawn had her hands out. Electricity started to crackle in the air around her, appearing to create a crown around her short brown head of hair. “Do I need to separate you two?”

The electricity zapped at the back of my neck, causing the hairs to stand up on end. Maddox tipped his lips up into a cocky smile. His square jaw twitched, arms crossed against his chest.

“No,” I said and moved aside. Maddox pushed past, stopping in the arching entry to the hall. I felt the chill roll off him like an invisible cloak. If he wanted, he could

cover himself in solid ice. He loved doing that as a kid, pretending to be an ice sculpture before cracking through it and scaring anyone who walked past him.

“Keep wasting time googling shit. I’m going to go figure out what’s actually going on.”

He left, disappearing down the hall, the heavy door to the entrance of our castle slamming shut. The sound reverberated through the space, echoing through the wide room.

“He’s just going through it,” Dawn said, a gentle hand falling on my shoulder. “Don’t get too upset at him.”

I wasn’t upset at Maddox. I was angry at myself. I’d dropped the ball. Everything Mads said was true: I had wasted time, chased dead ends, and failed at saving our mother. Now I was facing the very real possibility of failing my little brother.

“Snap out of it, Damien,” Xavier said. “I can already see you spiraling. Don’t. Let’s just focus on figuring this out, alright?”

I rubbed at the bridge of my nose, shut my eyes.

A smile flashed across my vision. Charming. Slightly naive. Toothy.

Pushing aside all my frustration and disappointment, I asked a simple question. “Why him?”

“Hmm?” Dawn asked, head cocked. “Who?”

“The guy at the shop. Robby. The vampires were clearly after him, which is interesting timing considering everything that’s going on. They could have killed him

in the blink of an eye, but they didn't. Why? What did they want with him?"

"Maybe he's got a past," Xavier suggested.

Dawn nodded, going back to the love seat, her laptop perched on the edge of the coffee table. "He could have crossed them at some point."

"It didn't seem like that." The anger still simmered inside me but was quickly being pushed aside. Bottled up.

Xavier agreed with a nod. "They brought up the prophecy... and, I don't know, did it seem like they wanted to kill him or capture him to you? Maybe turn him?"

My brother posed a good question. Vampires had a special venom in their blood and fangs that allowed them to turn others. One could either drink a vampire's blood before death and turn by choice, or they could be bitten shortly after death and be reawakened as a vampire by force—but only non-magic using humans were vulnerable. Shifters, dragons, Marvels, we all had immunity to their bite and blood.

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Either ingest the poison or inject the venom. Two ways toward immortality.

A gentle cough made us all whip around.

“War,” Dawn said, going to our brother and putting a hand under his arm. He had never looked more frail. Cheeks gaunt, eyes sunken in. But he still smiled. That was our Warrick. His dimples always on display, no matter what fucked-up situation we found ourselves in.

“I didn’t want to miss ou—” Another fit of coughs cut him off. “Out on the fun.”

“Oh, War, you’re burning up.”

I went to help Dawn hold him. She was right—heat steamed off his sweat-stained pajama shirt. We walked him to the couch, laying him down. Xavier was there with a glass of ice-cold water moments later. Warrick sipped at it, barely able to hold his eyes open.

“It’s so hot, you guys.”

The rage was back, but this time, it blended with a deep and unsettling hopelessness. Enough to suffocate me with it. We were helpless as we watched our youngest brother burn from the inside out. I crouched down, put a hand on his burning forehead. His hair was slick with sweat, sticking to him. I pushed aside a light brown curl.

“I’m going to do everything in my power to save you, War. I swear it. Whatever it

takes.”

He managed to open his eyes, and somehow, he smiled even wider, dimples like craters. “I know, I believe you.”

The smile spread to me. It felt like a stranger breaking into my home. Shouldn’t be there but was. That was Warrick’s special gift. He didn’t need access to his dragon to make others around him feel better.

“Thank you,” he said before resting his head back onto the throw pillow. His eyes slowly shut. He wore his sleep like someone lying in their coffin at a wake. I stood up, unable to look at him, unable to smile anymore. None of this should be happening.

Dawn sat on the floor, laptop on her lap and the book opened next to her. The keyboard clicked furiously under her nails. Xavier had moved to the bookshelf bordered by two velvet red tapestries, pulling out a book that I was sure he had no idea what it was even about.

I didn’t blame him. We all flailed for something to grasp onto. Maddox had likely gone to a bathhouse, Xavier was sinking into his own thoughts, and Dawn disappeared behind her computer screen.

“I’ll be back.”

Dawn looked up from the computer, eyebrow arched. I could tell she had questions, but she could see I didn’t have any answers. Xavier gave me a wave before looking back down at the thick book in his hands. He wouldn’t find anything in there. It was a book of natural ailments and cures for a variety of different diseases.

I had already combed through it weeks ago.

Still, if it helped him feel useful, then so be it. Maybe he could pick up on something I'd missed.

The rest of the castle was dark, the lights all off, and my footsteps echoed as I went down the hall and up a long set of stairs. Oil paintings of each of us hung to my left, depicting us as smiling humans with our dragon forms towering proudly behind us. It had been father's idea—back when he was still present in our lives and not just a shadow that flitted in and out whenever he pleased.

I passed my bedroom, the two sets of oaken doors shut tight. I climbed another set of stairs, this one spiraling and tight. They seemed to extend up into the sky, the cramped walls giving you no opportunity to see the end.

Fortunately, the stairs did end at a locked door. I tapped in the password, and the heavy dead bolt clicked open. Pushing the door open, I was met with a gust of wind from the other side. Salt tickled at my tongue, carried from the ocean that lapped up onto the dark beach below. I walked out onto the top of one of the five turrets—a private sanctuary for each sibling. I moved to the edge, where I placed a hand on the smooth stone that formed a barrier between me and thin air. The moon appeared to shine a spotlight down onto the shifting waters. Behind me were the jagged green teeth of the vibrant Malibu mountains.

How could a scene so peaceful coexist in a world so chaotic?

I gripped the stone and climbed up onto it, the tips of my shoes touching the edge. The ocean looked so inviting, even with its ability to put out any amount of flame I could manage to produce.

I dove, as if falling into a pool. Red mist swirled around me as I took my true shape, and my inner dragon roared to the surface. Long, leathery, and scarred wings beat at the air as I gracefully redirected myself back upward, spiked tail acting like a rudder,

wings adding propulsion.

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Up and up, past the castle, toward the stars, before I caught his scent.

A dip of my wings had me tilting back down and heading toward the Hollywood sign.

Chapter 7

Delay in the Snake-Way

Robby

My mind buzzed. Same as my fingers and toes. Same as everything between them.

Part of me wanted to run down the palm-tree-lined street, shouting random shit until my anxiety bubbled up and out of me, relieving me of the intense and invisible pressure building up inside me. Another part wanted to curl up on one of those dark green bus benches and cry into the crook of my elbow.

The last part of me wanted to run back to the Magic Box and straight into the arms of that handsome, red-scaled man with the brooding stare and the firm muscles.

I didn't listen to any of those parts, sticking instead to my logical side. I kept my shouts to myself, my eyes dry, and my horniness in check. Besides, I couldn't get distracted. Not when I could potentially be jumped by a gang of vampires at any moment.

Although, I had doubts they would do anything in the cramped Marvel District, where Marvels and fae and shifters and humans alike were all gathering for evening

dinner and drinks, hanging out on outdoor patios of colorful restaurants and teahouses. I walked past Santa Monica Pier, the sounds of children laughing and seagulls cawing mixed with music from a busker singing a song I didn't recognize, his hands swirling as he worked the invisible threads of mana to create a dark blue mist around him, shifting and changing into a dancing couple, twirling around him as his song reached a crescendo.

Los Angeles was a city that welcomed all but not in all parts.

There were four main districts: the Marvel District that ran up from Santa Monica and Venice Beach toward West Hollywood, a place where Marvels and other supernaturals found the most acceptance and exerted most of their influence. It was a beautiful chaos of color and imagination mixed with only a dash of the mundane us humans loved to cling to. Striking street art bloomed on the sides of colorful, tilted buildings. An improv theater made to look like a smooth and glittering black box sat next to a brick and concrete building advertising their expertise in entertainment accounting, the streets lined with parking meters that served as sinister traps the second the money ran out. Long and shimmering waterways carved from the historic Venice Canals threaded through the district, flanked by blossoming rosebushes throwing off a sweet scent. There was a charming irregularity to the layout, with winding streets leading to eccentrically designed homes and businesses, all mostly owned by Marvels, shifters, or fae.

Then there was the Concrete District, which went from Central LA down toward the south, brushing up against Long Beach. That part of the city was one of my least favorites. A jungle of monotonous cement-and-steel buildings, full of parking lots and pissed-off humans trying to outrun each other in the rat race. The Marvel influence was nowhere to be found. There weren't floating shop signs or storefronts displaying dancing chocolates and twirling dresses worn by invisible mannequins. Humans had kept tight control over business permits and architectural plans in that part of the city, and it clearly showed.

Above the Concrete District, wrapping down Hollywood Boulevard and going toward Los Feliz and Silverlake neighborhoods, was the Harmony District, my favorite. And not just because that's where I lived. It was a stunning mix of both Marvel and human influence, boasting breathtaking architecture by a famous Spanish dragon named Antoni Gaudí, who lived in Los Angeles for a few years in the mid-1800s. He worked stone and glass as if it were clay, creating cathedrals and skyscrapers and theaters that looked like living things with their soft curves and unique facades. Roofs looked like sleeping dragons with a rainbow assortment of scales, windows appeared to be dripping portals into lives unknown, and a blast of colorful tiles adorned columns and balconies and sculptures of unicorns and gryphons.

Last, and certainly least, was the Obsidian District, covering the entire northern valley area, shrouded in a permanent cover of clouds and mist with streets and sidewalks paved in pure obsidian, making it seem like you were stepping on a sea of midnight at all hours of the day.

We didn't talk about that district.

I continued my walk down the street, gas lamps flicking on as the sun disappeared from the sky. Normally, I had no problem walking around the city at night, but today wasn't normal by any means. I hurried my walk, going toward the glowing blue circular sign that denoted an entrance down into the snake-way.

I took the steps two at a time, following a crowd of people likely finishing work and heading home. There were business-suited men and sun-dressed women and athleisure-wearing fae. Some were in robes, others in casual sports jackets, strutting as if they were walking a runway or auditioning for their next role.

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Everyone looking way cooler than I probably ever could.

I tapped my phone against the turnstile and walked through after a pleasant-sounding ding, going down a white-stoned and well-lit tunnel lined with advertisements for new movies and plays and books, following the signs that pointed to the northern-bound Rodeo Line.

I kept looking over my shoulder, to the left of me, to the right. Couldn't help it. The feeling of being followed was pervasive and maybe walking into an underground passage with limited exits wasn't exactly the best idea...

Was that beady-eyed man leering out from under a dirty hoody looking at me or the map behind me? Was that fae standing a little too close to me? Her pink, jewel-like eyes seemed to be flicking my way. I wouldn't be surprised if she was silently feeding off my nervous energy, or could her intentions be even more sinister? Vamps could only turn us non-magic-wielding humans—all supernatural beings had some kind of immunity to their venom—but that didn't mean they couldn't get a fae or shifter to work for them.

Shit. I just wanted to get home. A bone-searing exhaustion began to take hold. I went over to the smooth bench and sat down across from a moving advertisement for some random shampoo brand. The ceiling in the snake-way had been enchanted to reflect the sky above, giving the illusion that we were out in open air and not crammed together in a tunnel under the ground.

I chewed on my nails as I waited for my ride. The platform filled up, the blinking sign near the tracks announcing that the basilisk would arrive within three minutes.

Good. Then another ten minutes, and I'd be home. I could shower, lock my door, fall into bed, and binge TV until I fell asleep. Then it would all be behind me, and I could focus on the future: like kicking ass at my new job.

That thought helped me breathe a sigh of relief. Sure, I had to be attacked by vampires and saved by dragons to get it, but who was I to look a gift-centaur in the mouth?

"Excuse me, this seat taken?"

I looked up and immediately tensed. Vampires weren't the easiest to pick out of a crowd if you didn't know what to look for: the slightly protruding lips hiding inches' worth of fangs, the penetrating stare, the agile movements, the airbrushed skin that wasn't attainable regardless of how many make-up tutorial videos you watch.

That predatory red-lipped smirk, advertising a permanent hunger.

Everything about this woman shouted at me: DANGER, DANGER.

"No, it's all yours."

I stood up and gave her the entire bench, shouldering my way up to the front of the platform and putting enough people as I could behind me and the bloodsucker.

Maybe I should have gone with Damien... fuck.

A gentle breeze whipped up into a sudden whoosh of wind as the sound of scales sliding against stone grew louder and louder. The head of the basilisk appeared first, its globe-sized yellow eyes aimed straight ahead as it filled up the platform with its massive body. A robed Marvel sat on a seat just behind the basilisk's head—the beast's bonded trainer and handler. Strapped to the giant snake's back were seven

seats with about thirty rows stretching down its length, the colors of the chairs identifying this basilisk as the Blue Line, the one I needed to get home.

It came to a smooth stop at the station and sunk down, allowing the riders already on it to step off. I looked around and spotted a nearly empty row of seats. I stepped up and onto the snake's back, its spine and evergreen scales as solid as concrete. These basilisk were all well fed and cared for, trained to make sure no one was accidentally eaten or turned to stone on their early morning commute. Not everyone trusted the snake-way, and many preferred to just drive or take the bus, but I didn't mind it that much. Especially not when all I wanted to do was get the hell home.

I sat in the plush blue-and-white seat, strapping on the seat belt. The aisle filled up with other riders, none of them seeming to want to sink their teeth into my neck. Above me, the paneled sky glittered with stars, a couple of stray wisps of clouds inching their way across. It was a nice touch. Kept the claustrophobia from hitting too hard.

And trust me, I had plenty of phobias now. Fear of shadows, fear of quick movements and long glares, fear of perfectly friendly-looking strangers.

It made sense, considering I grew up being a jumpy kid with the courage amounting to that of a cowardly dog. I would run from spiders and fox moths as if their quick little legs or furry orange wings were poisonous to the touch (they weren't). Other things I ran from?

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Arguments—they made my stomach turn.

Physical fights—they made me freeze up.

Zombie movies—they made me sleep with the lights on.

Cockroaches and gigapedes and—well, any insect to have ever existed, except maybe ladybugs. They were fine.

Now, I could include vampires on that list.

They had come through the Tears after the shifters, sometime around the roaring twenties. It was supposed to be a time of glamorous parties, pretty pearl dresses, and a general sense of peace between Marvels, supernaturals, and regular old humans.

Vampires changed that. They were hungry, literally and figuratively, thrust through a portal no one really understood, completely wiped of their memories, craving both blood and power.

Yeah, the peace kind of shattered after that. It wasn't until the Iron Treaty was formed in 1954 that the fighting stopped and the peace had been restored.

Tentatively.

The basilisk shifted and lurched underneath me. A light on the ceiling turned bright red. The snake lifted, like it just sucked in a big breath. It gave a loud hiss and began to slither forward, its body so large that the movement from side to side wasn't as

perceptible as the force from the accelerating forward speed. Next to me was a teenager, still wearing his school uniform, backpack between his legs. He had a textbook shut on his lap—History of Marvels and Magic—as he intently scrolled through his social media feed.

History was one of my favorite subjects, wasting time online being one of my favorite pastimes. I might as well have been looking at my younger self.

I noticed him stop scrolling on a video. It was from a news source I recognized. I didn't need to read the caption to know what it was about. The video depicted it all: a royal-looking icy-blue dragon flying in the sky, the video transitioning to a sickly man lying on a hospital bed. He writhed in agony as his sapphire scales rippled across his human form, turning into angry red blisters before erupting into flames, all of it captured behind a thick plexiglass wall.

“Crazy shit, huh?”

Oh crap, I didn't realize I was that obvious at being secretly nosy.

I nodded. I forgot to mention teenagers were another one of those things I tended to bolt from. Those still-underdeveloped brains could come up with razor-sharp quips, insults, and insights.

“It is,” I said, deciding to engage this one with extra care. “I feel bad for them.”

“Me too,” he answered. “My best friend's a dragon. It's scary shit. He already lost his mom, and now his little sister is sick. If something ever happened to him...” He shook his head and pushed the article off the screen with extra force behind his thumb. “I hope they figure out how to stop it soon.”

“They will.” My mind flashed back to being inside the shop. To Damien's worried

creases across his forehead, to the discussion of this very issue.

The teenager shook his head, looking back down at his phone. “I don’t know, man. Nothing ever gets fixed unless it’s happening to the humans.”

Ah, so he must have been a shifter. He didn’t have the jeweled eyes of a fae, and the way he spoke about dragons told me he wasn’t one of them either. Shifters came in all different kinds: feline, canine, reptilian, avian. They could fully shift into their breed or go for a hybrid shift, where they retain some of their human aspects while taking on more of their wilder ones. Maybe those tiger-striped sneakers meant more than just a cool sense of fashion that I’d never be able to pull off.

He also had a point. “I’m sure the—”

I couldn’t finish agreeing with him as the basilisk suddenly slowed to a complete halt, the momentum causing me to push forward, random and surprised shouts ringing through the snake-way.

Then came the vampires.

Chapter 8

Robby, Robby, Robby

Damien

I’d been following Robby since the moment he went down the steps into the snake-way. He looked nervous, jittery. Constantly peering over his shoulder. Even then, he didn’t spot me. Which actually surprised me. I wasn’t necessarily trying to be sneaky, nor was I the most discreet person walking through the crowd.

He wasn't a very observative guy was he?

I got into the last row of the basilisk and sat there, watching the back of his head, wondering what kind of thoughts swirled inside. He started up a conversation with the kid next to him. He still seemed tense, shoulders high and tight, back straight, but at least he was safe. I'd tail him until he got home, and then I'd fly back.

Maybe he was right. Maybe he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He might not have anything to do with what was going on.

Then the lights flickered and went out. The basilisk came to a sudden halt, the momentum pushing me forward in my seat. A chorus of "what the fucks" and "what's happening" filtered through the dark.

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The chill in the air was like the breath of an ice dragon waking up from a deep sleep. The scent of cold, ancient stone and musty shadows hit me, an uninvited intrusion. Emergency lights switched on, and any sense of calm shattered.

Vampires. They ran down from the stairwell with their inhumane grace, making them seem like they were floating.

Someone shouted to stop them; another shouted to run.

The vamps were like wraiths, their presence transforming the snake-way platform into a hostile and chaos-filled battlefield. Marvels weaved threads of mana that slammed some of the vamps up against the wall; other Marvels swooshed the mana around themselves to conceal them as they bolted toward the exits. Shifters were taking their half and full forms; a snow leopard lunged for a vampire and got thrown down to the floor like a rag doll, the vampire jumping over the limp body and racing toward—

Robby.

I leaped over seats, the basilisk shifting underneath me as the Marvel at its head tried in vain to keep it under control. The vampire practically flew through the air, hands outstretched, ready to latch around Robby's neck. I crashed into its side with my shoulder, slamming him against the back of a seat. The hard plastic cracked with the force.

“Run!” I shouted to Robby, who had a shaking beagle in his lap. He grabbed the dog and managed to jump off the basilisk onto the platform.

The vampire got up in a fury of red hair and sharp fangs. She went to sink her teeth into my calf but instead was met with my knee cracking against her chin. Her head snapped back at an unnerving angle and her body collapsed.

Lights-out.

I looked for Robby. Shit. Where was he? The platform was beginning to thin out now as most of the riders realized whatever was happening wasn't their fight.

That's when I spotted him. Cornered. Back against a brightly lit advertisement for some skin-care product. He looked terrified, big brown eyes blown out with fear, the beagle pup held tight against his chest, both of them trembling. All that rage from earlier came rushing back to the surface. A protective streak like I'd never felt came over me, a scarlet-red veil falling across my face.

I roared and threw open my hand, sending a fireball flying toward the vampire closest to Robby. Then another, and another. The vamps all turned their attention toward me as I jumped off the growingly agitated basilisk and ran directly for Robby. Loud and angry hisses echoed around the walls. The emergency lights flashed, casting everything in an ominous red and blue glow.

"Are you okay?" I asked over my shoulder as I stood in front of Robby, blocking him from the four vampires that were left. One sported a bloody claw wound down her thigh, shredding her jeans. I could already see the dark skin mending itself back together. The vamp I knocked out on the basilisk was beginning to get back on her feet.

"I think so," Robby answered in a breathless whisper.

I reached behind me. Don't really know why I did it. To provide some comfort? Didn't really matter why; I just knew it was the right thing to do. I reached back and

grabbed his hand. Squeezed. It was a silent promise.

You're going to be okay. I'm going to get you out of this.

And then the vampires all came for me at once.

They moved with a predatory grace, their bodies effortlessly gliding over the ground.

Launching into action, I met the first vampire head-on. I summoned my flames and covered my fist in it, connecting it with his face. The impact reverberated up my arm. His head snapped back, surprise flickering across his features. That gave me a hungry sense of satisfaction.

Using my momentum, I swung my leg up and around, the heel of my boot connecting with another vampire's torso. He crashed into a brick column, back cracking like a twig. He'd heal, but it would take at least an hour to get him back on his feet.

By then we'd be long gone.

The remaining two vampires circled me, their fangs bared. One of them held a dagger; another held lethal-looking spikes between his knuckles. I had to be careful. Dragons didn't have the immortality offered to vampires—yes, we could take blows and hits regular humans would likely crumble under, but a stab in the heart would end it all. I had some scales on my body that protected me at all times, but I didn't have the full suit of armor my dragon scales provided unless I turned which would be a mistake in these tight confines.

“What are you two after?” I said, taking a chance to dig for some information.

The bigger vampire gave a dry laugh. He shook his head and spat at my feet, scarred lip curling into a snarl. “Out of our way, dragon. Let us take that boy and be done

with it.”

“Is this about the curse?”

The vamp twirled the dagger in his hand, so fast that it appeared to be a blur. “The dragon fall? Probably. All I care about is the bounty on that one’s head. Now, move.”

Bounty...

There wasn’t time for any more questions. They lunged at me, a flurry of claws and fangs. I dodged a swipe from the dagger and used my forearm to twist the vampire’s arm. The dagger clattered onto the floor. I kicked it across the space, far from the vampire’s reach.

Each movement I made was a dance of survival. I spun, ducked, and attacked, each decision made in a fraction of a second as I tried to lead them away from Robby. My muscles screamed with the effort, the adrenaline numbing the pain.

I couldn’t turn into my dragon without bringing this place down around us, but I could still fight like my dragon.

Flame engulfed my hands, licked up my elbows. I didn’t feel any heat, but the vampires sure did. Their skin was marked with burns everywhere I landed a hit, but they continued to fight, continued to try and get around me. I could almost feel Robby’s vulnerability press into me. He had no abilities, no training, no way to fight them off.

If they grabbed him, it’d be over.

Suddenly, the bigger one of the two lunged toward me, his fangs bared and gleaming under the pale lights. If he got those into my neck and ripped through my aorta, I'd be dead in seconds. I pivoted, ready to counter his attack, but a bone-rattling roar shook the platform, freezing everyone where they stood.

The basilisk.

It had turned around to face us, its serpentine mouth revealing rows and rows of diamond-sharp teeth. Those rich green scales looked different than mine, more arrow-shaped and smaller, tightly packed. A forked tongue whipped through the air, so large that it cracked with an audible sound against the ceiling.

Its massive head swooped down, pinning the vampires under its amber gaze. Its eyes blazed like twin suns, casting an eerie light in the otherwise gloom-filled space. They both froze, like a pair of hares staring down a fox. They couldn't even blink. I could hear the hissing breath of the basilisk, a chilling sound that echoed off the stone walls.

I knew what would come next.

"Close your eyes," I shouted to Robby, snapping mine shut and grabbing him in my arms. I pressed him tight against my chest in case he, too, was hypnotized by the deadly beast, making sure not to crush his beagle friend in the process.

The serpent's eyes flashed, the bright glow shining through my eyelids.

Just like that, it was over. The vampires collapsed, their bodies having turned to stone, then crumbling to dust in an instant.

So much for immortality.

A deathly silence fell on the scene. The remaining vampires, the ones that were just now beginning to heal from their wounds, backed away, their confidence replaced by unchecked fear. For a moment, we all stood frozen, caught in the gaze of the basilisk.

With a suddenness that had me reeling, the basilisk turned its globe-sized eyes away, retreating into the shadows of the tunnel. The Marvel that had been controlling it crawled back up onto the platform from the tracks, looking shaken but unharmed, his robe stained with dirt and blood.

“Is it... is it over?” Robby’s voice, shaky yet filled with relief, reached my ears. The beagle jumped from his arms and was surrounded by a shimmering fog, growing approximately five feet into a teenager, looking equally as shaken but also as unharmed.

“Thank you,” he said, turning to Robby, then to me. “I was—holy shit. That was crazy.”

A chorus of heavy-booted footsteps came from the stairwell. Was that more of them? Shit. We had to go, had to get somewhere safe.

“Come,” I said, grabbing Robby’s hand in mine again without thinking.

But it wasn’t another gang of bounty-hunting vampires that appeared on the platform.

Instead, it was a group of ivory-robed Enforcers. They were an independent collective of Marvels that worked as a sort of police force, keeping things from ever spiraling too far out of control. They were also the only Marvels who had the ability to manipulate onyx threads. With those, they could sever a magic user from their connection to their mana or a shifter from their connection to their animal.

They couldn’t do shit to dragons, though.

“What’s going on here?” The woman who led the group already had her hand whipping up threads of visible red mana. She was getting ready to bind us all with a single swipe of her hand.

“Vampire attack,” I said, explaining before they got any ideas. Robby’s hand fell from mine. “You guys are about two minutes too late.”

“Were you three witnesses? Involved in the attack?” Her questions were carried with a forceful tone that emphasized her position. Her blonde waves of hair fell down against the gilded, lined robe, some of it picked up into a tight ponytail. My mother used to wear her hair like that.

Used to.

A rogue thought, one that sliced through me. It happened to me quite often, ever since she died. Random things would bring back a vivid memory, so vivid I would almost think she was still alive. Expect to hear her voice when I got back home. It would be a scent from a perfume she would always wear, a song from a movie she'd always love to watch. It was shocking how many facets of a person you came to know during their lives and how clear and striking all those facets became after their death. Everywhere I looked was a new reminder of my loss. It created a fucked-up mosaic I could never turn away from.

It never hurt any less, never got any easier to deal with. I kept the pain hidden like a child would with a pricked thumb behind their back.

“We were almost victims,” I answered with as much calm and patience as I could collect in my voice. My throat felt tight. I realized my fists were so balled up that my nails were digging painfully into my palm. I took a breath.

“And the basilisk?”

“Good question,” I answered.

The Enforcer considered me for a moment. If I didn't know any better, I could swear she was reading my thoughts. But that wasn't something a Marvel—no matter how powerful they were—could do.

“Go,” she said to us before turning to the others. “Find the basilisk, and detain any

vampires you come across.”

The group gave a unified nod and took off running down the snake-way track. The lead Enforcer gave us one last look before she followed, her rich white robes picking up behind her. I had no desire to stay underground any longer, and neither did Robby, judging by how quick he took himself up those stairs.

We exited the stairwell and stepped out onto the oddly quiet street near the heart of Hollywood. The station was close to the famous star-filled Walk of Fame and all the different shops and restaurants—a big tourist trap if you asked me. But the chaos that had been caused in the underground must have cleared out the area above because there wasn’t a single soul around. Very unusual for this time of night.

“Thank you again,” the teen said to Robby as he fumbled with his phone. “Can I, like, Venmo you or something?”

Robby shook his head, motioning for the teen to put his phone away. “Don’t worry about it. It’s this guy who did the real saving.”

He prodded at my chest with a finger.

“Well, my name’s Ty. I work at the Hollywood Bowl if you ever need, like, free tickets or anything.”

“Thanks, Ty,” Robby said, offering him a genuine hug.

He gave me a handshake before turning and disappearing toward the bright lights of Hollywood Boulevard. We could hear him calling a friend as he walked away.

“Bro, you’re not going to believe what just happened to me...”

My attention went back to the man in front of me.

Robby, Robby, Robby. He looked a mess. Sweat patches on his light blue shirt, curly strands of hair stuck to his forehead, a rip in his jeans. His brown eyes— no, they were more like golden pools— caught the light of a nearby street lamp and appeared to glow.

I wanted to pick him up and carry him to the bath. Wash off the dirt and sweat with some warm water and lavender soap. Brush aside his hair. Run my thumb across his lower lip. Push it between his teeth, onto his tongue...

He blinked, cleared his throat.

Right, I should probably say something.

“So, do you still want to go home, or do you want to come back to mine?”

This time, Robby didn’t hesitate with his answer. In fact, the eagerness spilled up and out of him. “Yeah, no, that sounds great to me. Let’s go to yours.”

I couldn’t keep the chuckle from escaping. “Great,” I said, cocking my head. I already knew his answer to my next question, but I still wanted to see his expression when I asked it:

“Have you ever ridden a dragon before?”

Eyebrow arched, lips parted, head slightly shaking from side to side. Surprise and a little bit of apprehension in his big golden gaze.

“Perfect. First time for everything,” I said, winking as my body became consumed in a red mist.

Chapter 9

Don't Look Down

Robby

I had never seen a dragon before.

Yes, I'd seen them online and in movies and all over certain fanfic websites I used to frequent, but never in the flesh. Never breathing, blinking, twitching right in front of me. They were rare, and most never turned to their dragon form in public unless provoked or threatened. Sometimes, they could be seen flying, but they were just high enough to blur out any details and low enough to where they wouldn't crash into any airplanes.

Damien was magnificent. Hard to really describe. I wasn't sure where to settle my eyes. On those illustrious red scales that seemed to change hue with every subtle movement? On the massive leathery wings that were tucked up against his side? He had a long and thick spiky tail that flicked back and forth like a house cat waiting for his seventh meal of the day.

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Except he was no house cat. I had to take a few steps back to really take him in. He took up the entire street, the three smooth spikes he wore like a crown reaching up to the third-floor window of the building next to him. He dropped down and turned his head, looking at me with one emerald green eye, his mouth curling into what could only be described as a smile.

He gave a snort and a shake of his head. I put my hand out, and he moved closer, slowly, until smooth scale met smooth palm. He was warm to the touch but not uncomfortably so. Like a towel that's been sitting on a warming rack. It was nice. Comforting almost.

He dipped his head lower until I realized he was lying down. He made himself as flat and compact as a dragon with the same wingspan as a commercial jet could possibly make himself.

“You want me to... get on you?”

He lifted his head in a quick nod before squashing back down against the ground.

I took a couple steps back. This couldn't be real life. Maybe I had died down in the snake-way, or maybe I'd gotten hit over the head? This could be a hallucination.

He snorted in a way that said, “Hurry the hell up.” His breath kicked a cloud of dust and dirt down the street, pebbles scratching at parked cars.

If this wasn't real, then I'd have to deal with my dissociation later. There was a crook between Damien's neck and shoulders, where the forearm-sized spikes briefly

stopped before starting again, forming a ridge down his back. Guess I sat there? They should have really taught this in school. Taxes and dragon riding. I would have been set for adulthood.

I grabbed hold of one of the spikes and hoisted myself up. I had a hard time finding purchase against his smooth scales at first, finally tossing one leg over in the most awkward way I could. “Ah, sorry, shit, does that hurt? Should I have taken off my shoes?”

He shook his head as he started to get back onto his four legs. The movement caused me to lean onto the spike behind me. It felt like a perfect fit, but leaning back scared me. Instead, I tilted forward, grabbing a tight hold of his neck as he started to move forward.

Started to pick up speed.

Faster, faster. I bounced against his neck like a horse rider fighting to stay on her most problematic steed. Holy shit. How was I supposed to stay on him while he flew? I was about to fall off, and we hadn’t even left the ground yet.

This was a mistake. He may have saved me from vampires, but he was definitely going to be the one to kill me.

“Wait, wait, no, don’t, hold on!”

Either I wasn’t heard or I was ignored. I didn’t like those options, nor did I like the sinking feeling that pulled at my gut as Damien gave three strong flaps of his wings and took off.

I snapped my eyes shut. My grip around his neck was so tight I worried I could be choking him, then realized I felt like a clinging strand of hair to him, so I held on

even tighter. The flapping intensified, and so did the sinking feeling, but the intense bouncing stopped. I didn't feel like I was about to be knocked off.

It was the opposite. I actually felt quite secure, especially once Damien leveled out his ascent. The flight became smooth. If I focused, I could almost trick myself into thinking we were still on the ground. The wind whipped at my face as if trying to pry my eyes open with invisible fingers. Look! Look at all the sights you're missing out on!

I peeked, cracking an eyelid open and seeing a sea of stars looking back at me. No, wait, those weren't stars. They were underneath me—they were houses glittering from out of the Hollywood Hills.

Nooooope. Nope.

My eye snapped shut again. This was too much. I wasn't cut out for this. I thought the hardest thing I'd deal with today would be getting a job. I was the kind of guy who only had the brain-width to handle one or two tasks a day, and that included sending emails. How the fuck was I supposed to process everything that had happened in the last five hours?

Everything that was happening now?

I took a couple of deep, cold, oxygen-lacking breaths. We weren't insanely high up; I could tell by the fact that I wasn't passing out. So that was good.

Alright, one more time. I cracked my eyes open. Fewer lights were shining back at me. We must have been leaving LA, getting closer to Malibu, where the hills were much more like tree-covered labyrinths than the populated ones directly bordering Hollywood.

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I opened my eyes a little wider. Lifted my head up from Damien's neck. Released a bit of my death grip.

The scared little boy living inside my chest still trembled, my teeth clattering together. And not because it was cold. It actually wasn't, not with the heat that radiated off Damien's body. He moved like silk through the air, riding the current as though it was a track.

I sucked in another deep breath, lifted my head a little higher. It really was quite beautiful. I could look to my right and see the road underneath us, dotted by a few headlights. To my left was the ocean, stretching out for an infinity. Wind swept through my hair as I sat up straight, my thighs still gripping tight to Damien's neck. I held on to the spike in front of me as the fear inside me slowly began easing its grip.

I began feeling safe up here. I realized that no one could get me when I was a stretch away from running my fingers through the clouds. Not that I would let go from my handhold on Damien to try touching clouds, but the thought was actually comforting. There was a freedom to flying. The anxiety about falling wasn't there any longer. Worst came to worst, I had no doubt Damien could pluck me out of the sky before I got anywhere close to touching the ground.

Not that I wanted to test that.

I could see the horizon ahead, the hills flattening and giving way to expensive grocery stores and beachside restaurants and busy bars. Malibu wasn't broken up into districts like Los Angeles was, so the influence between supernaturals and regular humans was much more pronounced, with magic shops bordering a church across the

street from a library that was a couple feet away from a dispensary. It was even more apparent when you looked down at the city from above, the European influence from a large exodus of Spanish and French Marvells during the cullings of the 1860s making its mark in the architecture. With their mansard roofs, ornamental ironwork, and glistening windows, the buildings radiated an uncanny Parisian charm, none of them taller than five stories. From this vantage point, I could see lush rooftop gardens, like a hidden oasis tucked away for those lucky enough to afford a home in this zip code. There were street-side cafes that were still busy even at this late hour.

I couldn't make out any faces or details, but I could spot a few people craning back in their chairs, trying to catch sight of the dragon that flew above them.

Damien started to slow down, his wings flaring as he began to engage the brakes. Their literal hillside castle grew larger and larger, its spiraling turrets crowned by menacing gargoyles. Their ruby-red eyes were trained on us as Damien gracefully landed in the center of the main courtyard, the flaps of his massive wings kicking up a few dust storms. He dipped his head and went back to flattening himself against the grass.

I hopped off and stopped myself from being dramatic and kissing the ground. The same red mist as before swirled around Damien, disappearing in less than a minute to reveal a smirking man, not a single strand of dark hair out of place. He wore the same clothes as earlier: T-shirt and jeans that fit just right. Not too tight, not too baggy.

"So?" He crossed his arms against his chest. "How'd you like your first time on dragon-back?"

"Well, it's not as good as the time I rode a bear."

"A what... oh."

He must have picked up on my joke, and if he didn't then he certainly picked up on the childish giggles I tried to swallow down.

"You're dumb," he said with a roll of his eyes. But he laughed. And he said it in a way that carried no teeth in it.

I winked. "You have to admit that's a good one."

Damien's smile grew, his gaze locking on mine. Flames licked at my core, spreading through my legs, those bright green eyes making my briefs suddenly feel too tight. Maybe it was residual heat from sitting on him for the flight, or maybe it was something else, but my body was reacting in a way that made my cheeks blush pink. I coughed and looked away, trying to break the spell but my briefs only getting tighter.

"Flying was great," I answered. "It felt... good being up there. I felt safe. Scared as tits at first, but I managed to calm down. Maybe it was the lack of oxygen."

"Maybe, but I'm not entirely sure your self-preservation instincts are as sharp as they should be."

I arched a brow. "Are you throwing shade at me for being hunted by vamps? Because that's really not my—"

"No, it's not that," he said. "It's the fact that I was trailing you for a while in the snake-way, and you didn't have the slightest clue. I don't exactly blend in either." The motherfucker started to chuckle again. It was a nice sound. A really nice sound. "Don't worry. You can take some training lessons with us. Xavier is great at detection and investigations. Maddox fights like a whirlwind and can use most weapons. War can teach you all about healing salves. Dawn is great at everything, so she can sharpen you up on whatever you need."

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“And you? What are you going to teach me?”

His smile tilted, turned suggestive. I blinked and stood my ground, even though I was slowly beginning to comprehend that I was flirting with a dragon.

“How to survive,” he answered after a short moment. “Come, let me give you a tour.”

He turned and started toward the two massive wooden doors wrought with iron, flanked by stone gargoyles that didn’t move a single inch as Damien neared. I couldn’t help but drop my eyes, not only because the gargoyles’ intimidating and unblinking stares made me nervous, but also because the view wasn’t so bad down here. I noticed that Damien’s jeans fit him extra well around the back.

I sucked in a breath and looked up at the tan-stone castle, with its stained glass windows and protruding balconies, ivy growing up the side that soaked in the most sun. The tile on the towers were a pale blue, reminding me of a peaceful, cloudless sky.

How had this become my life?

And, more importantly, how was I going to manage it?

Damien might have been teasing me, but he wasn’t far off from the truth. My survival instincts could get me through a power outage at a movie theatre, but was I able to handle being in the middle of... well, whatever the hell was going on?

I followed the bossy red dragon into the castle, stepping into a grand and surprisingly

cozy foyer. A fireplace crackled without giving off any heat, surrounded by a sunken-in seating area full of couches and throw pillows, a few books left in a messy stack next to a particularly comfortable-looking love seat. The stone exterior didn't follow into the interior, which had rich wooden floors and warmly painted walls, eccentrically framed photographs adding explosions of color at the perfect intervals. The ceilings had exposed wooden arches and recessed lighting that washed the space in a bright but warm glow.

I was about to compliment his family's sense of interior decoration, but before I could get the words out, I was hit from behind by a sudden force. Sharp nails dug into my shoulders, sending a burst of pain shooting down my arm. I shouted in surprise and jerked forward, a singular thought blasting through my mind:

Holy shit... The vamps—they followed us.

Chapter 10

Castle Crasher

Damien

“Bambi, no!”

I snatched the overly friendly cat off Robby's shoulder. She immediately started to purr against my chest, her scratchy tongue licking at my arm.

“Sorry, she loves surprising new guests.”

Robby rubbed his shoulders, honey-golden gaze wide.

“Did she tag you?” I asked.

“Just a little. It’s more the spook. I thought it was the vampires.”

“No vampires, just something even more dangerous.” I gave the fat calico saber cat a kiss on the head and set her gently on the floor. She was the size of a large house cat, with the facial markings of a light brown tiger. Her most distinguishing features (and likely also intimidating) were the two large canines that protruded from her down from her top jaw, curving and menacing although only used to eat her specially prepared salmon dinners. She swerved in an S-shape between Robby’s leg, her white-and-brown tail wrapping around his calf.

“Don’t worry,” I said, holding his elbow for a moment. “You’re safe here. Not only do we have the gargoyles as an alarm system, but you’ve got us. Vampires could be desperate, but they aren’t stupid. They wouldn’t make a move for you here.”

Robby rubbed at the bridge of his nose. I could see this starting to wear on him. He wore his emotions like physical pieces of clothing. It was... interesting. Intriguing. I liked to be more reserved, contained, but Robby didn’t seem to care about what was on display.

“Alright. Let me call my parents to let them know I won’t be coming home. They’ve always been super protective of me. They’re probably gonna freak.”

I nodded and moved aside, giving him space. I busied myself with straightening a couple of books on a coffee table. These were mostly all Warrick’s, who was the big reader of the family. He must have wanted to be out here instead of cooped up in his room. I used to see him reading all the time, but just the walk from his bedroom to the front of the castle drained him these days.

Fragments of Robby’s conversation drifted my way.

“I swear I’m okay.”

Not exactly a lie, not exactly the truth.

“Yes, with a friend.”

Also not exactly either.

“I’ll be back home tomorrow.”

That was definitely a lie.

He hung up the call with a heartfelt “I love you guys.” All truth behind that. Both hands in his pockets and shoulders slumped, he looked tired. And still, he smiled. It was charming, bright. Made the space feel much brighter. It was an interesting effect. I wasn’t really expecting it, but I certainly wasn’t opposed to it either.

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“Thanks, by the way.” He dropped his head.

No, look back up at me. Show me those teeth again.

“You saved me twice in one day. That’s got to mean I owe you a really nice dinner. Wine too. At least.”

A chuckle rose up from my chest. I shook my head, amused at the way humans liked to “pay each other back” for things that really had no inherent value. It was their incessant need to label and price and trade.

Most of all, it was their impulse to feel like good people. Like they weren’t taking advantage of a situation.

Dragons all operated on a base level of trust and understanding. We were creatures of immense honesty and pride, instilled with strong values from the moment we were born. We knew that not every favor needed to be repaid and were fine with letting debts fall away. So long as the intention was right, then so was the soul. It was the only thing we carried after death. Everything else—loans, debts, worries, bargains, gifts—all that was left behind, no need to focus on them.

“You’re fine,” I said. He looked back up at me. There it was. That damn grin. So fucking brilliant.

“The vampire in the snake-way said something about a bounty... Do you know what he was talking about?”

Not having answers left me with a frustrated thorn in my side. I could only shake my head. “It’s what we’re trying to get to the bottom of. They’re clearly hunting you for a reason; I just don’t know what that is yet.”

Robby winced. He rubbed at the back of his neck. That’s when I noticed he was bleeding from a cut on his elbow.

“Shit, you got hurt. Let’s clean that up.”

“I’m fine. It’s just a scrape.”

Heavy footsteps drew my attention toward the wide, arched hallway. It was Xavier in only a pair of black gym shorts, munching on a bright green apple. Golden scales glittered against his tan thighs and arms. He looked like he had just woken up from a nap. Likely had a famous starlet about to go club-hopping and needing a bodyguard.

“Oh, didn’t realize we had a guest. Wait, you’re the guy from the Magic Box, right?” My brother cocked his head as he looked Robby up and down. “Damn. You’ve been through it.”

“Do I look that rough?” he asked, arms out at his side.

“Not at all,” I said. He did look like he’d just completed a grueling gauntlet involving multiple timed trials that may have involved fighting someone to the death, but I didn’t think it was necessary to point that out. Besides, there was a charm to the way his wind-blown hair seemed to have a life of its own.

I gave Xavier a look—be quiet, brother—before I summarized what had happened in the snake-way. Xavier had finished his apple by the time I was done, his head shaking from side to side.

“This is bad,” he said. “And confusing as fuck. Why are they going after him?”

“That’s a very good question,” Robby answered for me. He had moved to one of the fluffy poofs of a seat. He sank into the center of it, legs crossed and head held up by his fists. “Maybe it’s because of my big, fat, juicy—”

“Boys.” We all swiveled to see Dawn walking into the foyer, a steaming cup of coffee in one hand and a heavy-looking book in the other. “There’s a fresh pot in the kitchen if anyone is planning on staying up tonight.” She turned her attention to Robby and gave him a friendly smile. “I see you changed your mind about staying with us.”

“Yeah, I had a pretty convincing argument presented to me down in the snake-way.”

I laughed at that. I was surprised at how resilient Robby seemed. Normally, humans tended to crumble under even the slightest amount of pressure. I had seen videos of people losing it over things as simple as a mistaken fast-food order, shouting about speaking to managers and leaving terrible reviews as if they wielded one-stars like a samurai’s sword. After everything Robby had been through today, I wouldn’t blame him if he curled up into a ball and shut out the rest of the world.

But he didn’t. He managed to crack jokes and seem completely at ease even though his established world actively shifted and cracked around him.

Still, I could see that the mask he wore began to slip. His smile flickered and wavered like a dying candle.

“Come, let me show you to the guest room and get you settled in.” I helped him get up from the sunken-in seat. Bambi, who had been perched on the back of the couch, saw her new favorite guest move and decided to follow us. Xavier and Dawn stayed behind, chatting about some new theory on how to break the curse. I’d join them once

Robby had a place to lay his head down and get some sleep.

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“Your home, eh, castle, is stunning.” Robby had his neck craned as the hallway opened up into the central gathering room, where the domed ceiling had been painted to reflect a scene with a rainbow flight of dragons flying around a blue sun and a red moon. It had become the beating heart of the castle and one of my favorite areas. A wide set of stairs led up toward the bedrooms.

“Is that your family?” Robby asked, head tilted back as he took in the scene.

“It isn’t. That had been painted up there for centuries, long before my brothers and sister existed. Just so happens that our mom had a rainbow flight of her own.”

We climbed the stairs, Robby’s hand curving with the smooth golden railing. His nails were bitten and chewed on, but his hands looked to be so soft. Delicate. I could probably fit both of them in one of my palms.

“A rainbow flight?”

I nod before explaining. “Yes, it means she had a dragon with each of the subtypes. Usually, dragons are the same subtypes as one of their parents. We should have all either been time manipulating gold like our mother or shadow manipulating onyx like our father.”

“Ah, gotcha,” Robby said. “And your parents? Are they home?”

I paused briefly, but enough for Robby to keep walking a few steps before stopping. His eyes opened wide, and his face bleached of any color.

“Fuck. I’m so stupid, and I’m so sorry. The curse... it’s so new. I should have thought about my question before I asked it.” The color started rushing back to his face, turning him a bright strawberry pink.

“It’s okay,” I reassured him. “It was an honest mistake. I just have a hard time with reminders. That’s all.”

He put a hand over his face. When it dropped, I could see that there was a shimmer to his eyes that wasn’t there before.

“Seriously, it’s okay,” I said. “She would have enjoyed meeting you. She always had a really big soft spot for humans. Especially the good ones. The ones with the kind hearts.”

Robby glowed like a diamond sunset at that, a dimple on his left cheek making an appearance.

There we go. I need to see that more often.

“How do you know I have a kind heart?” he asked.

“Because I’m a good judge of character. But if you need solid evidence, I think someone with a rotten soul would have left that teenage shifter to fend for himself in the snake-way. You made sure you protected him, even when you were scared shitless.”

“Okay, I wasn’t that scared.”

I arched a brow. He laughed.

“Fine, fine.” His golden eyes still shimmered, but no tears spilled over. He locked

them with mine for a moment, one that seemed to last an eternity. I suddenly became aware of the barely inches of space that stood between us. Robby cleared his throat and looked away, breaking the spell. "Alright, let's get on with this tour, then."

I tried not to wonder about what was happening between us as I continued up the stairs. Robby was here for a reason that was much larger than the soft tug that pulled at my core every time he blinked those long lashes at me. We had to protect him, we had to figure out why the vampires wanted him, we needed to figure out a way to break the curse.

What we didn't have to do was picture Robby naked, ass bouncing as I chased him up the stairs, both of us tumbling into my room, where I would devour every inch of him.

Maybe it was because I hadn't been with anyone in... damn, pretty much a year now. I wasn't the kind to sleep around, nor was I a prude either. I'd had my fun with a good handful (or two...or three) of men, but life had started to shift, and priorities changed. Especially once the curse fell. All thoughts of chasing down horny guys on apps or at bars were gone. Not that I still didn't have my moments driven by lust and tequila, but they were few and far between.

"This way," I said to Robby, guiding him to the large doors that sealed my bedroom shut. The freshly polished wooden floors gleamed under the soft white light. There was a sound from down the hall, a cough. It was Warrick. I had to check up on him before I called it a night.

"The guest room is that one." I pointed at a smaller set of doors directly across from mine, open and revealing a comfortable bed covered in clean white pillows. "This is my room. So if you need something, just knock." I opened the doors and let Robby step in first.

My bedroom reflected me pretty well. Clean and sharp, the walls painted a slick white with the arching wall behind my bed painted a navy blue, raised squares adding depth. There was a bookshelf and a desk where my new computer sat untouched. Just next to it was a pair of windows that looked out to the water. It sparkled like spilled ink.

“Wow,” Robby said, “how do you ever get out of bed?”

“Some days, it’s hard.”

“I bet,” he said, giving me a sideways glance. He turned his back to me, but not before I could spot that cheeky grin of his. He looked at the books placed in slightly chaotic stacks before he moved over to my desk, his fingers running along the back of my leather chair. I was pulled in his direction like a magnet being dragged along the floor. My bed was only a couple of feet away, a fact that became very apparent and very important to me all at once.

Maybe I should get him to the guest room. He could clean up and rest, and I could go use my hand to clear up my head.

He neared a shut and locked door in the corner of the room. I didn’t realize how close he had gotten to it; I was too lost in my fantasies. Another reason why I couldn’t allow anything to happen between us. Distractions were annoyances at best, lethal at worst.

Before I could ask him to step back, he reached out. His hand went for the door handle.

I was only able to growl out two words of warning. “No, don’t.” But he was already going for it. His fingers barely grazed the brass handle when I snatched his arm, grabbing him hard by the elbow and spinning him around. He looked shocked, his doe-like brown eyes dropping to where my grip colored his skin pink. I immediately let go, a handprint slowly fading away.

Shit. This was going to need an explanation and an apology.

Chapter 11

Impossible

Robby

I knew I'd made a mistake when I heard Damien snap at me to stop. By then, it was too late. I couldn't pull my hand back fast enough. Instead, Damien grabbed me—hard—and spun me around to face him. I looked up, seeing a simmering anger in the stern set of his brow and the heavy shadows that fell over those emerald green gems. It only took him a couple of seconds to let go, the shadows immediately lifting. His thick, dark eyebrows dipped downward, his expression turning apologetic instead of angry.

“Sorry, I just thought that was the bathroom.”

“No, I should be the one apologizing.”

We were standing pretty close. I could smell his natural scent: campfire smoke and sandalwood and citrus. An intoxicating mix. I cleared my throat and rubbed at my elbow, the impression of his large hand on my skin nearly gone now.

“It isn't the bathroom,” Damien continued, his gaze going toward the shut door behind me. “That would be my hoard room. Every dragon has one, where we keep our collections, and every dragon is extremely protective of them. I should have explained sooner. I'm sorry.”

I nodded at that, feeling like an idiot. Even if it wasn't a room full of priceless treasures, I knew better than to go and start opening every closed door I could see.

Although... now I was curious. What did Damien collect? And was it just a stuffy closet full of a hoarder's wet dream, or was there more to it? Judging by how pristine and clean his bedroom was, I guessed the locked room would be the same.

"Maybe I can show you one day," he said, clearly implying that today wasn't that day.

I smiled. When had we gotten so close? I could reach out and wrap my arms around him if I wanted to. Suddenly, I felt nervous. A flutter of butterflies tickled at my ribs. His scent was stronger but not overwhelming and certainly not unwanted. "I'd like that," I said.

It was then I realized just how big Damien was. He had at least five inches on my five foot eight, with a long, lean torso and arms that could wrap me up tight. He didn't have football player shoulders—those had gone to his brother Maddox—but he clearly spent time working out.

I audibly swallowed. I didn't do well in these kinds of situations. I wasn't the kind of guy who paid a subscription for one of those hookup apps. I didn't really date either, having only ever been with two guys before, and neither of them had lasted longer than three months after I realized they were both deadbeats. I was bad at picking up signals, and I was even worse at making any moves. My intense fear of rejection likely had something to do with that.

Damien's hand came up to my face. I flinched, but he placed it gently on my cheek. "You've got some dirt there."

Oh, great. While I was here drooling over his chiseled jaw and pouty lips, he was staring at the crust of mud on my face.

Alright, time to go to bed. I should skip my embarrassed ass out of his room and into

the guest room, where I could lie in bed and stare at the ceiling for the next hour or so, imagining a hundred different ways tonight could have gone differently.

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But his hand didn't move. His fingers only slipped toward my neck, running through my hair. I knew he hadn't used his powers to light me on fire, but I still felt as if I was about to turn into a pile of ash any second now. It started at the tips of my toes, the warmth climbing up my legs, spreading out through my core. We were close. His grip was no longer loose, his fingers applying pressure as he pushed forward.

The gap between us closed in the blink of a starry-filled eye. His lips crashed against mine, his hand steering the kiss. My breath was stolen, my entire being lit up in a blast of sparkling fireworks. I could physically feel my feet still on the ground, but I could swear that if I opened my eyes, all I would see were clouds. Like he had taken me back to the sky but with his human form instead, no dragon wings needed.

I was flying. We soared.

I let myself melt. I allowed all the stress and fear from today to fall away. Like bark from a growing tree, the skin underneath even tougher than before.

He was gentle with the kiss, but only for a moment. It wasn't long before his tongue probed deeper, his mouth opening wider. He pushed his body against mine. God, he was so big. And he tasted like fucking heaven. I hadn't kissed anyone in months, but something about this felt natural, as if we'd swerved around any initial awkwardness and gone straight into a lust-filled familiarity, knowing exactly how to make the other unravel.

His hand went down to my hip, tugging me harder. We were both getting turned on by this; there wasn't any doubting that now. I slipped my hand under his shirt, felt the heat of his skin scorching against my palm.

I fucking loved it.

And I wanted more of it. More than just my hand against his back. I wanted all of me against him. I needed that heat to consume me. It was a thought that burned its way to the very forefront of my focus. Maybe this would all be over tomorrow? Maybe I'd be back home to my normal life without Damien thinking twice about me once he realized this was all some big mistake.

Which all meant that I had to take advantage of the now. If tonight was the one and only night I'd spend with a hunky dragon, then so be it. I was going to make the best of it.

I fell back on the bed with a little bounce. Damien looked down at me with hooded gaze, a delicious smirk slanting his lips. They glistened in the light.

"You're an incredible kisser," Damien said in a low growl as he climbed onto the bed, taking my neck in his hand again, lips now pressed against mine.

"Why did you think the vamps wanted me?"

"I thought it was because of your big, fat ass, but maybe..." He arched a brow, chuckled as he moved back in. His breath tickled my skin. "It's because of your kissing abilities?"

"Yes, among other things."

"What are all of these 'other things'?"

I shrugged and moved in for another kiss. "Maybe you'll find out. I have to keep some secrets to myself." This comfortable banter, this 'no barriers up' mode felt foreign to me, but also it felt right. Exactly what I wanted. As if we had lived a

thousand other lives, always meeting, always crashing together, and in this one we weren't wasting a single second.

I kissed him without any reservations. I didn't want this inferno to die down... Not now. Not while I was still dreaming. Because this couldn't be real—there was no way. I didn't pull guys like Damien, ever. I jerked off to them plenty of times, sure, but being in the flesh with a man so far out of my league felt nearly criminal. And I was so fucking ready to do the time.

My hand went down underneath the waistband of Damien's pants. His firm, smooth ass felt good against my palm as I squeezed, moaning into another kiss. He ground his hips, rubbing himself against me. Both of us were rock-hard. I pushed back, the pressure inside me building, and the inferno roared. It scorched away any shyness I may have had. He wanted me, and now he knew I wanted him, simple as that.

"Fuck, Robby, I need to see those pretty lips wrapped around my cock."

His words heightened the fever that threatened to scorch me.

"Take it out, then," I said against his lips. He got up and went to undo his zipper, his pants bulging. This was it. The moment he'd bare it all, and I was ready to take it all. It was a need—just like he had said.

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Unfortunately, neither of us predicted or expected the three loud knocks on the door, making us both freeze like two bricked-up statues.

That's when the biggest and most notorious of all cockblocks struck: little siblings. Specifically, Maddox, Damien's younger brother, who called out from behind the closed door.

"Living room in five. I found something."

We heard heavy footsteps leading away from the door. I flopped back onto the bed with a huff. "Damn it. I thought I was about to have sex with a dragon."

"Maddox always exaggerates. Five minutes between you and I could be enough." He grinned, gripping his still-hard bulge.

"We both know we're going to need way more than five minutes."

He smiled at that. Fuck, I wanted to kiss him. And lick him, all over.

All over.

"You're right. I have a feeling I could lock you up in my hoard room for an entire week and still not be satiated by the end."

I cocked my head. "Okay, that sounds slightly creepy but also... really hot? Do dragons give off some kind of pheromones that turn their conquests into dick-dazzled sex fiends?"

Damien arched a brow before he gave a series of loud laughs, tilting his head back, Adam's apple bobbing. When he gathered himself, he said, "No, no. Not that I know of."

"Alright, well, maybe get someone to look into it." I got up and managed to walk past Damien without spontaneously dropping to my knees and unhinging my jaw. "Because I'm suspicious."

"I'll see who I can talk to," Damien said, still chuckling as he followed me out of the bedroom.

I had no idea what Damien's little brother found, but as I turned to look at a smiling (and slightly flushed) Damien, I started to wonder if maybe I had found something myself.

We were all gathered in the cavernous living room. Even Damien's sick brother, Warrick, had made it. He was bundled up under a blanket, his forehead was shiny with sweat from the fever. My heart broke for him, for the entire family. Shit, the entirety of dragonkind was affected by this. If it wasn't stopped, then they'd all be wiped out, an entire species of powerful and caring beings wiped out just like that.

It had been all over the news recently, and Damien and his family weren't the only ones working around the clock to figure out what was going on. Dragons and humans had always had a strong bond, ever since the dragons were spat out of the Tears over two centuries ago. They were allowed certain things that other supernaturals weren't. Initially, they were the only supernatural beings that were allowed to vote and hold positions in government, but that had since changed. The world had an easier time once the Iron Treaty had been put into place and the fighting for land and power ceased. Now we had a hawk shifter as senator and a dragon governor, who was one of the ones leading the biggest effort in stopping the dragon fall. She had thrown in all the resources she could at researching a way to stop this, but from the last reports I'd

read, she was coming up empty-taloned just like everyone else. Yes, it was clear the vampires were somehow involved, but without solid evidence, there was no way to charge the Matriarch with any crime.

A shiver crawled down my spine, snuffing out any residual warmth I felt from Damien's touch.

I sat on the couch, perched at the edge of the plush white cushion. Bambi had immediately wound her way through the group and tangled herself up between my feet, her fluffy tail flicking against my bare feet. I gave her a couple of head scratches as Maddox took center stage.

He was younger than Damien but carried himself as if he were years older. He was bigger than his brothers too, a little more round, where Damien and Xavier cut a thinner frame. The sapphire-blue scales on the side of his neck dipped underneath the collar of his black T-shirt, matching the depthless blue of his eyes.

"Alright, I've found someone who might be able to tell us what's going on. I just don't want anyone freaking out," he said, his gaze settling on me.

"Why would we freak out?" I asked.

"Because, well— Benjamin, you can come."

I looked to the hall, a shape moving through the shadows, stepping out into the light, hungry eyes snapping directly onto me.

I involuntarily pressed back into the couch. Heart hammering, Damien put a hand on mine. "It's okay," he said.

But it wasn't. It couldn't be. How did they allow this?

The man—no, he wasn't a man. He was a vampire. There wasn't a doubt in my mind. His tan skin looked airbrushed from not having any pores, and he moved with a grace reserved for a predatory cat. His jeans and shirt were slightly baggy, but that did nothing to hide the supernatural movement as he entered the living room.

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“Ben, it’s been a while,” Dawn said before she stood up and went for a hug. “How’ve you been?”

The vampire smiled as Dawn looked him over, hands on his shoulders. “I’m alright. Miss our game nights, though.”

“Come back sometime. Just because you’re not dating my rock-brained brother doesn’t mean we still can’t be friends.”

The vampire smiled, sharp fangs on display. “I’d love that.”

“Alright, enough of this gooey reunion. There’s important shit to talk about,” Maddox said. I looked between the dragons and the vamp, shocked. I shouldn’t have been entirely surprised. Not all vampires followed the Matriarch’s lead. Those who didn’t want to associate with the darker aspects of their species defected, moving away from the Obsidian District and finding space among the other supernaturals. They only drank synthetic blood and never used their power to harm others. It wasn’t the majority of vamps that lived that kind of life, though, and it was nearly impossible to tell if you were dealing with a vampire who wanted to seduce and feed off you or one who wanted to hang out with some beer and good TV.

Ben spoke to the gathered group. “I connected with some vampires that live in the Obsidian. It didn’t take me long at all to figure out they were hunting for someone.” I couldn’t help but imagine him launching across the room, hands outstretched so he could wrap them around my throat. “There was a photo being spread. A wanted-photo. There’d been a month’s long hunt and no one knew where the target was, until they were spotted just the other day. Helstriva is offering an eternal spot in her private

oasis, along with an unheard-of amount of money for anyone who brings back the person in the photo. There are vampires coming from all over the world off of her call to action.”

Damien, who stood nearest to Ben, stepped even closer. “Do you have the photo?”

He pulled out a folded piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Damien. “That’s definitely Robby.”

“Can I see?” I asked, standing up and swallowing down all my fear as I went toward Damien and the vampire. I felt like a rabbit voluntarily hopping into the jaws of a salivating manticore.

Damien handed me the paper. I wasn’t shocked when I saw my face smiling back. This photo had been taken when I was... wait. “Something’s off.” I cocked my head, arched a brow. That was my face, but there were tiny differences that twenty-six years of looking into a mirror helped me spot. A freckle on the nose, a slight slant in the smile, a gap in the teeth.

And the background looked like the photo had been taken on a cruise ship. I’d never been on a cruise ship in my entire life. My mom had always said she didn’t want to float around in a giant Petri dish, and my dad was scared of the ocean, so we stuck with family vacations to Disney instead.

“Is this edited?” I asked, looking at Ben. That’s when I realized he held another photo.

“It’s not,” he said. “There were two pictures handed out. This is the other one.”

I took it from him. Now I fully recognized myself. It was a photo pulled from my social media. I rarely ever posted, so it wasn’t difficult for me to remember this as

one of the more recent shots. I smiled over a birthday cake my cousin had baked for me, my mom coming in from the side of the shot with a knife, ready to cut into the cake.

“Okay, this is definitely me. But that other picture has to be edited. I’ve never been on a cruise, and I don’t have those freckles either.”

Damien looked at both photos in my hand. He looked to Ben. The room fell deathly silent. I could practically hear the rhythmic beating of everyone’s hearts. Why did Damien look so damn serious? This was good, wasn’t it? We were finally getting some answers.

“Maybe she did it to throw vampires off?” I suggested. “Make the hunt harder?”

“Robby...” Wrinkles appeared between Damien’s dark brows. He looked like he was uncomfortable. Like he was nervous about what he was going to ask next.

“Do you know if you had a twin?”

My head dropped forward, face scrunching in pure confusion. “No, of course not. Why would that even be a possibility? I’m an only child. I have always been an only child.”

Ben sucked in a breath. “Helstriva wanted both men in those photos found and brought to her. Only one already has.”

“One already—but how?” It wasn’t computing. I looked at the photos again. They hadn’t caught me, but if they had one... but there was no way. I would have known. My parents would have said something. I couldn’t have had a twin, someone out there that looked just like me, that shared the same womb as me. A brother. That was impossible.

“Impossible.”

It has to be.

“Robby.” Damien said my name in a gentle way. So gentle it made me crack. I started to blink away tears. My thoughts careened in a thousand different directions. I couldn’t pull one out of the tangle, couldn’t form a sentence. A twin? A brother? I had a twin brother out there. I wasn’t as alone as I thought I was. If Ben wasn’t lying about this, wasn’t confused, then it would change my life in ways I couldn’t even begin to fathom.

I somehow managed to put together a slightly coherent sentence. “How—how do we save him? How, if this is real, how do we get him back?”

That’s when the other axe dropped.

“We can’t,” Ben said with the cold delivery of a surgeon explaining to the family that their loved one didn’t make it. “His death was what started the dragon fall.”

“No... oh no.” The dam shattered. The tears flowed as the world reeled around me, my entire reality being altered in a matter of minutes. Damien pulled me against his chest as I repeatedly asked ‘how, how, how’, unable to understand how I could feel such a visceral pain for someone I hadn’t even known existed until moments earlier.

But the pain was sharp and deep. A knife twisting through my ribs, slicing cartilage, puncturing muscle.

I had a twin, and I'd never meet him.

All I could do was cry.

Chapter 12

Truths and Prophecies

Damien

I felt powerless as Robby crumbled in my arms. In one fell swoop, his entire view on life shattered. To learn that he had a twin brother, one who he'd never get the chance to meet, it was enough to make even the strongest among us turn to dust. I couldn't begin to imagine it. How the very foundation of his world had just been rocked.

"How?" he repeated into my chest. My family stayed gathered in complete silence, except for Warrick's heavy breathing. Dawn came back from the kitchen with a glass of ice-cold water. She went over to Robby and rubbed the small of his back. He turned to face her, cheeks streaked with tears.

"Here, drink some."

"Thank you," he said, taking the glass in shaky hands and bringing it up to his lips. My shirt had the imprint of his face, my chest wet underneath. "How?" he asked again. "My mom... she never said anything. And why was my brother's death what triggered the dragon fall?"

"All very good questions," Dawn said, her voice soft. She adjusted her gold necklace, moving the single pearl back over her T-shirt. Snow white scales glittered on her wrists. "I think the prophecy might have some of those answers."

“What was it again?” Xavier asked. He had the memory of a goldfish.

Dawn, without skipping a beat, recited the entire thing:

“When the dragons’ roars fall silent, and the curse burns through their veins,

To ash they turn, their life’s fire to wane.

Yet a glimmer of hope in the human remains,

The one who was sacrificed, yet now again regained.

Death’s icy grip shall lay claim, to undo what has been done,

One of two souls, under the waning dragon moon and sun.

The lifeblood of the one who invoked it first,

May be the lifeblood that quenches the curse’s thirst.”

Robby shook his head and rubbed away at his eyes. He moved over to the couch and sat down with his hands hanging between his legs and his head dropped. Ben, the vamp, moved back to Maddox’s side. I knew he wasn’t under the Matriarch’s directives anymore, but I still kept an eye on him at all times. There was a natural distrust underlying a vampire and dragon’s relationship. I still didn’t fully understand how Maddox could have a romantic connection with him.

I hooked onto one particular line. “The one sacrificed— yet now again regained. You’re the twin who was regained.” And then another line jumped out at me. The line that immediately followed talked about a death undoing what had been done...

“When were you born?” Dawn asked, pulling out her phone.

“July tenth. Why?”

She typed something into her phone and then looked up. “Because that was the last time there was a dragon sun and moon.”

It happened randomly but never frequently. I’d only ever seen it once in my twenty-eight years of flying this Earth. A dragon sun and moon were what happened when the sun turned a scarlet red in the sky and the moon shifted to a bright blue. The celestial event was named after the first two dragons who had come from one of the Tears, a blue and red mated pair who were the first to establish peace between the humans and the newcomers.

Robby’s next question was the one that permeated through my every thought. “So if my brother’s death caused the dragon fall—does mine end it?”

You could hear a puff of cotton fall against the floor with how silent the room became.

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I spoke first, unable to see Robby become any more distressed. “No, we don’t know that.”

Benjamin crossed his arms, eyes scanning a fragile-looking Robby. “It does say the lifeblood of the one who invoked the curse first is the lifeblood that ends it.”

I spun to face the vampire. He was certainly a cocky motherfucker, although, to his credit, he didn’t appear ready to sink his fangs into Robby. “That could mean whoever invoked the curse first is the one who needs to die. If the Matriarch called the dragon fall, then it’s her death we need.”

Ben remained quiet, his eyes pinned on Robby.

“Damien’s got a point,” Xavier said. He sat on a footstool, now wearing a three-piece suit, his hair perfectly gelled so that one loose curl fell across his forehead. His assignment must have been some black-tie party. “It could mean the Matriarch’s blood quenches the curse.”

“It could,” Ben said. “But it could also be his blood that needs to be spilled.”

“Enough,” I growled. The word was low but the impact high. Benjamin pursed his lips and dragged his gaze away from Robby.

“Fine,” the vamp said. “It isn’t my species that faces extinction.”

Fucking hell, the vampire was right. The dragon fall could very well be the end of all dragonkind. The curse effectively made dragons sterile, meaning that in a few

decades, there'd be none of us left. After tracking the way the curse wound through families, it had been made clear that childless dragons didn't seem to be affected. But anyone with children, even mothers still in their hospital beds from giving birth, could have been affected. It was a staggered effect so not all mothers fell sick at the same moment, but the burning sickness was making its way through every single dragon family in existence. It wouldn't be long until there were none of us left.

"Why? Why is Helstriva so obsessed with bringing down the dragons?" Robby asked, his voice shaking.

Warrick spoke up for the first time. I could hear the strain of exhaustion in his words. "Because we're the only things stopping her from taking control." He broke out into a series of racking coughs. Xavier came over with an ice pack and a bottle of water, sitting next to his little brother and dripping some of the water over his dried lips.

"He's right," Xavier continued. "Yes, there's the Iron Treaty, and humans would likely be well protected from a full-scale attack, especially with Marvels, fae, and shifters on their side. It would be a prolonged war, but the vampires would undoubtedly win if the dragons were removed from the equation. We could tear them apart in our dragon forms, one of the only ways a vampire could die. Maddox's ice could shatter them, Damien's fire could turn them to ash, Dawn's electricity would fry every single synapse beyond repair."

Robby turned paper pale. His leg bounced up and down, head shaking. I wanted to tell him it would be alright, wanted to tell him that I'd protect him. He looked even more frail now than he had back in the snake-way, facing down certain death.

"I don't even know his name..." Robby started to cry into his hands.

"Who?" Xavier asked.

“His brother,” Ben answered. The vampire moved to the couch where Robby sat. I tensed. But he just stood next to him, placing a smooth and gentle hand on Robby’s shoulder. “His name was Chris. I’m sorry about how you had to find out.”

Robby looked up, realizing for the first time that it was the vampire who consoled him. I could see fear flash through those tear-filled golden orbs. The vampire must have sensed it too. He took a few—slow—steps back.

I replaced him, moving to Robby’s side. I’d only just met the guy, but my protective instincts were kicked into high gear. “Come, let’s get you to bed.”

Robby waved away my hand. “No, there’s no way I can sleep right now.” He stood up and started to pace, rubbing at the back of his neck until it turned cherry red. “If I’m the key to stopping this... if it’s my death that needs to happen... then just do it. Get it over with. Do it.”

He turned to my brothers, my sister, to me. He was pleading, but I wouldn’t entertain it for a single second. “Absolutely not,” I answered, along with a chorus of “no’s” from the rest of my family. “We’ll figure this out, and we’ll do it in a way that doesn’t harm you. The prophecy could be wrong, we could be misreading it, or it could all be leading us to kill the Matriarch. But what I refuse to consider is hurting you, and I can swear to you that the rest of my family feels the same.”

Nods all around, broken up by a series of racking coughs from War. He wiped at the sweat beading across his forehead as Xavier gave him more to drink.

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My heart rended in half. Fuck. How the hell had this happened? And how would this all end? I felt as though I had just boarded a runaway train barreling toward the edge of a cliff. Sure, I could fly off the careening train and save myself, but would that mean sacrificing others in the process?

“Wait, if my death breaks the curse, then why are the vampires trying to kill me?” Robby asked.

“I’m not entirely sure they are,” I answered, doubting he would like what I was about to say. “If they wanted to kill you, chances are they could have done it already. It seemed as if they wanted to capture you instead.”

“And do what with me? Lock me up until I die of old age?”

Ben chuckled, the sound coming out of his mouth like a thick shadow. “Close. But what if you never die?”

Robby blinked a couple of times. I watched him process the question in real time, the math adding up in his head to a frightening result.

“They want to turn me?” he asked.

Ben licked his lips and looked out one of the arching windows draped in thick velvet blue curtains.

“I need to go,” Robby said, surprising us all.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Dawn pointed out. “Not when you’re on every vamp’s radar.”

“I don’t care. I have to talk to my parents. I have to find out if they knew.” He looked more and more anxious, more frightened. He wrung his hands together, squeezing them tight. “I have to.”

“Fine,” I said, realizing tonight was nowhere near over. “I’ll fly you there. Let’s go.”

He looked at me, relief flooding his features. He managed to crack the flimsiest of smiles. “Thank you,” he said.

It was quite literally the least I could do. I walked with Robby out of the living room, through the hall, out the foyer, to the front courtyard. The ocean breeze kicked up around us, laying salt down on my tongue. I grabbed Robby’s hand in mine, felt the raw fear manifest in how tightly he gripped me.

“Before I shift, I want you to know that I vow to never let anyone hurt you, Robby. We’re going to figure this out. I swear it.”

He gave me a slightly reassured nod before he stepped back. Red mist rose up and enveloped me like a warm touch, my body painlessly shifting into my dragon form.

I lowered myself down to the ground to make it easier for Robby to climb on, my sharp talons clicking against the brick of the courtyard. He jumped onto me, a little less awkwardly than the first time he had, and in three flaps of my wings, we were airborne, flying toward more unknowns. I could hear Robby’s quick heartbeat over the rushing wind. It was a rapid lub-dub sound that reflected the racing and uncontrollable thoughts that must be crashing around his skull.

He must have realized I didn’t know where I was going because he leaned forward

and began directing me, speaking loudly over the wind. Even though he was scared, he felt more confident riding me than earlier. When he had first gotten on, I could feel the tension coursing through every inch of muscle. He had held me tight, with both his arms and his legs.

He still wasn't completely comfortable, but the grip wasn't as 'death-grippy'. And as we fly over the twinkling streets and rooftops and billboards, I could feel him relax even more. It was the same thing that happened to me whenever I flew alone: a serene peace overcame me, a calmness that soaked into my bones, buoyed by the wind and clouds.

I soared ahead, finding an air current and floating, finding myself hoping that what came next would be as easy as flying.

And knowing, deep down, it wouldn't.

Chapter 13

Tears Over LA

Robby

My mom gasped when she opened the door. She looked fragile tonight. More so than usual. More than even when she was sick. Her cheek bones were prominent and heavy bags shifted under her eyes when she looked at me with a mix of shock and surprise. I knew I must have looked like I'd been tossed into a whirlwind and spit back out. My eyes felt puffy and my hair was a total mess.

And now, seeing my mom... a torrential rush of different emotions flooded through me. Confusion, sadness, anger, hopelessness, none of it good, and she must have sensed it.

Of course she did; she was my mother. She wrapped me up into a tight hug, the smell of her freshly washed hair filling my nose with strawberry and honey.

“We should get inside,” Damien said from behind me as politely as he could.

“What? What’s going on? Robby, is everything okay?”

I looked down the hilly street where me and my parents lived. It wasn’t Beverly Hills by any means; our cracked and pothole-marked streets were much narrower, and the homes were only a fraction of the sizes of those mansions, but it was more than I ever wanted. We had a good community too. Our neighbors were a Marvel and lion shifter pair who watched the house whenever we were out of town, and across the street from us was a woman whom I called Abuela since she’d practically raised me alongside my mom. It was a quiet night. The thick leaves rustling on the palm trees was the only sound you could hear. Such a weird contrast to the storm raging inside me.

Did she know?

Did she know?

The thought kept repeating in my head, like a broken record.

If she didn't know... fuck. How was I going to get through this tonight?

But how wouldn't she have known? She gave birth to me... to Chris.

"No, nothing is okay," I said as we went inside, my mom closing and locking the door behind us. My dad must have been cooking pancakes; I could smell the sweet, doughy scent drifting from the arch that led to the kitchen. He loved eating breakfast before bed, said it was a good-luck thing.

"Ricky, baby, Robby's home."

"Robster!" My dad cheerily popped out of the kitchen, wearing a batter-stained black shirt and pajama pants. "You made it just in time for some pancakes. I made enough for you and your friend." He said "friend" in an extremely suggestive manner.

"I'm not hungry," I said, moving to the years-old brown couch and falling onto the spot that was indented permanently with my shape. I started to cry again. My mom flew to my side, my dad asking what was wrong. Damien stayed by the door.

"Did he hurt you?" my dad asked, his tone turning aggressive as he looked to Damien.

“No, no.” He saved me. But I couldn’t get the words out. All I could say was “I had a twin. I had a twin brother.”

Both my parents made confused sounds before looking at each other. I watched as something clicked between them. Something profound. My mother put a hand up to her mouth, and my dad’s normally tanned skin appeared to turn a sickly yellow.

I shot up from the couch, a bitter sadness mixing with an acidic betrayal. “Did you know?”

My dad reached for my hand, holding my wrist. “We—of course not, Robby. What’s going on? What are you talking about?”

But that look they shared. They knew something. “How is it possible? I found out today I had a twin brother. He was taken—he was taken and killed. He’s gone. I just learned about him, and he’s gone. How could that happen?”

“A twin... No, Robby, no,” my mother shook her head. She leaned back in the couch, as if she was seconds from breaking. “That’s impossible... is it, Ricky? Oh, no. No, no, no.”

“Robby...” It was Damien. He stood just behind me. A gentle hand fell between my shoulder blades. Warmth radiated out from his palm. It still wasn’t enough to comfort me, to melt away the ice that was quickly forming around my heart.

My mom tugged on her silver necklace, her eyes brimming with tears. “Oh no, my little Robby. I didn’t want you finding out this way.”

“So you did know?”

I could hardly believe this. Today couldn’t be real. There was no way. How the hell

could I process this? My parents had been lying to me for my entire life? And I found out like this? After I sacrificed so much to help them. I worked two jobs, sometimes three. I let friends fall by the wayside. I let my grades suffer. I knew my dad had to stay home to take care of my mother after her accident; I could see us losing everything we had because of it. So as a teenager, I'd stepped up to the plate. I grew up faster than I should have, worrying about bills and electricity and gas when I should have been worried about prom and losing my virginity to some trashed football player.

I felt robbed. Of a childhood, of the truth. Of my twin.

"Robby, sit down." My dad looked like he was ready to start pleading with me. My mother stared directly ahead, as if her processor had fried and all she could do was blink.

"I don't think I can right now."

My father took the lead as my mother rubbed at her face. I'd never seen her like this. She always had something to say, some wise words or gentle compliments. "First off," he said, leg bouncing like a spring, "you know that you are our entire heart and our entire world. We live our lives for you, Robby, ever since the day you entered into ours. That's what we need to explain. Because you came into our lives not through birth but through circumstances that changed everyone's lives forever. Your mother had a sister, Robby. She was a bright young girl with the kindest eyes. She also had very big internal demons she battled, and we had lost touch with her for years.

"We didn't know she got pregnant. We didn't know she was three weeks away from giving birth. We didn't know she was putting herself in danger. We only got the call the night she was found. The night you were found with her. She didn't survive whatever attacked her, but you did. Neither of us hesitated. We drove straight to the

hospital, and from that night, you were ours. We should have told you earlier. I'm so sorry, Robby. But you were the only one that was found—we had no idea...”

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My dad choked back tears while my mom let out a sob. I'd only ever seen my mother cry three times in my life. All of them were over me: high school graduation, when I had to get emergency surgery for a broken bone, and when I told her how scared I was that I'd lose her after the accident. I wiped at my cheeks. My ears were ringing, as if someone had let loose a flash-bang in the tiny living room. Could be my skyrocketing blood pressure.

I had to sit. I sank down into the leather cushions, shocked. Completely and utterly shocked. I couldn't imagine anything else taking me by surprise tonight, but it turned out I was incredibly wrong. My entire world had already been flipped like a pancake, and now it was being tossed out the window, sticking to a speeding car as it careened wildly down the highway.

I looked at my parents—because I refused to see them as anything other. They'd made mistakes, multiple, and keeping such a massive secret from me might have been one of the biggest ones yet. But my father also didn't sugarcoat it when he said they took me in without hesitation. I never once felt like I didn't belong here, with them, under this roof. That was a testament to just how serious they took on their new charge, how much love they showered me with. Even when I was being a snotty and overly confrontational angsty teen or when I was a shouting and crying and shitting baby.

“Please, Robby, tu eres mi corazón. And we didn't know she had another—oh Lord.” My mom put both her hands on her chest. I could see this night was breaking her just as it was trying so desperately to break me. I didn't want to let that happen. I got up and moved closer to her, where I could sit between both my parents. I looked ahead at the scratched-up entertainment center, the decades-old television sitting on the top,

playing a tennis match on mute. Damien stood leaning against the wall, hands in his pockets. He gave us the space we needed, his eyes darting toward the door and windows every minute or so.

“It’s okay. I’m not mad at either of you. I’m not. I’m grateful. You could have said no—I could have landed in the foster system. You guys are both my parents. Nothing will ever change that.”

My mom looked at me with those big hazel eyes of hers shining with tears, and she pulled me into the tightest hug I’d ever had. My dad joined in, kissing the top of my head.

“How did you find this all out?” my dad asked when the hug was over. My mom still had an arm across my shoulder, fingers digging in as if she were scared I’d fly away at any moment.

“That’s honestly a long story, and it’s not over yet. But I think I need to sleep first. My brain is fried.”

Mom’s fingers gripped tighter. “You said you had a twin, Robby... Does that really mean...”

I could only nod. The news settled into the room like a poisonous mist. My mom choked back tears as my dad went stone-cold. He looked like one of the gargoyles guarding Damien’s castle, not even twitching.

“His name was Chris. The vampires got him,” I explained. Part of me clicked into autopilot. As badly as I wanted to shut off and let sleep take me, I knew my parents deserved some kind of explanation. “The dragon fall that’s happening, it started with his death. Apparently, we were both born on an extremely rare celestial event, and it, well, yeah...” I looked to Damien as if he would throw me some kind of life raft. I

needed to be pulled back onto shore because I didn't think I could keep treading water.

"Oh, Robby, my little boy." My mom pulled me into another hug. We stayed like that for a while, all of us absorbing the news. It was a lot to take in. So much heartache that there wasn't enough space to hold it all. I'd never experienced something like this. It was paralyzing. I stayed with my head on her shoulder for what felt like hours. Her hair was dry now, but it still smelled just like her shampoo. There was something else in the air, though. Something stark and smokey. Like something was—

"Shit! My pancakes!" Dad jumped off the couch and ran into the kitchen just as the fire alarm started to go off.

I couldn't help but chuckle. We got up and started waving away the smoke with a few throw pillows, Damien helping by opening a window. My dad came back into the living room with the pan, showing off an incredibly crispy pile of pancakes.

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“Anyone want?” he teased before going back into the kitchen and dumping it out.

“We should head out,” I said.

My mom looked surprised. “You’re not staying here? Your friend can stay too.”

“No, I don’t think that’s a great idea.”

My dad called from the kitchen, “We’ll make sure our rain noise machine is at the loudest setting so we won’t hear anything.”

“Dad!”

“Eric!”

Damien laughed while my cheeks burned. I rolled my eyes and looked back to my mom. “It’s not safe. The vampires are still after me for some reason, and I don’t want to put you guys in danger. I’ll stay with Damien until it all blows over.”

“And you’ll keep my son safe?”

Son. Something about the way she said it made the word carry a world’s weight of meaning.

“I won’t let anyone harm a single hair on his head.” Damien’s jaw set, the lines slashing in bold strokes, as if done by a paint brush.

I realized my mom didn't know the full picture. "He's a dragon," I said, watching as her eyebrows jerked up her forehead.

"Oh, well, wow." She went on to execute the most awkward curtsy ever. It made us all start to laugh, the sound a pleasant reprieve from all the crying and tears.

"No need for that, ma'am. Us dragons aren't very stuffy about etiquette. Always thought bowing looked pretty stiff to me." He smiled as he opened his arms. What happened next warmed my heart as if he had breathed fire directly down my throat.

"I will take a hug, though," he said. My mom smiled and disappeared into Damien's arms. I could see Damien's gesture was exactly what my mother needed to know I was safe. To know that I was with someone who cared.

When they separated, my mom quickly wiped away tears as she turned to look back at the kitchen. My dad clattered around with pots and pans in the sink. Most of the smoke had gone, but the scent of burnt dough still lingered.

I went to the front door and stopped with my hand on the handle.

"What was her name?" I asked.

My mom knew exactly who I was speaking about. "Lily. Lily Miranda. You have her eyes. Gentle, kind, intelligent, with a huge spark behind them."

"I wish I could have met them."

"I do too, Robby. I do too."

Before we could break down into more tears, I opened the door and stepped out into the quiet night. Damien shifted in the middle of the street, my mom and dad both

watching with their jaws slack. I climbed on and waved, the surreal quality of tonight making it seem like we flew directly up into one of Van Gogh's most famous paintings.

Damien floated through the sky, the wind caressing me as I let myself think about Lily and Chris.

I wondered if Damien could hear me crying, trembling around my hold on his neck.

Chapter 14

Blind Dates or Fated Mates

Robby

You know what one of the oddest sensations in the world is? When said world is rocked by some kind of life-altering news, and yet everything else goes on exactly as it was before you were irreparably changed. The only life that was blown off track was yours, but that track still remained completely intact. The smiling fae bagging groceries, the grumpy barista making drinks, the flirty (and oblivious) woman shopping for talismans. All of them were acting as if nothing monumental in the world had shifted, like everything was going on business as usual.

But it wasn't. How could it be? Not when I was hit with the visceral facts: my biological mother was brutally murdered, my twin was separated from me and killed before I could ever meet him, my parents kept the truth hidden, and now my death could be the potential key to stopping the dragon fall.

I leaned against the glass counter, feeling light-headed. The scent of burning incense wafted in my direction as a customer opened the door, the ocean breeze following them into the Magic Box. I knew I should have taken Maddox up on his famous

omelette burritos. My stomach had been tangled up in knots these last couple of weeks, though. It made getting anything down a mission that seemed near impossible.

At least Claire hadn't fired me, so there was that. I could be thankful for some modicum of routine in my life. Originally, Damien put up a fight, wanting me to stay locked up in the castle until they could figure out what was really happening. But two days of not stepping outside drove me nuts. We came to an agreement that Damien would fly me to and from the shop to minimize the risk of being jumped and kidnapped by a mob of vampires. Claire got some other Marvel friends together and placed new wards around the area, promising an attack in the shop wouldn't happen again, and if it did, the assailants would be instantly teleported out to the middle of the Pacific Ocean, where Bessie the famous hippocampus would likely lambast them with her horn and eat them for dinner. If anything got through, Claire would step in and beat them away with her mastery in utilizing the physical red threads of mana.

All in all, I felt safe, considering the circumstances.

“Scuse me, do you carry any tonics that can help with a hangover?”

I looked up, seeing a raven-haired woman. Both her eyes glittered pink as if the iris had been replaced with shimmering rose quartz. Heavy bags shadowed underneath them, proving how badly she needed that hangover cure.

“We have these revitalization tonics over here.” I walked around the counter and led the fae to a refrigerator set inside the smooth wooden walls of the shop. “It has peach, banana, star fruit, enhanced water, and plenty of sodium and electrolytes.” I handed the bottle of swirling pink-and-orange juice. I couldn’t attest to how good it was at curing hangovers, but I could say that it tasted like pure sex.

“Thank you,” she said, as if I’d just offered her the cure to cancer. She already looked much more bushy-tailed and bright-eyed. I wondered if that had to do with the fact that she was silently feeding off the tumultuous current of emotions flooding out of me. Fae could still eat and drink regular food, but they sustained their long and youth-filled lives by occasionally leaching off the emotions of someone close by, although touch helped them feed faster. They had to be within a couple of feet of their feast and could slowly siphon off emotions—the more heightened, the more filling—which didn’t even alert the person they were feeding from. Or they could be greedier than that and binge on someone’s deep depression or raging anger, sucking out all their emotions in one go and leaving the person feeling like an empty shell for the next week or so. In some cases, those people might never feel any emotions again.

It was strictly forbidden by the Iron Treaty, but that didn’t stop certain fae from going

rogue. Some fae became so addicted to a certain emotion they'd stop at nothing to keep feeding. A fae addicted to terror was not one you wanted to cross paths with.

And I had a feeling this fae was looking at me like an all-you-can-eat buffet.

I bagged up her hangover cure and grabbed her card. She gave me another thank-you and snatched her bag, taking the tonic out and uncapping it. She had guzzled it down before she'd even left the store.

The door dinged as she exited, but thankfully, I wasn't left alone to simmer in my thoughts for long. Claire came out of the back room, bracelets jingling. Her onyx robe, lined with sparkling gold thread, flowed behind her like a shadow made of fabric. Underneath, she wore one of the official store shirts, a soft blue color the same as the outside walls with the name of the shop written across the front.

"How's it going up here?" she asked, sipping from her latte, the spicy scent of pumpkin and autumn drifting from it.

"Good. Pretty quiet so far."

"It's a Thursday; that's usually how it goes." Claire walked over and straightened up a display of books that talked about best practices to manipulate mana. "I'm thinking of closing up early today, actually. That okay with you?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm going to need you to stay for your full shift. And clock in another five hours' overtime," I said in my most authoritative voice before I started to laugh. "Yeah, of course that's okay with me. You're the boss."

Claire laughed a bubbly laugh. She came to the counter, smiling. "I don't think I've ever had this much fun working before. The last shop assistant I had was a moody wolf shifter that kept snapping at me whenever I made a joke. Literally, he'd bare his

teeth and snap. So bizarre.”

“Wolf shifters are always pretty uptight, huh?”

“Not always. I dated one once. He had the biggest—hands. Huge hands. And a great smile that he flashed pretty often. And he also had a huge dick.”

That got me cracking up. “I don’t think I’ve ever dated a shifter.”

“Oh, you’ve got to. Best sex of my life.” She winked, smiled. I’d only known Claire for a few weeks, but if you told me we had been best friends since preschool, I would have believed it. There was something about her that just clicked with me. It was nice, especially with all the shit going on in my life. I had some good friends I could vent to, but none of them were local, and phone calls just weren’t enough. But having Claire around to distract me with silly jokes and conversations really helped me not sink into a pit of my own despair.

“How has your dating life been?” Claire asked innocently, head cocked, long lashes blinking up a storm.

“Not as great as yours, I can guarantee you that. I had a couple serious boyfriends, but neither of them had jobs or even knew how to do laundry properly, so I dumped them. I get nervous with hookups too, so it’s not like I’m constantly meeting up with guys. So yeah, pretty much a barren wasteland down there.”

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“Oh, babes, we’ve got to get you sorted. No wonder all this bad juju is attracted to you.”

“Because my pipes are clogged?”

She nodded. “Yep, you’ve got to release all that built-up stress and tension, or it’ll just accumulate and attract more.”

“I’ve never heard that before.”

“Probably because I just made it up, but sounds pretty legit, huh?”

I rolled my eyes and started to laugh again. “I mean, I’m ready to try and see if it works. I need something to turn my life around.”

“Alright, maybe I can hook you up with one of my friends. Javier is his name—he’s an office manager at one of those improv theaters in Santa Monica. A cheetah shifter, very kind, very funny, and very sexy. I think you’ll like him.”

It was tempting, and I wanted to say yes, but something—someone—held me back from that. That someone happened to be a six-foot-three man with red scales on his chest and a growly smile that made my stomach flutter.

Still... we weren’t really anything except acquaintances. Maybe friends? Yes, we almost hooked up in his bedroom, and he saved my life (on multiple occasions), so that could be affecting things, but I couldn’t deny that no matter what kind of Superman Syndrome I’d fallen under, there was an increasingly powerful tug

between the both of us. Over the last few days, it didn't matter how many rooms that castle had, Damien and I always found ourselves with each other for the majority of the time, hanging out like we were buddies reconnecting after a long separation. Except this separation happened to be from birth.

We hadn't talked about what happened in his bedroom, though. I figured he was still giving me some mental space to sort out all of my shit. But I couldn't deny that it made me wonder if maybe he regretted ever getting that intimate with me?

And why did that thought hurt so fucking bad?

"So should I give him your number?" Claire already had her phone out. I hadn't realized she'd typed out a message already with a...

"How'd you get that picture of me?"

"This one? I just took it." She smiled and turned the phone. "I won't send it if you don't want me to."

"Huh," I said. I was pleasantly surprised by how good the photo turned out. I expected to see myself looking beat down and tired, but it was quite the opposite. I was looking out toward the street, cheeks full and the scraggly beard now trimmed and shaped, my hair freshly cut, the dirty blond tamed with a fade on the sides and scissors on the top. The sun slanted in through a prism by the window that painted my shirt in rainbow colors.

"Actually, send it, and then send that picture to me."

Fuck it. Vampires were after me, my life was in shambles, and I wasn't even sure if Damien was into me. I deserved at least a little dick.

Well, hopefully not little...

Claire winked. "You got it, cutie." She sent the message and the pic. "Don't report me to HR for hitting on you."

"I won't. I will report you for pimping me out, though."

Her laughter hid the jingle of the door opening.

"What's so funny?" Damien asked, sunlight framing him, turning him into a beautiful painting that dripped in gold. The sight of him made me freeze. All thoughts of cheetah shifters and random hookups disappeared, replaced by that half-cocked smile and that tall, lean figure.

One simple thought echoed through my head as my body rebooted: I'm so fucked.

Chapter 15

Top of the World

Damien

I helped Claire and Robby close up the Magic Box. They still wouldn't tell me what they were laughing at when I first got here, but that didn't actually bother me. I liked to see how close those two were getting. Whenever they were together, there would be a constant stream of giggles and laughs, teasing and jokes.

I could tell Robby really needed that kind of connection, and I could trust that Claire would be good for him. I'd known Claire since we were in high school together, both of us meeting after being paired together for a group biology project. She'd ended up going to Wynwood Academy for Marvels in New York City while I stayed in Los

Angeles, attending a much less exclusionary school. We never lost touch, though, and when she moved back to California so she could open up her own shop, we immediately reconnected.

“That’s pretty much it,” Claire said, clapping her hands. “Cashier’s been closed, floors swept, displays cleaned, shelves restocked. We’re good to go, boys.”

Robby looked around with a proud smile. He had opened up to me about how his life had been feeling directionless lately, and I wondered if this gave him a sense of forward movement. I could easily see Claire making him a contemporary after a year or so of experience as an assistant.

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Maybe he can open up his own shop one day.

“Where are you headed off to?” Robby asked. He leaned against the counter, arms crossed. He wore a simple white T-shirt and worn, light denim jeans. A pair of slightly scuffed black Ray-Ban sunglasses hung on his collar. Sunlight played with the golden highlights in his dark blond hair.

He looked like a fucking movie star, and I was sure if I told him that, he’d just deny it and call me blind.

Claire took off her ocean blue robe, the hem enchanted to appear like lapping waves, and neatly folded it. She lifted a hand and swished some invisible thread of red mana, the robe lifting in the air—still perfectly folded—and gliding into an open cubby behind the counter. “I think I picked up on a lead. About how to stop the dragon fall.”

“You did? Really?” I asked, surprised as Robby must have felt, judging by his slack jaw. I’d been working nonstop these last few weeks, trying to dig up old connections and new avenues we could explore. But, just as before, I kept coming up with nothing but rumors and flat-out false information. No one knew how to stop this, and if they did, they were keeping quiet about it.

And time was running out. Warrick grew sicker by the day. He could no longer leave his room, not having an ounce of energy to even stand. I was beginning to shift out of information gathering, now focusing more on preparing for what was ahead. If we needed to infiltrate the Obsidian District to take out the Matriarch, then we would need to be ready for that.

“I didn’t want to say anything yet because it could turn out to be nothing, but... I’m hopeful,” Claire said.

“Do you need one of us to go with you to track the lead down? Any of my siblings?”

Claire threw me an acidic glance. The sunlight played with the assortment of gems and pearls in her long locs, making her literally shine, just like the row of diamond studs she wore up her left ear.

When the hell had I become surrounded by beautiful cover models? “Why do you dragons always think I can’t handle things myself?” she asked, “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

I immediately started to backtrack. “Whoa, no, that’s not what I meant. I just wanted to make sure you’re supported, that’s all.”

“I know.” Claire put a hand on my elbow. I had seen her handle her fair share of trouble before. The time we got into a bar fight with three leopard shifters and two knife-carrying humans being one of them. She took half of them out and barely even broke a sweat. “I’ll be fine. And I’ll try to have some news for you by tonight.”

I looked to Robby and recognized an optimistic glint in those expressive honey brown eyes of his. I knew exactly what he must be thinking: this could be a way to avert the prophecy. If Claire could stop the dragon fall, then we wouldn’t have to go after the Matriarch, nor would we have to consider the ramifications of what would happen if the Matriarch died and the curse stayed.

It was a thought I could barely consider. Killing any human went against the very root of a dragon’s existence, and killing Robby? No. There had to be another way. Claire needed to come back with good news tonight, for all of our sakes.

We walked out onto the street, Claire locking up the Magic Box with another swish of her hand. This time, the red and blue threads were visible, swirling around the lock. Red—the physical threads of mana—was likely being used to attach the blue threads—utilized for perception and illusions—to the entrance of her store, it's simple white door and windows barred shut, as if the pale blue brick walls stretched over them, the word “Closed” scrawled in gold across the space where the entrance normally was.

“I’ll be in touch.” She gave me a hug, the vanilla-and-lavender lotion she’d always used since high school filling my nose. She embraced Robby just as tightly as she did me before she started down the street, clicking her keys to the car parked just a couple of spots down.

“Thanks for picking me up,” Robby said. “I hate how you have to chaperone me.”

“I don’t.” It lets me spend more time with you.

I didn’t say that part out loud.

“Well, guess we should be headed back to the castle, then.”

“Do you have pressing matters to attend to?” I cocked my head, taking a moment to drink him up. His jeans fit him perfectly, but I couldn’t help but imagine how good they’d look off him. He had his sunglasses on, shielding his eyes and giving him a James Dean sense of mystique that made me thirsty for more. I couldn’t stop thinking about getting him naked, not since that night in my bedroom, and today certainly wasn’t helping.

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“Now, Damien, you know damn well my schedule is wide open,” Robby shot back at me.

I chuckled at his sass. He’d been getting more and more playful as the days went on, a quality that I became really attracted to. His sense of humor was a refreshing change from the drier jokes I was accustomed to.

“Good, because I set up a little surprise for you.”

“A surprise? Shit, those scare me.”

“Don’t worry, you’ve got nothing to be scared about. Unless you don’t like—no, that ruins the surprise. I see what you’re doing.” I shake my head and gently nudge him. “We can walk there, or we can fly. Whichever you prefer.”

I didn’t mind the thought of stretching my wings, gliding over the ocean, even if it was only for five or so minutes. The feel of salty air against my scales always made me feel at peace. Add to that the feeling of having Robby on top of me, enjoying the same sights and experiences I was, it made the flight that much more desirable.

“Let’s fly,” he said, cracking his knuckles and stretching his neck. That answer made me grin wide. We’d been on a few flights since Robby had started staying at the castle. Mostly night flights, where we’d both zone out, buoyed by the stars and the quiet presence of each other. I could feel Robby growing more and more confident every time we took to the sky. He’d started to build a trust in me, one I swore to myself I’d never shatter.

“Let’s go to this side street. It’s quieter and a little wider.”

Moments later, I was in my dragon form, stretching my wings, feeling the massive muscles and armor of ruby-red scales rippling and shifting. There was a freedom to being in my dragon form that was incomparable to anything else I’d ever felt. Not only were all of my senses enhanced, but I felt like my emotions were equally as heightened, in a way that made me see through them, made me hone in on what I wanted to feel, which in this moment was just peace. Yes, there was plenty to worry about, but for the next hour or so, I wanted to create a little escape for Robby and me. Somewhere we could go to feel as though we were in a bubble, if only for a moment.

Robby smoothly climbed onto my back. Once he gave me the tap on my neck to let me know he was secure, I started to run forward. A couple of teens who were shooting the shit outside of a surf shop all dropped their phones in unison and watched me as I took off.

My wings lifted us high, the leathery skin filling with air. I sucked it into my lungs, drinking it like the purest water. I couldn’t help the grin that followed, my sharp teeth on full display. The weight of Robby on my back only made this moment that much more soothing. It was needed. This day was needed. Life had become too chaotic, too dark. This world was full of shit that wanted to tear you apart the second you showed any sign of weakness, and it showed no signs of relenting. If anything, what lay ahead could potentially be harder than the challenges we had already overcome.

That thought scared me. I was a dragon, a being set to live for two centuries, aging as if I’d only lived for one. I could engulf my fists in furious flames and could raze half a city block if I opened my mouth and decided to rain down molten fire. I shouldn’t be scared of anything; I was at the top of the food chain.

Nothing should scare me.

But the future terrified me.

I dipped us toward the ocean, following the line of beachgoers tanning on their colorful beach towels or hopping in the gentle waves. Some wakeboarders zipped down the shoreline, the surf too gentle for anyone to go out on a board. Up ahead, I could see our destination, its landmark traits jutting out of the sand like a thorny black spine.

That's because we were headed toward one of my favorite spots on Earth: Manticore Beach.

It was a public beach in Malibu that had been named after the massive rock formations that rose up from the pebbly sand. It was a smooth black limestone that appeared to glitter and shift whenever the sun began to set, as if its namesake was buried under the sand, the mantichore beginning to wake up from its ancient slumber and stretching its thorny tail.

We weren't going down to the sand, though. I flew us around to one of the furthest spike formations. It leaned against its neighbor, creating a smooth and private platform that you could only reach if you had wings or could climb surfaces like a tree frog.

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I made a smooth landing in the center of the space, my talons finding purchase in the sun-soaked black stone. Robby bounced off with a “whoa.” My dragon form reached from edge to edge, but once I was back in my human form, there was plenty of room for the two of us. I went over to a small indent in the stone where the two large, spiky pillars met. I reached into the crevice and I pulled out a basket.

“This is stunning,” Robby said, his back to me as he looked out at the sapphire-blue waters of the Pacific Ocean.

“Like it?”

“It’s beautiful up here. And so quiet.”

As he took in the view, I worked quickly to set up the rest of the surprise before he turned around. I threw open the basket and yanked out the blanket, giving it a toss before laying it flat down on the ground. I pulled out the two bottles of chilled champagne and set them around the vase of tulips and violet roses. I was putting out the cheese and ham when I heard a surprised gasp.

He must have turned around.

I glanced up, smiled. “In the mood for a beach picnic?”

“Damien... you didn’t have to do any of this. It’s incredible. Of course I’m in the mood for a picnic with you.”

I tried not to focus on the way my heart fluttered when he said with you.

Robby sat cross-legged across from me, his sunglasses on and his smile easy. My eyes dropped down to where his jeans bunched up.

Now it wasn't just my pounding heart that I had to ignore.

A few silent minutes passed as we soaked in this moment of peace. It was broken when Robby asked a question. "Damien, remember that moment in your bedroom... Do you... do you regret it?"

I gave a surprised laugh, which made Robby's cheeks turn pink. "Regret it? The only thing I regret is not getting you completely naked and underneath me that night."

Those cheeks turned firehouse red now. He looked back at the ocean, the corner of his smile tugging up toward the stars.

"I was worried. I thought you were trying to ignore what happened in your bedroom." Robby blinked his long black lashes. If I was made of hay and straw I'd blow right over.

Instead, I shook my head. "I thought you were doing the same thing. But if I'm being honest, I haven't stopped thinking about that moment, not since it happened."

"Me neither," Robby said. His voice was low, his gaze aimed down at his feet. Seagulls squawked in the distance, mixing with the crashing waves. If I listened closely, I could hear another sound added to the chorus. A heartbeat. Thump, thump, thump. Coming from only inches in front of me.

He looked up to me, his lips curving upward. I couldn't hold back. I moved in for a kiss, wanting to prove myself with more than just words. I wanted to show Robby how badly I'd craved having him, how his bare body against mine was a rush I needed to feel.

I laid him back, using my weight to apply pressure, guiding him down onto the plush blanket. Whispers of sea foam flew up in our direction, making his kiss taste like the salt I had become so obsessed with from living next to the beach. He moaned into the kiss, his hands exploring my body.

He throbbed between my legs, making me pulse back in response. I pushed my hips down. Robby opened his legs, hitching them around my waist as I started to fuck him with our clothes on.

“Are you sure no one can get up here?” he asked against my lips.

“Positive. It’s just us.”

“Then get naked.”

I didn’t waste a moment, standing up and tearing off my clothes. Robby did the same, throwing his shirt and jeans into the pile next to the picnic basket.

And there he was, lying down, naked and hard and flushed, all for me. An image of pure perfection.

Long, lean legs dusted with dark hair leading up to a pair of tight balls and a thick, twitching uncut cock, already standing up straight, crowned by trimmed pubes that blended with the delicious happy trail leading up to his flat stomach. He had a little dip in his chest, his nipples already pebbled.

“Fuck, Robby, you’re the sexiest man I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

“Then you clearly haven’t looked in a mirror,” Robby said, his gaze dropping down to my already stiff dick.

I got down on my knees and moved between Robby's legs, kissing him before nipping at his bottom lip and moving downward, kissing that dip in his chest, taking those hard nipples into my mouth and playing with them between my teeth. Robby writhed underneath me, the heat from both of us rubbing together competing with the flames caged up inside me.

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“Are you okay with me having my way?”

Robby chewed his lower lip, eyebrows moving up on his face. “Yes, Damien, I’m yours. Do whatever you want with me.”

“That’s a good boy,” I growled as I buried my nose in his pubes, taking in his intoxicating scent. “Then lay back and relax. I want to make you come undone.”

Robby trembled as he listened to me. I slowly massaged his legs, watching his needy length twitch, as if begging for the same touch that squeezed and kneaded on his thighs. I grabbed his balls and gently tugged, gently rolled. I bent down and kissed them, licking up his shaft. His groan of pure pleasure had the same effect as dumping a gallon of gasoline onto a bonfire.

I leaned back and spit on my fingers, sliding them between his cheeks. This time, the moan Robby gave me almost pushed me over the edge. I looked down to see a string of precum leak from my tip. I added that to the slick mix on my fingers before pressing them back onto his tight hole.

“Oh, fuck, Damien, that feels sooo good.”

“Want it to feel even better?” I said as I nipped the inside of his thigh, leaving a shining ring of saliva against his light tan skin.

He gave me those puppy dog eyes of his and nodded while he bit his lower lip. A loose curl of light brown hair fell against his forehead.

Fuck. Me. How could this man be so fucking beautiful?

I pushed my finger inside of him, his eyes flaring wide as I entered him for the first time. He instantly tightened around me, which drove me wild. It was as if his body pleaded with mine for more, no words exchanged.

I abided, pushing my finger in deeper. His cheeks flushed strawberry pink as I massaged his inner walls. I watched his balls tighten against him. So perfect, every part of him. I wanted him to know just how perfect he was.

I moved back so that I could lie down, my finger still inside of him, his balls now resting against my nose. I took in a deep breath, intoxicated by his scent. Cedar and ocean and man and sex. Then I kissed him, his thigh first, the crook of space that met with his groin. I kissed him softly while I continued to finger him. I kissed his pubes, the soft light-brown hair tickling my nose. I kissed his belly, kissed his girthy cock, kissed the full sac that clearly needed to be emptied.

“You’re so fucking wet,” I said, stroking him as he leaked some more. All he could do was moan, head dropping back onto the blanket, and all I could do was keep kissing him.

And I realized in that sun-bathed moment that I never wanted to stop kissing him, not until the very, very end. Robby was someone I wanted with me for the long haul, and I quietly vowed in that moment that I’d make sure we’d make it there together. That we’d grow old and look back on it all with a smile and a laugh, sealing it with a kiss.

It’s what was meant to be, and I was determined to make it so.

But first, I was determined to make Robby come and judging by how he writhed on the blanket, I wasn’t far off from completing my goal.

Chapter 16

Ten More Minutes

Robby

I had never experienced this kind of passion before, this kind of raw lust. Sex was always decent fun for me but never primal. Never this fucking hot. I had to break eye contact with Damien as he swallowed me down his throat, those shining half-lidded green eyes of his pulling me closer and closer to the edge, his finger working me from the inside. His tongue swirled around me, drinking up every drop of precum I gave him.

This couldn't be real. Had to be a dream. Damien's finger curled inside me, pushing up and sending stars of pleasure shooting across my vision—oooh no, this isn't a dream. This is real.

And I never want it to end.

“God, Damien, that feels so good.” My toes curled down into the blanket, the hard surface of the towering stone pushing back. He moaned as my cock pushed against his cheek.

Holy shit, I wasn't sure if I could last much longer.

As if reading my mind (or my body language), Damien pulled off of me. He came up and kissed me, his finger still massaging me.

He tasted like sex. I couldn't get enough, thrusting up, rubbing myself on him and grinding back down on his hand.

“I’m getting close,” I warn over a particularly loud wave crashing down below.

He smiled down at me, lips glistening. All the worries, all the stress that had been building up inside me over these last few weeks, suddenly disappeared. I knew it was only a momentary escape, but that wouldn’t stop me from enjoying every fucking second of it.

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He slowly pulled out of me and stood, both legs on either side of me. His shadow painted the white-and-blue blanket I lay on. The head of his massive cock was already wet. He kept himself trimmed too, the dark black curly hair stopping in clean lines.

“You want this?” Damien said in a low growl, fisting the base of hard dick.

All I could do was nod as I looked up, the fire in his eyes shining brighter than the sun that framed him, a patch of ruby-red scales shining on his chest. I leaned up on my elbows and opened my mouth, sticking out my tongue as Damien lowered himself. He pressed himself against my mouth, rubbing the head of his cock over my lips.

“You like that?”

I nodded, giving him a needy look as I swallowed him down.

He dropped his head back, his words lighting me on fire. “That’s it, Robby. Take every inch of this big dick.”

I did as he asked, opening my mouth so he could sink down to my throat. His taste filled me, making my mouth water. I started to bob, up and down, working him with my tongue, massaging his balls with a gentle hand. He started to thrust, sinking deeper, fingers knotting in my hair. I could hardly take him down my throat with how big he was.

But I was a determined little dick-pig, and his pleasure-filled groans only spurred me

on.

“Fuck yeah, fuck yeah, baby. Swallow it all.”

I moaned around his cock, taking him just like he asked, letting him use my mouth for his pleasure. My own dick pulsed. All I had to do was give it a single stroke, and I was sure I’d blow.

“Like that, Robby? Like having my thick cock in your mouth?”

The only answer I could give him was a dick-muffled “mhmm.” His assertiveness, his need to get off, it drove me wild, and I could tell he was getting just as close.

“Want it, Robby? Want me to come for you, baby?”

Another “mhmm,” another nod. I started to jerk myself off, his thrusts becoming more erratic, his cock hitting the back of my throat. His words shifted to animalistic sounds, grunts. His fingers kneaded at my scalp before pulling my head down, holding me there.

He erupted, giving me just what I wanted. What I needed. He twitched and groaned, his knees shaking as my throat filled with his seed. As I swallowed every last drop, my own climax hit, cum spilling out of me, my toes curling as pleasure rocked through me. It crashed over me like the waves that were below us, washing me out onto a pleasure-filled shore.

Damien smiled, green eyes glittering, same as the red scales on his chest and bicep.

“...Damn,” he finally said. “That was hotter than any fire I could ever conjure up.”

“Fuck yeah it was,” I said with a breathless laugh and wiped at my wet lips. I

collapsed down onto the blanket, completely spent and drenched in sweat. My breathing was heavy, my entire body felt like Jell-O, and my brain couldn't put together a functioning sentence if my life depended on it.

It was perfect. Exactly the kind of escape I needed after everything I'd been through. I basked in the post-orgasm glow, feeling as if I was going to float off this rock and dive straight into the sky above.

"Did you enjoy the picnic?" Damien asked as he lay down next to me, a lazy grin on his face. He put an arm underneath me, surprising me. I wasn't sure what to expect after a hookup but was glad that Damien wasn't pushing me away now that he got what he wanted.

"What do you think?" I asked as I looked down at the cum on my belly, my cock still swollen. Damien's too. I wouldn't mind going for a second round, keeping this moment frozen in time for as long as we could. "You?"

"Yes, I enjoyed it quite a bit." He winked at me and rested his head back on the plush blanket. I almost forgot how high up we were, perched on our own private paradise.

I nuzzled into Damien's side. He didn't tense or move away, only wrapped me up a little tighter in his arm. Delicious heat radiated from his body. I trailed my fingers over the soft crimson scales that made an almost circular patch on his chest, right over his right pec.

A permanent reminder of the power and flame contained within.

"Can you feel this?" I asked him as I traced the delicate lines between the scales.

"Of course. Almost more so than the touch against my human skin."

“Really? I wasn’t sure if it was more like armor, or like a turtle shell... wait a second, do turtles feel their shells?”

Damien chuckled and nodded. “They definitely can. I was good friends with a tortoise shifter. He could feel every tiny tap against his shell.”

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“Huh. Interesting.” A fresh ocean breeze whipped over us, lifting the corner of the blanket and sending a couple of napkins flying out of the basket. The sun inched toward the horizon, reminding me of how late it was getting. “We should probably start heading back soon.”

“Let’s have ten more minutes up here. It’s so peaceful.”

“It really is,” I said, eyes shutting as I inhaled some of the sweet ocean air, filling my lungs with it. It brought me back to the days when I’d come to the beach as a kid. Rarely did my parents ever bring me out as far as Manticore Beach, sticking more with Santa Monica, but the few times we did come, I would always ogle at the massive leaning stones. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined I’d be lying down on top of one, relaxing naked with a dragon who happened to be the sexiest fucking man I’d ever laid eyes on.

“Life’s crazy, huh?”

Damien stirred. I wondered if he had dozed off in those minutes of silence.

“I never imagined myself being... important.” I continued on with my train of thought, unsure exactly where the station was located. “That sounds weird, but it’s true. I just thought I was a regular guy struggling with regular problems, and I’d go on living my boring and regular life. I never daydreamed that I was some famous actor or rock star. I never picture myself discovering some big miracle cure or solving some huge political crisis.

“And that was all fine with me... but now? I feel like I’m at the center of something I

don't want to be in the center of. This curse, the dragon fall—Damien, I just can't stop thinking about it." The postclimax glow began to fade, making way for the dull and constant tug of anxiety in my chest. As if every breath I took had been weighted down by bags of heavy lead.

"I haven't stopped thinking of it either."

I sat up, looked down at those worried green eyes. "Damien, what if it really is my death that stops this curse? What if—"

"No." He said it with a certainty that made my lips snap shut. "I don't think we need to think about what-ifs right now. We need to focus on solid, evidence-based answers. An old poem in a dusty book isn't the be-all, end-all."

"It's just... I don't want you to ignore a very real possibility. If my blood is the key to saving the dragons, then you need to spill it."

Now Damien sat up. His brows furrowed in anger, jaw clenched. "Robby, that is something I refuse to do. Ever. I can't explain it fully—I don't even understand it fully—but protecting you is something as natural to me as breathing. Just as necessary too." He shook his head and let out a huff. I half expected to see smoke rise from his nostrils. "No, I refuse."

His answer made me, well, happy. Which also made me feel guilty... If I was the key to saving all the dragons, then should I be pushing him harder to... to kill me?

Fuck. What the hell do I do? And why is this even happening?

The worries rose inside me like toxic vines, reclaiming the space that had been emptied and hollowed moments after my release. This was so fucked-up. Should I really just hide out while the curse ravaged all of dragonkind? How selfish would that

have made me?

Made us?

“I don’t think we need to tell others outside of the family either.”

My head dipped to the side, brow arching as if tugged up by an invisible string.

“Why?”

He chewed on his cheek before saying, “Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because my family won’t harm you, but I can’t make that promise of every dragon on this Earth. Desperation could lead to craven acts. I don’t want anyone getting any ideas until we can solve it ourselves.”

I sighed, shoulders slumped. “So now I have to hide from the vampires and the dragons? I’m getting so tired, Damien. So fucking tired.”

“I know,” he said and grabbed my hands in his. A pair of seagulls flew past, squawking their content at seeing two naked men perched up high. I let his hands encase mine. “It won’t last much longer. We’re all working to stop this. Just trust me. Okay?”

... Fucking hell. What did this all mean? And why did Damien’s touch alone reassure me more than anyone’s words had ever done? Even though he had the potential to set me ablaze and end it all right here, I had never felt safer.

“Okay,” I said. He leaned in and kissed me again. I could still taste myself on his lips. Fuck. His hands went to my chest, over my shoulders. Heat spread through me again,

slowly, burning back the fear and worry.

Damien's phone started to ring, vibrating inside his discarded jeans. "It could be Claire."

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I leaned back and let him grab it. Sure enough, it was our favorite Malibu Marvel.

“I’ve got something. Something big. Get everyone together at your place,” she said over the speaker.

“That soon?” Damien asked.

“I’m a fast worker,” Claire quipped back before hanging up.

“See?” Damien said with a growing smile, handing me some napkins so I could clean up. “I told you everything would be okay.”

I still wasn’t convinced, but at least I was hopeful. That was way more than I could say I was when the day had started.

Chapter 17

Daddy Issues

Damien

We gathered in the spacious Blackthorne living room, where the energy was electric. Everyone except Maddox and Warrick were here, my little brother barely having the energy to get out of bed lately. Claire wouldn’t say what she found until we were all together, which took a little bit since Maddox had been chasing down a lead of his own, all the way over in Texas. Still, she said it could be a way to save War and the rest of us dragons.

Benjamin was also with us, standing by the window with arms crossed and gaze turned out to the courtyard, looking like he'd just come from playing basketball in a sweat-less tank top and black gym shorts with high top sneakers. The vampire had been hanging out around the castle since he came back into Maddox's life, promising us that he'd do whatever he could to help stop the dragon fall. I knew he was one of the good ones, but I still didn't let my guard down fully.

Not when so much was at stake.

I glanced at a smiling Robby, chatting with Claire and Dawn about a viral trend that involved dancing on homemade platforms made to float by a Marvel. Something dumb called "Marveling." I may not have been very invested in the trend, but I was certainly invested in how relaxed and happy Robby looked sitting between my friend and my sister. He'd been through hell and back without any assurance that the path ahead would be any smoother; he needed these moments.

The trio started to laugh, catching Ben's attention. He normally kept his distance from Robby, if only because he could likely sense how uncomfortable Robby became when he was in fang distance. But this time, he leaned on the back of the couch and watched the videos over Claire's shoulder.

Dawn became distracted by a ding on her own phone. "Oh, hold on, this could be important."

"About the curse?" Claire asked.

"No, no. Something else." Going off Claire and Robby's inquisitive looks, Dawn continued to explain. "I sent in an application to be part of the TED. I'm supposed to be hearing back about next steps soon."

"No way. The Tear Exploratory Division?" Claire asked, leaning over Robby and

touching my sister's leg. "My uncle's part of that. Can I ask him if he can help you out?"

"That'd be great," Dawn answered, smiling, eyes lingering on Claire's for a moment.

My sister had been wanting to join TED since she was old enough to know what the Tears were. Her curiosity had always impressed me, the way she relentlessly searched for answers to whatever questions popped up in her brain. It made sense that the Tears would catch her attention, considering no one had any idea about how they worked or what was on the other side. Yes, our species (and many others) were spit out of the rainbow-colored fractures in the Earth's crust over centuries, but no one could recall where it was they had come from. Even some of the first vampires to have come from the Tears had no memory of their original homes. And there hadn't been a major species flood since the fae came during the disco-filled 1970s. Smaller species—gryphons, chimeras, gargoyles, kelpie—would occasionally arrive through the Tears at random intervals, but none that needed to be given voting rights and social security.

The heavy doors to the castle opened and shut, announcing Maddox's arrival. I turned to the arching entryway, ready to greet my brother, only to be shocked when it wasn't him who walked into the living room.

It was our father. He wore athletic shorts and a shirt, the sleeve torn up with scrapes across his skin. Onyx-black scales shined around his left wrist like a permanent watch, as dark as the tired eyes that looked out at us. The room fell silent. I hadn't seen him since the night my mother died. He'd taken to the skies and left without a word.

"Dad?" Dawn said, standing up from the couch, phone left forgotten on the armrest. "Where the fuck have you been?"

My father took a step back, as if the sparks from Dawn's anger was enough to warn him: don't come close. He looked down, his dark black hair a mess, matching the dark and scraggly beard. My father always took care of himself, never missing a monthly barber's appointment. He had immense pride, a trait he'd passed on to all his children.

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So what the hell had he been through? And why hadn't he been here with us?

"Where's War? Is he—"

"Still alive? Yes, he is." Dawn's skin crackled, electricity jumping across her knuckles. She had been the closest to our father and had been the most crushed when he revealed he wasn't the do-no-wrong dragon she'd always idolized. He was a selfish asshole, who was quick to fly away when shit hit the fan.

"Good. I've been searching, speaking with other dragons. Everyone is beginning to speak about the vampire Matriarch as if she's involved."

"You're about ten steps too slow, Father." It was Maddox, who came into the room like an ice storm, chilling us all with the glare he shot at Luca. Our dad stood his ground, the muscles in his jaw flexing.

This could escalate. It could derail us. I was about to intervene, but Claire beat me to the punch. "Maybe now's a good time to cut in." She stood, clapping her hands, her wrists full of golden bracelets clinking together. "I think I might have figured out how we can save Warrick and the rest of the dragons."

We all turned to look at her. She commanded center stage now. All thoughts of a feuding family were left at the wayside.

Had she really done it? Had my best friend discovered a way to save us all?

She swirled her hand out, aquamarine and teal and navy blue shades of mana

appearing, gliding through the air like ribbons of silk. They wound together on top of the coffee table, the space shimmering as the threads took shape, as if someone had dropped a curtain of fabric on something underneath.

Claire flicked two fingers toward her, the threads disappearing and leaving behind a perfectly solid-looking marble statue of a woman wearing a flowing dress that clung to her body, sitting atop a panther, the roaring predatory cat looking even more regal with a crown of antlers on its head. If I hadn't seen her conjure it, I would have completely believed it to be the real thing. Except I knew how Marvels worked their illusions. A single swipe of my hand through the statue would reveal there was nothing there but air.

"That's the statue of Huntress Aliana." Maddox moved toward the table. Robby hung back by me. I was acutely aware of how close we stood together. After what happened in Manticore Beach, I could feel the connection between us having been strengthened. What would come of it, I wasn't quite sure, but I certainly enjoyed it. I liked Robby being near me, close enough that I could reach out and hold his hand in mine. I wanted more of him, the way I had him back on the beach, and I wanted to give more of myself to him in return.

"It sure is," Claire said. Dawn cocked her head, looking from the statue to Claire. Her thin brows inched together.

"The statue hasn't spoken in years. Why bring it up now?"

The statue of the Huntress Aliana was famous around the world for one simple reason: it could speak. But it didn't just spout random words like a parrot—the statue spoke in fragmented pieces of pure truth. You could ask her a question, and she'd give you a fully honest answer, even if it was about something in the future or something hidden in the past.

“Because we can ask her how to cure the dragon fall, and she’d answer us,” I said. “But we haven’t been able to get her to speak, no matter what we’ve tried.”

And I’d tried. It wasn’t the first time I’d thought of the statue, located right here in Gryphon Park. But after a few months of trying to get stone to speak, I became frustrated and moved on to other possibilities.

“That’s because you didn’t have the proper offering.” Claire winked and opened up the bag hanging by her hip. She pulled out a glistening moon rose, the petals shining as if illuminated from the inside, small dark marks resembling the same craters that dotted the actual celestial body.

“Who wants to go on a field trip?” she asked as we all collectively picked up our jaws from the floor. “Let’s go get some answers.”

Chapter 18

Mystery in the Marble

Damien

Gryphon Park climbed up the Santa Monica Mountains and was a famous landmark for a variety of reasons, full of scenic trails that sloped up gentle hills, stages for plays out amongst the trees, and celebrities walking their dogs and desperate for their next photo opp. There was a planetary observation center set at the very top of the mountain, with spectacular views of the entire Los Angeles Basin for those who didn’t have wings to see it from the skies themselves.

It had originally gotten its name from a zoo that also took up quite a large footprint in the park. Full of exotic animals, it pulled in visitors from all over the world. Everyone wanted to see the chimera and the sea lions and the grizzly bear and the manticore

(which I always sadly expected was being heavily sedated, having joined an activist group in high school to protest it's captivity).

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But the real stars of the show were the two gryphons they had rescued from a poacher.

These two gryphons weren't exactly grateful for their newfound saviors. No one had realized just how intelligent these majestic creatures really were, and so the entirety of Los Angeles was surprised when they woke up one morning to gibbons swinging from palm trees and bobcats running down Rodeo Drive. The gryphons had not only broken out of their own enclosure, but they'd gone around the zoo and broken out every single animal they could find.

Since then, the zoo had been shut down, its abandoned skeleton turning into a kind of tourist attraction, where people strolled through to see the empty cages and graffiti-sprayed concrete buildings. And while the zoo never reopened, the two gryphons, Bema and Corin, never left. They made a nest at the top of the empty food court and stuck around, watching over their new home and posing for a few pictures.

Those two big birds sure did love attention.

The five of us—Robby, Claire, Maddox, Dawn, and I—were on the opposite side of the park, near the babbling river that cut through the center like a winding blue snake, always flowing no matter how dry the season. We were near the succulent gardens, home to a wide variety of colorful plants, all smooth-skinned and alien-like.

“I used to come here all the time as a kid. I brought my first boyfriend here on a date, actually,” Robby said as we entered through the iron gates of the garden. A dolphin shifter walked past, holding hands with his girlfriend, his fin rising up from the back of his head. The girl he was with had a bushy tail that flicked back and forth from out

of her skintight jeans. Squirrel was my best guess.

“Good choice,” Maddox said. “I personally like more intimate date spots. Like a chartered yacht for the weekend. How’s that sound to you, Claire?”

“Stuck on a yacht out in open waters with a shark right there on board? Yeah, no, it sounds like my personal hell.”

She strode forward down the brick-paved path, walking side step with Dawn and discussing something about the statue we were on our way to see. I wanted to tell my brother to quit it, that she clearly wasn’t interested, but he started up a conversation with Robby about his own first date experience.

“Yeah,” Mads said, chin jutting out. He wore a relaxed mint-green shirt with an open collar, curly dark chest hair contrasting the light white cat hair that covered his black shorts. Bambi must have been napping on him again. “He was the quarterback of my rival football team. He put up a good fight, considering he was a regular human. But he couldn’t stop me from winning, and he couldn’t stop himself from resisting me either.”

I rolled my eyes, having heard this story plenty of times already. Instead of focusing on my brother’s old conquests, I scanned the garden, sizing up any potential threats. I hated that we were so exposed, although having three dragons and a Marvel around Robby should have been enough to keep him safe.

No one sent up any red flags. Everyone was either paired off in their own romantic little worlds or by themselves and strolling through the park for a peaceful afternoon. None appeared to be vampires ready to snatch Robby and drag him away to Helstriva’s lair, where she’d do who-knew-what with.

The thought sickened me. Robby was quickly becoming a good friend—becoming

more than even that. I found myself waking up and immediately thinking about him, going to bed and dreaming about him. That didn't happen with any of the friends I had, but things were so different with Robby. His smile made mine come easier; his sassy and quippy humor was the perfect fit for my more dry sensibilities. He was incredibly intelligent and kind, and he had the sexiest fucking body I'd ever had the privilege of touching. Everything about Robby drew me in, and that scared the scales right off my rusty red hide. I had never opened myself up to this kind of connection before, and now it was the one person who was at the center of the dragon fall.

How the hell did this happen? And how the fuck is it going to work out?

I certainly hoped that this jaunt through Gryphon Park would be the answer to all our problems. I could tell my hope was shared with the group too. All of us were moving a little faster, a little lighter. Even the drive here felt good. Dawn teased my brother, who teased Robby, who laughed with Claire, all of them dancing when I lowered the top down on the Jeep and played a song I'd never heard of but was clearly one of Robby's favorites.

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That was another thing that surprised me—in a good way—about Robby. Not only his ironclad resilience through all of this, but the ease at which he seemed to be fitting in with the rest of my family, even during one of the hardest times of his life. He could have been shutting everyone out while he dealt with all his trauma, and I wouldn't have blamed him for a second. But he was doing the opposite. He was finding light where there should have only been darkness, and that was the quality that attracted me to him the most.

Well, that and his perfect bubble butt. Couldn't forget about that. Nor would I, not when I devoured him later tonight after celebrating us finding the cure to the dragon fall.

"The statue of the Huntress should be right up this path," Claire said, the satchel held tight against her hip, her sky-blue nails shining bright against the dark leather of the strap.

"And you're sure this will work?" Maddox asked.

"Of course not," Claire answered, not even looking over her shoulder at my brother. "But it's way more than you've brought to the table."

He stayed quiet at that. There weren't many people who could get Madds to shut up, but Claire was definitely one of them. "Is there anything besides the moon rose that we need to consider for this?" I asked, trying to bring us back into focus.

Claire shook her head, looking back at me and slowing down so she walked next to me. "From the scholars I spoke to, the statue only requires an offering of the moon

rose, harvested five days after a waxing moon, after it's been grown by only watering it with water you've let sit out for at least ten full moons. Obviously, not many gardeners and plant enthusiasts are into all that hard work, but for the Huntress, people would do anything. With how hard it was to get, I think we just drop the rose on the offering plate, and she'll speak."

"How'd you get the rose in your possession?" I asked.

"By paying for it, obviously."

"How much was it? We'll gladly cover any costs."

Claire waved a hand in the air. "Don't worry about it, Damien."

"Well, thank you."

"For saving the entirety of dragon kind? Sure, no problem." She winked and gave me a playful hip bump. The path curved and trailed through a tunnel of bamboo. "I just hope it works." There was an honest sincerity in her voice.

"It will," I assured her, without any real evidence to prove it. We were all running on fumes here, all hoping for the same thing.

The tunnel of bamboo opened up into a small clearing, surrounded by tall evergreen trees that had been here for thousands of years, creating a kind of permanent green fortress around the beautiful statue.

And beautiful it was.

A huge piece, sculpted by a master artist back when Gryphon Park didn't even have a name yet. He'd made it for a particular Marvel that was said to be similar to a

goddess in not only her powers but also her being. She impacted thousands of lives through her blessings, while she saved countless lives by single-handedly hunting enough food to keep them all fed through cruel and bitter winters.

Well, maybe not single-handedly. The Huntress wore a flowing marble dress to match her long flowing hair, an elaborately sculpted bow in her hands, resting at her side but ready to shoot an arrow in a split second. She sat atop her familiar, Rhox the stag leopard, a rare and deadly beast that worked with her as though he were a phantom limb. In person, he would have been a slick midnight oil in color, with white rosettes that dotted his hind legs and down his tail, his head crowned in antlers that reached at least five feet in length, framing the Huntress on top of him.

“It’s stunning,” Robby said, walking up to the statue. It was sculpted to be the same size as the subjects it was based off, but the pedestal they were on gave them an even more impressive height. At the base of the pedestal was a silver bowl. Dried flowers and old heirlooms had been left to collect dust there until park maintenance came by to clean it up.

Claire moved it all to the side with a swish of her hand, ruby-red threads of mana gently carrying the collection of offerings down to the ground in a neat pile. She then unclipped her satchel and reached inside.

Out came the moon rose. It held us all in a hypnotized breath. It was beautiful. The stem was a soft blue in color, the rosebud opened and full, the petals each looking like the surface of the cratered moon. Even more spectacular was the way the petals glowed, matching the same light that was put off by a full moon. The trees around us provided more than enough shade for it to appear as if Claire had plucked it out right from the sky and placed it into the palm of her hand.

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“Whoa,” Robby said, blinking away the shock of the moment.

“Pretty, huh?” Claire gently held the moon rose up for closer inspection.

“Pretty’s an understatement,” Dawn replied. “It’s the most beautiful flower I’ve ever seen.”

“And it’s about to solve all of our problems,” Madds said, rubbing his hands together as if he were about to throw down the winning dice on a craps table.

Claire turned to the group. Anticipation rolled off each of us. No one else was around this part of the garden except us, giving us complete privacy for the moment ahead. “Everyone ready? She’ll only answer one question, so we have to make sure it’s a good one.”

“Let’s do this,” Maddox said. “We need to save War. We need to save us.”

Claire nodded, moving to the statue, her soft sandals clapping against the smooth brick. Bushels of lavender surrounded the statue, another one of the Huntress Aliana’s favorite flowers. Although, rightfully so, they weren’t in the top spot like the moon roses were.

Claire looked back at us—this was it, the moment that would decide all our fates. I found myself holding my breath as she delicately placed the rose down on the offering plate and stepped back.

And we waited.

And waited.

Waited.

Until Claire shook her head. Until Robby's shoulders slumped. Until Maddox kicked some rocks at his feet.

Shit.

"We're sure we don't need an incantation?" I asked through the heavy silence.

"No, it's just the offering. It was supposed to work," Claire said, pulling her phone out of her jeans pocket and furiously dialing someone's number. "Ryan, did you give me a fake fucking moon rose?" She stomped away, starting to shout into the phone. "I paid over ten thousand dollars for that piece of shit. Now what do I do with it?"

She scoffed. "I swear to the gods, I'll press your dick in a book before I do it to that fucking rose."

The statue stayed completely still, as all statues were known to do. I could see Robby slowly start curling inward, like a soda can being pressed down by an angry fist. Maddox leaned against a tree, as stumped as it was.

No. This couldn't be the end of this path. We were so close. Maybe there was a clue to how the statue worked on the marble itself? I leaned in, touching the smooth surface, trying to sense even a slight change in the stone. Something that I could press or twist. I even pulled at the antlers on the roaring leopards head to no avail.

Wait a second...

There were two subjects in this statue. One was the Huntress Aliana, and the other

was her trusted familiar, Rhox. She had loved the beast so much that she requested Rhox to be humanely killed if she were to die first so she would be buried with him. If the stag leopard died first, then Alian would be burned in a pyre, determined to meet him in the afterlife.

So why would only one of them get an offering?

They wouldn't. Huntress Aliana was said to favor the moon roses over anything else, but what would Rhox favor? A predator who feasted on prey three times his body size?

Blood, flesh, meat.

I put my hand out, fitting it into the leopard's mouth.

I pressed down. The marble teeth were much sharper than I expected, cutting into my skin with surprising ease. Blood dripped from the cut and onto the glistening white statue, dripping off the stag leopard's jaw and falling down on the bowl that held the moon rose.

Robby came to ask me what I was doing but got cut off by another voice. One that was melodic, sounding as if there was an entire chorus speaking the same exact words behind her.

"Speak your question," the statue said, "and I'll speak your answer, dragon."

Chapter 19

You're Formally Invited

Robby

I watched, stunned, as the statue started to move. The stag leopard shifted, his jaw closing as Damien removed his still-bleeding hand. The Huntress lowered her bow, solid stone moving as smoothly as if there were joints and muscle underneath. I could have sworn I saw the edges of her thin lips curling upward.

“Speak your questions, and I’ll speak your answer, dragon.”

This was it. This would be the moment we solved all our problems. We wouldn’t need to worry about prophecies or vampires or the entirety of the dragon species becoming extinct.

I didn’t have to worry about dying. About being sacrificed, the same way my brother had.

The thought cut me as deep as the stag leopard’s teeth would have. I tried to bottle it up—there were more important things to focus on right now—but I couldn’t stop myself from thinking of him. Could we have saved him, too, if he hadn’t been kept hidden from me? Would any of this even be happening?

“Esteemed Huntress,” Damien began. Claire, Maddox, and Dawn were standing around the statue. If I had to guess, I would say that all five of us were holding our breaths. “Thank you for speaking with us.”

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“We come based off your offering. What is the truth you seek? And remember, dragon, you only have one question.”

Damien nodded. I watched him, his face as unexpressive as the Huntress. Like both of them were made from the same ancient marble. “There has been a curse placed on the dragons. It’s bringing us down from the skies and taking us out one by one.”

“I am aware,” the statue replied. The stag leopard flexed its front paws, long and vicious marble claws slipping out and scratching against the pedestal. I wondered if it was capable of leaping off that platform and having a late lunch.

“Good,” Damien continued. “Then the answer I seek is in regards to the dragon fall.”

Damien was doing exactly what we had talked about back in his castle. He avoided asking any kind of question until he gave enough information—or gleaned enough information—from the statue to know that her answer would be relevant and accurate. It would be very simple to ask an open-ended question that landed us with an absolutely useless answer, and then our one shot at solving this would be gone.

The Huntress tilted her head. I could hear kids screeching and laughing from a nearby playground, completely oblivious to the scene playing out only feet away from them. “Would you like to know who called the curse?”

Damien shook his head. “No, we already have a good idea as to who is responsible.” The ruby-red scales on his chest peeked out from under his button-up blue shirt, the top three buttons left open. A bold reminder to the power he had swirling inside him. “We want to know how to end the curse.”

“Is that your question?”

“Yes,” Damien said.

“Then ask it,” the chorus of invisible voices said. Her lips were definitely curling into a smile now.

Damien cleared his throat. “Huntress Aliana, how can we end this curse before it’s too late?”

There was a moment of worrying silence before the Huntress spoke again. “If a cure is what you seek, find the place where sunsets on the boulevard gleam. There, you will attend the dance of the world’s end dream. The cure to the dragon’s fall is behind a hidden door inside of the mirrored hall you’ve walked before.” With the answer given, the statue of the Huntress and her stag leopard shifted back into its original position, her mouth closing and the smile disappearing into a neutral expression, the curved bow held at her side and at the ready for another silent eternity.

I looked expectantly at Damien, but the confusion on his face worried me. Same with Dawn and Maddox. Even Claire appeared to be left at a loss. “Um, did that answer help at all?” I asked Damien.

He blinked, clearly thinking over the possibilities as he chewed on the inside of his cheek. Dawn looked down at the piece of paper she had jotted the answer on. Claire leaned over her, resting her head on Dawn’s shoulder as they read it over.

“Shit,” I said, sensing the growing dread seeping through the group. Had we wasted our time? Did we chase another dead end?

Dawn rubbed at her forehead, ran a hand through her brown hair, worn in her natural loose curls falling down past her shoulders. “The answer is here; we just have to

figure it out.”

“Let’s take it piece by piece,” Claire said. “This first part, ‘where sunsets on the boulevard gleam,’ that must be talking about Sunset Boulevard.”

Maddox narrowed his eyes. “Great, so the statue sent us to a major road that cuts through the entire city. That really narrows things down.”

“What about this line?” Damien asked, ignoring his brother’s frustration. “About a dance for the world’s end?”

“Sounds like a Britney song,” I said under my breath. I had the sudden urge to time travel back to being a teen, dancing and singing in my bedroom to a crowd of zero but imagining the stadium in my head being sold out. Life was so fucking simple back then.

Another memory rose up from my past. Multiple memories. Of me going to work with my mom when school was out. It was during her time as a maid at Marmont’s Chateau. He was an eccentric old dragon who’d bought out a huge property in West Hollywood, tucking into a sloping hill that made up the private residences of a bevy of famous people—along with being a couple of their last resting places. It had opened up as a hotel in the 1960s and brought in disgustingly rich visitors from all over, but the dragon had never left, staying in one of the Spanish cottages that surrounded the property.

It also had one of the most interesting hallways I’d ever seen.

“A mirrored hallway... I know where that is.”

Everyone’s gaze snapped in my direction.

“I used to go with my mom when she would work at Marmont’s Chateau. I remember being a kid and thinking his hall of mirrors was always really weird. I’d never forget it. Made me really fucking dizzy.”

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Damien's eyes widened, the specks of forest green appearing to shine under the sunlight. "That's why she said, 'a hall you've walked before.' She wasn't talking to me—she was talking to you."

"Holy shit," Maddox said, a hand digging into his shorts. He pulled out his phone, the screen cracked but still functioning. "Holy fucking shit."

"What?" Dawn, Claire, and Damien all asked at the same time.

"I got an invite months ago. With everything going on, I totally forgot about it until now." He turned his phone around so that we could read what was on the broken screen.

"Maddox Blackthorne," Claire started to read it out loud. "You are formally invited to Marmont's Chateau for a party to end all others. We're celebrating Marmont's most imminent demise, so bring a bucket and a mop in case you need to clean up his ashes before the night is done. And be ready to dance and fuck like the world is ending, because it is."

I couldn't hold in my excitement, doing a comical jump-in-place. Damien's emerald eyes shone like precious gems. "We did it," I said, matching the handsome red dragon's grin.

"You did it," he said, putting a hand (the one that wasn't cut) on my arm. "We wouldn't have realized what the statue meant if you hadn't been here to help."

That made my cheeks flush with heat for some reason. Or was that his touch? The

warmth flowed down my jaw. I knew my throat must have been turning a strawberry pink.

I felt... useful for once. Not like I was the powerless human being dragged along or protected from the big bad vamps. I had offered something necessary to the group—potentially to all of the dragons. Sure, maybe they would have connected Marmont's Chateau to the Huntress' riddle eventually, but every second counted when their little brother was withering away back at home.

"This is perfect," Maddox said. "Marmont's known to throw elaborate parties, but there's a moment in every one of them when the rooms fill with thick colored smoke. Like a foam party but colorful and less messy... well, depending on who you're with. People use it as a chance to hook up—not that many of his guest need the modesty anyway—but I think that 'mist moment' would be the perfect time to go and break into Marmont's hoard."

Dawn sucked in a breath. "You think the cure is in his hoard?"

"It has to be," Maddox answered. "He wouldn't keep something like that out in the open. The entrance to his hoard has to be inside of that hallway."

"Is breaking into a dragon's hoard... not great?" I already knew the answer to my question based off their expressions alone, but I decided to ask it anyway.

Damien gave a grunt. "That's putting it lightly. You saw how I instinctively reacted to you just getting near the door handle to mine. Breaking into another dragon's hoard is one of the most heinous crimes we can commit."

"Okay, so then why are we breaking in?" I asked. This time, the question felt obvious, but the answer eluded me. "If this saves his species, then why not just ask him to let us in?"

“We can, but it’s unlikely he’ll cooperate,” Damien said. “Since the dragon fall started, there have been a few of our kind who’ve embraced it. They’ve turned themselves into a group called The Falling. They consider the curse a blessing, meant to bring them back to the paradise they think we came from—from the other side of the Tears. That’s why he’s having this party—he knows he’s set to die and welcomes it.”

“Honestly, I don’t think we should even ask him,” Maddox said, arms crossed against his barrel-chest. “It’ll send up red flags. He’ll revoke the invitation, and then it’ll be even harder to get inside.”

“I agree,” Claire said. “I’ve worked with him before. He wanted some artifacts disenchanting so that he could use them as decorations. He’s also a big buyer of potions and tonics. He’s usually more paranoid than that one time I ate too many of those pot brownies Xavier got us.”

“You were wide-eyed for like two days,” Maddox said with a chuckle.

Claire rolled her eyes. “You weren’t all that much better. Didn’t you think the Nutella we were eating had sewed your mouth shut?”

Dawn and Damien both laughed at that. “Alright, you two,” Damien said. “We’ve got work to do. Let’s get back to the castle and figure out what we’re going to do next.”

“Let’s,” Maddox said, starting down the brick path and out of the small clearing, the scent of lavender and eucalyptus carrying on the breeze. “I’m picking up some brownies on the way home. Let’s try it again.”

As we were leaving, I turned to look at the statue one last time. For no reason other than my own gratefulness, I mouthed a silent thank-you, giving up my gratitude as if it were another offering.

It could have all been in my head, but I was sure the Huntress winked at me before I turned to follow the dragons and Marvel out of the park.

Chapter 20

Flying High

Damien

Maddox and Claire sat giggling in the corner of the room, by the pinball machine that constantly dinged and dazzled. We were in the arcade room, lit up by neon lights and sparkling screens. There were two arched windows bordering the pool table that allowed the room to soak in some of the last light from the dying sun, a view of the surrounding Malibu mountains painted in those golden strokes. The walls were the gray stone of the castle, which contrasted against the more modern lights and toys in the room. Robby, who had taken a nibble of the brownie, was in deep conversation with Dawn about her theories on how the Tears started and where (if anywhere) did they lead. Even Warrick was with us, looking slightly pale but actually smiling.

I made sure he didn't have any of the brownies, but apparently, even just being around us was enough to bring some of the shine back into his bright eyes. He lay on the couch, curled into the corner, a heavy pink blanket over his lap and a book shut on top of it.

The thermostat was set to a warm seventy-two degrees, but Warrick was clearly getting colder and colder. His jaw trembled, which he tried to hide but I could see it. He was the youngest brother, my little brother. Of course I could see it.

“Want me to turn up the heat?” I asked him as I sat down next to him on the couch.

“No, no, I’m good.”

“You sure?”

“Positive,” he said, his smile quivering as he coughed into a closed fist. I saw a flash of emerald green scales ripple across his forearm.

Fuck. I glanced around the room. No one else saw.

It was getting worse, but at least there was hope now. I had to remind myself, I had to fight back the images of my own mother burning. Of her face—a warmth constantly radiating from a wide and easy smile, framed by golden blonde hair—twisted in agony. In an expression I never fathomed she could even wear. Excruciating pain and a depthless sadness, knowing she’d never be able to hold her children again.

And there was nothing we could do to save her. All we could do was watch her burn.

I’d never forget that helpless feeling. It rooted itself deep down into my soul, twisting around my gut like barbed wire. I bled for my mother every fucking day, wishing I could have been faster, or smarter, or that I could have been the one taken instead. Those memories—that sinister emotion—it wrecked me, and it made me all the more terrified for my brother.

But I had to believe it wouldn’t be Warrick’s fate. I wouldn’t allow it, not if I needed to bring down the vampire matriarch with my own bare talons.

I put a hand on my brother’s shoulder. He must have lost at least ten pounds in the last two weeks. He was always the smallest out of the siblings, but now he looked like he was a sneeze away from snapping in half. Seeing him like this... it tore me

apart. Shredded me. I thought back to the times I'd protect him as a kid, when he would be bullied and take it, crying on his way home about the mean hyena shifters in class. He hated confrontation and would rather laugh off cruel comments to only later internalize and believe them.

I showed up to school the next day—a sixteen year old dragon pissed as fuck—and I scorched the front lawn with a blast of flame from my fists, right as they were being dropped off.

They didn't say a single thing to my little brother after that. And the four weeks of grounding my father had dropped on me was worth seeing Warrick happy. Besides, mom managed to negotiate the four weeks down to one and a half, giving a silent stamp of approval for my actions. A slap on the wrist, sure, but a wink and a whisper of how proud she was of the both of us soon followed.

My brother smiled at me, his eyes still bright under those thick-rimmed glasses.

Eyes just like mom's.

The blade between my ribs twisted. Breath stolen.

“Hey, Damien, do you remember that time mom was teaching me how to fly?”

The question had come from Xavier, who passed on the brownies but instead nursed a fireball and coke. His favorite drink, even when we all teased him about it. He was on the beanbag chair wearing his usual uniform: tank top and gym shorts with a backwards blue LA Dodgers baseball cap. A patch of gold scales glittered against the tan skin of his bicep, rippling when he brought his glass up to his mouth.

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The question had also come at the perfect time, distracting me from the sorrow-filled thoughts I began to obsess over, shifting to brighter, happier memories.

“You mean when you almost crashed into a hot air balloon and managed to land on a nude beach instead?” I asked.

Maddox burst out into a series of strong belly laughs. “Bro, you were traumatized for years after that.”

“Well, obviously,” Xavier said, “Not only was it a nude beach but it was naked mole rat season apparently. Those shifters had more wrinkles than the world’s largest nursing homes combined.”

That made the entire room crack up, even Warrick laughed until he wiped away a couple of stray tears.

“Hold on, hold on,” Robby said when the laughter died down. “So you guys have to learn how to fly? It’s not like, instinct?”

His curiosity was a spark of light in a dark room. Robby was always interested in the world around him, wanting and willing to learn. He had asked me plenty of questions about dragons over these past weeks but it appeared that flying had never made the list.

“We do have to learn,” I answered, trying hard not to get lost in those sunshine bright eyes of his. “It usually happens when we’re around sixteen or seventeen and our wings are strong enough to support our weight. Mom took us all to the hills in Malibu

and looked for the gentlest slope she could find, starting us off small. Soon we were launching ourselves from the top of the Hollywood sign, though.”

“Huh, I didn’t know that. What about your powers?” Robby asked.

“Same thing,” Dawn answered. Her eyes were squinty and red and her lips curled into a permanent, giggly grin. “Dad taught us how to use them. Even though we’re each different elements, the general gist of it is the same. We pull on the magic inside of us, which is a little different to Marvels who work with the threads of mana around them.” She glanced to Claire, who scrolled on her phone and laughed to herself at whatever videos popped up. My sister’s gaze lingered for a moment. It wasn’t clear to me whether it was because of her delayed reactions from the brownie or because there was something else there.

Robby, sitting cross-legged on the floor in gray sweats and leaning against one of the racing games, was looking so much more relaxed than when we’d first met. I could see he felt the same spark of hope I did.

His smile—damn, was it infectious.

We continued to discuss different dynamics of dragon life, Robby unleashing a torrent of questions that were all answered by the family. As I looked around the room, I realized something else about Robby: just how easily he fit in. We were a group of powerful beings that could raze a city if we were so inclined to. Maddox could summon a blade of deadly ice, Xavier could manipulate the time stream, Dawn could lob out bolts of lightning like they were candy in a parade.

Yet Robby seemed like he’d been around the family since the start. He never showed fear or apprehension, and he never othered us either. He did the complete opposite. Investing time and energy into fully understanding us, all while seamlessly blending in. It was nice to watch and, for some reason, it made my heart swell.

The sun had long disappeared but the conversation still flowed. I could tell the day was catching up to Robby, who gave a deep stretch and loud yawn. Bambi, who'd found her way onto her favorite human's lap, also yawned wide, her saber teeth catching the blue light from behind them.

"We should probably head to bed," I said, giving Robby an out. He nodded and gently moved Bambi.

"Thanks for the impromptu dragon class," Robby said to the room. We were all still gathered there except for Warrick, who excused himself to his room when his energy started to wane.

The gang waved and said their goodnights as we left them in the arcade, Claire and Dawn leading a spirited discussion about some new supernatural dating show, where the contestants vying for the super are naked and revealed slowly. It was wild... but I admit Robby and I binged some episodes the other day.

"So, anything else you want to know about dragons?" I asked as we walked down the hallway that passed the kitchen. Someone must have recently baked bread, the fresh dough scent making my mouth instantly water.

"Nothing that wasn't answered tonight."

"You sure?"

He chewed his bottom lip. "Well, I guess I'm curious about your mating habits?"

That got a chuckle out of me. "Our mating habits aren't any different than yours. I think I proved that to you on the beach."

Robby's face flushed a bright pink. Fuck, I loved it when that happened.

“I mean like, do dragons take mates that aren’t other dragons?”

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“Of course we do,” I said as we climbed the spiraling stairs, my hand gliding over the smooth wrought iron railing. “Look at Maddox and Ben. Vampire and dragon. Didn’t last long, but it seemed to be working for them. Dawn’s had a human girlfriend before. It definitely happens.”

“Ok, good to know. Good to know.”

I noticed the flush didn’t disappear, only got slighter pinker as we drew closer to the bedrooms. I wondered how far I could push him. How red I could make him.

“Anything else you want me to teach you, Robby?” There was a clear suggestion in the tone of my voice, the length of my words. I pinned him with a stare that sealed the message.

He swallowed. Audibly. Fixated, I watched his throat bob up and down.

“Nope. Think that’s it.” He nodded and slowed down as we reached his room. I could tell he was mulling something over in his head. He had a habit of chewing on the inside of his cheek whenever his ‘thoughts got too big’ he’d say.

“Is it... alright if I crash with you?” Robby had a hand on the door to the guest room. He blinked, his long lashes nearly whipping up a tornado.

“Of course it is,” I said, hoping he’d ask that very question. If he didn’t then I was planning on offering. I pushed open the heavy double doors and stepped into my bedroom. Robby followed close behind, the cool wood of the hall changing to soft, plush carpet under my bare feet.

We took turns getting ready for bed, Robby bringing over his toothbrush from the other room. We joked as we brushed our teeth together. I took a moment to examine us in the long mirror, the warm white light from behind it illuminating our faces. I stood taller than Robby, but his energy made him miles taller than me. His sweats hung low on his hips, the white t-shirt he wore lifting up as he brushed his teeth, revealing a soft swath of skin. I was shirtless, a soft pair of cotton shorts on and nothing else.

I noticed Robby's eyes wandering on a couple different occasions.

"Which side do you like to sleep on?" I asked when we were back in the bedroom.

"Oooh, the true test of compatibility. I like the right, closer to the window."

"Perfect," I said as I got into bed on the left, the side I preferred anyway.

"Oh, and I also like to sleep naked, if that's alright with you." Robby said with a mischievous grin, a hand already beginning to tug down his sweat pants.

"Lucky me then," I said, a soft growl to my words.

I watched as he took off his clothes, admiring every naked inch of him.

He was a skinny guy but seemed to be putting on more muscle, which probably came from the back-to-back training sessions he's had. There were cuts in his stomach, and those v-lines leading down to his sexy dick were even more pronounced. His chest looked meatier too, likely from the hundred push-ups a day Maddox had him doing.

It was fun, watching him transform in front of my eyes. But what was even more fun was getting his naked little body curled up against mine, which happened the moment he got under the covers. I reached over and turned off the lamp on the night stand, the

room appearing to be filtered through a black and white screen, the four posts of my bed dripping in moonlight that came in through the open window.

I had to sleep with the sound of the ocean in the background. Even when I traveled, I'd play some kind of ocean sound on my phone just to have the noise.

But nothing beat the real thing. The gentle, loping crash, the foamy after wash, the drawled out words of the ocean. It always soothed me, settled my thoughts and let sleep drift in.

"I think maybe you should be naked, too. Just so I'm not the odd one out," Robby said as I pulled him against me in my arms. I took in a deep breath, his scent flooding through me. Like a star-lit field of moon roses, sweet and soft.

I reached under the comforter and pulled off my shorts. I had already started getting hard watching Robby undress, and now I was at full-mast, throbbing against Robby's back. But neither of us acted on it. I just wanted to hold him, let the night cradle us together. There'd be plenty of time to fool around with each other. For now, I just wanted to hold him.

"This is nice... really nice, Damien."

"It is."

He pushed a leg back through mine.

"You know, I'm pretty good at putting up a front most of the time. Of not being worried and letting things bounce off me. A lot of the times, I'm actually a nervous wreck on the inside. But... Damien, here, in your arms, I feel nothing but peace. My heart isn't racing and neither are my thoughts. I'm just... happy. So fucking happy."

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“I didn’t know that about you. That you hid your anxieties like that.”

He nodded, wiggling his hips so that he fit even closer against me. “Ever since I was a kid. I think it really started around the time my mom got sick. I didn’t want her to see me worried.”

“How old were you?”

“Twelve—no, thirteen. Yeah, thirteen because I was just about to go to high school. I’d visit her in the hospital and joke about whatever dumb things happened that day, and then go home, lock myself in the bathroom, and break down. Always making sure the shower was on so my dad wouldn’t hear.”

“I’m so sorry, Robby.”

“It’s ok. It took her three years, but she came out the other side. It was a long three years, though.”

“I can’t even imagine. Those few weeks that my mother was sick felt like an eternity. Every minute equal to a decade.” Another twist of the blade. I held Robby a little closer, his warmth a comfort. Like sipping honey steeped tea from a hot clay mug.

“It’s not fair, what’s happening. It’s not at all. But I really think we’re onto something, Damien. We could be days away from a cure.” Robby flipped around so that he faced me. It was dark but I could see him as though we stood out in a sun-baked field, clear as day. His leg still between mine, our bodies pressing together.

I lazily trailed my fingers down his back, watched his eyes flutter shut.

“I think we are,” I said, finding myself with a growing smile. “I’ve got hope.”

“So do I,” he said, eyes still shut. “I’m really happy. I know that’s weird to say with everything going on, but I am.”

“It’s not weird at all. I don’t think anything you could say or feel is weird.”

“Really?” His eyes blinked open. I couldn’t hold myself back from leaning in and kissing him.

“Really,” I said. It was a gentle kiss, a flutter of what I really wanted to do to him. But I showed restraint. It had been a long day, and right now this was all I needed. Holding Robby in my arms, feeling his heart beat against mine. He didn’t have the same fire roaring inside him and yet his warmth matched mine, comforting me.

At some point, sleep started to pull Robby under. His body though was quite awake, the proof of it pulsing against mine. Instead of pushing anything, I held him there, listening to his gentle breaths, feeling the rise and fall of his chest. I wasn’t entirely sure when but he soon started to twitch, sleep fully claiming him.

Between his soft breathing and the lapping waves, I found a serenity I hadn’t known in quite a long time. Most noticeable was the absence of the barbed wire, the dagger no longer embedded through my ribs. I wasn’t sure how long this peace would last, but I tried to stay awake as late as I could, if only to just enjoy the moment for as long as I could.

As long as I possibly could.

Chapter 21

Learned Behavior

Robby

Blood pounded in my head. I wiped at the sweat that beaded on my forehead with the back of my hand. My muscles ached, every single one of them. I don't think I'd ever felt this sore in my life, and I still had five more squats to finish. I looked at Maddox, who sat on a medicine ball with a sick and twisted look on his face.

He was enjoying this. Fucking asshole.

"Two more," he said, keeping count as my legs shook underneath me.

"One more."

I was in front of the long mirror, watching myself look like a newborn fawn. Although I had to admit, I looked beefier than I had when I first came to the castle. I had the physical training to thank for that, but I also couldn't ignore the effects of Damien's excellent cooking skills. He had been making me dinner these last few weeks, whipping up everything from filet mignons perfectly cooked and seasoned to exotic dishes I wasn't even sure how to pronounce. I'd been so used to my Hot Pockets and Chipotle orders that I forgot how good home-cooked food good be.

Especially when the chef was a scorching hot fire dragon who was hung like a stallion and had the cuddling abilities of a god.

"Alright, that's it, you're done for today," Maddox said as I collapsed onto the mat.

"Nice job, man."

"Thank you, thank you," I said as I tried to suck in a few breaths. My body may have been spent but I had to admit, mentally I felt good. I was finding enjoyment in

working out which... well, that never happened to me before. Honestly, I wasn't entirely sure who I was becoming. Stepping into a gym would give me night terrors when I was younger, but now as much as I complained, I found that I always felt better when I finished than when I started.

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“You got anything else to do today?” Maddox asked me as he started to re-rack the weights.

“Nope,” I said, getting up with a huff and going to help him. “This was all I had on the agenda.”

“Good, then go enjoy your day with Damien. You two love-birds earned it. We’ve got a lot of shit coming up, might as well have as much fun now as possible.” He shot me a wink. “Just be safe about it, I don’t want any surprise nieces or nephews.”

“Ha. Ha.”

I couldn’t help but blush a bit. It was becoming an open-secret: me and Damien. Still, I wasn’t entirely sure how the rest of the family felt about it. It seemed like they all really liked me, and vice versa, but I was an awkward little bean and speaking about Maddox’s brother in a romantic sense made me want to melt into the floor.

“You two look good together, by the way.” He was busy hanging the resistance bands on the hooks, his back turned to me, but I could still hear a smile on his words. “I haven’t seen him this happy in a long time.”

“Really?”

“Yup. My brother’s always been more of a solo-pilot. He’s only had a couple of guys he’s brought around the castle, and none of them ever put a smile on his face the same way you do. It’s nice to see. Especially after losing mom... I didn’t think any of us would ever smile again.”

The mention of their mother made my shoulders drop. All of the siblings were affected, but through my casual observation, it seemed like Maddox had taken it the hardest. Damien had said he was a big momma's boy, and that his spirals were normally hidden from view. It worried him, which in turn worried me. There had been days that Maddox had gone missing, Damien explaining that he was likely giving into one of his vices in hopes of giving up the pain.

Maddox finished organizing the resistance bands, turning back to me, his eyes—blue as the water flowing through a fjord—flashing with something. Happiness? Relief?

“I’m just glad one of us found someone worth keeping,” Maddox said, placing a strong hand on my shoulder and squeezing.

That brought up a question, and since I was used to asking whatever popped into my head, I decided this would be no different. “How about you and Ben? What ended up happening there?” I uncapped my water bottle and took a couple heavy chugs, the icy cold water instantly bringing a little more life to my worn-out body.

Madds shrugged. “We were never a good fit. Don’t get me wrong, I love him, I want the best for him, but from the start we were better lovers than partners. That’s what I have the hardest time with. Separating sex from romance.”

“Do you have to separate it?”

“For me, yes. Sometimes I get too into the sex. I forget there’s other aspects to a relationship. I don’t blame Ben for cutting things off with me.”

I tried to examine his expression but Maddox remained pretty neutral. He looked out the window, eyebrow arched, the scar that cut through it giving him an edge, although there was a softness to him just underneath the icy layer. I saw it when he cared for his little brother, cleaning his room and washing his clothes, or when he

spoke about memories with his mother. Maddox put on a big front, but underneath there was a deep well of compassion and empathy I didn't see in any of the other siblings.

“Think there's a chance of things working out again?”

“Nah,” he said with a shake of his head. “We had a good year together but that's all that destiny had in store for us. And I'm fine with that. He's found someone, someone who makes him way happier than I ever did.”

The tinge of sadness in his tone made me look up. He rubbed at the back of his neck, looking out the window and to the front courtyard. A storm was being pushed in from the ocean, ominous clouds inching closer and closer. A rarity for California, guaranteed to make everyone instantly forget how to drive once the rain started to fall.

Maddox shrugged. Let out a huff of air. I could have sworn a dusting of snow blew out, the air turning into sparkles for a brief moment. “Who knows, maybe we were never meant to work out anyway. Vampire and dragon? It's practically in our blood to hate each other.”

“I don't believe that,” I said, crossing my arms. Sweat made my shirt stick to my chest. “Hate isn't coded in anyone's DNA. That's learned behavior. And in this world, with how divided we can all get, it's an easy behavior to learn.”

Maddox's blue eyes probed mine. “You really think so?”

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“Without a doubt,” I replied. “No one’s born knowing how to hate someone. As much as babies scare me, I can admit they’re completely pure of heart.”

Maddox chuckled, cocked his head. “Babies scare you?”

“Madds, everything scares me.” I grinned, watching the smile grow on Maddox. He had some resemblances to Damien, in his strong jaw and brows, but he had more differences too. The roundness in his cheeks, the shorter hair, the bigger nose, the permanent five o’clock shadow. He was thicker too, like a big icy teddy bear you wanted to hug if he’d let you get close enough. “Point is, I think it’s easier to believe the good in people than it is to believe the worst. If they show that those are their true colors, then fine, believe them. But don’t default to ‘they’re this so they must feel this’. Let people surprise you.”

Maddox squinted those bottomless blue eyes of his. “I like that. I believe it too. Maybe not all the time, but it is nice to be reminded.” He motioned toward the door with an empty water bottle. “Ready? I don’t want to hold you back from hanging with Damien.”

“You’re not holding me back, Madds. You’re the reason why I can do ten pull-ups in a row without bursting into tears.”

He laughed, walking with me out of the gym and into the hall. We were toward the front of the castle, the sounds of people hanging out in the foyer drifting up the stairs. “You’ve been really improving since you got here. I’m proud of you. Really.”

“It honestly feels like it’s been years since I met you guys at the Magic Box. I keep

having to tell myself that it really hasn't."

"And even in that short amount of time, you've come a really long way."

I smiled, never great at taking compliments. I decided to just accept this one. Not bat it away, not add an asterisk to it. Just accept it. "Thanks, Maddox."

That's when the big icy bear of a dragon surprised me, opening his arms and wrapping me up into a tight hug. "I love you. Like you were one of our own."

I hugged him back. "I love you too, Madds." And in that moment, I felt like I was hugging a brother. My brother. I felt the love as if he were in the room with me, my twin.

I managed to wipe away the tears before we broke apart.

This—this was an emotion that was written into our very souls, down into the very strands of DNA that built us up. Love wasn't learned, it was known from the start.

"How'd training go today?" Damien had just come in from somewhere, a thick tome of a book held at his side as the main doors to the castle shut loudly behind him. I was heading to the front gardens where I figured I'd scroll through my phone and get some fresh air before the storm hit, but this diversion was just as welcome. He kicked off his sneakers and placed them into the shoe rack, partially hidden by a potted fern draping its thick leaves.

It was a tiny, meaningless gesture. A man who like tidiness and cleanliness. But he wore a button-up shirt that was undone just enough to show the ruby red patch of permanent scales on Damien's chest, reminding me that this silly little human thing of putting your shoes neatly into a rack was being done by an all-powerful dragon who's size eleven Nikes wouldn't even fit on a single one of his talons, a dragon who

could roast me like a pig with a single breath.

Although, if I were being honest, I'd much rather him baste me instead.

"It was good," I said, Damien wrapping me up with his free arm and giving me a tight side-hug. I couldn't pinpoint the exact date or time we started to greet each other like this, but I could say that I liked it. A lot. "Madds is putting me through it. But it's actually kind of fun. Maybe not the first few times, I thought I was going to collapse and die after the second crunch. But now, it's not all that bad." I lift my arm and flex. Although I could admit there was still some work to be done, Damien's green gaze told me the complete opposite. He grinned, licked his lips.

Maybe he did want to roast me?

"What about you? What official dragon business were you getting up to?" I asked.

We walked through the open and airy foyer, past the curving staircase and underneath the domed ceiling that depicted the rainbow flight of dragons in such vivid detail, each one flying around a bright sun. If I had been forced to choose which room in the castle was my favorite, I'd have to say this one. Sometimes I stood here for way longer than I needed to, my neck craned back as I gawked at the beautiful scene.

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“Went with Xavier to the Magic Box. Claire wanted to show us something.”

“What was it?”

“The decorations she set up to surprise Dawn for her hatch day tomorrow.” Damien grinned as we walked past a row of stained glass windows, the shards of purple and red and blue illuminated with whatever sun managed to break through the clouds.

“That’s sweet,” I said. “They seem to be pretty close, huh?”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that, too. I think we all have. Except for Madds.”

“Think he has a thing for Claire?” I asked.

“Maddox has a thing for everyone. But he wouldn’t mess things up for Dawn if he realized. Maybe I’ll chat with him later.”

“Or I could,” I said. “We had a little bit of a break-through earlier today. He’s got a really good heart.”

“He does, and he deserves to find someone who appreciates it.” Damien smiled at me, the glow in his expression nearly blinding me. His teeth were perfectly white and his lips so perfectly kissable, and those eyes... I could stare at him for an entire lifetime and never get bored.

“I’ll talk to him then,” I said. Damien put a gentle, warm hand around my elbow and then continued on. I followed him through the castle, already knowing where he was

headed. He stopped there every time he arrived home.

Warrick's room.

We reached it, silence falling over both of us. He gently pushed open the door. It was a single oaken block carved with vines and roses and roots, tendrils that went down toward the plush carpet, stopping right at the threshold. The lights were off inside his room, the thick curtains drawn. I could hear his struggled breaths, rasps that filled the room, a stark contrast to the peace that the flush of green plants gave.

I hated it. I was instantly reminded of the times I'd visit my mom in the hospital. When I'd hear those same noises from her, wondering if one of those rasps would end up being her last. How could anyone—much less a pre-teen—deal with those kinds of thoughts? I had to imagine that even dragons weren't immune to heart-wrenching dread and sorrow. And in the three centuries that dragons can live to, Damien's late twenties might as well have been baby years.

I put a hand on Damien's lower back. It felt like there were two steel rods rammed around his spine, making him stand tall and straight even though I had to assume all he wanted to do was crumble.

He slowly closed the door, trying not to make a single sound. He looked down the hall but not before I could see a swell of emotion gleaming in his eyes.

"Come," he said, still turned away from me. "Let me cook you lunch. You can tell me more about your theater kid days."

It had been a topic of conversation that I kept Damien up with last night. We had been cuddling naked in bed, giggling and laughing at my slightly unhinged antics to land whatever roles I could. Those moments—the nights where Damien would hold me against him, his body flush against mine—had turned into my favorite times of

the day, where all my worries would melt away and nothing existed but the constant and comforting warmth radiating from my dragon.

Those nights were a distraction, and I knew Damien badly needed one right now.

I walked up to his side, put my hand in his, and jumped right into a story about the time I arrived to my sophomore bio class method acting as Glinda the Good Marvel.

Chapter 22

Tip of the Tongue

Damien

The world's end party—and our shot at stopping the dragon fall—had finally arrived. Same as when my mother was sick, the seconds seemed to have crawled by over these last few weeks, but the day had come. I had kept myself busy preparing for tonight, and I wasn't the only one.

I watched as Robby started to train more and more, spending entire days with my brothers, either inside of the gym with Maddox or the yard with Xavier, where he learned how to spar and fight.

Occasionally, I would watch from my bedroom window. Dragons were prideful beings, but something about seeing Robby progress in his defensive skills made me feel more pride than ever before. He was still a slightly gangly and awkward guy, his long limbs needing a little extra finesse to get just right. But he was learning—I could already see the progress in such a short amount of time. He no longer flinched and fell when he was struck at, his balance steady and his stance strong. He learned how to dodge and duck, and his punches and kicks were also beginning to land more frequently. There was still a long way to go, but Robby appeared to be learning

quickly, surprised at himself every time he landed a blow or dodged a hit.

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Today, he was getting a last-minute training session in with Xavier. I wasn't at my window; this time, I sat outside on a chair, taking a front-row seat.

"Remember to keep your hands up here," Xavier said, lifting Robby's fists so that they covered his perfect face and not his sensitive nipples. "You never want to leave your money-maker open to a hit."

"Right, right... Then maybe I should be covering my ass?"

I snorted before adding, "And keep that leg a little forward." I pointed. He dropped his gaze and listened. "There. That way, you can brace yourself and leave an opportunity to kick him in the nuts if you need to."

"Which you won't be needing to, thank you very much." Xavier moved away quickly, the back of his sneakers touching the edge of the pool. A tall stone wall surrounded the yard. Green ivy and purple lionheads grew up the wall, adding a beautiful splash of verdant color to the backdrop.

"You ready to head out?" I asked Robby, checking my watch. There was an hour until the party started, an hour until we ended this all.

"Yup," Robby said. He wiped beads of sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. "Let me just go inside and get changed real quick." He wore a pair of white gym shorts and a bright pink T-shirt splattered in old and dried-up gray paint. I couldn't help but notice he wasn't wearing any underwear. I could practically trace the outline, which was exactly what I wanted to do. Just not with my hand, but with my tongue.

“I have to change shoes,” I said. Robby glanced down at my perfectly fine pair of black sneakers. He shrugged and didn’t ask any questions as he walked past me back into the castle. I followed close behind.

Yeah, he isn’t wearing anything. Not with how his ass is eating those shorts.

Fucking hell. I couldn’t get enough of that ass. Or those legs, or hands, or lips, or cock. All of him. From the soles of his feet right up to the very crown of his head, I found myself craving him. Thankfully, he had also given in to the lusty connection that tied our two cores together, forgoing the guest room and sleeping in mine instead.

Those nights were all I ever really wanted and more. We’d spend all night tangled up together, licking and sucking and kissing and touching. There were times we would watch the sun wake with its gentle bluish-golden glow creeping in through the blinds.

And even on those days, I still wasn’t satiated. He had woken a beast in me that was difficult to put back to sleep. I couldn’t wait for this all to be over so I could fully enjoy him. I didn’t want the cloud of this curse hovering over us any longer, I didn’t want to think about what would happen if the cure couldn’t be found. My intentions weren’t as noble as most hunting for a stop to this. Of course, I wanted to see my little brother back to full health and for the extinction of my species to be put on pause, but there was also the underlying current that tugged at me to protect Robby at all costs. It was a battle that raged inside my head from the moment I woke to the seconds before sleep.

“You don’t really need to change, do you?” Robby said as we entered my bedroom.

I shut the door behind me. “No, I just couldn’t resist stealing another moment with you before we go.”

“You know, stealing can get you in trouble,” Robby said as he slowly dropped his shorts, revealing that my assumptions were correct. He’d been wearing nothing.

“What could my punishment be?”

“Hmm,” Robby said, finger against his lips, his other hand cupping his balls. “I think I can let you off easy this time. But if it happens again, you’ll have to serve some time.”

“Thank you for your mercy.” I grabbed the bottom of his T-shirt and lifted it off him. He stood completely naked, his toes wiggling against the red-and-blue Persian rug, his cock hanging heavy between his legs. He had such a sexy fucking body, with those divots in his hips that led your eyes down to a trimmed bush of dark pubes, a happy trail leading up toward a perfect stomach and chest. The dusting of chest hair stopped around those perfect clavicles, leading to a neck I loved to kiss on.

And that face. Fucking hell. I pushed in for a kiss, reaching around to grab his ass.

I wanted him. All of him. I wanted to be buried deep inside him, watching him writhe underneath me as I filled him up, making him beg for more.

But that would have to wait. “Fuck,” I said against his lips, already hard as a rock. And so was he, his twitching length pressed up against me. I wanted to be selfish and say we could be late to the party, just so I could slowly devour this man and watch him come undone... but we couldn’t get distracted. Not today.

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“I just came to get a taste,” I told him as I dropped down to my knees. I grabbed him by the base of his cock and licked the already wet tip. He let out a pleased breath, which turned into a moan as I took him into my mouth. I looked up, placing a hand on his stomach, watching his eyes close in response to my lips wrapped around his length.

“If you keep doing that, you’ll get more than a taste.”

I grinned around him, picking up my pace. I hadn’t realized he was already so close.

“I was jerking off earlier and didn’t get to finish,” he said as if reading my thoughts. “Oh shit, Damien, keep going, keep going.”

I kneaded his ass as he buried his cock down my throat. He thrust his hips, his fingers knotting in my hair. I squeezed his ass, pulling him harder against me. I gagged around him but didn’t let up, wanting that release. Needing him to spill down my throat. I could feel him tensing, his body coiling with the building tension.

“Fuuuuuuck,” he said in one long, drawn-out breath. He gave a single thrust and blew, filling my mouth with his cum. His knees shook, and his hands held tighter to my head as he unloaded.

I swallowed every last drop he had to give me. He took a couple of deep breaths and shook his shoulders before his postorgasm giggles took him over. I didn’t even wipe my lips, getting back on my feet and kissing him, sinking into it the same way he sank down my throat. We were bonded in a way that surpassed quick hookups and carnal moments. A surge of warm emotions overtook me, forming three words on the

tip of my tongue. Words that would surely change the entire trajectory of our lives. I gripped his hips and pulled him toward me, wanting to hold him until the end of time. Never wanting to let go. I wanted to soar through the skies with him until we circumnavigated the entire globe.

But, unfortunately, we had that very same world to save, and that meant getting some clothes on this perfect man so we could continue with our plans of breaking into another dragon's hoard. Those three words still sat poised to fall from my lips.

"I have to return the favor when we get back," Robby said against my mouth as he gently stroked my erection from the outside of my jeans.

"You humans, always wanting to get even." I kissed him again. "It's a date."

I sat down on the edge of the bed and watched Robby get dressed, going to his closet with his swollen and glistening cock swinging, his perky ass bouncing.

The three words moved closer and closer to being spoken. I had a feeling that they'd be said by the end of the night, which... scared me. I had never told anyone that I loved them, not unless they were family. Opening myself up like that to someone always felt like handing a dagger with my name scrawled across the hilt.

We aren't even anything official.

The thought struck as cold as the steel of the dagger. It was something I'd have to remedy. We already acted as if we were boyfriends, with the way he'd cuddle into me at night and how I'd learned how to brew the coffee he loved to drink, making sure it was by his bedside every morning. More than any of that, I just enjoyed spending time with him, no matter what we were doing. We could be sitting in silence, researching different things, him with his nose in a computer screen and me buried in a dusty tome, and still I'd look up and realize I was having the best time of my

damned life. All because Robby was in it.

“Ready?” Robby asked, wearing black shorts and a short-sleeved button-up shirt, thick white and navy stripes running down its length. The top three buttons were left undone, showing a peek of his still-flushed chest and the shine of a thin golden necklace I had bought him. I noticed he had forgone putting on underwear again, not that I’d ever complain about his newfound love of going commando.

“Ready.”

I wish I had known where the night was headed... then maybe I would have realized just how unprepared we were to handle it.

Chapter 23

Donuts & Dragons

Robby

We were driving down Sunset Boulevard, cutting through the Harmony District on our way to the party. Moving billboards floated against the stone-and-glass facades of the tall office buildings and apartments that stretched up toward the cloudless blue sky, beginning to be painted by the orange and purple splashes of a setting sun. We decided against flying because neither of us wanted to draw too much attention our way and the snake-way wasn’t exactly high on my preferred means of travel lately.

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“Jeez, I can’t believe what we’re about to do,” I said, lowering the music.

Damien looked at me, slowing down under a red light. “We’ll be in and out, hopefully with the cure in hand.”

“We don’t even know what the cure is, though. What are we even looking for?”

“I have a feeling it will be whatever Marmont has hidden deepest. It might even be the only thing in his hoard—that could be why the Huntress didn’t specify.”

“Can that happen? Can dragons just have one thing they collect?”

“If it’s valuable enough.”

I shrugged, looking out the window at the skinny palm trees and colorful boutique shops that sold clothes more expensive than the car we drove in. “That kind of defeats the purpose of a ‘collection’ if you ask me. That’s more of a ‘possession,’ I think.”

Damien chuckled. I couldn’t help but recall that time I’d almost stumbled into his own hoard and his reaction to my mistake. Sure, his intensity when he grabbed my arm scared the shit out of me, but stronger than that was the growing seed of curiosity planted in my chest.

What was in there? And when would Damien trust me enough to show me?

I couldn’t dwell on it. It wasn’t like Damien owed me anything. We were simply friends—very, very, very good friends—on a mission to save his entire species (along

with my life). That didn't make us anything more or anything less than just good friends.

...Right?

"The vampires seem to have calmed down a bit," Damien said as he continued the drive, his hands relaxed around the black leather steering wheel.

"They have. But to be fair, there haven't been many chances for them to try something. Not when I've got my big bad dragon bo—buddy as a bodyguard."

Whoa. Was I seriously just about to call Damien my boyfriend?

"You know, I've been thinking more about their motives. And I can't help but wonder why they seem to want to capture you."

My stomach dropped, but I tried to keep my expression neutral. I didn't want to show Damien just how scared this topic made me. Since he had met me that fateful day in the Magic Box, I had come a pretty long way. I knew how to throw a punch and swing a sword without mortally wounding myself, and I no longer ran out of breath after fifteen minutes of strenuous physical activity, but I wasn't delusional either. I was still being hunted, and I wasn't even entirely sure why.

"Could they want to keep you alive forever?" Damien asked, almost as if he were speaking to himself.

"Huh?" I asked, my mouth suddenly dry as ash.

"The vampires—they don't seem to want to kill you, and why would they if they know that breaks the curse? But if you can never die..."

My eyes went wide. I cleared my throat, but the ash still coated my tongue. “They want to turn me into a vampire? So the curse can last forever? Holy shit.”

“It’s a theory, Robby.”

Another thought lurched to the forefront of my brain. “Then, what if... what if I die and then get turned? That can happen, right?”

Everyone knew there were two ways of turning a human into a vampire. Either before death by drinking their blood or after death by getting a fang-filled hickey. I didn’t want either of those options.

Damien chewed his lower lip, silent for a moment. The traffic was building up ahead of us, red brake lights engaged all down the boulevard. “If a vampire bites you in the moments after you die, yes. But we don’t know if that would break the curse and bring it back when you get resurrected. We also don’t know if your death really does break the curse. We’re going off an ancient poem that could have been written by someone who found some special herb on the ground and decided to smoke it.” Damien shook his head, looking straight ahead, the bustling gayborhood turning busier and busier as the sun fell further down the horizon, slipping behind the tall glass and stone neon jungle that made up most of the Harmony District. There was a restaurant made to look like a purple pump, a long line to get in already forming and crashing into a line of harness wearing burly men waiting to get into the club next door.

“It’s too much risk,” Damien said, sounding like he wanted to put a button on this. “Let’s just find this cure and hope it ends the curse.”

My stomach twisted into knots.

Fuck, I really hope we find this cure.

I swallowed down my nerves and tried to distract myself with the bevy of sights and lights in the city of angels. A bright pink-and-blue neon sign caught my attention. Dizzy's Donuts, a famous landmark on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles. They were said to have the best donuts in the country, using a special ingredient in their mix that no one had been able to figure out yet. The contrast between the invitingly kitschy shop and the gathering darkness was stark.

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But it also made my mouth water. And the line wasn't long—rare for the shop. We were inching along the street, passing two open parking spots.

“Hold on, Damien. Would you kill me if I ask you to stop? I've always wanted to try one of those donuts.”

Damien cocked his head, lips quirking to the side. He looked at the time on the dash.

“We're only fifteen minutes away,” I said. “We'll run in, grab a couple donuts, and then we'll have treats for later when we're celebrating.”

He still didn't seem convinced. I batted my eyelashes at him. What could possibly go wrong with a tiny detour?

The puppy dog look seemed to have worked. He pulled into the open parking spot, the one behind us being snatched up instantly. Outside the shop was a floating display of glazed donuts appearing to have been dipped into a rainbow. On the other side of the entrance was another display, showing each kind of donut they had. One that looked like a skull, another that looked like an actual chunk of gold, another that was simple with a chocolate drizzle.

I got out of the car, leading the way toward the bright pink doors.

“Normally, the line wraps around the block,” I explained to Damien as I went to open the door for him.

“We came at a good time, then.”

“Sure did,” I said, pulling the door open and glancing over my shoulder.

Freezing.

Oh no... no.

I tried to open my mouth to warn Damien, but no words were forming. He still understood something was wrong, whipping around on his heels. A few confused patrons ignored their donuts and stared through the glass windows as shadowy figures began to spill from the car that parked behind us, their poreless skin making them seem like moving marble.

“Stay behind me,” Damien growled, his eyes narrowing, scanning the urban landscape filled with a jumble of billboards, bars, and towering palm trees. The bustling city seemed to freeze for an instant as the energy of the vampires charged the air.

“Shit,” I replied, a shiver of anticipation running down my spine. They must have been following us since we left the castle.

Fuuuuuck. I’m so stupid. We never should have stopped.

I had no more time for regrets. Only to react. They were on us in moments. Vampires, their perfect skin gleaming under the neon streetlights, moved with a grace and speed that was inhuman. There were four of them, three women and one man, all of them baring their fangs at me with sinister smiles.

People bolted down the street, shouting. An employee inside the donut shop ran straight for the door and locked it.

“Stand back,” Damien said as he launched himself at the four vamps. He was a

whirlwind, his dragon strength evident as he punched with flaming fists, connecting a hit against one of the vamp's skulls. I heard a sickening crack and watched her crumble to the ground, her silky black hair singed with flames.

The other three didn't relent. Two vampires lunged, lethally sharp teeth aiming for Damien's throat.

The third vampire swerved around him. I could no longer focus on Damien. It was time for me to—

Shit, shit, he was coming at me fast. I wasn't sure whether to duck or dodge. I could feel myself freezing. I could see those hands closing around my throat. I could see it all ending.

I reached into my pocket and snatched out the can of mace, then aimed it directly at the vamp's face and pressed down on the trigger. A stream of burning mace landed a direct hit on the vampire. He shouted a shrill shriek and dropped to his knees, clawing at his face. His accelerated healing would take care of it in a minute or so, but at least that bought me time. I bolted straight to the car, but not to hide.

I threw open the back door and grabbed the sword lying down on the floor.

The maced vampire was back on his feet. I glanced at Damien, who was keeping the two others occupied.

My pulse hammered in my ears. I was sure my heart would explode in my chest before this was all over. But I somehow managed to keep my hands from shaking as I took the offensive stance Xavier had hammered into me. The vampire moved cautiously toward me. He smiled, his eyes still red and wet with tears.

“You want to play with our swords? Give me a chance to pull mine out.” He reached

for the zipper of his black pants.

“Pull that out and watch it get cut off,” I threatened, surprised at the aggression in my voice. I was sure my words would come out as if squeaked by a mouse.

That’s when he reached behind him and pulled out a gun, its dark metal gleaming ominously. Guns were extremely rare, difficult to make, and not at all reliable. Most of the time, they backfired more than anything, and when they did work, they were useless against beings who could freeze time, create invisible barriers, have impenetrable scales, or could heal in a flash.

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But against a human? Yeah, they could be deadly.

I heard the sharp bang as the trigger was pulled, and my heart leaped into my throat.

“Watch out!” Damien yelled, forgetting about his vampires and shielding me in his arms. He spun us down to the ground, taking the brunt of the hit. I heard him exhale a pained breath.

“Shit, are you okay?” I asked as we quickly got back up to our feet.

“Yeah, you?”

“Yeah.”

But I wasn't sure for how long. The three vampires were surrounding us, pushing us back against the car. There was a lion shifter in the shop that appeared to be seconds from joining the fray, but his wife held him back, pulling him behind the counter.

“Just give us the boy and we'll go.” The vampire shifted closer to us, the gun held lazily by his hip. A fake show of peace. I knew he could whip the barrel of that gun up to our foreheads in the blink of an eye.

“Enough of these games,” Damien said. He stepped forward. Just as the vampire raised the gun, he was met with a fireball directly to the face. He fell forward, but I saw that whatever was there had been melted off. Another fireball flew, hitting the vampire with the dagger directly in the chest, flying out the other side. The fatal wound had been instantly cauterized so that not a single drop of blood had been

spilled.

The last vampire standing got the message. “Fuck this,” she said, turning and bolting down an alleyway. A fireball narrowly missed her, sizzling away on the brick wall she had run past.

I blinked, trying to control my breathing, trying to fight back the shock.

“Holy shit,” I said. “You could have done that from the beginning?”

“I didn’t want to hit anyone in the donut shop,” Damien said. His forehead was beaded with sweat, his neck flushed a ruby red. “It also takes a lot out of me if I’m not in my dragon form.”

“Shit,” I repeated. I fell back against the car, a hand over my mouth. The three vamps were done, their healing abilities unable to rebuild brains or create hearts from thin air.

No wonder they felt threatened by the dragons. Those bloodsuckers didn’t stand a chance if a war really were to break out.

“Come, let—” Damien was cut off by a rush of air, frigid cold, whipping up trash and dirt from the ground. Then, there was a shimmer in the air, like the pavement had been heated by a burning hot sun for hours on end.

It was then that she appeared.

Helstriva, the vampire Matriarch, the embodiment of pure terror.

She materialized on the sidewalk, standing tall and regal, a figure of hypnotizing beauty. Her skin was flawless, her eyes deep wells of darkness, her lips a cruel slash

of red. But beneath the beauty lay something twisted and foul, something that made my skin crawl and my stomach twist in revulsion.

And then I saw it. When she smiled, small inky-black tentacles slipped from the corners of her mouth, as if searching for a soul to suck. I had heard about the parasites that were responsible for choosing the next Matriarch, giving the vampire leader powers that regular vamps lacked. It was the stuff of nightmares, something told to children to keep them from straying far from their parents.

“Robby,” she purred, her voice dripping with venom, those tentacles continually searching. “Finally, I see you in the flesh. You look just like your mother.”

I wanted to drop to my knees and throw up every last thing in my stomach. Retch until I turned to a husk.

“Don’t talk about his mother,” Damien said, finding the strength I wish I had to confront her.

The Matriarch ignored him. Her jet-black eyes drilled through me, her gaze making me freeze in place. “Your mother was my most desired concubine, did you know that, Robby? We shared many special moments until I found out that she had a secret love for another human. She tried to escape, but I found her. And now I’ve found you.”

My blood ran cold. She had to be lying. This must be a manipulation tactic... and still, the Matriarch’s words were a knife, cutting deep into my soul. The street, the donut shop, the glitz of LA—all of it faded away as I stared into her eyes, trapped by her horrifying beauty.

“And now I’ve found you,” she repeated, the tentacles extending out as if trying to grab me and pull me against her bloodred lips.

I felt Damien's hand on my shoulder, grounding me, pulling me back from the abyss of fear and fascination. "She's not really here," he whispered urgently. "It's a projection. A trick."

The Matriarch's image flickered like a mirage, her form a blend of seductive grace and monstrous cruelty. Her midnight-black gown flowed around her, clinging to her form. It looked designer made, with silver threading and filigree, draped down to her bare feet. It was see-through, a living tapestry of shadow and malice. At her hip was a midnight dagger that appeared to suck in any light from nearby sources.

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“You cannot escape me,” she hissed, her voice echoing off the buildings, reaching into the very core of our beings. “I will have you, just as I had your mother and your brother, and this curse will go on.”

Her sinister laughter filled the air as her image began to fade, leaving behind a chill that cut deeper than the wind.

A sickening silence fell on the street. The neon lights of Dizzy’s Donuts flickered, casting eerie shadows on the pavement. The Matriarch’s words hung in the air, a promise and a threat. Her power was real, and she wouldn’t stop until she had what she wanted.

Me.

“We have to find the cure,” Damien said, his voice grim. “We have to end this curse. Now more than ever.”

I nodded, knowing he was right. The fight had just begun.

Damien grabbed my hand and opened the car door. “Let’s go before the Enforcers get here and we’re stuck in an interrogation room for the rest of the night.”

Chapter 24

‘Till the World Ends

Damien

The adrenaline of our confrontation with the vampires—the haunting image of the Matriarch and those disturbing tentacles falling from her lips—still flooded through my mind as we approached Marmont’s Chateau. I had asked Robby about a hundred times if he was okay with continuing the night, and each time, he would answer with a resolute “yes, abso-fucking-lutely.” So I stopped questioning him, realizing that maybe it was me who needed the reassurance in this situation.

I had—once again—feared that I was about to lose Robby. Of course, I had confidence that I could kick four vampires right in the ass, but when Helstriva appeared, I thought it was over. I didn’t think I’d be able to put up any sort of fight against her ancient power.

But it had been a projection. We were safe. Robby was safe. And now we had a dragon’s hoard to break into. It was time to set aside all the doubt and anxiety, focusing instead on what was ahead.

And what was ahead happened to be fucking beautiful. I thought the Blackthorne Castle was a sight to behold, but Marmont’s Chateau had us beat by a long shot.

Nestled in the heart of West Hollywood, the chateau seemed to resonate with the ancient power of dragon magic from its pale stones and polished marble, its grandeur a testament to ages long gone. The structure was a spellbinding fusion of timeless elegance and modern luxury, a property imbued with magic at every corner. Its pale stoned spires loomed above skinny palm trees, carved with intricate patterns that made it look like the brick were actually made of scales. There were statues of a variety of mythical creatures, each one holding a torch ablaze with enchanted blue fire.

A bridge wrapped in phosphorescent vines and bathed in soft moonlight led us to the grand golden gates. They were guarded by two jewel-eyed fae, one with sapphire eyes and the other with turquoise eyes, whose beauty was outdone only by the

ethereal ledger they held, shimmering with names of the invitees.

“Name?” the sapphire-eyed one asked, moving aside a golden curl from her airbrushed skin. Unlike the vampires, fae definitely had pores, which was a testament to how great she was at doing her makeup.

“Maddox Blackthorne,” I said. “This is my plus-one.”

Maddox’s name glowed brightly as they stepped aside and the gates opened, the aura of the chateau beckoning us in, its walls pulsating with an energy that seemed to say, “Forget your worries; embrace the night. It could be your last.”

The chateau wasn’t just Marmont’s residence. Sometime around the late ’90s, the dragon had opened up his property to guests who wanted to pay exorbitant amounts of money to stay there. We walked past five separate bungalows, one of them having the windows wide open to reveal a six-person orgy in full swing.

No, seriously—they had a swing in there.

“That looks fun,” Robby commented, his cheeks flushing pink.

“Want to join them?” I teased him, walking around a kissing pair of fae dressed in mesh shorts and nothing else.

“Oh?” Robby said, continuing down the path by my side. “Have you ever, you know, done any group stuff?”

“Once or twice,” I answered. He nearly stumbled and fell into a glittering koi pond, purple and blue lights under the water making the fish glow like captive stars.

“How was it?” he asked, and I could tell his curiosity had been piqued. I couldn’t

hold back the smirk.

“It was a good time,” I said, deciding to play it a little coy with him. I wasn’t ashamed of playing around with a group of other guys. I was single, and so were they, all four of us drunk and the last ones standing (and sucking and fucking) in the hot tub, the rest of the party having dispersed.

“Hmm,” Robby said with a sheepish grin.

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“What? Are you upset?”

“No, the opposite, actually. That’s kind of hot. I like the idea of exploring different situations with you. It’s... exciting.”

“Good, because I plan on exploring a lot with you. And of you.”

He fiddled with the collar of his shirt, and I noticed his neck turned a delicious pink color.

We had to leave it at that, having arrived at the main entrance to the party, a wide open archway covered in roses and tulips, their lush leaves and petals creating a living portal. The sound of loud, thumping music flowed out of the space, rattling my ribs.

We walked inside and found a main hall that was jaw-droppingly beautiful, an intoxicating blend of opulence and magic. Chandeliers fashioned from crystal flowers and suspended by threads of pure light sparkled above. Their glow illuminated frescoes depicting legends of love and heroism, each painting alive and moving, telling the story of Marmont’s favorite goddess, Elune, the goddess of revelry. In the center of the hall was a dance floor that was packed shoulder to shoulder with sweaty, writhing bodies.

Floors of iridescent marble reflected the grandeur, leading to rooms filled with laughter, music, and the scent of exotic enchantments. One room hosted a garden of musical flowers, their blossoms opening to the rhythm of a celestial symphony.

The hall of mirrors must have been somewhere close by.

There was an interesting dynamic at play as I looked out at the gathered crowd of fae, Marvels, shifters, and humans, grinding and touching to the beat of a song playing from invisible speakers. The surroundings were opulent and rich, but all the attendees were dressed in what could only be described as “world’s-end chic.”

Torn-up leather crop tops, shorts made of dangling gems that showed off everything underneath, low-rise jeans that clung to gyrating hips like dangling cliff divers. There was a snake shifter who danced in a pair of bedazzled bra and panties, her pierced fork tongue flicking out into the air and brushing against my earlobe as I walked past her. People were dancing on the floor like they were having sex—and I wouldn’t doubt that a few of them were.

I felt a simultaneous sense of awe and discomfort, caught between the desire to lose myself in the splendor and the unsettling memories of the night’s earlier events, all paired with the weight of the mission ahead of us.

It was a lot of fucking shit to deal with, even for a dragon.

Robby must have sensed my tension and took my hand. This was one of the first times he had reached out for me in public, and I couldn’t help but notice the ember it had planted in my chest.

“Come on,” he said, tugging me toward the dance floor. “We still have time before the colored mist disperses. Let’s dance a little. Let go of some of this stress.”

My first instinct was to pull back. We were here for a purpose. We couldn’t afford getting distracted.

But Robby was right. It still wasn’t time. According to Maddox, the famous Marmont

mist always happened toward the end of his parties—we could afford to let loose for a few moments.

And then she appeared, almost as suddenly as the vampire Matriarch had done. A drag queen—a Marvel, judging by the shimmering threads of forest-green mana she wore around her neck like a necklace— her presence as dazzling as her outfit. Sequins sparkled like tiny suns, feathers floated around her like clouds, and a train of iridescent fabric trailed behind her like a comet's tail. Her heavily painted eyes sparkled with mischief as she approached us, the blue and green eyeshadow reminding me of a peacock.

“Well, hello there, handsome,” she purred, her eyes on Robby. “And who might you be?”

“I’m Robby, and this is, uh, Maddox,” Robby replied, a grin on his face.

“I’m Starlight,” she said, her voice dripping with allure. “But tonight, I could be anything you want me to be.” Her eyes twinkled with humor as she looked at me and winked. “Or anyone, if that’s what you’re into.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, the drag queen’s energy electric.

“You must be new here,” Starlight continued, her gaze fixed on Robby. “I’d remember a face like yours.”

“Yeah, I don’t get out much lately,” Robby admitted with one of the understatement of the century. Poor guy had been trapped in our castle and Claire’s magic shop like a hostage.

Starlight’s eyes softened. “Well, babe, I’ll be glad to help you get it out. I mean, get your dick out. I mean, get your dick into my—oh, you know what I mean,” she said,

laughing with a playful slap against Robby's chest. He started to crack up, taking out his wallet and pulling out a five-dollar bill.

“Don't you dare think about tipping me. I'm off the cock. Clock,” Starlight said, grabbing the money anyway and stuffing it into her dress. “I just simply won't have it.” She winked and grabbed both of our hands. “Now, come. We need to dance. Follow my lead, boys!”

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With Robby on one side and Starlight on the other, I let myself be swept into the dance. The worries of our mission, the fight with the vampires, all the dark clouds that had been hovering over our minds, slowly began to lift. I wasn't big into dancing, but I'd had enough practice to find the rhythm without looking like I was attacking the beat instead.

It didn't really matter, though, seeing as how Starlight guided us, her body moving in perfect harmony with the music. Her laughter rang through the air as she pulled Robby into a spin, then reached for me, her hand cool and firm.

"Come on, loosen up!" she teased. "Let the music take you."

I felt a surge of something—freedom, perhaps, or pure joy—as I followed her lead, my body responding to the music and the energy of the people around us. The magical orbs above us seemed to match the energy of our dance, their colors shifting and pulsing in time with the beat. Neon green, fluorescent blue, ruby red, bright pink. Some of them dropped sparklers and confetti and glitter as if it were snow.

Robby's laughter joined Starlight's, his gaze shining with a light I hadn't seen in a long time. We danced together, the three of us lost in the music, lost in the moment. The crowd around us blurred into a kaleidoscope of color and movement, the world narrowing to the sensation of bodies moving in perfect harmony.

Starlight's magic wove through the dance, a subtle thread that tied everything together. She guided us, challenged us, flirted and teased, her presence a force of nature. At one point, she flared open her arms and pushed me and Robby together before she was swept away by a pink pasty-wearing human.

That's when Robby and I paired off. I grabbed him by the hips and swayed, dancing to the beat of a popular reggaeton song. Robby had a hand on my neck, his gaze turned up to mine. I went in and stole a kiss, closing my eyes, keeping the rhythm.

Side to side, grind, side to side, rut forward. I wanted him to feel how badly I craved him. Because I had no trouble feeling how much he was liking this.

"You're so fucking sexy," I whispered under the music, just loud enough for Robby to hear me. "I can't wait to pick up where we left off earlier."

"Why wait?" Robby said with a wink, grinding himself against me.

"This fiery side of you is nice." I kissed him again and again.

"I figured a fire dragon would like it."

"That's not the only thing about you that I like," I said, feeling him throb between us.

We danced some more, moving through the crowd, our bodies in sync with each other. It was... magical. Fucking magical. Robby's lips, his hands in mine, his hips against mine, his breath, his scent, his dimple. Every single inch of this man, every moment of this dance, of us—pure magic.

But, unfortunately, even the magic had to end at some point.

As the song we danced to reached a crescendo, Starlight was back at our side. She pulled us both into a tight embrace.

"You're special, both of you," she whispered, her voice soft and intimate. "Don't ever forget that... Too bad Marmont canceled the mist moment, or I would have so totally made a move on the both of you."

“Wait, he did what?” I asked, loud over the music.

“Yeah, he decided he wanted to see everything tonight. That’s why he has that raised platform over there. Oh, look, there he is.”

Marmont, the white dragon, was climbing up onto the pedestal as if on cue. He was a blocky man with wide shoulders and a barrel chest that pushed against the sheer white fabric of his sweat-stained shirt, the stark white scales on his forearms shining under the disco ball above him. He sat on the seat and looked out at the gathered crowd with an expression of pure delight.

Shit, shit, shit. If he wasn’t going to trigger the mist, then we were fucked. We were counting on that to give us cover for the break-in. Without it, this job got a whole lot more difficult.

“We were looking forward to it,” Robby said. He looked as worried as I felt. “Is there any way we can talk him into doing it?”

“He seemed pretty sure about his decision. And he’s always hardheaded about his parties. He never wants to mess up his vibe.” Starlight drank a long sip of her bright pink drink.

“You know,” Robby said, his long lashes blinking up a storm. “I think that’s a real shame. I know for a fact the two of us are down to, you know, fool around. But only if we could get that mist going.”

Starlight’s eyes widened. She looked between the both of us like a hungry panther shifter sizing up their meal.

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“I do happen to know where the controls for it are. Maybe I can make something happen.”

“Please, Starlight, that would be perfect.” Robby bit his lower lip, almost as if he were worried, but I knew the effect that expression had on people. And so did he.

Starlight gave a nod and put up a long blue fingernail. “Wait right here. Don’t move. Give me like ten minutes.”

She spun around, the dress flashing through the air, and disappeared into the sweaty crowd.

“Think she’ll do it?” Robby asked.

“Hoping so. Let’s get to the hall just in case.” I grabbed Robby’s hand in mine, the connection feeling so natural. So needed. “Lead the way.”

Chapter 25

Lost in the Labryinth

Robby

We got to the hall of mirrors just as thick, colorful mist started to drift out from the air vents. It picked up in pace, filling the hallway, starting at our feet. There were a couple of partygoers who ran past us so they could get back to the dance floor, where I was sure the main debauchery would be happening.

But Damien and I had other plans. We started to press against the mirrors, pushing on each panel. We moved quickly, trying to beat the mist before it completely filled the hallway and made our job that much harder.

“Anything?” Damien called from the opposite end of the hall, hands up against a mirror.

“Nothin—” The wall shifted under my palms. “Hold on.” I pushed harder, and the wall gave way, the illusion breaking and my hands going straight through empty air.

“Found it!”

“An illusion, nice,” Damien said. He grabbed my hand and pulled me through the fake mirror, walking us out into a well-lit tunnel. It must have buried directly into the hills that the chateau was tucked into. The walls were still raw gray stone, with vines and roots coming through tiny cracks.

“We did it,” I said, unable to hold my excitement. “Now, let’s find this cure.”

Damien apparently couldn’t hold back his excitement either. He grabbed my face in his big hands and pulled me in for a knee-trembling kiss. When we separated, I could see that his lips still glinted under the dim light in the tunnel.

We continued down the path and found ourselves at another door, this one with a heavy padlock on the handle. I had a brief moment of worry that this would be where our journey would end, being locked out of the room that held all our answers.

Then I remembered I was here with a dragon.

He grabbed the padlock in one hand as flames erupted around his fingers, climbing up toward his wrist. It only took a minute or two for Damien to melt it with a fire-

engulfed hand.

“I don’t think I’m ever going to get tired of seeing that,” I said as Damien’s hands returned to normal, not a single burn mark on them. “You look so damn cool.”

“I thought you were going to say hot.” He gave me a wink and a playful grin.

“Too obvious. I like to go for the unexpected,” I said, reflecting the same smirk he gave me.

“Ready?”

“Let’s do this,” I said as Damien opened the door and let us into Marmont’s hoard.

My jaw dropped. The sight that greeted me was the furthest thing I was expecting after walking through the rock-walled tunnel.

The secret labyrinth of Marmont’s hoard was like nothing I had ever seen before: onyx-black floors reflecting clean white walls, all lit by sconces that highlighted an impressive collection of rare vials, potions, and tonics. It was both awe-inspiring and terrifying, a mixture of art and danger that left me feeling a strange unease. There was an endless illusion to the way the hall curved and split ahead of us, and there were some potions that looked to be held under heavy security, with thorny iron cages, bars that looked as thick as tree trunks. There was one vial that kept shifting and banging up against the invisible barrier that contained it.

“So Marmont collects potions?” I once again asked the obvious.

“Looks like it,” Damien said, moving toward a red-and-green vial that emitted the sound of a beating heart.

I glanced at a vial of purple liquid. Underneath it, written on the marble pedestal, was a description: Cage of Force. There was something haunting about that potion, a sense of power restrained.

Damien's voice brought me back to reality. "Hey, you okay?" he asked, concern in his eyes.

"Yeah," I said, shaking off the unease. "Just... impressed." A question blasted to the forefront of my thoughts. But was it okay for me to ask? I'd been curious about Damien's hoard since the day he spoke to me about it, but he still hadn't told me what was even inside, much less offered me a chance to look into it.

I walked with him down the hall, the path splitting into two as we curved down the left. I couldn't hold the question back. "So, what do you collect in your hoard?"

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Damien smiled, a little secretive. I wondered if he was just going to keep his mouth shut. Maybe I'd never find out? I was probably getting way too far ahead of myself. "Books. Rare, antique, old books that I find."

That surprised me. "I didn't realize you were a reader."

He chuckled, scratched the back of his neck. "I'm not. I just add on to my 'to-read' pile without ever actually reading anything. Warrick is very appreciative of my habit of collecting rare books, though. He's checked plenty out of my hoard room. Thankfully, he's always brought them back."

"What is it about the books you like if you don't read them?"

Damien chewed on that for a bit as we walked down the left path. I kept an eye on every potion we passed, as did Damien. I wasn't entirely sure what we were looking for, but I assumed that the plaques and inscriptions underneath each one would tell us when we had found it.

"I like the potential they have inside them," he answered. "I like the idea of me being able to go in there and get lost for weeks in different worlds, whenever I want. I also really enjoy cover art. I think that's just as expressive and inspiring as a book can be."

I nodded. "That makes sense to me," I said as we continued down another hall. This place felt endless. Our footsteps echoed for what felt like years—clap.

"What was that?" I asked, recognizing a sound that wasn't at all like our footsteps.

“Probably noise from the party, or it could be the plumbing,” Damien suggested as he continued down the hall, looking at all the beautiful vials we walked past. He looked unbothered, so I decided to be the same.

“Probably... So, about your hoard. When do I get to see it?”

Damien’s laugh was low. He bumped his shoulder into mine. “What about tonight? After we’re done here, I can show you mine. Once we have the end to this curse and finish celebrating, of course.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said, an ivory bottle with a crimson red base catching my eye. It was described as a Vampire Repellent. “I could probably use this one.” I slowed down at the pedestal, pointing at the shining bottle. Damien put an arm around my waist.

“Why? You already have a vampire repellent right here.”

I looked up at him, his touch around my waist feeling like an anchor thrown down in rocky waters. Not only was he a grounding force, but he was right too. I owed him a hell of a lot for how many times Damien had saved me. I had to pay him back somehow—maybe later tonight. I could make sure he knew just how grateful I was for him.

I kissed him as a little preview for what I had in mind, grabbing the back of his neck and pushing myself up against him, leaving no space for doubt.

“Whoa,” Damien said, eyes glinting under the white lights. “What’s that for?”

“For being my prince in shining armor. Don’t worry, there’s more where that came from.”

“Oh, really?” Damien arched a brow, head cocked. The bright red scales on his bicep glittered the same as his eyes. “Let’s hurry and find this cure, then, because if you kiss me like that again, I’m going to have to drop your pants and take you right here.”

My eyebrows jerked up my forehead. Damien knew damn well the kind of effect his dirty words had on me. He chuckled and continued down the hall. I glanced one last time at the Vampire Repellent and followed after him.

The hall split again, and again, and again. I asked Damien if there was a chance we’d get lost in here, but he had been memorizing the potions that we went by, keeping a trail of breadcrumbs in his head. Which was good because I had already gotten lost after the first right we took. My sense of direction was currently equivalent to a blind mouse bumping into walls inside of a cheese maze.

It was in one of those moments where I was stumbling around blindly that I spotted it, freezing in place. Damien continued on for a few steps before realizing I had stopped. He turned to stare at the golden vial, its cap sculpted to look like two feathery wings. It was held inside of a gilded cage on top of a stone pedestal.

On that pedestal, two words were written in a fancy script.

“Curse Breaker,” I read aloud. “This has to be it, Damien!” I couldn’t keep the excitement out of my voice, and neither could Damien, exclaiming that I could be right. He went right to the pedestal, but the cage surrounding the potion had no door, and it wouldn’t lift off the pedestal when Damien grabbed it.

If it was just me down here, there would have been a problem. But solutions seemed to be much more prevalent when there was a fiery red dragon around.

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Damien grabbed the golden cage in both hands. I watched as the bars melted, dripping down the pedestal in thick golden streams. It only took less than a minute for a hand-sized hole to appear. He reached in and grabbed the vial, gently handing it to me. I looked up at him, feeling an overwhelming wave of excitement, of hope. This could be it, all we needed. I wasn't sure exactly how a single potion would break the curse, but at least we had it in our hands now. We just needed to get out of Marmont's hoard and back to Blackthorne Castle before someone realized we were in here.

"We did it," Damien said. He stared at the shining vial as if he were looking at the most precious gem in the world. "Let's get out of here."

"Let's." I turned, ready to follow Damien out of the hoard and figure out what our next steps were.

That's when I heard it again. Clap, clap, clap. But the sound was louder now, faster. As if something was running... or maybe riding a horse? But who would have brought a horse down here? Could we have triggered some kind of defensive cavalry? Damien shot me a worried glance.

"That's not the plumbing, is it."

Damien shook his head. "No." He started down the hall, moving quickly. "Let's go. Now."

He started to run, which only made me more nervous. What did he know that I didn't? And how would we ever outrun someone riding on horseback?

The answer was: we wouldn't. We turned a corner and came to a screeching halt as we saw the owner of those clop sounds. It wasn't someone riding a horse. It wasn't messed-up plumbing. It wasn't the music from the party.

The labyrinth was guarded by a minotaur.

The creature towered over us, its bullish head nearly touching the ceiling, the horns scraping against it. It was now that I could see the scratch marks above us from the monster's endless pacing. Its eyes were a blazing, bloody red, its body a twisted combination of human and beast, muscles rippling beneath a hide of coarse black fur. Its snarl was a sound straight from my nightmares.

"We're in trouble," Damien whispered. "I can't turn to my dragon form without bringing this entire place crumbling down."

"What else can we do?"

"We fight," Damien answered.

The labyrinth erupted with a deafening roar. The minotaur, eight feet of twisted sinew and fury, charged, eyes ablaze, horns sharp as scythes and aimed down at us, ready to gore us in one swift movement. Its hooves pounded the onyx floor, and in its hands was an axe gleaming with a sinister promise of a swift death.

"Stay back," Damien growled at me as his fists ignited in flames.

He met the charge head-on, grabbing the horns in his hands and twisting. Fire met flesh. The minotaur's roar split the air as Damien's fists struck, flames licking its hide, sizzling, crackling. I could smell the sickening scent of burning hair and cooked meat. It swung its axe, the blade hissing through the air. I could see rust and dried blood on the wicked blade.

Damien ducked, sparks flying as the axe crashed against the ground. Heat rose in the air, coming off Damien as if he had captured the sun in his chest. He dodged another blow from the axe, and another.

The minotaur was going on the offensive, and it looked like it was winning.

I scrambled, desperate, searching the rows of pedestals. Potions glinted at me as if each was offering their help, but I had no idea which one to use. Time slowed down to a crawl. We were so close, so fucking close. And now we were going to lose it all. Damien's cries echoed down the hall with pain and determination, mixing with the minotaur's howls.

It was rage incarnate.

I grabbed a vial, green and glowing, and threw it at the minotaur. Shattered glass sprayed across the floor. The minotaur's movements dulled as the green liquid solidified around its hooved feet. Damien pounced, fireballs hurling at the beast. It was a dance of flame and fury.

The minotaur roared, lifting its legs and breaking free from the green slime. He used his axe to block the fireballs. For how large and lumbering the minotaur was, the bastard was also swift. It fought back relentlessly. Its axe whirled and sliced downward, directly at the crown of Damien's skull.

I held my breath.

Damien dodged with flames trailing behind him. He was a streak of fire and defiance, and I was just a useless potion thrower. All the training I had gone through went up in smoke against a minotaur who could rip me apart with a pinky.

The minotaur struck again and this time landed a hit. Damien cried out, blood

spattering from a wicked slice that slashed across his arm. I shouted meaningless words, feeling completely helpless and becoming paralyzed with fear. All I could do was hold on to the golden vial in my hands.

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Damien retaliated as though he'd never been hit, dodging blows and trading them with his own. The minotaur roared and continued to fight, the burning patches of fur appearing to do nothing to stop it.

Damien attacked, fists aflame, each blow a drumbeat of war. The minotaur stumbled, faltered, but would not fall. How the hell were we going to get out of this alive?

And then, a gasp. A choke. A jerk.

The minotaur froze before it fell forward with a loud crash that echoed down the hall. A hand was holding its still-beating heart. A hand that belonged to the vampire Matriarch herself, standing there in the same black dress from earlier, but this time, it wasn't a projection. She was really there, her devil-laced red smile curving as she lifted the heart to her lips.

She drank with a smile, and I realized then that we were just as dead as the minotaur.

Chapter 26

Run

Damien

Helstriva, the vampire Matriarch, stood with blood dripping down her chin, those sickening tentacles latching onto the minotaur's heart, slithering into the aorta and bursting out of the bottom. She slurped as if she were drinking a smoothie after a day spent in the hot summer sun. She relished it, and we were just two more pieces of

meat, hypnotized by the dread of inescapable death.

I looked to Robby, who'd gone paper pale. He was seconds from collapsing. The potion—the one we had come this far for—was still held in his hands with a white-knuckled grip.

No, this can't be the way we go. I'll get us out of this.

The Matriarch dropped the heart to the ground with a wet splat, where it fell next to the corpse of its previous owner. The minotaur's thick tongue lolled out of his snout, close to where the heart had fallen. My stomach flipped. I'd never felt fear like this before. It went beyond bone-chilling. This was the kind of dread that came down on someone seconds away from a death that they could see coming.

The Matriarch licked her bloody fingers before she said, "I didn't want to miss the party. And neither did my friends."

That's when the situation went from "oh shit" to "we're fucking done." The sound of claws scratching against the floor came from around the corner, immediately followed by unnerving laughter. The kind of laughs produced by a sicko enjoying the torture they were performing on a captive. A bloodthirsty laugh... something otherworldly almost.

And then they turned the corner. If I wasn't shocked at seeing the Matriarch, I was definitely shocked at seeing the Shades.

They were demonic. Creatures that had no semblance to anything that had been naturally created. They were made of shadow and ink and nightmares, standing on two legs with four long arms that reached down to their knees and ended in bladelike claws, covered in cracked flesh, the skin around their eyeless faces pulled much too tight. They had jaws that unhinged, sporting rows and rows of yellowed teeth sharper

than diamonds.

What the hell was the Matriarch doing with these abominations? They hadn't been seen in decades. Not since the Chaos King had been banging away at his prison. Could that mean...

"Don't look so scared, boys." Helstriva put her hands on both Shades, petting their bald heads as if they were her fluffy little Pomeranians. A tentacle slipped out from her red-lipped smile, licking at her chin. "I'm only here to kill one of you." Those endless orbs of death locked in on a terrified-looking Robby before shifting over to me. "Now, which one of you wants to dance with me first?"

The Shades giggled like rabid hyenas. I let two fireballs loose, landing directly on the Matriarch's chest and fizzling away without a single thread of her dress burned. She smiled.

"Guess that'll be you," she purred.

"Robby... run!" I grabbed Robby's hand and yanked him backward. He nearly tripped on himself but managed to keep his footing as I dragged us down the hallway. Those nightmarish laughs immediately followed behind us.

"Don't kill the human," the Matriarch commanded as she gave pursuit.

We sprinted down the labyrinthine corridors, our breaths ragged, hearts pounding like drums in our ears. The excited screeching of the Shades echoed behind us, growing nearer with each passing second. The dark, twisted maze seemed to close in on us.

A Potion of Will—turn left. I yanked Robby down the left hall, loosing another fireball over my shoulder.

A Tonic of Philosophy—right.

We ran down the right path, bouncing off the wall and running, running, running. I held on tight to Robby's hand. I could hear his terrified breathing, his occasional whimpers. I let another fireball fly behind us, and another and another. But I knew the flame wouldn't stop these monsters.

Nothing would stop them until they got what they wanted.

I glanced back to see the terrifying sight of the Shades coming after us, their ink-like bodies gliding over the floor, claws reaching out, eager to rend flesh from bone. The Matriarch, her eyes glowing with a murderous rage, floated behind them, the midnight-black dress billowing behind her, clinging to her form, her long black hair flowing along with it.

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A Potion of Good Growth.

“Left!” I shouted, and we darted into a narrower passage, the air thick with the stench of... blood. The iron stench was getting stronger and stronger.

But there was the exit. The door we had come through. We’d get out and shout to evacuate the party. The chaos caused would give us enough cover to leave. And Helstriva—she wouldn’t attack the partygoers. Not without triggering action against the vampires for breaking the Iron Treaty and causing a terroristic act.

We just had to get out.

“Wait!” Robby shouted as he pulled out of my grip. My eyes went wide. What was he thinking? The Shades were almost on us. I let go of another fireball, hitting one of the demonic creatures in the face. Its cracked and bleeding skin turned an angry red, but the monster didn’t stop running toward us.

Robby, still holding the Curse Breaker potion, grabbed a vial of green liquid off a pedestal.

That’s when Robby stepped in front of me. He lifted up the potion and hurled it at the ground. It shattered, releasing a whirlwind of light and energy that spiraled outward, entrapping the Matriarch and the Shades in a glowing cage of force that stopped them in their tracks. The Shades banged against the cage of light, but they couldn’t get it to budge. The Matriarch gave a banshee-like screech.

He’s a fucking genius.

“Go, go!” I shouted over the ear-splitting sound, finding the exit and running out into the stony hallway.

We didn’t stop running until we reached the main party hall.

And that’s when we came upon the true nightmare. It was a scene that would scar us both for the rest of our lives.

The iron scent I had been smelling was no longer a question.

The grand hall, once filled with laughter and music, was now a house of bloody horrors. I was wrong about my assumption earlier, about the Matriarch not attacking the partygoers. The Matriarch and her Shades had been thorough, tearing through the party like a blade-filled hurricane. Bodies lay strewn across the floor, torn apart, some still twitching in their death throes. Faces frozen in terror stared blankly at the gilded ceiling, blood splattered across ornate tapestries and covering the crystal chandeliers, soaking through the rug. It was fast. Marmont couldn’t even fully shift, his dead body was a mangled and mixed up form of dragon limbs and human. I’d never seen something like that. Never.

My stomach flipped and twisted and threatened to empty.

She must have had the Shades do this. No one would know who caused this carnage. No one but us.

Robby staggered, falling to his knees and retching. I crouched down next to him, a hand on his back. Nothing I could say would be able to help this. But I knew we couldn’t stay—the cage wouldn’t hold those sadistic fucks for long.

“We have to go, Robby. Come on.”

I helped him up to his feet, his legs and shoulders shaking. He looked at me with pure, unadulterated fear. It wrenched my heart from my chest. But there was no time to console him.

“Starlight... where is she?” Robby gasped, tears in his eyes.

“We can’t search right now. Everyone here is dead. We need to go.”

I had to be brutally honest. Every second that ticked by meant a second we were pushed closer to meeting this exact same fate. Robby gave a weak nod. I put my arm around him and held his head against my chest. “Just close your eyes. I’ll lead us out of here.”

He did as I asked. I maneuvered us around severed arms and torsos, the wet sound of blood splashing against our sneakers following us out of the chateau. Once we were outside and the carnage had stopped, Robby lifted his head again, and we both ran across the twinkling lights of the bridge, out onto the street.

It took me seconds to turn to my dragon form. I whipped my tail against a car in anger as Robby climbed onto my shoulders. He grabbed on and rested his head against my neck as I took to the air. I could feel Robby sobbing against me for the entire flight.

The house of horrors was left behind, but the night would stick with us forever.

The entire family was waiting in the living room as we stumbled in, Robby clutching the potion to his chest with tears still streaking down his cheeks. He wasn’t actively crying; it was more so the residual emotion that poured out of him. His normally vibrant eyes were taking on a distant quality to them from the shock of the night. It would take time for him to get over the things he saw tonight, if he ever fully did. But I would help him each step of the way.

That would come later. For now, we had to focus on the curse.

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“You got it?” Maddox said, jumping up from the couch. Xavier joined him while Claire and Dawn hung back. Our father hovered on the edge of the room, silent. “Holy shit, what happened?”

“We’ll explain later,” I said. “How’s War?”

“He’s unresponsive, Damien. We don’t have much time.” Dawn squeezed her hands together.

“Is this it? The cure?” Claire moved past my brothers and went for Robby. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. More silent tears slipped from the corner of his eyes, but he managed a weak smile and handed it over.

“It is,” Robby answered. “We went through hell and back to get it.”

Understatement of the century.

Claire lifted the golden vial up in the air. The wings on the cap glistened under the bright light in the living room. She uncapped it and looked inside, wafting the scent in her direction before it reached me. Whatever was in that bottle smelled like a mixture of vanilla and berries. She looked around the room with a worried expression, her thin brows inching together.

“What? What is it?” I asked.

Please don’t say this was all for nothing. Please don’t say that.

She took a breath, licked her lips, and swallowed down whatever was bothering her before she spoke. “We have two choices here, and I want to leave the decision up to you guys.”

“What do you mean ‘choices’?” Xavier asked.

Claire recapped the vial, holding it delicately in her hands. “This looks to be for only one person. I think it only works on an individual’s curse, not the entirety of dragonkind. I can hold on to it and see if I can replicate whatever is in here, but that would take me months—if I even can replicate it.”

“But War...” Dawn said, her voice trailing off.

“He doesn’t have months,” Claire finished.

“He doesn’t even have hours,” Maddox said, moving toward Claire as if he was going to take the potion from her, decision made. I tried to process a hundred different ways this could play out, but all I kept thinking about was one possibility: losing my little brother because we waited. And there wasn’t even a guarantee that Claire could replicate the potion. If we lost him for nothing...

“We don’t have time.” Dawn stood ramrod straight, her lips tight together and her expression set in stone. “I say we just give it to him.”

Xavier cleared his throat. “If anyone finds out we used the one thing that could stop the dragon fall—”

“Who the fuck cares?” Maddox retorted, raising his voice. Ice started to climb up his fingers, encasing his knuckles.

“Calm down, you two,” I said, stepping between them. The last thing we needed was

a full-on brawl.

Maddox puffed out his chest, his biceps flexing. The black tank top he wore made it very obvious that he was getting ready to fight. “I’m done being calm. I’m not losing War. Not when we have a cure right fucking here.”

“I get it, Madds, but we need—” I was cut off by my father.

“Fuck this,” he said. He pushed past us all and snatched the vial out of Claire’s hand. None of us could—or would—stop him as he stormed down the hall, up the stairs, directly to Warrick’s bedroom. We followed behind him, a procession of silence and nerves.

The decision had been made. It was out of our hands.

We filed into Warrick’s bedroom. He was on his bed, looking eerily calm. His eyes were closed, and there was the tiniest hint of a smile on his youthful face, even with how gaunt he looked. He had his hands cupped on his chest, his most comfortable pajamas on. I saw a flicker of flame light near his ankle.

We didn’t have much time left.

Our father went straight to the bedside. He uncapped the vial, throwing the golden wings to the floor. He knelt down and gently lifted War’s head. My little brother’s eyes were still shut, his chest rising and falling in extremely long intervals. Emerald scales rippled up and down his arm. He likely only had a few more minutes before he’d burst into flames and leave us with a pile of ash.

Dad brought the vial up to my brother’s lips. None of us intervened; none of us interjected. Dawn stood with Claire, their arms wrapped around each other’s shoulders in support. Madds stood by my brother’s feet while Xavier watched from

the other side of the room, as if he couldn't stand to be near Warrick if this didn't work.

And then there was me and Robby. I wasn't exactly quite sure when I had reached out for his hand, but all I knew was that our fingers were interlocked, and it was this touch that kept me grounded. If Robby wasn't here, I would have been spiraling with a hundred different "what-ifs" and "don'ts." With Robby next to me, I was able to relinquish some of that. It would all happen how it was meant to; if not, then Robby and I never would have crossed paths.

Serendipity.

Robby proved to me it was true.

My father tipped the entire bottle down Warrick's mouth. His throat bobbed, some of the liquid spilling out the side of his mouth. It was like gold paint, shining down his cheek.

We waited. The scales still rippled, his eyes still shut. I could hardly breathe from the pressure sitting on my chest. This had to work. There was no other choice—we couldn't lose Warrick.

Please. Please.

Please let this work.

Robby's hand tightened in mine. Xavier was already beginning to cry, his sniffles echoing in my brother's book-filled bedroom. Books that hadn't been opened in months. Stacks of them created a nightstand next to his bed, which had an arching bookshelf placed over it, built into the stone of the castle.

He had to come back. I had rare books to show him. I had jokes to share with him. I had—

He coughed and then sputtered, and then his eyes opened, and the entire room gasped. We held our collective breaths for a moment, waiting for the axe to drop. But nothing happened. Our little brother didn't erupt into flames. The scales stopped

fluctuating up his arm, staying instead where they were meant to be. He tried to speak but coughed instead.

“Water!” Dawn said, but Dad was already on it, grabbing a glass from the book-stacked nightstand and helping him drink it. I saw my dad’s normally dark and unexpressive eyes glinting with tears.

Warrick drank a heavy gulp and wiped his mouth, his hand shaking but his smile growing. “So,” he said, looking around at the shocked and relieved faces. “What did I miss?”

I was the first to laugh. It was a sound of pure joy mixed with unconfined relief. My little brother was saved, but wait... “Xavier.” I looked at the next oldest in the family. “You can still sense your dragon, right?”

His eyes went wide, face pale. Shit, shit, shit. We hadn’t considered this. The pressure of the moment drove most of the decision-making, along with Dad.

And then Xavier breathed a sigh of relief, shoulders dropping as if he released a swoosh of tension with that breath. “I can still feel it. We’re good. The curse is broken, at least in our family.”

My dad kissed my brother’s forehead and stepped back, giving us all space to go in for our own hugs and “love you’s.” Even Robby took Warrick in a tight hug, saying how glad he was that he was okay.

This is a double-edged sword.

The glee of having my brother back didn’t diminish—it never would—but the fear and dread of what would come next started to grow stronger.

The curse still had to be broken. Robby came back to my side, hand finding mine. I noticed Dawn drop her eyes and smile as they came back up to mine. “I think I’m going to go to bed,” Robby said, sounding completely drained.

“I’ll join you,” I said.

“You can spend more time with your brother, that’s fine.”

“He’ll likely need some rest too.” I said good night to my family and told them I’d explain everything in the morning, but for now, the two of us needed to sleep. To reset.

And frankly, I just wanted to lie down and hold Robby in my arms, in a room where I was sure we were both safe, where I could stay awake listening to his gentle breathing and feeling his light twitches.

It was all I wanted, and I vowed, in that moment, as we walked in silence to my bedroom, that I’d do everything in my power to keep him safe.

No matter what—or who—the cost was.

Chapter 27

If Someone Just...

Robby

Blackthorne Castle was a paradox, its sleek lines and modern elegance in the interior serving as a stark contrast to the centuries-old legacy of stone that built its exterior. It felt like a sanctuary, and yet the nightmares still found me there. Nightmares that hadn’t stopped since that blood-soaked night a few weeks ago. I would wake up

imagining Helstriva hovering just above me, her tentacles slipping from her lips and caressing my face. I'd wake up shouting, crying. Damien would wake up at the sounds of my terror, wrapping me up in his arms, where I'd find brief moments of peace until I shut my eyes again.

Currently, my eyes were open, sunlight shining bright through the arching windows inside the Blackthorne home office. I sat in a comfortable leather chair with Bambi purring in my lap as I scratched under her chin, making sure not to get poked by those sharp saber teeth. My laptop screen was filled with a sympathetic-looking man—Eric, my therapist—as he wrapped up our session for today.

“I know it feels like this pain will never end, Robby, but healing takes time,” Eric was saying, his voice a soft, distant hum as I tried to focus on his words. “The trauma you’ve been through is real, but so is your strength. And with the tools you’re learning to use through our sessions, I think that you’ll find yourself feeling better soon.”

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“I hope so, Eric. I just want one full night’s rest.”

“We can discuss some sleep aids with your primary care physician if you want to go down that route?”

“I might,” I said, leaning back in the chair and rubbing my face. The smaller window in the corner of the screen showed my exhaustion as clear as the daylight that flooded the room. The bags under my eyes were heavy, and the blond hairs on my chin were growing a little scraggly. I was never able to grow out a full beard, but these random patches of hair also weren’t a great look. On top of all that, I desperately needed a visit to my barber so that it didn’t seem as if I’d decided to throw a dirty mop on my head and called it a day.

With our session wrapped up, I closed out of the call and laid my head down on the cold desk with a sigh. This was helping. I could feel the weight on my shoulders lessen by the day, but the anxiety and dread of the future still remained. Because all I could keep thinking, over and over and over again, was that:

I had to die.

It would be the only way to break the curse. Yes, Damien and the family still held out hope that killing the Matriarch would do it, but somehow, I knew that wasn’t the case. It was as if the script had been written down in my bone marrow. I knew the way this play would end: a tragedy. For me, at least. Same way as it ended for my brother. For our mother.

But for the dragons, my death... it would be a miracle.

How could I keep living with that fact stuck in my brain like a thick, barbed thorn? It would be the ultimate selfish act, keeping the curse going by keeping my heart beating.

The room started to spin. Tears welled up in my eyes. I bit at my knuckle. I didn't want to cry again. Not again. I've cried so much, haunted by so many ghosts.

I had to get up and go for a walk.

The castle was bustling with energy, even just outside of the office. Friends of the family had come to stay, living with the Blackthornes as they prepared for the fight for their lives. They had dragons, fae, shifters, Marvels, and even a couple of humans walking the halls, some of them staying in surrounding properties but coming over during the day to train and strategize.

I walked past a room where two burly men were sparring with wooden swords and another room where a few Marvels were practicing to fight with the vibrant red threads of mana that whipped through the space. I made it to the living room, where the core group of the family sat on the couch. The television was playing a newscast on mute, the reporters still discussing the horrific events at Marmont's Chateau. The chyron at the bottom of the screen read: "No culprit or suspects for the Chateau massacre have been found. Please contact the Enforcers with any useful information."

I sat down between Dawn and Maddox on the couch, both of them with their noses buried in books. Warrick sat with his legs crossed on the floor, a grin on his face as he looked up at me.

"How ya feeling today?" he asked, brushing a dark brown curl away from his forehead. Ivy-green scales on his left thigh peeked out from his shorts.

"Better than yesterday, so that's a plus," I said. Warrick was very empathetic, which I

appreciated. He always checked in on me, asking how I was doing and if I needed anything. He was quickly becoming a good friend, and seeing him up and out of his bed made going through those halls of horror so worth it.

Damien came in, wearing gray shorts and a white T-shirt, the collar darkened with sweat. He smelled like the outside, having likely just come in from a run. He padded barefoot across the blue-and-white rug, sitting on the love seat directly across from me. I smiled at him, feeling a strong sense of comfort the moment he stepped into any room I was in.

Damien looked to his brother and sister. “Have you guys figured out if there’s anything on what the Matriarch is weak to?”

“Nothing in this book,” Dawn said.

Maddox shook his head. “Same here. No one’s been able to give her as much as a paper cut. Much less actually hurt her. It has to do with the parasite she ingests when she becomes the Matriarch, but there’s nothing that says how to destroy it.”

“You should have seen how my fireballs did nothing against her. It might as well have been sparks I was throwing at her.”

I sat up, deciding it was my turn to ask another probably obvious question. “Why don’t all the dragons just fly up there and fuck her shit up? She can probably survive against one, but all of you guys? That sounds impossible.”

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“We’ve considered that,” Damien said. “But it’s difficult. Dragons are naturally averse to big warlike conflicts, and attacking the vampire Matriarch outright would definitely break the Iron Treaty. She also has defenses up that protect the Obsidian District from large-scale attacks. And those Shades we saw with her, they’re what tore apart Marmot’s Chateau. Not the Matriarch. She could have more of them, which would decimate us.

No, It’s better if we’re tactical—surgical—about this.”

I nodded. “Makes sense.” As did most of Damien’s answers. “So... how are we going to kill her?”

Maddox scoffed. “Question of the decade.”

“At least we know how to break into her lair,” Dawn said, her voice tinged with optimism. “If it wasn’t for Benjamin, we would have been fucked.”

That was true. Benjamin, Maddox’s old vampire boyfriend, had given us one of the most crucial pieces of information yet: the location of an underground tunnel that led directly into Helstriva’s home. He had learned it after messing around with one of the Matriarch’s closest concubines, the vampire becoming drunk off blood and spilling all of the Matriarch’s secrets after a particularly long sex session. The tunnel had been made as an emergency escape hatch if she were ever surrounded, and the tunnel itself was guarded by plenty of skull-rupturing wards. With the entrance pinpointed and a distraction planned for somewhere else in the Obsidian District, it would allow for our group of Marvels to work on disenchanting the wards and let the core fighters in to surprise the Matriarch.

I was set to go with that core group, consisting of Damien, Maddox, Dawn, Xavier, Warrick, and Claire, along with a few others. They had originally wanted me to stay locked in the castle, but I refused. If this was going to happen, then I was going to be there, and I'd help in whatever way I could. Training for the upcoming fight had also kept my mind and body busy, blocking out most of the anxiety during my waking hours.

It was at night that the demons would come roaring back.

My phone buzzed in my lap. I opened the text, smiling at the GIF of a dancing drag queen taking shots on the stage.

It was from Starlight. It had taken a couple of hours after the night to reach her, but after looking on social media, I had found her profile and was more than relieved to see she had posted a message saying she was safe. I immediately messaged her, and we reconnected when she introduced herself to me out of drag as Mason Jun, someone who happened to be just as bright in and out of makeup. Mason had told me that after he triggered the mist and realized he couldn't find us that he decided to leave and grab some In-N-Out instead.

Approximately ten minutes later, no one in the chateau was left standing. No one but us.

I replied to Starlight's call for a girls' night, telling her I could use some time to dance and let loose but that it would have to wait. There were other, eh, more pressing matters.

Damien stood from his seat and stretched his arms over his head. A little tuft of armpit hair peaked through and instantly turned me feral.

"I'm going to go shower and get ready for the evening training." His eyes went to me,

the corner of his lip twitching up. I could already read his body language as if I'd spent multiple years studying it on Duolingo. I got up from my seat and excused myself, saying I could also get cleaned up before tonight's practice.

I never turned down an opportunity to shower with Damien. He always looked so damn sexy with water dripping down his body, catching on the muscular abs and glinting on his red scales.

And honestly, just being intimate with Damien helped teleport me to another world. One that wasn't haunted by shrieking howls and unfiltered terror.

Maddox shot us both a look that said he knew exactly what the two of us were up to, but no one said anything else, going back to what they had been doing earlier.

"How was your run?" I asked as we walked down the curving hall, polished wooden arches and clean white floors lit by the rainbow sunlight that came in through the stained glass windows.

"It was good. I got about four miles in."

"Not bad. I think I got about a quarter of a mile in from pacing around the bedroom today."

Damien chuckled, his hand finding mine. "Has it been difficult today?"

When is it not?

Instead of saying that, I stuck with, "No, it wasn't that bad. I'm just being dramatic."

We reached his bedroom, the true sanctuary inside of Blackthorn Castle. He closed the heavy door behind us, walking over to his closet and grabbing a clean pair of

shorts and a blue T-shirt.

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I sat on the bed with a sigh. Damien joined me, eyebrows twitching together in concern. “Talk to me, baby. What are you feeling?”

I still wasn’t entirely used to being called “baby” by Damien. It felt different, but not in a bad way. The complete opposite—it made my heart start to race in my chest.

“I’ve just been thinking too much,” I said, beginning to crack under Damien’s stare. I didn’t want to spill out all my guts because some of it had to do with him. But I could tell by the set in his jaw that he wasn’t going to let this one go. “I’ve been thinking about how all of this can be avoided if I just... if someone... well, if someone just kills me.”

There.

I said it.

I looked directly ahead, finding a spot on the blue-and-silver wallpaper that appeared to be slightly chipped, revealing a sliver of wall underneath.

“Robby, we’ve talked about this.” Damien’s tone shifted, became more tense. “I don’t want to have this discussion again.”

“But if that’s how the curse is broken, then we have to consider it. I can’t just be walking around knowing that I’m the reason there won’t be any dragons—besides you guys—left in a few months. I can’t handle that.”

“We don’t know that killing you breaks the curse,” Damien repeated. It was the same

answer over and over again, but it didn't solve any of my worries.

I rubbed at the back of my neck. "We can't be selfish about this, Damien. We can't ignore what the prophecy said."

"I'm not ignoring anything." His hand balled into a fist on his lap. I could see him grinding his teeth. "I'm keeping you safe. That's what matters to me right now."

"If people, other dragons, if they find out..."

"I don't give a fuck what happens if others find out. Like I said, we don't know that killing you breaks the curse, and neither does anyone else. No one knows how this shit really works."

"There's one way to know—"

"Enough!" Damien stood, towering over me. The force of his shout nearly pushed me back onto the bed. I could see heat radiating off his shoulders, anger flushing his cheeks a bright crimson. I'd never seen him look like this. Chest puffed and stare full of sharp daggers.

Shit... had I gone too far?

Chapter 28

Seeing Red

Damien

Robby's words had made me irrationally angry. I could see that I was blowing up for something that deserved a more levelheaded conversation, but I just couldn't take it

anymore. This stress, this pressure, this intense desire to make sure not a single hair on Robby's head was harmed. Killing him to end the curse wasn't an option I would ever consider. Even bringing it up made me boil inside.

Ever since that moment in the magic shop, when we met for the first time, Robby and I had become entwined. I could see that now, clear as day. Our connection went much deeper than anything I'd ever felt before, than any relationship I had ever had.

"I can't even think about it, Robby. A world without you isn't a world I want to be in. And I know how that makes me sound. I know you must see me as some selfish creature, but I can't—I won't lose anyone else." A swell of emotion rose up and got lodged in my throat. I successfully swallowed it down, coughing into a tight fist. I ignored the tears that began pricking at the corners of my eyes. This had been built up for a while, and it was finally time to bust down the dams.

"I don't think you're selfish," Robby said in barely a whisper.

"I do. I know that if anyone outside of this family were to find out, they'd think the same thing." I shook my head, running a hand through my hair. I felt like a pressure cooker. I wanted to shout, to roar, to turn to my dragon and burn this world down for being unfair, for constantly wanting to take, take, take. I didn't want to give anything else up. "I feel shame, Robby." A sob got caught in my throat. "It's putrid, it's horrible. I feel like I'm horrible, thinking of all those families currently being ripped apart one by one, dragons turning to dust. But I also can't take on that responsibility. Who am I to consider myself the savior of all dragonkind? Why do we have to make the ultimate sacrifice?"

Robby looked out the window. The afternoon sun sat high in a cloudless sapphire sky. "I don't know the 'why,' Damien, and I don't think anyone ever will. But I do know that you aren't horrible." He huffed out an exasperated breath. "Fuck, we're talking about taking my life here. How can I ever think you're horrible for not

wanting to do that?” He dropped his head in his hands, starting to cry, much more than the few tears that slipped down to my chin. I immediately went to his side, sitting down on the edge of the bed with him.

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I rubbed his back, listening as the tears started to slow down, ceasing altogether. He sniffled and looked at me. “And what if we can’t kill the Matriarch? Your fireballs did nothing to her. She could be truly immortal. Then what happens?” I could see all the torment in his deep amber-brown eyes. I would give up all my power if that meant I’d be able to reach in and take that torment from him.

But I didn’t have an answer for him. His question cut to the heart of it. We were discussing different ways of potentially taking her out, but none were guaranteed. Even bringing a guillotine didn’t mean she’d die. From lore and facts we were able to scrap together, it seemed like she had the ability to regenerate entire body parts. What was to say she couldn’t regenerate an entire body?

All I knew to say in that moment was this: “I will sooner burn down the world for you than live in it without you, Robby.”

The words settled in the room like dust and ash falling after a wildfire. And I meant each one of them.

“I’m... I’m grateful for that. And I believe you, I do. It’s just so much to consider,” Robby said, tears welling up in his eyes. “There’s so many different ways to look at this. I don’t know—I’m just so overwhelmed. I can barely sleep, and when I can, it’s because you climb into bed and snuggle in with me. Those are the only moments I truly feel I can let all my guard down, that I can relax enough to finally sleep.”

I put an arm around his shoulders and pulled him into my side. “You know, I feel the same. I go to sleep at night feeling that pressure weighing me down, but it instantly evaporates when I turn and pull you against me. Everything that was once wrong

turns right. Everything that was upside down flips to right side up.” I blinked and felt a streak of wetness run down my cheek. “And I can’t lose you. I already lost my mother—that was like getting my heart pulled right out of my chest. I don’t have anything left. If you were to go, then I’d go with you.”

Robby rubbed at his face, drying away his own tears. I got up from the bed and kneeled down so I could look him directly in the eyes, my hands on his knees. They trembled slightly. I moved my thumb in soft circles and felt his legs steady, still.

“Robby, I love you. I’m in love with you, in a way that unravels me and effortlessly stitches me back together into something new, someone better. Your smile lights up my world, your jokes make me crack up, your slightly obvious questions always illuminate unseen answers. And most of all, the heart that beats in your chest is one of the most genuine I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing.” I took a moment, caught my breath. “So no, I will never entertain the idea of hurting you. No matter who it might save.”

Robby’s bottom lip quivered. I used my thumb to dry off the corner, still slick with his emotion. “I love you, Damien, so much. I don’t know how I found myself in this position, but having you in my life has been the best thing to ever have happened to me. And I once won a years’ worth of free Taco Bell. Do you realize how many tacos that is?”

I cracked up, kissing him through the laughter. He grabbed the back of my neck, his smile pressed against mine. “Seriously,” he said, eyes shut, words landing directly against my skin. “I love you more than I can even say.”

“Then don’t say anything,” I answered as I kissed him back, our bodies doing enough of the speaking. The way he melted against me, sunk into our kiss without any abandon, it showed me more than any words could: this man loved me just as much as I loved him. We were two souls meant to be one, and today, I planned on making

two bodies joined as one.

But first, there was something else I wanted to do. It was a thought that struck me like a comet. Now would be the perfect time to show him. I broke from the kiss, standing and grabbing Robby's hand in mine. "Come," I said, helping him onto his feet. "I want to show you my hoard."

Robby's eyes lit up, his smile growing, those sexy lips of his made even sexier with the evidence of our kiss still glistening on them. He looked so handsome with his blond hair tousled and his cheeks flushed pink, matching the pink shirt he wore. It made his tan skin look golden. Pink was a great color for him.

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I placed my hand over the door to my hoard, feeling the warmth of ancient magic beneath my fingers.

“This,” I whispered as the door creaked open, revealing the room beyond, “is where I keep my most prized possessions.”

Robby gasped as he stepped into the room. It was as if the sun itself had decided to make a home within the walls. A golden hue bathed the space, the illumination dancing over shelves upon shelves of rare books, scrolls, and tomes. The shelves were all imported wood, each individually and intricately carved. Some stood on clawed feet, and others were made to look like snakes slithered up its sides. It wasn't a vast, sprawling cavern like Marmont's labyrinth, but the sheer brilliance of the room gave it a grandiose aura. The domed ceiling was made of cracked blue marble, giving the effect of a permanently bright sky crowning my collection. The sunlight effect was an enchantment I had a Marvel do for me. In the center of the room was a large lounging area full of plush evergreen pillows and cushions, thick white blankets folded neatly in a basket nearby.

Robby looked up at the dome with a slack jaw before he approached one of the shelves, the one that was carved to appear as if it was made of wooden dragon scales. “This place... it's magical,” he whispered. His fingers brushed the spine of a leather-bound book, and his eyes widened with awe as he read the spine.

“A first-edition Lazlowe? Are you serious? His book of poems is supposed to be worth over a hundred thousand dollars. I saw a news story on it just the other day.”

“I know,” I replied with a cheeky smirk. “I was the one who bought it.”

“Of course you were,” Robby said, smiling as he moved to another shelf and another.
“Can I hold one?”

“Yeah, go for it,” I said, finding glee in his sense of wonder.

“Wait. Is this a history of dragons in Cuba?”

I nodded, approaching him slowly. “It is. My collection has stories from nearly every culture and country.”

He had a pensive expression as he moved on, hands behind his back. “That’s where my parents are from,” Robby said. He paused, his eyes distant. “I assume my biological mother is too. I wonder if she had come with my mom or if she had come at a different time. I don’t know. It’s strange to think about....”

I reached out, pulling him into a gentle embrace. “It’s all part of the history that’s inside of you, Robby. One day we can put it all together.”

“How about you? Where is your family from?”

“Originally, who knows,” I said, referencing the other-side of the Tears. A mystery to every single soul walking this earth. “But my family initially settled in Italy before they moved to the US.”

“Can you speak Italian?”

“Un po,” I said with a cheeky grin. I actually was fluent, but I liked to keep a few surprises in my back pocket to impress Robby with.

He chuckled and looked around at the room. “Well, speaking of rare books... how do you afford all this? This castle, the books? It’s like you’re living in a fairy tale, and I

haven't seen you clock into a nine-to-five that I'm aware of."

I leaned against one of the shelves with a laugh, the light casting a glow on my face. "Generational wealth, if I'm being blunt. Our ancestors left behind a considerable legacy. The castle, for instance, has been in the Blackthorne family for centuries. Over time, smart investments, dealings with other supernatural entities, and a bit of treasure hunting added to our bank accounts."

Robby smirked, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "So you're basically a supernatural trust fund baby?"

Laughing, I caught his chin with my fingers. "Maybe. But that doesn't mean I don't have my own ways of contributing."

As I pulled him closer, our lips met once again, and the weight of our conversation faded, replaced by an overwhelming desire to devour Robby right where we stood.

Except that what I planned on doing to him would be more proper outside the sanctity of my hoard. Some dragons didn't care, but I liked to keep this space as pure as possible. Which meant leading Robby back toward the door. "I think we should get back in the bedroom," I said to him, reaching down and grabbing his growing bulge. He nipped at my neck.

"Yes, please."

His please did something to me. I growled and brought his face back up to mine, lips finding his. We stumbled back into my bedroom in a tangle of limbs and tongue. His hands roamed all over my body, my cock already rising at his touch. I pushed myself against him. I wanted him to know how hard he was making me.

He groaned. The heat inside me flared. A dragon's fire ready to scorch down the

walls that surrounded us.

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“Take these off,” Robby said, tugging at my shorts. I dropped them to the ground, revealing a black jockstrap with thick white waistband, my hard dick having already slipped out the side.

“Fuck me, you’re so fucking sexy.” He leaned in and kissed the head of my cock, a smile still on his lips.

“Fuck you? That’s exactly what I plan on doing,” I said.

He looked up at me, eyes twinkling as he took me into his mouth, pulling out the rest of my length so he could really get a mouthful. He went all the way down, pushing me to the back of his throat.

Fuck, I thought as I knotted my fingers in his soft hair, how could I not fall in love with this man?

“Get up here,” I said. “I want to taste myself on you.”

Chapter 29

Rah, Rah

Robby

The weight of our pasts, the pressure of our futures, the world outside these castle walls—all of it melted away the moment our lips touched. Damien’s lips were soft yet demanding, my entire body catching with his fire.

His hands were on me instantly, nimble fingers tracing the curve of my jaw, traveling down my neck, and exploring the expanse of my chest. As he kissed me, I could feel the intense, hungry energy of the dragon within him.

I wanted to feed it.

My fingers fumbled with his shirt, the soft fabric slipping against my fingers as I tugged it up and off him. With his chest bare, I leaned in and kissed his nipples, tasting the salt of his sweat and the unique flavor that was all Damien. I moved over to the red scales just above his nipples, stopping near his collarbone. I kissed those too, soft—almost silk against my lips.

He sucked in a breath, watching with rapt attention as I worshipped every inch of him.

He groaned, grabbing me by the hips and pulling me flush against him. His cock was hard and pulsing against my own. The friction as we ground against each other left me dizzy.

With effortless strength, he picked me up and laid me onto the bed. His emerald eyes, usually so soft, now drilled into me with a primal intensity. There was also an underlying tenderness there, a promise of care and affection, even as the world around us threatened to combust.

Damien paused to admire me, his gaze devouring every inch of my exposed skin. I grinned at him, rubbing my chest and letting my head fall back on the pillow.

“You’re the most beautiful man I’ve ever laid eyes on,” he said in a low whisper as he moved in. He was slow, methodical, in his approach. Each touch was filled with purpose. He started with my toes, leaving soft kisses that traveled up my calves and along my thighs. By the time he reached my hips, I was a quivering mess, my breaths

coming out in ragged pants. My rock-hard dick leaked a string of clear precum onto my belly, more evidence of how badly I needed this man.

“Damien,” I gasped as his lips wrapped around a particularly sensitive spot on my inner thigh. “Please.”

He grinned against my skin, a mischievous glint in his eyes. But he didn’t make me wait any longer. His fingers ghosted over my twitching cock, teasing and tantalizing until I thought I’d go mad from the pleasure, my toes curling with his touch. I whimpered as he wrapped those pouty lips around me, his tongue running up and down my shaft.

“You like that, Robby? Like it when I suck on this big dick?” He slapped his cheek with my dick, leaving a light pink mark and making me fist the sheets.

“I fucking love that,” I said as he took me back into his mouth. The pleasure came at me like a monstrous tidal wave, consuming every inch of me. I dropped my head, closed my eyes, and let myself float off into sea, the sounds of Damien slurping and sucking the only things reminding me I was actually on land.

The match was lit; the flames in the pyre crackled. My body craved more. I could see Damien’s stiff cock jutting out between his muscular thighs.

“What was that you were saying about fucking me?” I said, almost breathless from the way Damien worked me with his tongue.

He smiled around my dick, coming up for a breath and kissing me. Now it was my turn to taste myself, the salty-sweet flavor still on Damien’s lips.

“Are you ready for that?”

“More than ready,” I said, sucking his neck and thrusting my hips up, pressing myself against him. “I need it.”

He didn’t say another word, reaching over to the nightstand and pulling out an unassuming and unlabeled black bottle. He squirted out some lube onto the palm of his hand and then some more on his cock, spreading it on himself before bringing his fingers to my hole. I gasped, opening my legs wider and moving back on the bed so he could get on.

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The world shrunk to the space between us, the universe solely consisting of Damien and me, our desperate breaths the only sound in the vastness. His slick finger ran over my entrance before pushing in, causing my eyebrows to jerk up, a moan escaping.

“That ok?” he asked, keeping his finger still.

“Yeah, keep going,” I answered, grinding down on his hand, showing him I could take more. He went in knuckle-deep and I saw the stars. He continued to work me, making me leak all over myself. This had never happened to me before, I’d never been this wet, but damn did Damien do things to me. Things I couldn’t begin to explain.

I didn’t really care to explain it either. Just wanted to experience it. All of it. My eyes rolled back as Damien added another finger. The stretch was pure pleasure, heightening my desire—I was ready for more than just his fingers.

“Damien,” I said, voice raspy with need. “Please, give it to me.” I reach for his cock, stroking him as our lips crashed together.

We broke from the kiss, Damien’s chiseled face flushed red. He positioned himself at my entrance, the head of his thick cock teasing me, slipping inside. I shivered with pleasure, my skin prickling with goose bumps.

“Fuck, baby, look at how your ass just takes me,” Damien whispered, his voice a throaty growl laden with desire.

I could only respond with a whimper as he sunk in deeper. He pushed into me slowly,

steadily, every inch of him filling me up, stretching me in the most delicious of ways. The sensation was overwhelming, and I gripped his muscular arms, my fingers digging into his flesh as our bodies became one.

He stilled for a moment. The intensity in his eyes was palpable, his emerald gaze searching mine for any sign of discomfort.

“You okay?” he murmured.

I nodded, the sensation of being so completely filled by him sending shock waves of pleasure throughout my entire body. “Yes, Damien, more than OK. Please, fuck me. Hard.”

“Since you asked so nicely,” he said, wearing a devilish smirk that nearly made me come right then and there.

With that, he began to thrust, deep, hard, setting a rhythm that was slow and deliberate, each push and pull designed to draw out the pleasure for as long as possible. His mouth found mine, our tongues dancing together in time with our bodies.

The feeling of him moving inside me was pure bliss, and every touch, every kiss, only served to heighten the sensation. His hand slipped between us, fingers finding my stiff dick and stroking in time with his thrusts.

“God, Robby,” he groaned, his breath hot against my neck. “You feel so good, so tight. I can’t... I can’t hold on much longer.”

I moaned, lost in the sensations he was drawing out of me. “Let go, Damien. I want to feel you come inside me.”

That was all it took. With a final thrust, Damien spilled into me, his body tensing as he rode out the waves of his climax. I clung to him, my own release crashing over me a moment later, cum shooting and leaving us both breathless and spent, my chest and stomach and chin all left a sticky mess.

But Damien wasn't done. Even as the tremors of his orgasm still shook his body, he pulled out only to flip me over onto my stomach. I gasped at the suddenness of the movement, passion jolting through me once again. I was still hard too, my cock leaking onto the bed.

"Can't get enough of you," he growled in my ear, his fingers digging into my hips as he entered me from behind. I gave a shout of pure pleasure as skin slapped against skin.

This angle was deeper, more intense. He set a punishing rhythm, each thrust sending me closer and closer to the edge all over again.

"You're mine, Robby," he hissed, his voice dripping with lust. "All mine."

I could only moan in response, the pleasure building once more. And then, with a final thrust, Damien and I both came again, his release warm and filling as he collapsed on top of me, the two of us spent and sated as we lay on the dry side of the bed.

For a long while, we just stayed there, our breathing slowly returning to normal. Damien pulled me close so that our bodies were entwined. We exchanged soft, tender kisses, coming down from the heights of our sex.

And fuck, did we reach some heights.

I'd never come like that before. My body still felt like jello, the connection between

us stronger than ever. For the first time in a very long time, I felt truly alive.

“I love you, Robby,” he murmured.

“I love you too,” I whispered back.

Damien’s strong arms wrapped around me, and we lay nestled together, our heartbeats harmonizing. The intimacy of the moment had me feeling like we were the only two people in the universe.

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“Do you remember that first time we met?” I murmured, my fingers tracing patterns over his chest.

Damien chuckled softly. “How could I forget? You were at Claire’s; you had that lost puppy look about you. And then the next minute, you were being chased by vamps.”

I laughed, looking up at the clean white ceiling. “And you, being all mysterious, tall, dark, and brooding. I think you were trying to do your best ‘I’m a powerful fire-breathing dragon with a huge dick’ impression.”

Damien smirked. “Was it that obvious? And is it that big?”

“To me, it was. And to me, it is. But then you really showed off when you rescued me down in the snake-way.”

“You did well that day,” he said. “For someone thrown into this mess from one day to the next, you’ve handled it all very well. Way better than most people would have handled it.”

I sighed, resting my head on his chest, the soft ruby scales warm against my cheek. “I had you by my side. I knew I’d be okay.”

I thought back to that day. The fear I felt when the vampires stormed the snake-way, the responsibility I felt at having to take care of that beagle shifter, the admiration I experienced when Damien stepped in front of me and took most of the vamps with ease. And of course, there was the basilisk, which...

Wait a minute.

The basilisk. The vampires. Stone and ash...

I snapped upright, startling Damien. “The basilisk!” I blurted out.

Damien looked at me, confused. “What about it?”

“The vampires—they weren’t immune to the basilisk’s gaze. Do you remember? They turned to stone and then dust when they looked into its eyes.”

Realization dawned on Damien’s handsome, glowing face. “Holy shit, you’re right. The basilisk’s gaze had an effect on them.”

A spark of hope ignited within me. “Could that be how we defeat the Matriarch?”

Damien’s expression turned thoughtful, an arm supporting his head on one of the fluffy pillows. “It’s a possibility. But we can’t bring an actual basilisk. It’s too risky, and controlling one is next to impossible unless you’re a trained Marvel specializing in basilisks.”

I chewed on my lower lip, thinking. I felt like I was on the edge of something big; I just had to reach a little harder for it. “What if we didn’t need the actual creature? What if we could somehow harness its power or recreate its gaze?”

“It’s an ambitious idea. If we could replicate the basilisk’s effect without the beast itself... it could be our secret weapon against Helstriva.”

“But how?” I pondered aloud.

“We’d need research,” Damien said. “Old tomes, old artifacts, something that could

help us understand the power of the basilisk and how to channel it.”

My eyes darted around the room, landing on the door that led to Damien’s hoard. “You have a collection of rare books. Maybe something in there can help?”

Damien nodded, determination setting in his eyes. “Guess we know how we’re spending the rest of our day.”

“Fucking each other senseless?” I teased him, kissing him again. “You had me rah-rah’ing there at one point. Like a broken record, I couldn’t form any actual words.”

Damien laughed at that, the bed rumbling with the sound. I crossed my leg with his, rubbing his foot with mine.

“I’ve never come twice in a row before either,” I admitted.

“Neither have I,” he said with a slight rumble in his voice. I smiled, nuzzling my face against his neck, taking in a deep breath of him. “Maybe we should try for three next time.”

Damien laughed and pulled me in tighter, kissing the top of my head. “What an overachiever.”

“I think the proper term you’re looking for is ‘overass-chiever.’”

More laughter from the both of us, easy and carefree. This moment felt like the most precious gem, shining as bright as the sun itself, and all I wanted to do was guard it. Keep it hidden, tucked away from anyone who could tarnish it.

Because I knew that even though today may be easy, what was ahead carried enough pressure to crush a barrel full of diamonds, and I wasn’t entirely sure how we were

going to handle it.

Or how we would even make it through alive.

“Yeah, I’ve got no idea how we’re getting out alive,” Warrick said, leaning forward in his chair and furiously pressing the controller in his hand. “Oh, oh! Shit.” He dropped the controller on the carpet by his feet.

We were in his room, playing a game after I had spent all evening researching with Damien (and getting in a few more orgasms). We still hadn’t found anything, and I was getting frustrated, so I decided to walk aimlessly around the castle. That’s when I bumped into War, who was extremely excited about a new video game he’d just bought and wanted me to come play it with him.

I watched as my character was mobbed by a group of zombies, the screen flashing red and the words “GAME OVER” scrolling over the scene.

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“Don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of it,” Warrick said. “I heard this is one of the hardest levels.”

“I hope so because that was embarrassing.”

“Not at all,” Warrick said with a chuckle. I stretched in my seat, looking around at Warrick’s plant- and fern-filled room. Blasts of green surrounded us, adding color everywhere you looked. It was soothing. Like his bedroom was a sanctuary mixed with a greenhouse mixed with an arcade. I noticed his degree on the wall, framed by trailing ivy. He had just recently graduated from SoCal University with a degree in mythozoology and a minor in botany.

Mythozoology...

“Hey, War,” I began, placing the controller on the table, feeling the weight of my newfound idea pressing on my mind. “Can I ask you something?”

Warrick looked up, his blue eyes shimmering with curiosity. He had softer features than most of his siblings, with a rounder chin and bigger cheeks. He always had kind eyes too. “Of course, shoot.”

“Well, Damien and I were talking—”

“Is that all you guys were doing?” he said, leaning over his seat and jabbing me in the ribs with an elbow and a wink.

“Yes, we were just talking and strategizing.” The look he shot me said, “yeah, alright,

buddy.” I powered on with my question, even though I could feel my cheeks getting red (and my ass still pleasantly sore from getting pounded). “What if we could somehow utilize the basilisk’s stare to fight the Matriarch? Without actually bringing the creature itself?”

Warrick’s eyebrows knitted in deep thought. He leaned back in his chair, tapping a finger against his chin. “You’re thinking about replicating its effects?”

“Yeah, exactly,” I responded eagerly. “Is there a way?”

He paused for a moment, thinking. “Well, basilisks are unique creatures, not just because of their deadly stare but because their essence is believed to be concentrated in their eyes. There have been some studies that show that those who could extract the essence without directly looking into the basilisk’s eyes could use it to mimic the creature’s power. But the sources are iffy on those studies.”

I felt my heart race. “So you’re saying there’s a chance we could... create some kind of weapon using this essence?”

Warrick shrugged. “It’s theoretical. We would need a medium to store and release the essence, something that can replicate the intensity of the basilisk’s gaze.”

We slipped back into thoughtful silence. I started to look around his room again, my gaze settling on the large golden mirror leaning against the wall next to his closet. That’s when it hit me.

“What about a mirror?” I suggested, thinking about how Medusa’s reflection had been her downfall. “If we can trap the essence in a mirror, then use it to reflect its gaze—”

Warrick snapped his fingers. “That’s brilliant, Robby,” he said, adjusting the round

glasses so that they sat higher up on his nose. “I think it could work.”

“So how do we go about doing this? Extracting the essence without getting turned to stone?”

“Leave that to me,” Warrick said. “I’m friendly with some basilisk handlers. Actually, I should probably go talk to them now.” He was halfway across his room and grabbing his sneakers in a matter of seconds, a whirlwind of excitement. “You’re a genius, Robby.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t—” But he was gone, disappearing out into the hallway with a wave over his shoulder and a promise that he’d be back soon.

I couldn’t tamp down my smile. Killing the Matriarch had been a big roadblock that had seemed insurmountable, but now, maybe it wouldn’t be the impossible mission I had imagined it to be.

I got up and shut the game off, putting the controllers back in their charging station and heading out. As I left Warrick’s room, I walked headfirst into someone else. Someone as solid as a brick wall. I looked up, locking eyes with Benjamin the vampire. Even this close, I could see that there wasn’t a single pore on that ethereal face.

“Sorry,” Benjamin said, stepping aside so I could move past him.

“Actually,” I said, cocking my head, smiling. “You’re the person I’ve been wanting to talk to.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, let’s go somewhere a little more private.”

Benjamin's perfectly plucked eyebrows inched together, but he didn't argue. Instead, he flashed me a fang-filled smile and silently followed me as I led us to a quiet study, closing the door and locking it.

The conversation I was about to have with Benjamin would need to stay private.

Chapter 30

Like a Dungeon Dragon

Damien

Today was the day. Blackthorne Castle was alive with activity, as if the walls themselves had been replaced with the honeycomb pattern of a beehive. There were Marvels and fae and dragons and shifters and even a couple of vamps, all going to their assigned squadrons, refreshing on their duties. These were all friends of ours, people who not only wanted to help us but also wanted to be a part of something even greater.

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The death of the Matriarch. We had to kill her. We had to break the curse, and thanks to my little brother, we now had the tool to do it.

It was held in a padded satchel hanging off Robby's hip. A small hand mirror, enchanted with the vamp-ending powers of the basilisk. Since the Matriarch didn't seem to want him dead, we figured having him hold it would keep it the safest. It only had one charge, so we had to be extremely careful as to when we whipped it out, but with the mirror in our possession, we actually had a chance at destroying her and breaking the curse.

Or so I hoped.

"How are you feeling?" I asked Robby as we walked down the hall, going past a room where five wolf shifters were dressing into their leather tunics.

"Nervous but excited. I just want today to be over with already."

"It will be soon," I said, reaching for his hand. "And when it is, you and I will be in bed celebrating our victory."

"Oh, really?"

"Really," I said, biting my lower lip and squeezing his hand in mine. His smile inched up his face, his brown eyes brightening.

"Maybe we should let everyone else handle it, and you and I can just stay home and fuck each other's brains out?"

I chuckled at that, even though my cock twitched against my thigh. “That does sound tempting.” It was all I wanted to do. Carry Robby up to my bed and have my way with him, and then I could lie down, and he’d do the same with me. Our love-making was intense and never enough. I always wanted more, more, more of him. “We’ll make sure to celebrate our victory all night tonight.”

“How are you guys going to celebrate?” Benjamin asked as he walked in on the wrong part of the conversation. He wore the same thick leather tunics we saw the shifters changing into. It wasn’t as restrictive as mail, but it also wasn’t as protective. At his hips hung two sheathed daggers dipped in the toxins of a ruby sunflower—one of the only things that could incapacitate vamps. It wouldn’t kill them, but it would slow them down enough for Ben to finish the job.

“By playing a long, long, long game of Monopoly,” Robby answered as we entered the grand foyer. Benjamin snorted a “yeah, right” and went over to where Dawn and Claire were, going over some last-minute plans. I looked at the clock on the wall. Only thirty minutes left until the first squadron created the distraction.

“It’s almost time,” I said to Robby, his hand still in mine.

“I’m getting a little nervous.”

“And that’s normal. What we’re about to do is going to be difficult—no amount of joking can hide that. But we’ll be in this together, and I won’t let anything happen to you. Okay?”

Robby nodded, but his tense shoulders and furrowed brow hinted at the storm raging inside him. I leaned in for a quick kiss. Just another reassurance that everything would be okay.

“You two lovebirds ready?” Madds said. He had on the same dragon-scaled shirt and

pants as I did, except his were a sapphire blue as opposed to my ruby red. It was armor made to give us the same protection as our dragon forms, protecting us from most blows and stab wounds. The scales were taken from the annual sheddings, where dragons would drop scales and grow new ones. It was a long process, and the armor was extremely rare since most scales that were shed weren't usable, but today called for our most special attire.

"Ready as we'll ever be," Robby said.

"I know you're ready." Madds poked him in the chest and smiled. "I've seen you swinging around that short sword with Xavier. And you've learned a good amount of hand-to-hand combat from me. You fight like a dungeon dragon: raw and angry. Like you want to prove something, like you belong up in the skies with us. I think you'll be the one to save us today."

"Nah, I'll leave the saving up to all the supernaturals. I'm just there for moral support."

Maddox squeezed Robby's shoulders. "Don't cut yourself down." He nodded toward the door, where our group began to file out. "Come. Let's get this over with."

We followed them out into the courtyard, the bloodred eyes of the gargoyles watching as my siblings and I gathered. Our group would make up the core infiltrators: Dawn, Claire, Madds, Xavier, War, Robby, Ben, and me. It was too important of a mission to include most others. We had to keep it tight and focused with people we could trust with our own lives.

"Okay," I said, standing in front of the group. "This is it." All eyes turned to me. We didn't necessarily have a leader, but I did feel comfortable taking the mantle. "Today decides not only our fate but the fate of the rest of dragonkind. We need to kill the Matriarch and break the curse, and I believe that together, we can do that. Remember

to have each other's backs in there. I don't want any of us even getting so much as a paper cut."

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“Let’s do this,” Xavier said in his golden armor, hair slightly windswept and a hand relaxed on the sword hilt at his side. “Shall we turn?”

Dawn nodded and turned into her dragon first. A cloud of white smoke surrounded her, dispersing as a dragon ten times her size took her place. A magnificent blast of ivory white, her tail whip-long and her horns much thinner than mine. Her snout was longer too, and she had two tendrils hanging from her chin that were responsible for conducting electricity, along with a mane of striking golden hair, soft as snow.

Warrick was next, his forest-green dragon form the smallest out of all of us but also the most nimble. He had spiraling horns made of wood, etched with animals, his body much more aerodynamic than ours. Around his tail grew a verdant green rope of ivy, wrapping around him and hinting at the powers of nature he could control.

Madds and Xavier both turned at the same time. Maddox—the biggest of us all—looked like an icy-blue tank, all muscle and teeth and spikes, standing like a gigantic bulldog with leathery wings, dusted in ice. Xavier contrasted him in his regal golden form, his neck long and his two spiraling horns looking like a crown, a tuft of silver hair at the end of his whiplike tail. His scales glittered like sand sparkling under a bright, warm sun, darker around his legs and wings, as if he’d dipped them in the lapping tide.

“Wow,” I heard Robby whisper next to me. I realized then that he hadn’t seen us all in our dragon forms yet. His eyes were full of wonder as he took in my siblings for the first time.

“Ready?” I asked him.

He could only nod. I stepped back and started to turn, my body magically morphing and shaping into my true form, the flame inside me growing to a roaring brush fire, ready to be rained down from my open jaws. I flexed my large wings and shook my hide before flattening myself so Robby could climb on. Claire went on Dawn's back, and Benjamin took his seat on Maddox.

"Let's fucking do this," Claire said with a loud "woot!" as Dawn took off, Claire's majestic silver-and-golden robe flowing in the wind, a long ivory-white staff floating against her back. They were followed by Mads and Xavier. Warrick was up next, his emerald-green wings flashing in the light of the setting sun. I could feel Robby's legs and hands holding on to me as I took to the skies last, joining my brothers and sister up in the cloudless sky. Ahead of us were some other of our dragon friends, the only ones who'd decided to get involved in this fight. Without any solid proof that this would even work, many of the dragons we'd reached out to decided to stay out of it, scared that it would break the Iron Treaty.

But we knew that there was no time for fear. We'd deal with that later. Now was the time for action.

My wings beat against air pockets, climbing up toward the clouds, the Pacific Ocean stretching on for what seemed like infinity. We flew in silence, all of us likely focused on what was ahead. I thought back to how this all began, to me racing home before my mother passed away in a burst of scales and flame. She had been one of my staunchest supporters, one of my fiercest allies. She was a role model and a hero and my mother. And she was ripped from us because of a power-hungry monster.

It ended today. No one else would be taken. Not from me, not from my family or my friends.

We flew over the small shops, cafes, and rooftop gardens that lined Malibu, entering the beautifully eclectic Harmony District, with its mix of Marvel and human

architecture, flying past the Santa Monica Pier and up toward West Hollywood, the streets full of tourists on the hunt for celebrities and locals on the hunt for their next big break. The hills rose like jagged green teeth, dotted with homes, the valley above it clouded by the permanent mist that obscured the Obsidian District from the rest of the world.

Our formation of rainbow-colored dragons tipped upward, flying directly toward the thick and swirling mist. The weight of Robby on my back, usually a comfort, made my heart beat a little faster, nerves starting to kick in. He'd insisted on coming with us, arguing that it was his chance to make things even for his brother, for his mother. It had been an impassioned plea, one I couldn't turn down.

But should I have put up a bigger fight? We were flying directly into enemy territory, bringing Robby straight to the source of all his nightmares.

I hoped we hadn't made a mistake. It was far too late to turn around now, the mist closing in around us as we entered the clouded valley. Flying through the fog cut down visibility, but it wasn't as blacked-out as one would presume. I could still see homes underneath me, small and run-down, but homes nonetheless. The streets were winding and empty, the stores and restaurants and businesses all shut down during the day. Even the banks were shuttered, with planks across the windows that would likely come down around opening time.

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It felt like an abandoned ghost town, but I knew it was far from it. There were thousands and thousands of vampires below us, most of them already sensing our presence. Beyond that, the Matriarch had four flying chimeras that patrolled over her district, big alligator-like beasts that had feathered wings the length of two school buses from tip to tip.

A loud explosion from the opposite side of the district boomed through the air. The distractions had begun. Ear-piercing shrieks sounded as the chimeras dropped from their roosts and flew toward the noise. Two of them whipped past us in the mist, only discernible from the way the thick cloud shifted and wavered, neither of them noticing the flight of dragons dipping down toward a quiet street.

Another shriek, this one louder, closer—fuck! I had to hope Robby was holding on because one of the chimeras locked directly onto me, its wicked green jaws appearing out of the mist, ready to latch onto my neck. I dove, the sudden drop making my stomach feel like it flipped. I could also feel Robby's death grip on my spikes as I leveled us out.

Xavier and War, both riderless, gave chase to the chimera, going on the offensive. Xavier managed to get a body blow into the chimera, getting hacked by one of its big paws, thick claws clipping into my brother's golden scales. He opened his mouth and fought back with a stream of thick sand directly into the creature's eyes. It yelped and swung around, flying awkwardly as it tried clearing the sand from its eyes.

Warrick, the fastest one of all, appeared like a green comet flying through the mist, his teeth clamping down on the chimera's lion tail and whipping it down, throwing them both to the ground. But before they hit solid concrete, Warrick let go and used

his powers to make a thick bed of roses appear. His fall broke in a cloud of velvet red rose petals.

The chimera wasn't as resourceful, or as alive, its head cracking against the shining black obsidian that paved the ground, its body falling limp and lifeless.

The streets were no longer quiet or as empty. Vamps began to filter out of their homes, looking around in confusion before realizing they were under attack. Some rushed back into their homes to grab weapons; others started to run barefoot down the street toward another huge explosion. This time, it had come from the other side of the district. That would be the shifter pack of wolves that were working with us, the leader owing Xavier a massive favor.

We didn't have to fly too much further into the Obsidian District until we reached the building that housed the Matriarch, rising up through the dense fog like a shining pearl. It looked almost like a temple, with golden columns and grand arches, shining against the black backdrop of the rest of the district.

I dipped down toward the building next to it and landed, Robby hopping off of me so I could shift. The non-descript building was guardhouse that had already been taken care of by an icy-fisted Maddox and an electrified Dawn. The three vampires were on the floor with irreparable wounds to their hearts and heads.

Benjamin ran past them and straight to the back of the small, circular room. "It should be..." He grabbed a loose looking stone and tugged it out. "Here."

The stone collapsed downward, as if a slit had opened in the floor and started to swallow them one by one. A dark tunnel opened up where solid wall once stood.

"Everyone ready?" I asked, Robby's hand held tight in mine. I was answered with a chorus of affirmative nods and yes's. I turned to the tunnel, the shadows seeming to

stretch on into infinity.

This was it.

The attack on the Matriarch had officially begun.

Chapter 31

Sharp Objects

Robby

I stuck by Damien's side as we entered into the dark tunnel. My heart raced at about a hundred and fifty miles per minute. This was it. There would be no turning back now. Our fate was sealed the second we closed the door behind us and plunged ourselves into darkness.

Moments later, a flame in Damien's palm gave us enough light to continue. Outside, we could hear the sounds of a distant fight as the other groups continued with their distractions. We had to pull as many vamps away from the Matriarch as possible.

"This way," Damien said, taking a curve in the hall. There was an incline now as we began to head up to the main areas. I stepped in something wet but didn't even bother checking what it was. With my head down and my shoulders slightly trembling, I continued on with the group.

"Wait," Claire said, holding out a hand and stopping all of us in our tracks. "Hear that?"

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We listened, honing in on whatever sound Claire picked up.

Scratching. Like something was running... something behind us.

“Shit, go, go, go!” Maddox shouted, urging us on as he blasted the floor behind us with a sheet of ice. “That should slow whatever it is. Go!”

We didn’t waste another second, the eight of us bolting down the tunnel, Damien’s flame flickering with the wind but never going out. The sound got louder before there was a shriek and a crash. Whatever it was had tripped and fallen on Maddox’s ice, but it likely wouldn’t stop them for long.

“Could it be more Shades?” Xavier asked as they reached the exit of the tunnel.

Damien shook his head. “I fucking hope not.” He reached the door and went to open it, but it was locked.

“No time for subtlety.” He took a flaming fist and punched it right through the door. He reached inside the hole and opened the door from the other side.

According to Benjamin, the tunnel should have opened up into a grand atrium where the Matriarch spent most of her time and where she’d go if her district was under attack. It would allow her an easy way to escape while also being defensible, if they needed to fight.

And, just as Benjamin had said, the tunnel spilled into what seemed like a magnificent grand hall. With its towering jet black marble pillars gilded with flecks

of gold, the room shimmered and cast reflections in the dim light. The ceiling was domed, painted a midnight black that seemed to suck in all the light from the various sconces and candelabras set around the space.

That's when I saw her, the Matriarch impossible to miss.

At the far end of the hall sat Helstriva, flanked by seven pissed-off looking vampires. Her deathly silhouette was framed by the elegant drapes of her black dress, clinging to her form in a sick embrace. The top was made of a spider webs silk, see-through, making it appear as though the black threads were tattooed into her poreless skin. Her eyes glittered with malevolence as they settled on the intruders. Particularly on me.

Damien's voice echoed through the room. "Helstriva, the dragon fall ends today."

My heart thudded and my knees shook. I half-wanted to throw up and half-wanted to run the hell out of here. I'd come a long way since that scared kid in the snake-way, but I still wasn't immune to fear. My mouth was ash-dry, and my hands were tight at my sides to hide the shaking. I wanted to be back at with my parents, eating my dad's pancakes and laughing at the tv with mom, Damien sitting with us on the couch. I wanted it so, so, so fucking bad.

But it didn't matter how badly I wanted something. I knew that now.

It didn't matter.

"Ah, I should have guessed it was you who started this whole mess." Her voice seemed to echo through the space, vibrating inside my rib cage. A thin, wormlike tentacle slipped from her mouth, stretching out in my direction.

"No Shades," Xavier mumbled, his amber eyes scanning the surroundings.

“They’re probably busy with the explosions outside,” Dawn replied, her usually bright demeanor now replaced with steely resolve, her bright white armor glittering under the light of the chandeliers.

“None of this is necessary,” the Matriarch said as she stood and cupped her hands in front of herself, her smile wickedly sharp. Another tentacle fell from her mouth, reaching up toward her midnight black eyes. “If you would stop meddling and let my plan continue, then I can be the one to usher in a new era, not just for vampires but for everyone on this hells-ridden Earth.”

“What is your plan?” Damien asked, his voice way more rock-solid than anything I could produce right now. If I spoke, I was sure I’d sound like a squeaky rodent looking for some cheese. “What’s the endgame here?”

The Matriarch gave a sickening laugh that echoed through the grand hall. Her bodyguards’ chuckles only added to the macabre chorus. I tried to make it so that my knees wouldn’t tremble, but it felt like my legs were about to give out.

“My plan? My plan is to see the Chaos King reign again. My plan is to eradicate the biggest blocks stopping me from seeing him rise again. When I discovered the dragon fall curse, I realized it would be my only chance at creating the world I wanted. It took some—work, but your kind is dropping from the skies like burning little flies. Now I just need to make sure it stays that way.”

The Chaos King.

A name that made blood freeze solid and hearts stop cold.

Everyone knew about the Chaos King, currently imprisoned deep in the Earth’s crust after a coalition of supernaturals fought and defeated him, ending eight years of living under the maniacal tyrant. It had happened long before I was born, about six

generations back, but the scars still marked the world's psyche. It was a time when the skies were constantly cloaked in crimson red midnights, and water only ran as blood, the drinkable water needing to be diluted and boiled and extracted.

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Sacrifices were made in city squares, babies were pulled from their mothers' arms, sleeping men yanked from their beds by their ankles.

It was a living horror, and it brought everyone together. Petty fights and long-time species rivalries were all set aside as the world came together. Fighting against the Chaos King as a united front was one of the catalysts that led to the Iron Treaty being formed, which, silver lining, I guess.

And to know the Matriarch wanted to bring him back... no wonder she had the Shades with her. They were mindless agents of the Chaos King, if she had them under her control, then maybe she wasn't all that far from freeing the nightmare.

"Now," she said, her inky black gaze settling on me, her fingers delicately tracing a sinister dagger at her side. "Give that boy to me, and maybe I'll let most of you leave here alive."

I swallowed down a thick lump of fear. Or was that lunch? The walls were closing in on me, the anxiety running like a flooded river through my body, my palms tingling, my forehead and armpits soaked in sweat. I wasn't ready for this. I was stupid for having coming along.

Shit. Not a great time to realize that.

"You're not touching a hair on his head," Damien growled as flames consumed both his fists. Dawn stepped up next to him, Maddox on his other side. I could almost see the sparks of friction catch in the air. I held my breath. I knew what would come next.

It was starting. The fight for our lives was about to begin.

“Fine. I’ll take him by force.” She dropped her head back and let out a glass-shattering screech, multiple tentacles erupting from her mouth.

The room erupted in violence. The Matriarch’s bodyguards, feral and swift, lunged at us. Maddox’s hands shimmered with frost, summoning ice blades, which he wielded with expert precision. He met the group first, like a solid brick wall. Sliced, ducked, spun. The blades of ice were as solid as diamonds and sharp as guillotines.

Two vampire heads rolled across the floor as the Matriarch screamed, throwing herself into the fray, going toward Maddox but being blocked by a solid and shimmering column of sand.

“Thanks, bro,” Madds said as he dodged a swipe from a vampire.

“No problem,” Xavier said, rewinding a vampire who was seconds from sinking a dagger into Xavier’s neck. The golden armored man duck and swept his hand up, twisting the vamp’s arm around and impaling the dagger into her own chest.

The battle had officially begun.

And I could feel myself freezing up in fear.

My legs wouldn’t move. Why wouldn’t my legs move? And why couldn’t I shout? I wanted to shout for help, wanted to shout to stop, but my mouth wouldn’t open. And my hands—my hands wouldn’t work either, my brain felt like it was on overdrive.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I was panicking. Cold dread locked my joints in place.

Damien let a fireball fly through the air, pushing a vamp up against the wall before they could sink their fangs into a distracted Warrick, who was fighting off an increasingly agitated Matriarch by trying to hold her down with thick vines, climbing them all the way up to her neck as if creating a colorful flower covered noose. She had produced a long and wicked onyx black blade, swiping it through the air and cutting the vines clean off her body.

Snap. Out. Of. It.

The mirror on my hip felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. But I didn't have a clear shot on the Matriarch; I couldn't risk another vampire looking into the mirror and wasting the enchantment.

A loud hiss behind me caused me to spin around. Seeing the grim-faced vamp running toward me was like dropping a bucket of ice cold water over me. It woke me up. This wasn't the time to give into my fear or my doubt. I had to face this head on, same as my friends were doing. I had trained for this, I had grown. I could do this.

I can do this.

I instinctively reached for the hilt of my short sword. This was a move Xavier had me practice over a hundred times.

Swing around, pull it out, aim it up.

The vampire got one hand around my neck before it became impaled by my sword. She looked down with a shocked expression as she went limp, the blade having gone directly through her heart. She'd likely heal in five minutes or so, but this would at least stop her for now.

And it was me who had done it.

Holy shit... I had no time to celebrate my sword-fighting prowess as another vampire lunged at me. I braced myself, holding the sword in a defensive position, ready to counter the assault with a broad stroke of the blade.

But before the vampire reached me, vines snaked out from beneath the marble floor, ensnaring the vamp and throwing him down to the floor. Warrick winked at me before turning his attention back to his own fight.

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An especially agile vampire darted toward Xavier, slashing at him with a glowing sword made of jade. One blow was deflected off Xavier's golden armor, but another landed. Blood oozed from the gash on his neck, but before the vampire could deliver another hit, it was sent flying backward by a burst of Claire's magic: ruby-red mana made to look like a hammer, cracking against the vamp's skull.

"You okay?" she asked, pressing her back against Xavier. She held out her staff and a cocoon of pale red mana encased Benjamin just as another vampire was about to slice an axe across his neck. Instead, the axe clanged against the mana shield before Claire whipped her staff to the right and up toward the ceiling. The red mana wrapped around the axe and launched it up in the air, out of the shocked vampire's hands.

The shocked expression remained as Benjamin took off his head with a swing of his own wicked blades.

Claire was, well, a marvel to behold, her movements fluid and dance-like as the silver-and-gold robe flowed around her. She swung her staff, channeling her magic through it, the hammer moving through the air to mimic her movements as she took out two more vampires.

Benjamin, a stark contrast with his silent, measured moves, swiftly dispatched his kin, his twin black daggers gleaming with each precise strike. The number of bodyguards appeared to be increasing. We had taken down at least five of them, and there were about seven more left.

Two of those turned their attention to me. I took a few steps back, pressing up against the wall. I angled myself so that the mirror was away from the approaching vampires.

Even though the satchel was heavily padded, I couldn't risk getting even a single crack in it.

"Enough!" the Matriarch screeched again, quick as lightning, and seized Dawn, who had gotten too close without realizing it.

A chilling silence settled, broken only by the grotesque sight of tentacles beginning to slide down Dawn's throat, her gasps echoing in the hall. My stomach flipped, threatening to empty all over the marble floor.

Claire's voice broke through the room's collective shock, desperate and commanding, "Let her go!"

The Matriarch's words, cold and dripping with malice, slithered through the room. "Want her safe? Then he must drink my blood." Her free hand pointed to me. "He must become immortal without death first. He must let this curse run its course."

The room seemed to spin. I sucked in a rattling breath. Fear filled my throat, my mouth, my chest. Every cell in my body shouted at me to run, to escape, to do whatever I could to get the fuck out of here.

Instead, eyes locking onto a desperate Dawn's, I made a split-second decision. "Release her, and I will." I held Dawn's gaze for a moment, trying to convey with her what I wanted to do next.

Close your eyes.

The Matriarch smiled. The tentacles slipped out of Dawn's mouth, allowing her to gasp for air.

This was it. I knew there was no second guessing it. Her attention was directly on me.

Her eyes were pinned to me. I had one chance, and it was staring directly at me. If I didn't take it, I'd be a fool. I would be letting down everyone around me. I'd be letting down Damien.

Something I never wanted to do. This was for him. I wanted to make him proud. I wanted to be the one doing the saving for once.

So instead of approaching the Matriarch, I reached for the satchel, the shake in my hand gone. Adrenaline made me steady. Hope made me push forward.

I unsheathed the mirror with the basilisk enchantment and held it up. The mirror was gilded in gold, which had an unnatural shine in my grip, projecting outward, as if I pulled out a flashlight. Dawn instantly shut her eyes. The Matriarch looked directly at her reflection, confusion before realization slashing across her face.

"This is for everyone you've taken from us!" I cried out, emotion raw, my words echoing in the large space. The room seemed to slow but my pulse only quickened. Damien was at my side. I didn't have to look at him to feel him.

Still, I stole a glance to my right, seeing him there, red armor shining, his attention pinned to the Matriarch, smiling as his sister was let go. He looked to me, that expression full of a hundred different emotions. All of them spilling out and into me.

I'd done it, I had made him proud.

And that's when it all took a sharp, sharp turn for the worst.

As the basilisk's spell spread through the Matriarch, starting at her feet and moving up, she reached for her side and hurled a dagger through the air.

It moved like jet-black lightning.

A blur. A desperate attempt to hit the mirror and stop the enchantment from taking hold.

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All my life, I had floated through the world in a bubble. It had been a way to protect myself, to protect my happiness. I had bounced off problems and challenges, retaining what kept me happy and hopeful and slightly naive.

Guess I had to find that pointy edge eventually. The bubble popped. The blade found its mark, plunging through the mirror and directly into my chest. Blood coursed down my shirt in warm rivers of crimson red. I blinked in shock. It didn't hurt as badly as I thought it would. Neither did it hurt when I collapsed to the floor, my knees hitting the cold ground with a hard smack.

No.

The only thing that truly hurt, that rendered my soul in half, was the cry of desperate anguish that had ripped from Damien's throat, his face twisted in an expression I'd never seen him wear.

Grief. Sudden, world-shattering, heart-crushing grief.

He came down to my level. Picked up my head. Put it in his lap.

The lights. They were getting brighter. My shirt. Warmer, wetter. The room grew colder. So cold. Not even my fire dragon's heat could keep me warm. Damien sobbed, repeating himself. "I love you, Robby. I love you." And then, "War! Heal him, someone, please!"

Warrick was by my side. The lights bloomed, the pain becoming more intense now. Voices were distant, as if I'd moved to another room. Warrick moved his hands over

my body, and I could feel some of the pain push away, but it was getting harder and harder to breathe. I didn't have the energy.

"It's okay," I rasped, gargled. The thick taste of iron filled my mouth. I coughed up blood, cleared my throat so I could speak. "We did it. We—saved the dragons."

"You did," Damien said, crying, hand on my chin, coming up to rub his forehead, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Damien's blood-streaked face was the last thing I saw before my world went pitch-black.

Chapter 32

Thirsty

Damien

My vision tunneled on Robby, bleeding out.

My Robby. Blood. Everywhere. Some had gotten on my lips. So much blood. My Robby.

"Xavier, do something," I spat at my brother, desperation clouding my thoughts.

"Damien..." He put a gentle hand on my shoulder. I shook it off. "You know I can't bring someone back, even if I turn back time. And I didn't see that dagger... it all happened too fast. I'm so sorry."

Robby's face went pale. His eyes began to take on a glossy expression, blood still trickling from his mouth. And I started to sob. Holding him. Pleading. Someone.

Please.

Not again. Not now. We had done it. We had reached the end—we could have had it all. Now we had nothing. I'd have no one. Robby would be gone. Dead.

More tears racked my body. A rush of wind drew my attention upward. Benjamin stood with his eyes fixed on a dying—no, a dead—Robby. He wasn't breathing. His chest no longer rose and fell, and his heart no longer beat, the dagger still impaled inside of it.

We were supposed to grow old together. Laugh together. I had so many jokes to make with him, so many memories to share with him. It had been a promise. I broke it. I fucking broke it. I couldn't keep him safe, I fucked up, and there was nothing I could do about it. Nothing but slam my fists against the ground. Nothing but shout out to a quiet god, nothing but feel like a complete, powerless fucking idiot.

I was helpless. Hurtling forward, being pushed in a direction I didn't want to go. This was all wrong. Why? Why couldn't I do something about it.

My Robby... we still had so much more left. I had dreamed about it all. And now, all I could see were his empty brown eyes, no longer honey gold. Empty. A sight I wanted seared from my memory, and one I knew—instantly, I knew—it would haunt me for the rest of time.

"Move," Benjamin said, and I instantly realized why I shouldn't.

"No." The word flew out of me instinctually, even though I wanted to shout, "Yes! Do it! Bite him and bring him back!"

"Don't be foolish," Benjamin said. "We only have a few minutes before the lack of oxygen to his brain results in permanent brain death. Bringing him back won't be an

option then.”

It would be the ultimate selfish act. Handing Robby over to a life of blood and shadows, a life that never ended. All because I wanted him back. How could I ever forgive myself?

“I can’t allow that, not without knowing if he’d want to be brought back. It’s too big a burden.” The words felt like razor blades falling down my throat. The shock of the Matriarch’s death had made all the other vampires stop fighting, but I wanted to throw myself back into the fray and fight until I didn’t have a drop of blood left in my body. It was the only decision that made sense to me.

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“Well, good thing we know it’s his will to be brought back,” Benjamin said, kneeling down. He put a hand on mine, coated in Robby’s blood. His touch was gentle. His eyes, deep black, were also gentle. I wondered how often he gave this same exact expression to whoever he was trying to seduce under his power.

I couldn’t submit to his lies.

Even though I wanted Robby back.

I just needed Robby back.

“I just want him back.”

“I know,” Benjamin said, hand squeezing mine. “We spoke before the fight. He told me if something happened that I had permission to bring him back.”

That hit me like a hammer to the back of my head. Shock. I blinked through it. He could be lying. Could be trying to bring another vampire into his coven, one that would owe him a life debt. It wasn’t entirely unheard of.

But Benjamin had been right. Every second we wasted was another second we risked the vampire venom not being enough to bring him back. It could mend hearts, broken bones, torn limbs, but fixing a brain was near impossible.

“Do it,” I said.

Ben didn’t wait a moment longer. He bared his fangs and craned down, sinking them

directly into Robby's still neck. I couldn't look at him. Not into those empty brown eyes, those eyes that had been so full of life. I would get lost in those eyes, trying to decipher every tiny speck, make out every distant dream. Another cry lodged itself in my throat, wrenching free. Dawn and Warrick were at my side. Xavier, Maddox, and Claire were all watching the other vampires warily, making sure they didn't get any ideas. With their leader dead, many of them turned and ran, disappearing through large doors.

And here I was, a destroyed mess. My heart might as well have been the one that got stabbed. I'd never felt this kind of pain, this type of raw fear. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Benjamin stood back up and wiped his lips with the back of his hand, holding the dagger that had killed Robby. His lips were still bright red. "It's done."

I looked down, still seeing Robby's lifeless stare aimed up at the domed ceiling. It made me want to retch. I held my stomach, stood my ground. As wary as I was of letting Benjamin bite him, I was now focused on willing it to work. He had to claw his way back from death. Please.

Please, Robby, please.

"It's going to be okay," Warrick said, rubbing my back. I must have been talking out loud.

But Robby wasn't moving. "Why isn't he coming back yet?" I asked. It seemed that was all I could do in this situation: ask stupid fucking questions that no one knew the answers to. No amount of magic or fire could fix this now. It was all out of my hands.

"The damage may have been too severe," Benjamin said in a low voice as if the bad news would make me blow his head clean off.

I wanted to launch a fireball directly at him.

“No, no.” I had been given a raft, a way to hope, and it was quickly being yanked away from me, same as Robby was. I couldn’t handle this loss—it would break me. In ways I couldn’t recover from. I collapsed to my knees, the hard crack of the marble not bothering me in the slightest. I took Robby’s cold hands in mine and held them up to my lips, my cheek.

A breath. A twitch.

My eyes widened. Robby’s focused.

He gasped, gargled, coughed. I cried, shouted for Warrick. He could help the healing process with his magic. My hand tightened around Robby’s, and his tightened around me.

“It’s okay, you’re okay,” I said to him over the sound of him coughing. His eyes were no longer glassy and distant—a sight that would undoubtedly haunt my nightmares for years to come—but they were still confused and panicked. He looked down at his chest as I helped him sit up, patting at where his shirt was sliced by the blade, his skin already mended together and not even showing a scar.

“Am I... am I dead?”

“You could say that,” Benjamin answered.

Robby’s jaw cracked open, eyebrows dipped downward. “I’m—a vampire?”

“Ben said you asked him... If that isn’t true...”

“No, it is, it is,” Robby cut in, dousing the rising fury. “I just, I can’t—this is so

much. I'm... I can see. Like perfectly, and I can smell... everything. Everyone. And, Damien, I'm so thirsty."

"He'll need to feed," Benjamin said. "We can get him on synthetic every other month, but he needs something now."

I didn't hesitate, taking off the sleeve of protective red scales I had donned. "Here, take it from me."

Robby blinked, clearly still dealing with shock. Frankly, so was I. But having him back, having him speaking, looking at me, it made me forget about everything else and focus solely on the fact that we had a chance now. We could deal with the consequences of this later, together.

“I can’t. Damien, I can’t do this.”

“Don’t worry,” I assured him. “It’s okay. Just bite.”

Robby took my arm in both of his hands. He was shaking as he approached. He looked at me again, and I nodded, giving him the OK. He opened his mouth and bit, his brand-new fangs slicing right through flesh. It was an almost intoxicating rush, something I had only heard about happening but had never experienced firsthand. I shut my eyes as Robby drank, hungry. His grip tightened, fangs sinking in a little deeper. Blood dripped down to the floor. I could feel his tongue lapping at me.

“Okay, that’s enough, Robby.” Benjamin was behind him now, trying to pry him off. But he wouldn’t let go; he only kept feeding. “Robby, stop, or you’ll drain him.”

I could make out his words but not the actual meaning of them. I was just happy. Robby was back. I had him back.

“Robby!” A blast of Dawn’s electricity threw him back to the floor. His eyes were wide, apologetic. Realization instantly dawned on him.

“Damien, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I tried to reassure him.

“It happens to all of us,” Benjamin said, helping Robby up to his feet. I decided to stay sitting for a moment while my head stopped spinning. “Welcome back.”

“Did we...” He looked to the statue of the Matriarch. Unlike others affected by the basilisk magic, she didn’t turn to dust, staying instead as that solid stone statue, her wicked smile still on her lips, a curling tentacle slipping out and stretching through the air. “Do we know if the curse is broken?”

“I’ve just got confirmation from a friend,” Xavier said, holding his phone up. “Their sister isn’t sick anymore.”

“Same,” Dawn said, her face lighting up as bright as her armor. “Penelope said her mother isn’t sick anymore. That’s it. The dragon fall is over.” She couldn’t hide the excited hop in place she did. Warrick wooted; Madds pumped the air with a fist. Xavier started to cry.

I got to my feet and went directly to Robby. He took a step away from me. “I’m a monster now. I literally almost drank you dry.”

“Robby, nothing about you could be defined as monstrous. Nothing. I know the soul that’s still in here.” I placed a hand directly where the blade had been. I could feel his heart beating, and I’d never been more grateful. “Your body may have changed, but you’re still you. Now with some added, eh, quirks.”

He arched a brow, and I saw a flare of the old Robby flash in his eyes, which was a slight mindfuck because his chin was still coated in my blood. “Quirks? You have such a way with words.”

“It’s all the books I’ve collected over time and never read. The vocabulary sinks in with osmosis.”

Robby shook his head and chuckled, the sound as sweet as warm honey.

“Come,” I said, reaching for his hand. He didn’t pull away this time. “Let’s get you

cleaned up and out of here. We've done what we came here to do. We'll let the vamps deal with the aftermath."

"You mean me? I'm one of them now, remember?"

I didn't think I'd ever forget. I just squeezed his hand and pulled us toward the exit, every step I took with Robby at my side feeling lighter and lighter than the last.

Chapter 33

Second Chances

Damien

The castle flooded with an energy I hadn't felt fill these walls in a long, long time.

Pure, unfiltered, overflowing joy.

Robby was in the shower, my family gathered in the living room, a few of our friends and fellow fighters also with us. The mood was absolutely celebratory as beers were popped open and glasses of wine were clinked together. We had done it. It had been confirmed that the curse was broken, the dragons were saved, the Matriarch defeated.

And my Robby still with me.

Yes he was changed, and yes there was a journey ahead of us, but at least we could tackle it together. I had never felt more helpless in the moments after Robby was stabbed, seeing his blood flow to the floor, having no way to stop it. I thought everything I had envisioned between us had went up in an instant puff of smoke. I thought the last I'd see of Robby was those haunting, soulless eyes turned up to the ceiling.

It was still an image seared into my brain, and one I doubted I'd be able to shake for some time. But at least I had the antidote; Robby's actual gaze, lit up by that permanent smile of his. I'd stare into his deep brown eyes all day, every day if it meant helping erase those empty, dead orbs from my memory.

"We fucking did it," Xavier said, bumping into me with his shoulder, smiling from ear to ear. He had recently gotten a haircut, a near buzz cut, the sharp new look making him appear like one of the celebrity clients he protected.

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“Robby did it,” Warrick said from the love seat, feet tucked underneath him and a fizzing flute of champagne in his hands. Bambi purred on his lap, her thick tail thumping on the deep green armrest and leaving behind a dusting of white and brown fur. “How’s he holding up?”

“As good as he can be holding up,” I answered.

Benjamin, sitting on the couch next to Dawn, looked pensive. “He’s going to need a lot of help with all of the changes he’s going through.”

I grunted at the understatement of the century. “I’m assuming you don’t have any vamp manuals I can pass on to him?”

“Unfortunately no, no manuals.” He cocked his head, smirked. “I do have a few PowerPoint’s though.”

I moved to sit on the couch between Ben and Dawn. She lifted her drink and clinked it against mine. Music drifted from somewhere down the hall followed by the sounds of laughter.

“And how are you feeling about everything?” Dawn asked. My sister always had a way of reading me, even when I forced myself to wear as neutral an expression as I could.

“Good,” I answered, finding myself smiling. “Really good. I feel like we all got a second chance... I just wish mom were here to see it.”

Dawn's lips curled downward, her eyes shutting. "Me too."

"She's watching down from the eternal sky," Xavier said, glancing up at the ceiling. "And she's proud."

A splinter of sadness lodged itself in my side. We were too late to save her, but her death was what triggered the chain of events that lead to the end of the dragon fall. I could see that now, even though I hated it. I hated that she wasn't here to see me happy, to meet Robby, to celebrate with her family. And it was all because of a fucked up power-play by a rogue vampire Matriarch.

But we had done it.

Robby had done it.

"Where's Madds?" Ben asked, looking around the living room. Sunlight washed in through the arching windows, bouncing off the white walls and making the vaulted ceiling seem even more cavernous, the smooth and exposed wooden beams shining.

"He had to answer a phone call," Claire answered, walking in from the hall with a bowl of fresh fruit in her hands. She no longer wore her robes, changing into a much more casual halter top and shorts. She went over and perched on the armrest closest to Dawn, who reached into the bowl and grabbed a handful of grapes. "It seemed pretty important."

"Maybe he's looking for a hook-up or two to celebrate with tonight," Ben said, a dash of bitterness slipping into his tone. He'd been with my brother longer than most of his other relationships, which was surprising since they had met holding blades to each other's throats. We didn't expect the two would actually make it as a serious couple, but they had both proven us wrong.

“No, it sounded more heated than that. Something about a painting.” Claire replied.
“And Robby? He’s alright, right?”

“Yes,” I answered, standing up and deciding it was time I check up on him.
“Probably just tired.”

Warrick let out a huff as he scratched under Bambi’s neck. “Poor guy’s been through it.”

“I can’t even imagine what he’s going through right now,” Claire said.

“I can,” Ben said in a dry tone. “Want me to go talk to him?” He looked at me, his dark and poreless skin appearing to be airbrushed.

“You know I can hear you all talking about me from across the castle, right?”

Robby’s voice made us all whip toward the hallway. He stood there in a pair of gray shorts and a tie-dye tank top, his golden brown hair looking darker with the moisture from the shower. His skin was just as flawless as Ben’s, his lips slightly protruding from where his fangs now sat underneath. I noticed him running his tongue along the sharp point, almost like a child testing out the gummy gap left after a lost tooth.

“Robby.” I went to him, just happy to see him standing, breathing, speaking. I reached for his hand. His honey brown eyes looked down at my bandaged wrist, filling with worry. Dragons were fast healers, but vampire bites slowed down our healing abilities, so a bandage was needed for this one.

“It’s fine, I already feel it getting better.”

He shook his head, looked out the window. Somewhere nearby a wolf shifter howled and encouraged someone else to take body shots.

“Come, let’s go somewhere quieter,” I said, guiding him down the hall, away from my family and up the stairs.

“It’s not like I won’t be able to hear them if we go to your room,” Robby said a little dryly.

“Good, because we aren’t going to my room.” I lead him past the double-doors that marked my bedroom, into another curling stairwell and out onto the breezy and star-blanketed turret. I shut and bolted the door.

“Better?” I asked.

“If I focus on the ocean waves, yeah.”

I walked with him over to the stone barrier, placing a hand on the smooth rock as we both looked out at the dark ocean, waves lapping up onto a quiet shore. I wrapped an arm around Robby’s shoulder. He rested his head against mine.

“I can’t believe this all happened,” Robby said in a whisper barely louder than the gentle winds.

“Fate is fickle, and she also loves surprises. There’s going to be a lot that happens to us in life that surprises us, it’s what we do to take advantage of those surprises that matters.”

“Damien... I’m a vamp now. I’m forever changed. I feel like I can compete and win gold medals in sports that I don’t even know the rules to. I feel like I can run a marathon and eat a farm and drink for ages. I feel like I can cry until I’m a husk and then cry some more, but I can also jump straight up to the moon with how happy I am.

Basically, I’m a fucking mess right now.”

I held him a little tighter. “And you have all the space you need to be a mess. What you went through—going through—it isn’t easy. At all.”

“What if I can’t handle it?”

“You can,” I said. “You’ve handled far worse.”

“Than lifelong immortality and extremely sharp teeth?”

“Yes. Yes you have. Remember that time you had to kill a tarantula when you were closing up the Magic Box by yourself? I’d say that was pretty bad.”

He chuckled, the sound settling in my chest like the sweetest melody known to man. “True, true. And I guess now I can just use my heightened reflexes to snipe it with a sandal from across the room.”

“See, there you go, silver lining.” I kissed the top of his head. He didn’t know how fucking happy this made me, to hold him against me, listening to him breathing and laughing. Tears slipped from my eyes.

“And what about you?” Robby asked, head still on my shoulder. “Are you ok with dating an arch-nemesis? Dragons and vamps aren’t really known to get along.”

“We can make it work. Just look at Ben and Madds.”

“You mean the two who are currently broken up and still pining for each other? Not the best example.”

My turn to chuckle, which only pushed more tears down my cheeks. “They would have worked if my little brother wasn’t such a commitment-phobe. We won’t have that problem.”

“We better not, considering I’m in it for the long haul. The very, very long haul.”

Silence settled over us, the implications of his words not lost on me. Robby now had immortality, set to live until the world turned to dust or someone turned him to dust.

It was both a blessing and a curse. One I would never be able to have. At some point, I'd grow old while Robby stayed locked in his invisible case of amber, keeping him looking and feeling like a twenty-seven year old for the rest of his life while my skin started to sag and bones began to creak. Granted, it wouldn't happen for another two-hundred years, but compared to Robby's infinite amount and that looked like child's play.

It would be another hurdle we'd have to overcome, but we had time to face it. Now all that I wanted to do was soak in my second chance. I kissed the top of Robby's head again, tasting some of my own salty tears against my lips.

"I love you, Robby. Always, forever, until the end of time. I love you."

Robby lifted his head from my shoulder. I could see he had been crying, too. Golden brown eyes glittered under the moonlight, bright and full of life. I kissed him, hands going to his hips, bodies pressed together.

"I'd come back a thousand times over for you, Damien. I love you."

I'm not sure how long we stayed up there, talking about anything and everything, watching the stars dance over the dark waters, the world finally feeling like it made a little more sense than it had the day before. Things were working out for us, finally.

I could look ahead and be excited about the future, not scared, and that was a feeling I could only attribute to the smiley and bubbly huma—vampire I called mine.

Chapter 34

Back to Work

Robby

The shop was busy today, a steady stream of customers coming in and out of the teal-blue doors. Some of them smelled like sand and sunblock, their flip-flops clapping against the freshly mopped floors. Others smelled like pan con bistec and a cortadito—likely coming from lunch at the nearby Cuban cafe. The shifter I was currently assisting with a purchase of crystals smelled like a field of lavender and roses.

It had been two months since the battle in the Obsidian District, and it was only a few weeks ago that I had started to become accustomed to all the different scents I could pick up. At first, I'd get constant migraines, overwhelmed every time the breeze picked up or someone walked past me. Now, though, I was learning how to manage it, same as I managed the side-eyes and fearful attitudes some people took when they realized I was a vamp. It was difficult at first, more so than the migraines and stomach cramps and urge to run until I fell off the world. I'd grown up wanting people to like me, breaking my back so that everyone around me felt comfortable and happy. That part of me was still very much alive and well, but it was a part that people seemed to ignore when they saw my airbrushed skin and subtle fangs. I had to go further in proving to people that I wasn't a threat.

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The shifter's tufted white ears flicked back and forth.

"I think I'll do these five," she said, holding out a palm full of quartz and jade, the smooth stones and crystals clicking together. She set them on the glass counter and handed her card to me. She had come in quite a bit over the last few weeks, so she didn't bristle when our fingertips touched.

The bell above the door tinkled, announcing a new arrival. As I looked up, Dawn's bright eyes met mine. She was in high spirits, radiating a buoyant energy as she danced over to the counter, her orange sundress catching the draft of the closing door.

"Robby! Guess what this is?"

"One of those cool VIP Starbucks cards?"

"No... I'm like fifteen points away from that. I got my acceptance to the Tear Exploratory Division!" She showed off a letter adorned with an ornate TED seal—a multicolored rift with the letters rising up from it. Her smile stretched from ear to ear.

"That's fantastic, Dawn!" I congratulated her, but then my eyes flicked to Claire, who was walking out of her back office. I knew it wasn't really me she wanted to break the news to.

She blushed as the two locked eyes. "Claire, guess—"

"You're a TED now. I knew you'd make it," Claire said, bracelets jingling as she wrapped Dawn up in a tight hug, giving her a congratulatory kiss on the cheek. I had

noticed the two becoming very, very close recently, and frankly... I shipped it. Hardcore. Those two were as perfect together as—

“Damien!”

My handsome red dragon walked in through the doors as the shifter I had been helping walked out, her crystals held tight in a small blue bag.

“Is it a Blackthorne meeting here?” Claire asked as she leaned on the counter. “I wasn’t aware.”

“No meeting,” Damien said and lifted up a picnic basket in his hand. “Just here to take your employee on a date.” He wore a pair of well-fitted jeans and a blue-and-white shirt, half tucked into the waistband of his shorts. He’d just gotten a haircut, so his dark brown hair sat perfectly styled on his head, the sides trimmed, the perfect length for me to run my hands through.

That was another perk to this whole vampire thing: sensations were extremely heightened. I’d get hard just twirling his hair in my fingers. I could feel every silken strand, every soft wave. I’d play with him for hours, slowly rubbing and stroking him, enjoying how it felt just having him in my hands.

And the sex. Fuuuuck. It was mind-blowing, each and every time. I was getting hard just thinking about it.

“Good thing I’m closing up early today, then,” Claire said, waving a hand and collecting all her belongings in a big thread of red mana, her wallet and keys slipping into the pocket of her purple robe.

“You are?” I asked, a surprise to me.

“I am,” she said, bumping a shoulder into Dawn. “I’ve got to go get happy-hour drinks and celebrate this one. I’ll handle the rest of the customers and close up. You guys head out on your date.”

“Thanks, Claire.” I gave her a hug, happy that my Marvel boss had an all-welcome policy at her shop, because even though I now had immortality, I also still had bills to pay. Damien offered to help out, but I actually enjoyed working. It kept my mind busy and my days interacting with people, some of them annoying but most of them kind, especially the regulars, who were already used to seeing me behind the counter.

I walked with Damien out into the sunny afternoon, holding his hand in mine. It was hard to let go of him. I wanted to spend every waking minute of every passing day with him, especially now that we had nothing to really worry about. The dragon fall was officially ended, and a war between supernaturals was averted. It required us testifying in front of Congress as to why our actions were justified and didn’t break the Iron Treaty—which was nearly as stressful as anything else I’d experienced. It was a grueling two-week-long process behind closed doors, facing down some of the most intimidating people in the government, flanked by stone-faced Enforcers.

We were found innocent of all our actions and were hailed as heroes once the news got out, and boy, did it get out. We were getting gifts from all over sent to the castle, endless baskets of chocolates and flowers and wine, attached to invitations that would bring us all over the world, visiting grateful dragons and their families.

We already had a trip lined up to Mykonos and another to Paris. Might as well hit up the good spots if someone else wanted to fly us out.

“How was your day?” Damien asked, the sunlight beaming down on him like a spotlight.

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“Busy. Better now.” I went in for a kiss, smiling as his lips met mine. “Where we headed? Our usual spot?”

“You know it,” he answered. “Want to walk there?”

“I think I’d rather hitch a ride if that’s okay.”

“For you? Always.” Damien let go of my hand and waited until the street cleared of traffic before he turned to his dragon form. I’d never get tired of seeing him in all his scarlet-scaled glory. He was a king, horns crowning his powerful head, a smile curling on the elongated snout as he dipped down so I could climb on. I no longer fumbled, moving with the supernatural grace granted to me by my second chance, jumping onto him in a fluid movement, the picnic basket in my hands now.

I leaned back as Damien took off, gaining height at an impressive speed. I was so used to flying with him that I no longer grabbed onto the spikes in front of me, instead leaning back as if I were sat in a chair, my legs holding on and keeping me steady.

A sense of freedom flooded over me as we flew toward the twinkling ocean. I felt like I could see all the way to the end of the world. Seagulls cawed and dipped in the air around us, a pod of dolphins leaping from the water, a spray of ocean water splashing in their wakes.

Of course, life wasn’t made up of all these perfect, peaceful moments. There had been an astronomical number of challenges placed in front of me ever since I came back from the dead. The biggest one was dealing with the existential weight of

knowing I would never die of natural causes. That was a lot to chew on, and I knew I'd need time to grapple with the true weight of that fact. It was something Benjamin had warned me about when I'd asked him to bite me were I to die in the battle. He warned me that seeing everyone you love grow old and die was a burden that could not be understated.

I didn't care. All I wanted was more time with Damien, and I wasn't going to let anything stop me from that.

Then there was the occasional craving for warm blood. That was another burden that wasn't easy to describe. It didn't happen often—about every other month—but when it did, the cravings needed to be fed, or my impulse control would severely suffer. And a vampire with a lack of impulse control was not one you wanted to cross paths with.

Thankfully, Ben also helped me out with that, hooking me up with a supplier of synthetic blood. I kept them stocked up in the fridge and poured myself a glass whenever I felt like I needed it. Other than that, I could still enjoy regular food. In fact, I think I actually enjoyed it more now that I was able to taste every single ingredient and seasoning that went into making it.

Minutes later, Damien was making a graceful landing on our secret beach spot, up high above the water and secluded from prying eyes. It was the perfect escape. Somewhere that felt truly us—only ours. It was special, reminding me of the earlier days, when I was still unsure of what Damien wanted or even who he was.

I can't believe I had a moment thinking this would just be a hookup.

I helped him set up the picnic, spreading the thick blue blanket down on the smooth stone underneath a shadier spot where the large obsidian rock blocked out some sun. There was a spread of tasty cheeses, flavorful olives, salted hams and salami, and

sunflower crisp crackers that I had become obsessed with recently. Damien uncorked the bottle of rosé with a celebratory pop and poured some into both of our glasses.

A cheers and a drink later, and we were settling in, sitting side by side on the blanket, facing out to the ocean. Silence lapped over us like the tide. It was comfortable. I never felt like I needed to fill space with needless words when I was around Damien. I didn't need to waste time or keep us busy. Sitting together quietly was just as fulfilling as having an hours-long philosophical conversation with him, and that was something that I truly loved about the man.

The silence didn't last too long, though. A rush of gratitude overtook me, the next words just falling out of my mouth. "You know, I really wish I could go back in time and tell that terrified Robby you protected down in the snake-way that it would all turn out okay. That it's okay to feel it all—joy, pain, sorrow. But to always know that it turns out okay." I looked into Damien's eyes, never having said more truthful words. I'd burn, burn, burn down with him and still know that everything had turned out okay because in this moment, there was nothing inside me but pure happiness and love.

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And maybe only the tiniest urge to nip his neck.

“I don’t think that Robby would have believed you if you’d told him.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “No, I don’t think he would have. I can’t imagine him ever believing where we ended up.” I looked out at the calm seas and rested my head on Damien’s shoulder. I kicked my shoes off and pressed my foot against his, something I had found I loved doing. Lying in bed, sitting on the couch, eating dinner. It was a simple little touch that made my heart soar. He rubbed his foot against mine.

“We’ve come a long way.”

“We really have,” I said. “And I’m excited to see what’s still ahead.”

“Hopefully, it’s an all-inclusive vacation to somewhere tropical for a few months. That sounds like it’s right up my alley right now.”

“Same. What about Costa Rica? I have an uncle who lives there. He can show us around.”

“That’d be nice,” Damien said, his hand tracing invisible shapes on my arm. His touch always sent sparks shooting through me, but this intimacy made those sparks catch on a miles-high tinder pile. The cool ocean breeze did nothing to calm the fire that started to spread inside me. I thought back to the first time Damien had brought me up here, and I suddenly wanted an encore. I tilted my head and started to kiss Damien’s neck.

Soft pecks, gentle. My hand on his thigh, giving him a playful squeeze. The softness in my kisses quickly evaporated with the rising heat. I sucked at his flesh, careful not to sink my teeth in. I'd just had synthetic blood about three days ago, which kept any urges down to a minimum. Damien didn't shy away, instead leaning in.

I climbed onto his lap and switched from sucking his neck to sucking his bottom lip. His eyes, hooded with passion now, locked onto mine. His grin made my cock rock hard. I ground myself down on him, feeling him throb in return.

"Fuck," I groaned into another kiss. "I want you. So fuck—"

I stopped, freezing mid-admission of lust. My senses were sharp, sharp enough to pick up a peculiar sound. One which got louder and louder. The sound of flapping. But it wasn't a seagull flying down the beach—this was louder. It sounded like...

"A dragon?" I saw the shape now, coming in closer. "Hold up," I said, climbing off Damien, realization dawning on me. "Are you kidding me?"

"How does he do this every single time?"

"I don't know," I said, watching as Maddox approached our secret picnic spot. "I think he's got some sort of cockblock radar."

I laughed at that, all boners ceasing to exist as Maddox made a less graceful landing on the bare strip of rock, quickly turning before his bulky ice dragon form knocked us all off our (not-so) private perch.

"Madds, what are you doing here?" Damien asked, arms crossed and brows pushing together in concern.

"Sorry, man. Dawn told me this is where I could find you. I would have sent a message, but I think those are getting read."

I cocked my head and let out a surprised “Wha?” What the hell had Maddox gotten himself into?

“Are you in trouble? What is it? You’re worrying me.”

Madds chewed his nails. His fortress of a self looked deflated, like someone had sent a cannon flying through the bricks that made him stand so tall and proud. “I need your help. I think the Crimson Ring is after me.”

“Holy fuck” was both mine and Damien’s response.

So much for that all-inclusive Costa Rican vacation. It looked like the universe had different plans for us, but that was fine. Maybe that old Robby wouldn’t believe it, but as I looked to Damien, his hand finding mine again, I knew that no matter what, it would be okay.

“Alright,” Damien said. “Start at the beginning.”

The End.