



All's Fair in Love and Magic

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: I went to the Supernatural Resort for protection—and was immediately claimed by the shifter who owns the place.

Because of what I am, everyone hates me. Humans and supernaturals alike.

But the Resort needs magic like mine to protect it.

So the owner makes me his.

Which backfires, because now even more people want me dead, and we're going through an altered version of heat together.

This place is supposed to be paradise... but it's starting to look like I'm not going to make it out of here alive.

But hey, if I have to die, I might as well do it on the beach, with a drink in my hand and a sexy shifter at my side.

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one

SAGE

The smell of smoke clung to my skin as I stepped out of my ancient vehicle in front of the luxury resort that engulfed the horizon.

It wasn't cigarette smoke—just smoke that accompanied burning plants. Not the pleasurable kind of plants, either. I'd turned normal weeds and decorative-bush clippings to ash in an effort to keep my old Slug Bug running on magic alone.

It had failed, of course.

Magic didn't work on engines.

I'd been desperate enough to try anyway.

Eyeing the expansive building and pristine landscaping in front of me, I tried to brush the last bit of ash off my oversized t-shirt. They fell to the parking lot's fresh-looking pavement, just as out of place in front of the luxury beach resort as I was.

That ashy t-shirt, a pair of cotton shorts, and a tropical-patterned bikini I'd purchased from a thrift store was all I had to my name at the moment.

Other than about five bucks in coins, and the Bug. It was debatable whether or not she would even start again.

The sun was rising over the resort. It was framed with picture-perfect palm trees, stunning white sand, and an endless view of the Pacific Ocean. Not to mention the other tropical plants that had been flown in from around the world.

Legal?

No.

But supernatural beings didn't follow human rules.

I itched to get my hands on some of those new plants, just to play around with them. Witch magic was largely dependent on the quality and variety of the plants used to influence it.

Filling my cheeks with air, I let it out slowly.

The Supernatural Resort was one of the last places anyone ever hoped to visit. Yes, it was known for being stunningly beautiful, built on a magic-made island outside California with a road that only a magical being could find or drive down.

But it was also known for being the hiding place of many inhuman criminals.

Which I supposed I technically was, now.

Yikes.

None of the authorities, either human or supernatural, were willing to risk the wrath of the man who owned the resort. I was pretty sure that was why it remained protected. I didn't know anything about him—it didn't seem like anyone outside the resort did—but obviously, he wasn't the nicest guy you'd ever meet.

Somehow, I was going to have to convince him to let me stay.

The island was full of restaurants, pools, and gorgeous beaches, so I couldn't have picked a prettier hiding place.

Then again, if I had any other option, I would've chosen it over the resort.

Hiding among supernatural beings was never a good idea for witches. We were universally hated by humans and supernaturals for reasons that were unknown, even to us. We stuck together, because we were all each other had.

Now I had no one.

Except my mom, but she'd stayed with the coven. So, our relationship wouldn't be anything like what it had been before.

I was on my own.

It was a miracle that I'd lasted twenty-four years without the coven realizing what I was, so I couldn't exactly complain about the turn of events.

Letting out a rough breath, I adjusted the tangled mess of wavy brown hair I'd thrown into a bun on top of my head two days earlier. There were a few pins in it, but they were sharp at the tips, and mainly there to use with my magic. Helping tame my hair was just a perk.

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Finally, I forced myself to walk toward the resort's big, fancy doors.

The main building looked like something out of a magazine. It was twenty stories tall, insanely wide, and built entirely of natural-looking wood, bronze, and glass.

I'd done enough research to know it was casually called the tower by the residents and visitors. While a ton of people lived there permanently, there were also more than a hundred small bungalows built around the island.

The closer I got to the edge of the parking lot, the more power I could feel resonating through and around the island to form the wards that protected it. Surprisingly, there was a definite presence of witch magic. I could smell the coconut that must've been infused heavily in the wards, but that wasn't the main source of energy.

I couldn't pinpoint what the main power was. The smell was unfamiliar, and it felt... warm.

Witch magic didn't have a feeling, so the warmth was kind of alarming.

I assumed it belonged to the resort's owner. I hadn't been able to find information about what kind of supernatural he was.

It didn't take long to reach the sidewalk in front of the tower.

Unlike a human hotel, there were no valets waiting outside the resort. The doors stood open, letting the salty air inside, but no one occupied the expensive-looking furniture that decorated the entrance.

My stomach clenched with nerves as I stepped through the open doors and looked around.

I was waiting for some kind of supernatural to catch a whiff of me, realize I was a witch, and try to kill me.

They'd probably succeed.

My magic was insanely strong, but I wasn't particularly fast or skilled with it. It was illegal, and practicing had been difficult to hide.

The resort's expansive entryway was lined with pillars along the path as I walked past potted plants, an empty restaurant, a huge koi pond, and an indoor garden before I finally reached the front desk.

There still wasn't a soul in sight. Just a couple pens and brochures.

I peered past the desk, trying to see through the doorway. "Hello?"

I heard heavy footsteps a moment later, and a gigantic guy came stumbling out of the room. I could tell he was a vampire the moment I saw him, thanks to the aura of his magic.

His nostrils flared, and he scowled as he stepped up to the desk. The nametag on his flowy, white linen shirt said Cecil. He had pale skin and strawberry blond hair, and was built thin but strong. "We don't want witches in the Resort. Fuck off."

His words were kinder than I expected. At least he didn't yell. Or insult me.

"I have an offer for your leader. I just want to have a conversation. Please," I said.

The pleasewouldn't help my case, considering he already didn't like me because of what I was. But my coven was going to kill me if the resort turned me away, so I'd beg before leaving.

"They're not interested."

"They?" I was under the impression there was only one leader.

"The Supernatural Resort is owned by Liam Kohin, but we have two others who help him keep things running. None of them are interested in you." Cecil waved his hand, shooing me toward the door. "Leave, or I'll make you."

It still seemed safe to assume Liam was the supernatural whose warm magic made up most of the wards.

"Liam didn't create this place alone," I countered. "I can smell a witch's magic, and there's only one kind of witch that can make wards as big as these. I'm one of them. Hewillwant to hear my offer."

I really hoped so, at least.

Cecil didn't look any less annoyed. "Prove it."

It was my turn to scowl at him, but I wasn't going to ruin my one shot at keeping myself alive.

I pulled a pin out of my hair and pricked the back of my hand before grabbing a pen off the desk. Pressing the tip of the pen to my blood, I murmured a few words for the simple charm before I handed it to the vampire.

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It was such easy magic that even the youngest witches could do it—minus the part where I used my blood. But the vampire wouldn't believe in the magic unless he used it himself.

So many kinds of supernaturals were like that. Because witch magic functioned differently than shifting into a big-ass wolf or drinking blood, they didn't trust it unless they had no other option.

Cecil eyed the pen suspiciously, but after a moment, grabbed a loose brochure and put the point to paper. The moment he started writing, my charm tugged on the magic in the drops of blood I'd fed it.

Shock filled his expression as the pen jerked away from his grasp and continued scribbling across the paper. I knew he was seeing his thoughts written out in his own handwriting.

He watched it for a solid thirty seconds before he finally lifted his gaze back to mine. "I'll call Liam. He's usually in the sky in the mornings, so it'll probably be a while."

"That's fine."

What kind of being was he, if he was in the sky?

A dragon? An angel? A demon? Some other kind of rare monster shifter?

"Actually..." Cecil grimaced. "Let me get Harvey and Bailey over here. I don't know if they're going to be happy about being woken up, but for a blood witch, they'll get

over it. Is your coven hunting you?”

“I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“Yeah, I’ll get them all down here. Give me a minute.” Cecil pulled a phone out of his pocket and scrolled through it. He lifted the device to his ear and turned away from me, leaning against the desk.

He lowered his voice. “Hey, Gunner. I’ve got a blood witch in the lobby. I need you to quietly get Bailey and Harvey, and find out if Liam is back from his flight yet.”

There was a pause.

“Yes, I’m sure. She used her blood to charm a pen.”

Another pause.

“No, I’ve never seen witch magic before, but Harv and Bailey are our best shot at figuring out whether or not she really is one. And if she is, Liam will want her. We all got that text. She says her coven is after her, so we need to figure it out now.”

There was another pause.

“Alright. Good luck.”

Cecil hung up and turned to look at me again. His nostrils flared as he inhaled, and he grimaced again.

“I can’t smellthatbad,” I said.

Actually, on second thought, I probably did stink. It had been three days since I ran

away from my coven, and I hadn't had the cash for a hotel room. Or the time for more than a few hours of sleep. Showering definitely hadn't happened.

I had done my best to clean up in a gas station bathroom a few times, but vampires had sensitive noses. A lot of supernaturals did, actually.

"You smell like pepper. It's not necessarily bad. Just strong. And there's sweat with it. Can't say sweat and pepper are appealing together," Cecil said.

I smelled likepepper?

It was better than smelling like my coven's gingko trees, at least. They reeked.

The vampire continued studying me, and I casually turned my back to him so I didn't have to continue the awkward eye contact. I was used to being disliked, but that didn't make it pleasant.

"You're not going to ask what Liam needs a blood witch for?" Cecil asked.

"No." I didn't elaborate.

"Why not?"

I didn't answer.

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My reasoning wasn't any of his business.

"If you want me to trust you with my resort's leaders, I need the full story," the vampire insisted.

"If Liam genuinely needs a blood witch, you're not going to risk turning me away. You don't like me because of what I am, and I'm here because I have no other choice. You and I have nothing else to discuss," I said calmly.

The man made a noise that resembled a growl. I couldn't say I'd ever heard one in person before. "Everyone who lives here contributes their time and energy to keep it functioning. It belongs to all of us."

"The magic that makes it a sanctuary belongs to Liam and a blood witch alone, actually."

In a flash, Cecil was in front of me. I flinched, though I tried not to.

His hand gripped my chin, his eyes lit with warning as he bruised my skin.

Silently, I urged him to grip harder. To dig his nails or his teeth in. If my blood was on his skin or in his mouth, I would have control.

"You're itching for a lesson in who has the most power here, aren't you? With my fangs in your throat, you won't be the strong one, little witch," he practically purred.

"What the fuck are you doing, Cecil?" a gravelly male voice asked.

A shiver rolled down my spine.

Something about the voice was... different.

Important, somehow.

Cecil stiffened immediately. He didn't step back or release me, though. "You're here early, Liam." He blocked my view of the man who apparently led the resort.

"I felt the witch's magic as she reached the wards. Go ahead and bite her if you want to."

Cecil's forehead creased, slightly, and he finally looked over his shoulder. "You don't mind?"

My suspicions rose.

Someone who had worked with a blood witch in the past would know exactly what was going to happen if a vampire bit me.

"No. She won't either," Liam said.

His response confirmed my suspicions.

Cecil looked back at me. "What happens if I bite you?"

I flashed him a humorless smile, the motion making my chin ache under his grip. "There's an easy way to find out."

A large hand landed on Cecil's wrist, and it jerked the vampire's hand off my skin. Cecil was immediately ripped away from me, and I came face-to-face with the man

responsible for the wards around the Resort.

He was a few inches taller than Cecil, and much thicker. Tan skin stretched over his bare, expansive chest. With the pure amount of muscle on display, he looked more like a boulder than a man. Even the thick, dark hair on top of his head barely swayed my mind from the boulder category.

The look in his hazel eyes was dark in a way that made my breath catch.

He was stunning, but not in a conventionally attractive way. He looked more like a giant than a man.

But the magic radiating off his skin was a perfect match to the power that surrounded the Resort. Strangely warm and incredibly strong, though without a scent of its own.

I noticed steam coming off his body alongside the magic, which was strange. I didn't know of any kinds of supernaturals thatsteamed, though there were a nauseatingly large number of different types. Far too many to know off the top of my head.

Someone in my coven had spent years researching so she could compile a full list of them, and she was still looking for more.

“You owe my witch a bag of your blood for marking her skin,” Liam said without looking away from me. “And you owe me a month's work in the kitchen for letting you keep your life.”

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It took me a second to realize that he was talking to Cecil.

And that he'd just called me his. Which seemed like a very bad sign, though not one I could actually do something about.

I was completely at the mountain of a man's mercy.

And he was still steaming.

Also not a great sign.

Cecil's nostrils flared, but he jerked his head in a nod and took another step back. "Bailey and Harv should be on their way. The bitch says she's a blood witch."

The steam coming off Liam's skin intensified.

"She definitely doesn't smell like a wolf, Cecil," a woman drawled. "And I know you're not stupid enough to insult a witch in front of our fearless leader."

My head jerked toward the voice, and I saw a gigantic man walking in with a tall, strong-looking woman at his side. He had dark skin and a shaved head, and she was pale with a reddish-orange bun that was almost as messy as my own sitting on top of her head.

Their auras labeled him a werewolf, and her a vampire.

Their rumpled clothes made me think they had just rolled out of bed. And the way

their arms brushed as they moved made me wonder if they'd rolled out of bed together.

"This is your last chance to leave here in one piece, Cecil," the werewolf guy said flatly. "If I were you, I'd take it."

Cecil's jaw clenched, and he strode out of the room.

"Are you sure you're a blood witch?" the woman asked me.

"She is." Liam answered for me, looking my way again. "How far behind you is your coven?"

I lifted a shoulder. "I don't know. There aren't many places I could go. Even if they can't track me, they'll come looking here sooner rather than later."

He nodded.

"Is she strong enough to fix the wards?" the vampire woman checked.

Liam studied me for a long moment.

I wasn't going to let them decide my fate, though.

"If you can guarantee me a safe place to live for the rest of my life, I can fix them," I confirmed, trying to sound much more confident than I felt. If I had to guess, I'd assume that the Resort's wards were crazy intricate and would require a shit ton of magic. They were also probably spells, which definitely wasn't my specialty. "It's going to take a while to figure out exactly what the first witch did, and it'll need to be maintained frequently, but I can handle it."

Probably.

I wasn't going to bring up the possibility that I might not actually be able to do it. Not until I made every effort, and established that it really wasn't possible.

I was obviously hoping to avoid that outcome, because it could cost me my life.

"If she can—" the vampire woman began, but Liam cut her off.

His intense gaze was fixed on my face. "If you want to stay, you have to mate with me."

I blinked, and looked at the vampire woman.

He had to be talking to her, right?

But she was gawking at me.

The werewolf next to her was too.

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I looked back at Liam.

He wasn't seriously talking to me, was he?

But his gaze was on my face.

"I really hope you're joking," I finally said.

"I don't joke."

I looked back at the vampire woman.

"He doesn't," she admitted.

"You can seal a mate bond with me and stay, or you can leave and deal with your coven on your own," Liam said.

Given what we'd already discussed, he was well aware that my coven wasn't an option.

"I have nowhere else to go. Am I allowed to know why you want to mate with me?" I finally asked.

My entire body was tense.

I had never even considered taking a mate. It usually wasn't an option for witches. Sealing a bond with someone would cost us everything. It wasn't a punishable

offense, but the coven was our entire world, and mated witches weren't allowed to live with their coven.

Neither were blood witches, of course.

But we just flat out weren't allowed to live.

"I need your magic to keep my resort running, and I need you alive to use it. Your coven won't give up hunting you until you're dead, and unless you mate with me, I have no way to keep you alive." Liam's voice was blunt.

"I don't see how a mate bond will protect me," I said weakly.

"I'm a phoenix. My mate will have access to my magic. She couldn't die if she tried."

"You're not waiting for a fated mate or anything?"

Please let him say he was.

"I make my own fate."

I looked back at the vampire woman. She had stood up for me, at least a little. She seemed like my best chance at backup.

And I knew women a hell of a lot more than I did men. Only women were allowed on coven land.

"You could wait until the coven finds her to mate with her," the vampire woman suggested. "Or you could ask someone else to do it."

Maybe I shouldn't have assumed she was on my side.

“No. Show her to my room and help her get settled. I need to deal with the wards.”
Liam ended the conversation just like that.

I expected him to leave—but he didn’t.

He strode toward me instead, ignoring the way my body stiffened when he neared. He took my chin in his hand much like Cecil had, but his grip was much gentler.

A sharp pulse of heat rolled through my skin where he touched me, and I had to close my eyes as I felt the warmth of his magic swell around us.

I didn’t know what he was doing or why he was doing it, but it felt amazing. My muscles loosened, and my entire body heated.

Liam lowered his lips to my ear. They brushed my skin as he spoke.

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“If anyone ever mistreats you in my resort again, kill them. If you don’t, I will, and I’ll make it so slow and painful that they beg for death.”

My throat swelled.

He inhaled, and his chest rumbled. Almost like he enjoyed my peppery scent.

But that couldn’t be right.

I reeked. Cecil had made that clear.

After another moment, Liam released me and stepped back. My attention lingered on his eyes. Was that fire in those pretty hazels?

I must’ve been imagining it.

He left as quickly as he had arrived, and the room stayed silent when he was gone.

The vampire finally muttered under her breath, “Tell me that bastard didn’t just claim a woman whose name he doesn’t even know and order me to make her comfortable.”

The wolf next to her chuckled. “I can’t.”

The vampire let out a long breath and met my gaze, lifting her voice again. “I’m Bailey.”

“I’m Sage,” I said.

If I had any other option, I would already be running back to my Bug and making the fastest possible getaway I could.

But I didn't have any other option.

So, when she gestured for me to follow her, I did.

two

SAGE

"I'm not sure how Liam would react to me giving you a tour, considering everything that just happened, so I'm going to show you to his room," Bailey explained.

The hallway we were walking down was as elegant as everything else I'd seen in the building, and visually, equally empty of people.

But the magic I could feel around me said the emptiness was due to the time of day. There were an assload of supernaturals around—they were just sleeping.

"That's fine. I only need a safe place to stay," I said.

It was true, even if I would've preferred to get the tour so I could see exactly where I was going to be living.

Potentially forever.

Or until my death. Whichever came first. Death was far more probable than eternity.

"I'm sure he'll give you a tour when he comes back. We can hope he comes to his senses about the mate thing. Obviously, that came out of nowhere for all of us.

I bit my lip. “What’s the phoenix mating process like?”

“No one knows for sure. He’s a hybrid. His mom was a witch. Sperm donor was a dragon. It’ll probably be some alternate version of whatever the dragons’ process is.”

“What?” The word came out sharper than I expected. “Witches only give birth to witches.” And we were all female.

“Usually. Hybrids are rare, but they do happen.”

They wereinsanelyrare.

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Some witches were paid outrageous sums of money to attempt to alter a baby's magic in the womb. If it worked, the kid would be a hybrid of both parents rather than the same kind of supernatural as one or the other. It always failed. And obviously, it was morally questionable.

There were a lot of witches who didn't mind morally questionable uses for their magic. Considering how long I'd been hiding my power from my coven—dangerous power that was despised by all other witches—I supposed I kind of fit into that category.

But there wasn't any amount of money I would've accepted to try to alter an unborn baby.

And I was likely the only living witch at the moment who could successfully do so. Which was one of the reasons blood witches were so dangerous.

We reached an elevator, and Bailey hit the button for the top floor.

I was still feeling warm from whatever the phoenix had done to me in the lobby, but I wasn't against it. The feeling was blissful, even though I was supposed to be on my toes and ready for anything.

"If Liam doesn't know what the mating process is like, how does he know he'll be able to start it with me?"

She shrugged. "I don't understand phoenix magic any more than you do, but I'm sure he at least talked to a dragon and got an idea of what it entails."

“He trusts you, so you obviously know more than me.”

“Trust doesn’t equal an explanation. I have no idea how he even holds the wards together with his magic. All I know is that they’ve been crumbling since our last blood witch died, and he’s sort of glued the pieces together with whatever magic he has.”

I considered what I’d felt.

An assload of warm power, over the top of witch magic.

Yeah... I could agree with the glue description.

“He’ll want me to repair the original wards,” I said. “I don’t even know if that’s possible with the current state of them. It might be easier to build my own from scratch, depending on what they are.”

Mainly, depending on if they were complex spells.

And honestly, easier was relative. I’d been studying runes since I was a teenager, so I was pretty good with them, but it would still take a lot of effort to create wards that could protect the whole sanctuary with runes. I’d need at least one spell to anchor them to, as well.

“I don’t think he’s going to care what you do to the magic as long as you take it over. He spends all his time keeping them together.”

“Holding crumbling magic would take a lot more energy than maintaining healthy spells and runes,” I agreed.

She shrugged.

The elevator dinged, and I followed her out. The hallway was decorated similarly to the bottom floor, though there were rugs over the tile and extra plants and decorations throughout the space. We headed down the hall, and I turned with her a few times.

“I don’t need to be his mate to fix the wards. Maybe you can talk to him and try to reason with him?” I asked.

She snorted. “Nobody tries to persuade Liam of anything. He’s the only reason any of us are here—and most of us would be killed or imprisoned if we tried to leave. You’re not the only one whose family is after them. Your situation is bad, but most of us have shitty, dangerous backgrounds.”

We stopped in front of a door at the very end of the hall, and Bailey gestured to it. “Welcome home, I guess. The code is 8888. It’ll go up a number on the first of the month. After nine, it goes back to zero and starts again. Everyone knows it, so... watch your back. Until Liam actually seals the bond with you, I don’t know how safe you’re going to be. Cecil seemed to hate you, and he has a lot of friends.”

I grimaced. “If my options are letting my coven kill me quickly or letting a vampire drain me dry, I might as well go back to the coven.”

“Hopefully Liam will be back before that becomes a problem. I’ll send someone up with spare clothes that might fit you. Good luck.”

With that, Bailey padded down the hallway, leaving me to my own devices.

I reluctantly typed the code she had given me.

8888.

A light on the keypad flickered green, and I slipped into the room.

The space was...

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Nothing like I would've expected the Supernatural Resort's owner to claim.

It was the size of a normal hotel room. Everything matched the decor in the rest of the resort. There were no personal effects in sight.

The only sign that someone lived there at all were the rumpled blankets on the bed, and the dry swim trunks hanging over the bathroom door. I figured they must've been draped there when they were wet.

I did find clothes hanging in the closet. When I checked the drawers of the built-in dresser and found more, I felt slightly better.

A quick check of the bathroom proved that there were large bottles of shampoo and conditioner, as well as body wash, in the oversized shower. There were toiletries under the sink too. All of that proved Liam was at least living there.

Though I was dying to wash off the grit of three days of travel, and still felt oddly floaty from Liam's magic, I wasn't about to get in the shower when everyone in the Resort had the code to get into my room. There was no deadbolt or child lock or anything else I could use to keep other people from barging in, so I would've been completely vulnerable.

Instead, I sat down on the edge of my bed and pulled my burner phone out of my bag. It only took a few minutes to send my mom's burner a quick message and let her know I'd gotten into the resort.

The Supernatural Resort had been our backup plan since the beginning, so she would

know where I was even if I didn't tell her. The burner phone was a part of that backup plan—the coven would kill her if they knew we were still in contact.

She was busy pretending that she had no idea I was a blood witch, and probably being questioned intensely. Thankfully, she was well-practiced at lying about my magic.

If the lies failed, she would join me at the resort because the coven would try to kill her for hiding me.

Neither of us had expected I would get caught when I did. The strongest witches in the coven ran surprise checks for blood magic, but I'd never been found practicing. I'd figured I was safe enough to work on a few small blood runes the day after their last check, but they came back through again a few hours afterward.

Luckily, I'd been carrying my wallet and keys with me when I heard about the second check and had to run. Otherwise I'd already be dead.

Unluckily, the coven had the resources to find me if I accessed any of my accounts. I stopped at a bank a few towns away from the coven on the first day and withdrew all of the money I'd saved, but I didn't have much.

Because the magic I'd been born with was forbidden, I'd spent my life feigning weakness. As far as my coven had known since my magic came in, I was nearly powerless. I could manage to infuse runes with tiny amounts of magic and work small charms without my blood, but I didn't let myself practice potions or try to create spells.

I needed blood to make my potions or spells work even somewhat passably.

Unfortunately, selling magic was the best way to make money as a young witch. And

mine just wasn't worth much, hence my lack of money.

I'd had enough to stop at a thrift store after I ditched my clothes so I couldn't be tracked that way, though. And to get me across the country, so I could reach the resort. That was plenty.

Me

I made it safely. They sort of gave me a place to stay

Mom

Thank goodness! But, sort of?

Me

It's a weird story

I'll tell you when I'm a little more settled

Mom

Alright, be careful

Me

I will

How is the questioning going?

Mom

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I think I made it through the worst of it

Me

Good. You be careful too

Mom

Of course. Love you!

Me

Love you too

I ran a hand through my hair, tugging it out of my face and freeing my eyes.

Just getting inside the resort was a huge change for me. I had never lived anywhere other than the coven's compound. It was basically a small town. We were self-sufficient in every way, and even made our own clothing and medicine.

In the days since I left, I'd had to learn a little about how to maneuver through the outside world, interact with humans and other supernaturals, and do all sorts of other things I'd only seen in TV shows and movies.

Now I was done traveling.

But there were still a bunch of crumbling wards I was going to have to somehow fix

or remake. A phoenix determined tomato with me, too. A vampire receptionist who hated me and apparently had a lot of friends, on top of that.

And I couldn't even lock my new room's door so I could take a few minutes to cry in the shower about losing everything I'd ever known.

What a mess.

I dropped my phone on the bed. Squeezing my eyes shut, I lifted my palms to cover them as I fought back tears.

I could never go home again.

If I let those tears fall, I wasn't sure I'd ever stop crying. So, I warred with them as I focused on my current situation and tried to come up with something I could do about it.

The door had no real lock since everyone knew the code. I knew a rune that could lock it, obviously. And a few charms. If I'd been any good with spells, I could technically build one to do it too.

Back with the coven, I couldn't have used any of them. My magic had been absolute shit, so anyone could get past it.

But I didn't have to hide anymore.

I was far from the weakest, now.

That was a perk. A big one, even if I didn't quite feel like it yet.

Lowering my hands from my face, I wiped away the condensation that had gathered

beneath my eyes.

I didn't have to pretend to be weak anymore.

I didn't need to hide what I was.

Biting my lip, I stood up and crossed the room. It only took a moment to pull one of my pins from my hair, cut the back of my hand, and use the blood to draw one of the simplest runes there was.

Stop.

The scent in the air wavered slightly as my magic set in. It would've been stronger if I had a plant to tie it to as well, but I didn't need it for a rune as temporary as that one.

Only a witch stronger than me could've broken through without my permission—and as far as I knew, there wasn't one.

Blood magic was the pinnacle. Rune, charm, spell, and even potion witches could do incredible things. But none of them could craft magic with nothing but their own bodies. I could.

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And I could do every kind of magic, while most of them could only perform one or two types with any amount of skill.

Blood witches weren't any more dangerous than any other kind of witch. But we were stronger than them, so they hated us.

Just to make sure the magic worked, I grabbed the handle of the door and tried to pull it open.

Some of my tension eased when it didn't budge.

I could shower in safety after all.

I padded into the bathroom, shucking my t-shirt, shorts, and bikini as I went. I paused when I saw myself in the mirror, taking a closer look at my chin.

There had definitely been a bruise after Cecil grabbed me. Liam said as much.

The bruise was gone, though. Entirely gone.

Did that have something to do with his magic? Or the warmth I'd been feeling since he touched me? He had to have used his power on me when he took my chin in his hand.

I shook my head.

It didn't matter.

I had bigger things to deal with than whether or not the phoenix could heal me.

Starting with my lack of clean clothing to change into.

If the spare clothes Bailey mentioned weren't there when I got out, I'd have to borrow some of Liam's or something. If the phoenix really did want to mate with me, he was going to have to learn how to share his things. Right? Women in movies and TV shows often borrowed their significant other's clothes.

Granted, I wasn't sure if that was real or if it was fiction.

I'd never actually been around a mated or married couple before. The closest I'd gotten to that was when I saw a human guy grab a girl's ass in a gas station. They were both wearing rings, so it seemed safe to assume they were married. Hopefully to each other, given the physical contact.

Anyway, whether or not it was normal, I'd likely end up taking some of Liam's clothing.

I turned on the shower, then took a minute to check a small bathroom closet I hadn't noticed before. When I found a stacked washer and dryer, I threw my clothes in with some detergent and started it up.

Stepping under the water, I finally relaxed and closed my eyes.

Physically, I was safe.

That was what mattered.

I could figure out everything else over time.

The warmth I'd been feeling since Liam touched me melted into exhaustion as I scrubbed myself clean. When I finished rinsing conditioner from my hair, I stumbled out of the shower and grabbed the nearest towel off the hook. It was massive, and I sighed as it engulfed my body. The smell that clung to it was delicious, and it somehow relaxed me further.

I squeezed some of the water from my hair with a second towel that smelled like the first, then grabbed a t-shirt from the closet and slipped into bed. It was Liam's bed, but I was drained enough not to care who the mattress belonged to.

And the blankets smelled so good, I don't think I could've cared if I tried.

three

LIAM

The curtain rustled lightly over the window as I sat across the room from my witch, studying her.

She looked good in my bed.

Really fucking good.

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Of course, that was probably heat speaking.

I'd been attracted to her before I ignited heat, though. The moment I caught the woman's scent, I'd known exactly what magic was going to connect us the first time I touched her. Heat was instinctual for dragons, and while I lacked most of their instincts, I had enough to know when I'd found the woman meant to be my mate.

Most dragons avoided a bond at all cost, of course. They preferred not to take mates at all. I had understood the desire for freedom, until I met my blood witch.

She was mine.

There was no way around it.

And even if fate hadn't intervened, I'd be doing whatever it took to seal a bond with her for her protection. Regardless of fate's interference, I needed her help to keep my resort running.

My witch slept soundly, despite the flush on her cheeks and the thick scent of her desire in the air. She had one leg on top of the blankets, and the t-shirt she'd taken from my closet had ridden up to the top of her thigh, barely concealing the slickness I could smell from my view.

The dragons had mentioned their mates being in physical pain when they weren't touching them during heat, but mine seemed completely fine with the distance.

Well, maybe not fine.

But she clearly wasn't hurting.

Just intensely horny.

Which was obviously preferable to her being in pain.

I'd have to figure out exactly what our version of heat was while we went through it. Though I would've rather had a plan and an idea of what to expect, I'd adapt.

The drier buzzed as it finished, and the woman sat up suddenly. Her brown eyes were bright with concern, and sweat glued a few strands of her natural waves to her face.

Her gaze landed on me, then jerked to the door she'd locked with magic.

"It's still locked," I said. "I came in through the balcony."

Dragons couldn't fly without their mates on their backs, hence their choice to avoid mate bonds. I'd wondered if the same problem would affect me—and when I'd plunged from the sky an hour after starting our bond, I had my answer.

Luckily, I'd managed to glide to the balcony.

We'd need to move to a different room. Being trapped on the top floor without being able to get in and out with my wings was going to drive me mad.

She let out a harsh breath and peeled some hair off her face.

Then fanned it.

"Is it always this hot in here?"

“No.”

I considered how to explain what was happening without panicking her. Like most witches, she seemed entirely unprepared for a mate bond or romantic relationship of any kind. The woman had been absolutely stunned when I touched her chin. I was going to have to take things slow with her.

She slipped out of bed and disappeared into the bathroom. When she emerged a few minutes later, she was pulling her own shirt on over her floral bikini.

I didn't bother trying to stop my cock from responding.

That fucker had been hard since before I touched her in the lobby.

As soon as her top was on, she was fanning her face again. “Do you think that vampire could've infected me with something? I feel weird. Also, did you switch my laundry?”

“I did. And it wasn't the vampire.”

She blinked.

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Her forehead creased.

“My sperm donor was a dragon, so my mating process will follow a dragon’s, at least loosely. When I touched you, it ignited heat,” I said.

“Heat?”

I dipped my head. “There’s fire in my eyes. If I was a dragon, your body temperature would rise over the next few weeks. You’d be in pain if we weren’t touching, and you would slowly be overwhelmed by sexual need until we fucked to seal the bond. The longer we fought it, the more pain you would be in. I would be mindlessly lost to the need to ease your suffering.”

The look on her face was almost comically horrified. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I told you, I don’t joke.”

She lifted her hands to rest on top of her head, panic parting her lips. Her top rose, showing me a few delicious inches of her abdomen.

“That can’t be right,” she finally said. “I’m a witch. I’ve never even... we can’t... I don’t...”

“You’re a virgin. I’m aware. We can, and I’ll ease you into it slowly. It seems like there may not be any physical pain for you, which is good. But you shouldn’t want me as much as you currently do, so our heat will likely progress in a different way than the dragons’.”

Her face flushed redder. “I didn’t agree to this. You can’t possibly want this with me. I don’t know what game you’re playing here, but I’m well aware that I reek, and my magic makes me unappealing, and?—”

I stood up and crossed the room. She cut herself off when our chests nearly met.

I took her chin in my hand and tilted her head back, so she had no choice but to meet my gaze. “I felt your magic the moment you crossed through my wards—and I wanted you the moment I felt it. This is not a game. Your life is at risk, and this bond is how I keep you alive to fix the crumbling magic I’ve been holding together through willpower alone.”

“But I smell like pepper,” she whispered.

“You smell like cloves, and it’s fucking delicious.”

“Say I agree,” she said.

“You agree.”

“No, that’s not—” she huffed. “Pretend I was agreeing. Which I’m not. Just pretend I was. What would happen next?”

“I would show you the wards, and you would develop a plan to fix them. When heat bothers you enough, I would take the edge off for you.”

“I’m going to need a better description of that second bit.”

I lowered my lips to her ear, and her hand wrapped around my forearm. “When you can’t handle the need anymore, I’ll slip my hand between your thighs, and you’ll ride my fingers until you’ve soaked them with your pleasure.”

She let out a strangled noise, squeezing the hell out of my arm.

I couldn't resist the urge to push her, just a little more.

“The next time heat swells, you'll strip your clothes off for me so I can feast on your pretty little cunt until you've climaxed so many times you can't get out of bed.”

The sound she made was something between a breath and a moan.

“When you can't handle heat's pressure anymore, I'll finally fill you with my cock and make you mine in every way there is.”

“You don't even know my name,” she gasped out.

“I don't need to, Clove. You belong to me. That's all that matters.”

Finally, she used her grip on my wrist to shove my hand away from her face. Releasing her hold, she stepped back and pointed a finger at me. It would've been more threatening if it hadn't been trembling.

“You don't touch me again unless I ask you to.”

“Sure. But you will ask me to.”

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She made a sound of frustration, but the scent of her desire softened it. “Show me the wards. If I’m going to lose my mind to your fucking mating process, I need to get to work.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

four

SAGE

I fought like hell to ignore the slickness between my thighs as I followed Liam through the resort.

He gave the world’s least informative tour as we went. When we passed a monstrous pool connected to a lazy river that seemed to wind around the entire resort, he waved toward it with a grunt of, “pool”. When we passed a restaurant, he gestured toward it with another one-word label.

I wasn’t even sure where we were going, but as long as I wasn’t trapped in a bedroom with him while he whispered dirty words in my ear, I was in better shape than I had been.

And what was with him switching my laundry for me?

Yeah, I appreciated it, but that was weird. Wasn’t it?

Movies and TV shows were really letting me down as far as teaching me what to

expect from a man.

I definitely hadn't expected anything he'd whispered in my ear.

Liam gestured toward the beach as we passed it, and I watched a group of supernaturals surfing just past it.

I'd never tried surfing before. I'd never even been to the beach before, and I was itching to take a shoeless walk on the sand just to see what it felt like.

Instead, I followed Liam down a paved trail that led through an overgrown jungle.

A few minutes down the trail, Liam stopped at a large wood and metal bench that faced directly into a cluster of bushes. He waved me after him as he went around it and took a seat.

I was slightly suspicious, but followed anyway.

When I sat down, the tingle of magic washed over my skin, and I realized why he'd stopped there.

We had reached the wards' anchor. The spot wouldn't mean anything to anyone who wasn't a witch, but an anchor was basically the physical location for the magic a witch created. A hearty plant was usually a good place to put an anchor, and it was safe to say one of them in the cluster in front of me was doing that job.

"I might not be able to repair the wards," I warned Liam. "There's a good chance I'll need to rebuild them from scratch in my own way. It'll depend on what the other witch did, how she did it, and whether or not I can repair her magic."

"I don't care how it's done. The magic's so weak at this point, I'm barely holding it

together.”

I focused on the shimmering spot just in front of us that anchored the wards, and studied it.

Within the blazing fireball that was Liam’s magic, I could see an intricate web of glittering witch spells in the shape of a sphere about the size of someone’s head. The scents of a dozen different plants melded with the power, and blood tangled with it.

He wasn’t kidding about having a blood witch in the past.

Most of the spells looked like very specific, altered forms of complicated magic.

“These are really complex. Who was your last blood witch?” My forehead was creased as I tried to visually separate the parts, to figure out where I should even start.

“My mother. She was well-known as one of the world’s best spell witches. No one realized she was using blood magic until I was born. By the time I came, she was hidden safely within these wards.”

My eyebrows lifted. “She made the resort to give you both a safe place to live?”

He nodded. “We lasted about a century here before her old coven managed to pay someone inside to kill her. I’ve been holding the wards together for the last century and a half myself, but they’ve been breaking down since she passed.”

No wonder they were failing.

That was an insanely long time for someone who wasn’t a witch to maintain magic. Especially magic as complicated as what I was looking at.

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“I’m not going to be able to rebuild these spells if we let them fall. Most of my training is with runes,” I admitted. “I’ll have to focus on repairing them instead, and it’s not going to be fast.”

“That’s fine. We have time.”

He didn’t sound worried, but I could see the state of the magic. Time really wasn’t on our side.

When my coven started sending spell witches, it wouldn’t take them long to destroy the wards in their current state. Even with Liam’s magic in the way.

I leaned closer to the anchor, carefully placing two fingers on it and using them to slowly turn the sphere around.

Studying it, I watched for something familiar. A common spell that hadn’t been altered too much, or?—

There.

I leaned in until my nose nearly touched the magic.

The innermost layer was the most structured. The most whole.

And thank fuck, I recognized it.

“This one’s a bubble spell.”

“Okay.” Liam clearly had no idea what that meant.

“It’s basically a shield that surrounds a person, place, or thing. Your mom’s is only altered a tiny bit, and it’s in better shape than most of the others. It’s the center of the wards, too. It looks like...” I trailed off, squinting. “It’s mostly being used for detection. And maybe keeping people out.”

“Anyone who wants to harm someone in the resort is prevented from coming in,” Liam agreed. “And we do have a circle of detection around us. It ensures that I know who enters and leaves the resort at all times. A lot of the other spells are tied to that circle.”

Relief rolled through me. “I should be able to repair it fairly easily, and since most of the others are connected to it, the fix should take a lot of the pressure off you.”

“Alright. What plants do you need?”

“I’m not sure. Hold on.” I studied the bubble, carefully nudging the anchor with my magic. If it was healthy, I wouldn’t need to be careful. But it was covered in cracks, holes, and patches made of flame. Everything was held together by phoenix fire, but Liam clearly couldn’t heal the magic.

About twenty minutes went by before I finally knew what I needed. I didn’t have a name for it, or any idea what it looked like, but I would know its aura.

Without another word, I hurried into the jungle before I could forget what I was looking for. Going back to the anchor if it slipped my mind was going to be a pain.

“I can find whatever plants you need,” Liam growled, following me through the jungle. “We have a greenhouse. I knew I’d eventually need a witch’s help again.”

“I won’t know what I need until I see it. Where’s the greenhouse?”

He grumbled, but led the way.

My stomach growled when we reached the entrance of the building.

Liam didn’t acknowledge the sound, so I didn’t either.

Guess I’d eat after I fixed the bubble spell.

We spent half an hour going through the monstrous greenhouse before I finally found the leafy plant I needed. I was careful as I took multiple clippings, then snapped a picture of the plant with my phone before heading back to the bench. I’d need to put together a grimoire to keep track of all the spells and plants used for the wards, or I’d be in the same situation again in a few months when they started to age.

Someone intercepted us on the path.

I didn’t recognize the woman, but she smelled like a demon.

“I have a delivery order for you, Liam,” she said with a coy smile, holding out a paper bag with handles.

He grunted a thank you and took it. She put a hand on his shoulder, not even trying to conceal the fact that she was feeling up his muscles. He stepped away from her touch, and she took a step closer to him.

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I tried not to glare at her as a strange feeling swelled within me, but I failed.

She noticed me glaring, and lifted a lip in what looked a hell of a lot like a threat.

I didn't know what had come over me, but it was ridiculous.

I strode away from the demon and the phoenix, heading back to the anchor.

The last thing I needed was to start feeling possessive of the flaming bastard who ran the resort.

He claimed we were going to be mates, but that didn't mean it was really going to happen. And I sure as hell wasn't going to seal a mate bond with someone who flirted with other women right in front of me.

I didn't even want a mate bond.

Even though I was still slick between my thighs—and ignoring that fiercely.

Liam caught up to me on the path in the jungle so quickly that he couldn't have had time to talk to her or make out with her or anything. “Elizabeth has never touched me before, and she isn't going to touch me again, Clove.”

“My name is Sage.” I didn't look back at him.

If I did, he was going to realize that I was pissed, and I didn't want him to know that. I would've much rather been fixing the wards in exchange for my safety, not mating

with him for it.

“Word hasn’t spread yet that I’ve chosen a mate. It will, and the people here will respect that,” Liam added.

I bit back a retort and picked up my pace. With his insanely long legs, he had no problem keeping up with me.

“I’m going to need spellbooks,” I said. “As many as you can get your hands on. I’m going to have to train myself, since your mom’s magic is so complicated.”

“I’ll get as many as I can.”

Thankfully, we reached the bench before he tried to take the conversation back to the mating thing.

Unthankfully, he set his hand on my arm to stop me from reaching for the magic.

“You need to eat before you continue, Clove.”

I bit back another snapped retort about my name. He obviously didn’t care.

When he handed me a paper box of food, I opened it reluctantly. I was hungry, but he hadn’t asked if I was vegetarian like most witches—and I was.

To my surprise, I found stir fry within the box. There was no meat in it.

I blinked down at it for a moment before looking over at Liam’s food.

It matched mine.

“Are you vegetarian?” I asked.

“Yeah. Half witch, remember?”

Right.

That was difficult to come to terms with, considering how big he was and the fact that he was a dude—but I did understand.

“Did your mom know what she was turning you into?” I wondered.

“I never asked.”

I supposed I could understand that.

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We ate in silence.

When I was finished, I handed him the paper box and refocused on the magic. “Are you opposed to me using runes to strengthen the spell as I repair it? I can use them directly on the bubble. It’ll take longer, but it should make everything a lot more stable.”

“Do whatever you think is best.”

I nodded, grabbed a sharp pin out of my hair, picked up my plant cuttings, and went to work.

Hours passed as I fixed the bubble, then slowly covered the newly-repaired spell in runes. It was painstaking work, but giving up on it wasn’t an option if we wanted to keep the framework for the rest of the wards. Which we did, because I couldn’t even identify most of the spells. Let alone remake them myself.

The sun wasn’t beating down on me while I worked, but sweat still dripped down my back and between my breasts.

My slickness coated my bikini’s bottoms. My body still wasn’t getting the memo that I wasn’t interested in Liam’s heat, even after he left me on the bench for a bit when he went off to deal with something.

The sun set.

My entire body was coated in sweat. My clothes were wet with it.

Sweat, and desire.

Fucking heat.

Liam put a hand on my thigh as the sun finished setting, interrupting me gently. I had vaguely noticed him return a few minutes earlier, but I was buried in the magic.

“You need food and rest, Clove.”

“I need to finish this,” I mumbled.

“No. You need a break.” His voice was calm, but he didn’t leave any room for arguing. “Heat is hard on your body, and you need to rest.”

“I’m almost done.”

He growled, but I ignored him.

Lowering my pin back to the wound I’d created on my arm, I started to dip it in my blood—and stopped abruptly when a large hand plucked it from my grasp.

Said hand landed on my arm a moment later, and fire blazed over my cut. The wound closed immediately, the blood vanishing.

I gasped out a curse as liquid pleasure rolled through me with the burst of his magic. “You can’t do that.”

“Sorry.” There was a beat of silence. “The wards are already in much better condition. I can feel it. You can finish what you’re doing in the morning. You need food and rest,” Liam repeated, nowhere near as apologetic as I would’ve hoped.

“Fine,” I gritted out, holding a hand toward him for my pin.

He looked at me warily, but returned it.

I stuck it back in my hair and stood up. Everything swayed around me, and I had to grab the bench for support.

Slickness rolled down my inner thighs.

More sweat dripped down my back and between my breasts. My hair was soaked with it.

I waited for the world to stop swaying.

And waited.

And waited.

Finally, I let out a huff and closed my eyes.

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It wasn't going to stop.

A strong arm went around my waist.

Another dipped below the backs of my knees.

In one smooth motion, Liam scooped me up and hauled me into his arms.

I made a sound of protest, but everything was still swaying, so I couldn't exactly tell him to put me down.

"You pushed yourself too hard." He sounded pissed.

"I fixed the bubble."

"Your health is the priority," he snapped.

"I'm a blood witch. My health is a means to an end."

"Like hell it is."

I squeezed my eyes shut as everything swayed some more while he carried me.

"Is she okay?" someone asked.

"Whoisthat?" someone else snarked. "She reeks of witch magic."

“Insult my mate again and you’ll have to find yourself another resort,” Liam said in a low voice.

Silence fell for a few blissful minutes.

“Technically, I’m not your mate yet,” I mumbled.

“I don’t give a shit about technicalities, Clove.”

“Liam is mated to a witch named Clove?” someone whispered.

“The least you could do is use my real name if you’re going to force me to mate with you,” I said.

“I’m not forcing anything.”

“I never said you could start heat.”

“Nature insisted you were mine. Fate would’ve intervened if I hadn’t taken initiative.”

“Sounds like bullshit to me.”

“My magic is exactly the bullshit you need to survive your coven when they show up, Clove. If you want to live, you need to learn how to embrace it.”

I made a face.

The noise around us grew louder, and I heard someone else talking to Liam as he picked up more food. They were asking about me, and he was calling me his mate again.

Which was lovely.

Just lovely.

The noise faded as he made his way up to the top floor. I heard a keypad beep, and the door shut behind us a moment later.

He set me up in his bed as I tried to wrestle my eyes open again. My body was insanely hot, and now that I wasn't focused on the bubble spell anymore, need had me aching between my thighs and in my lower belly.

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“Drink this.” Liam slipped a straw between my lips. I didn’t bother asking what it was, just taking deep swallows.

A gloriously-thick chocolate milkshake flooded my mouth, and I couldn’t suppress a moan of pleasure.

Liam made a sound that almost resembled a chuckle, but that couldn’t be right. He didn’t joke, which probably meant he didn’t laugh either.

I basically inhaled the ice cream. When I reached the bottom of the cup, I was already feeling much better.

He warned, “Next time, I’m stopping you sooner.”

I was too busy reaching for the food to argue.

We silently devoured veggie burgers and fries. I watched Liam finish up while I licked my fingers clean, eyeing the few fries in the bottom of his box.

He held it out to me, and I made a noise of protest.

When he didn’t move to eat them, I snagged the rest of the fries and downed them too.

“I think I used more energy than I realized,” I admitted, relaxing against the headboard of the bed. I didn’t even have the energy to care that there was probably salt or crumbs on the mattress after our meal. Or that Liam was sprawled out next to

me.

It had been an insanely long day.

“I’ll feed you more tomorrow,” Liam said.

“It’s not your job to feed me.”

The look he flashed me said he disagreed with that statement.

I was too tired to argue.

Closing my eyes, I let out a long breath. I’d figure out the heat thing in the morning. Something told me my body would force me to.

“If the magic makes it difficult to sleep, wake me up,” Liam added.

I made a noise of agreement, though I had absolutely no intention of following through. If heat woke me up, I’d try to deal with it myself.

I managed to doze off pretty quickly, despite the sweat coating me and the slickness between my thighs.

five

SAGE

The few hours of sleep I got were plagued with dreams of Liam.

He was making good on his promise to touch me and taste me, and it was glorious.

I woke up panting, with one hand between my thighs.

Yikes.

I bit back a groan and grabbed a pin out of my hair, pricking the back of my arm and scribbling out two quick runes next to the cut.

I waited for relief, and when it didn't come, I really did groan.

“What happened?” Liam’s voice rasped. “Why are you bleeding?”

“I tried to ease heat with a pair of runes.”

“You can’t satisfy magic with more magic.”

“Apparently not.”

“Come here.” Liam put an arm around my waist and pulled my back to his chest. His skin felt so good against mine, I could’ve cried. “Let me take care of you so you can get some sleep.”

“You don’t even know my name,” I protested, though it was a weak argument.

There was no way around letting him ease heat for me—and the sex dreams I’d been having made it pretty clear that my body didn’t want a way around it.

“Sage.” His lips brushed the side of my throat, and it felt so good my eyes stung. “Let me help.”

“Okay, fine.”

His hand slipped beneath the hem of my bikini bottoms, and I moaned when the pads of his fingers brushed my clit. His erection throbbed against my ass, and I pressed my backside against him harder.

He growled, pushing my bikini bottoms and shorts down with his free hand. He dragged his fingers over me again, and my hips jerked.

Liam slowly worked my clit until I came harder than I ever had before. My cries flooded the air, my hips jerking with the waves of pleasure. He kept touching me, sliding his fingers through my slickness and dragging out my pleasure.

I leaned the back of my head against his bare chest as I panted, catching my breath.

The heat and tension that had gathered were gone entirely, leaving pure exhaustion in their place. “Thanks,” I whispered, my eyelids lowering.

“Of course. Sleep well.” Liam’s lips brushed the side of my throat. His hand was still between my thighs, but it felt nice there, so I didn’t ask him to move it.

Heat’s intense dreams woke me up again a while later. A glance at the clock showed that I’d slept nearly twelve hours, and a peek down at my thighs showed that Liam was still holding my core, while my bikini’s bottoms and shorts were around the middle of my thighs.

He was breathing steadily against my back.

I moved just slightly, and his grip tightened. I sucked in a breath, and his lips brushed my throat.

“That feel good?” The rough growl in his voice made my toes curl.

“Really good.”

He rumbled, and he pressed the heel of his palm against my clit.

My hips rocked.

More moans of pleasure escaped me, entirely out of my control.

One of his fingertips brushed my entrance, threatening to fill me, and I climaxed hard.

My breathing was desperate as I came down from the high, trying to recover from the intense pleasure.

“That was—wow,” I panted, pushing his hand away.

“Better?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

My face flushed. “I need to go back to my bubble spell.”

His grip tightened for a moment before he finally released his hold. I eased myself away from him.

He let out a long breath. “Bailey left a bag of clothes outside the room yesterday. I brought it in when we got back last night.”

That was good, considering my only outfit stunk thanks to heat.

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I tugged my shorts back into place as I got out of bed, padding across the room. There was a grocery bag just inside the door, and I crouched down in front of it.

Inside, there was a pair of sweats, two t-shirts, and two bikinis. There was no normal underwear, and all of the clothes were preowned, but that was fine. I didn't need anything fancy.

Taking one of the bikinis and a t-shirt into the bathroom with me, I slipped into the shower.

The door didn't lock, so I just had to hope Liam would give me privacy.

Unfortunately, that hope didn't last long.

He rapped on the bathroom door after a minute, and I held an arm around my tits as he poked his head in. His gaze moved slowly over my figure before he cleared his throat.

"I need to check in with Bailey and Harv. It shouldn't take long."

"Great. Have fun."

He hesitated for a moment before finally leaving the bathroom. I heard the door shut a minute later, and let out a long breath.

Everyone still knew his room's code, so I had precisely zero security at the moment.

I scrubbed my skin and hair in thirty seconds flat, drying off and getting dressed in another thirty seconds.

When I was done, I padded back out of the bathroom while I dried my hair with a towel.

I had no idea when Liam was going to get back, so there was no point in sitting in his room. He said it wouldn't take long, but I had work to do.

I didn't think we needed to spend every minute of the day together, either.

And I really didn't want to be a sitting duck, waiting for Cecil or one of his many friends to attack me in Liam's room.

My stomach rumbled with hunger, and I could clearly visualize my bubble spell.

I still had at least a full day of work to do on it, to finish strengthening it. Hopefully by tomorrow, Liam would have a spellbook I could use to try to tackle whatever the next biggest one was after that.

So, I might as well get going.

Liam would figure out where I went when he got back. Probably. Assuming a certain vampire receptionist didn't eat me while I was gone.

I slipped out of the bedroom after sliding two of my sharp hairpins onto the straps of my swimsuit top, so I wouldn't lose them.

Even getting attacked by Cecil outside the room was far easier to stomach than just sitting on Liam's bed and waiting for someone to try to kill me.

Especially when I was still sweaty, and I couldn't stop remembering the way his hand felt between my thighs.

Yeah. Leaving was definitely the best idea.

The hallway was empty, and I waited in silence for the elevator to rise. When the doors opened, there were two women standing inside. Both of their magical auras told me they were shifters, though the power was unique enough that I had no idea what they could shift into.

Both were tall and athletic-looking, like all shifters.

One had light skin and long blonde hair. The other was tan, with bright red hair. They were both leaning against the wall of the elevator, their gazes fixed on something in front of them. Since they stood somewhat close to each other, it seemed fair to assume they knew each other.

Though I didn't want to make small talk, I wasn't about to walk down twenty floors of stairs, so I slipped inside with them. I hoped that because they were shifters, they weren't friends with Cecil.

"Are you Liam's witch?" the blonde asked, as the elevator descended.

"Um, I guess. I don't particularly want to belong to him, but that does seem to be the situation I've landed myself in, so..." I trailed off.

The redhead snorted. "In our world, that's a common problem to have."

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“No kidding. That’s why I’m here.” The blonde gestured to the elevator. “But I imagine it’s more of a shock to go from living with a coven to trapped with a phoenix, than it is to be claimed by some asshole as a female shifter.”

Relief rolled through me. “You have no idea.”

“Have you ever been away from your coven’s compound before this?” the redhead asked.

“No.”

“I bet you’re enjoying the beach, then.”

“I haven’t even been on the beach yet,” I admitted.

“Seriously?” the blonde checked.

The doors opened on the main floor, and the women stepped up to my sides.

“Seriously. The wards are in bad shape, and I need to get them fixed before my coven tries to kill me.”

“Witches won’t attack the resort without a plan. Even the supernatural government uses this place to get away when they need a break,” the redhead said.

“Come have breakfast with us. One of the resort’s restaurants is on the beach—we can kill two birds with one stone,” the blonde offered.

“Alright.” It didn’t take much convincing. I was hungry, and I didn’t know where the restaurants were anyway. “Do I need money, or…”

“You’re a lifer, so no,” the redhead said.

“A what?” I probably should’ve known what that term meant in the resort, but I didn’t. My tour guide hadn’t exactly been helpful.

The blonde explained, “There are two types of currency in the resort. Cash, and work. Vacationers pay cash, lifers pay with their time. I’m Vera, by the way. This is Madison. We met a few days ago, and we’re both vacationers.”

“I’m Sage. I didn’t know anyone came here on vacation.”

“Most sane supernaturals don’t,” Madison agreed. “But for the rare and powerful, this place is an escape that can save your life.”

I wanted to ask what they were escaping from, but that didn’t seem like an appropriate question two minutes after we met. And since they hadn’t known each other either, it seemed safe to assume they led very different lives outside the Resort.

We all headed down a path I hadn’t taken before. It was the middle of the day, and there were tons of people around. Many of them stared at us.

“Are they looking at you guys, or me?” I asked, as we turned down another path.

Madison snorted. “Definitely you.”

“The lifers have their own society and culture,” Vera put in. “We matter so little here that we’re basically invisible to them. Because Liam claimed you, you’re one of them now. I think they’re still trying to decide how they feel about it.”

“Well Cecil and his friends, whoever they are, already want me dead. And no one likes witches in the first place.”

“Witches do their own thing, and no one knows what it is, so I think you guys are disliked for that. If you’re fixing the resort, no one here will hate you. We did hear about the Cecil thing, though. Even the vacationers are gossiping about you right now,” Madison said.

I grimaced.

Lovely.

“I’m surprised Liam let you out of his sight,” Vera added. “Most male shifters are pretty overprotective of their mates.”

“I don’t think he’s that protective. He’s only mating me with me to keep me alive so I can hold the resort’s wards together.”

Madison made a noise of surprise. “Seriously?”

“Did he actually watch you leave?” Vera checked. “Because I’m telling you, I know male shifters pretty well.”

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“Technically, no. He left me in our room and said he’d be back soon. I wasn’t comfortable waiting, considering everyone in the resort knows the code. That’s true, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s 8888,” Madison agreed.

“But when he gets back and finds you gone...” Vera trailed off.

“I’ll figure it out.” I waved her worry off as we reached a restaurant that sat on the edge of the beach.

“At least one of us is confident about that,” Vera murmured.

“Can we get a table on the beach for three?” Madison held up three fingers to the man in front of the podium of the busy building. He was looking down, so he couldn’t have seen her fingers. “Two vacationers, one lifer.”

“No problem. I just need the lifer’s... oh.” The man finally looked at me, cutting himself off. His nostrils flared as he stared.

Madison waved a hand. “Hello?”

The guy’s attention snapped to her, and he cleared his throat. “She doesn’t have a Resort ID yet.”

Madison didn’t bat an eye. “Just put it on her mate’s account.”

He hesitated.

“Sage is supposed to spend all day fixing the wards that keep everyone in this place safe, so I’d recommend feeding her,” Vera remarked.

The guy nodded. “Follow me.” He led us into the restaurant, around a few tables, and out under a large canopy.

I stopped in my tracks to take in the view. The ocean was a gorgeous shade of blue, its waves rolling lazily onto the pristine white sand. Further out, the waves must’ve been better, because I could see a few people on surf boards.

Vera and Madison were already sitting down when I joined them at our table.

“We can walk on the beach after we eat,” Vera suggested. “Unless your mate shows up to lecture you for disappearing.”

I grimaced.

Hopefully his meetings or whatever took a while.

We chatted about the food as we looked at the menu, and both of the women gave me advice about what they liked the most. It was technically lunch time, but I couldn’t resist ordering the macadamia nut pancakes they both raved about.

The conversation was surface level, but laid-back while we ate. They asked me questions about the coven, and I asked them about their lives.

Vera mentioned the water a few times, so I figured whatever she could shift into liked to swim. I was drawing a blank on what she could be, though. Madison mentioned climbing a tree, so whatever she was could climb. If I’d known more about animals,

maybe that would've told me something, but all I really knew was plants and runes.

When we finished eating, we walked out onto the beach.

The sand was insanely soft, sliding between my toes as we walked in the direction of the wards' anchor.

A gigantic dude came jogging up the beach straight toward us. I barely glanced at him, but Vera made a face. "Alpha werewolf, twelve o'clock."

I looked back, and realized who he was.

The werewolf from the lobby. Harvey.

"Sage!" he called out.

"We can distract him while you run if you want," Madison whispered.

"Thanks, but I should probably find out what he wants." They could technically still kick me out of the resort. And if they did, I was toast.

Although, maybe that would end the heat thing...

That was tempting.

Death was less tempting, though.

If I had to choose between dying to taking a mate, there was an obvious answer.

I waved, and Harv reached us quickly. His phone was already to his ear.

“Yeah, I found her. She’s fine. Made some friends.” There was a pause. “No, they look pretty female to me. Want to confirm?” Another pause. “Of course you do. Here.” Harvey pulled the phone away from his ear and put it on speaker. “Alright, say hi to your mate’s new boyfriends.”

“Hi, Liam. Great resort you have here,” Madison said aloud. “You should’ve given Sage a better tour. She’s never even been on the beach before.”

“For the record, wewouldmake great lovers,” Vera teased. “Even if we’re both currently unwillingly engaged to asshole men.”

“Technically, Sage is too,” Madison pointed out.

Liam growled, and I pointedly ignored his sound of complaint.

“I’m heading to the anchor to work on the wards,” I told him. “I’ll need the spellbooks by tomorrow, and I need a blank grimoire too. And pens and pencils in a few colors.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Liam said.

“Great.”

“She needs underwear too,” Vera called out. “And new bikinis. All of hers have been on someone else’s vagina before.”

“They were washed,” I protested, my face reddening.

It wasn’t fun to leave everything I owned behind. Not having anything to really call mine was shitty. But, much like the mate decision, it was that or death. So I was dealing with it, and I was doing just fine.

“Do you know how much we’re paying to stay here? Your fiancé can afford a few bucks to make you comfortable while you save his resort,” Madison said.

“I’m leaving,” I called, stepping away from the group before the conversation got any more uncomfortable.

“Don’t forget the surf lesson tomorrow morning,” Vera reminded me.

“I won’t.” I waved goodbye on my way down the beach.

Harvey caught up to me quickly, no longer on his phone.

“He’s on his way, isn’t he?” I asked, my gaze trained on the horizon. It was so hot that I was itching to dip my shirt in the water to cool myself off, but I refrained.

“Yup.”

“How pissed is he?”

“Twelve out of ten.”

I grimaced.

Fantastic.

six

SAGE

Harvey stood a few feet away while I sat down on my bench and went back to my bubble spell.

At some point, I felt the space behind me grow hotter, and knew Liam was there. He didn't interrupt me, but there was no doubt he was pissed.

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He stiffly sat down beside me an hour or two later with a box of food in his hand. I finished up what I was working on, and he handed me the box.

When his arm came into my sight, my eyebrows lifted.

“You’re steaming again.”

Liam grunted.

I was silent as I ate the fruit and pastry from the box. He was too.

I set the empty carton down next to me. “If you want to say something, just say it.”

“I can’t fly without you,” Liam gritted out.

I blinked.

That wasn’t what I expected to hear. At all.

“What do you mean?” I finally asked.

“Dragons have the same problem. It’s why they avoid taking mates. After heat starts, they can’t fly without their mate on their back. I can’t either.”

“Okay...”

“Imagine if you couldn’t use your magic without me holding your hand. It would

make you paranoid when I wasn't near, wouldn't it?"

I considered it. "Probably, yeah. I can imagine it would be frustrating."

"Very. You vanished. Yesterday, I could've tracked you down myself in a few minutes or less. Today, I was fucking helpless. Cecil could've had you. Anyone could've had you. You're my mate, and there's nothing I could do to make sure you were alright. I don't even have your fucking phone number."

"I don't have a phone, actually. Unless you count my burner. I tossed the old one so the coven wouldn't be able to track me."

"We'll fix that tonight. What happened this morning is not going to happen again."

"Okay. I'm going to hang out with Vera and Madison again, though. We're taking a surfing class tomorrow."

"That's fine. I'll go with you."

I flashed him a narrow-eyed look. "No. It's not a date."

"I never said it was."

"If you want to go, you're staying on the beach."

"How am I supposed to prevent you from drowning if I sit on the beach?"

"You're not. That's the point. You started a bond with me, but I'm still me. I get to be who I want and do what I want."

"To an extent," he said.

“That extent includes taking classes with my friends without you hovering next to me.”

“You barely know them.”

“I know them better than I know you, and I’m on my way to becoming yourmate. I don’t think you want to start getting into the semantics of this situation. Ultimately, you need me if you want to get these wards fixed, so you’re going to have to accept that you don’t get to make all of the decisions here.”

Liam’s entire body was tense, but after a moment of silence, he jerked his head in a nod. “I have a bungalow that I use for storage right now. We’re going to need to move there. If I can’t fly all the time, I don’t want to be trapped on the top floor of the tower.”

“A bungalow sounds nice. Is it closer to here, too?” I needed to ease up on the sass and stubbornness now that he hadn’t tried to argue against my personal freedom.

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“Yeah, it’s one of the closest buildings to the anchor. I lived here when my mother was still alive.”

Ah.

It was emotionally charged, then.

“If living there would be uncomfortable, we could move to a different one. I don’t care how close we are.”

“It’s fine. The rest are occupied, anyway. I’ll start cleaning it out after dinner.”

So he could stay with me until I was done working.

He really was paranoid.

I couldn’t complain about having him there to protect me while I was lost in my work, though. Especially when there were a bunch of vampires who theoretically hated me because Cecil did. And the fact that Liam had brought him up told me the vampire was a real threat.

“Sounds good.” I would help clean it out, if he let me. Probably. Depending on how exhausted I was after dealing with the wards.

I refocused on the bubble spell I was reinforcing. While I worked, Liam typed on his phone.

My body grew warmer as the hours passed, like it had the day before. Sweat slowly soaked my t-shirt and bikini. Need did, too.

I really needed to get an airier swimsuit coverup, because it was extremely uncomfortable.

Exhaustion set in faster than it had the day before. Between heat's overwhelming pressure and the intensity of stretching my magic so much for the first time in my life, I was wiped out before the sun started to set.

Finishing up the last reinforcement rune that was really necessary, I leaned back against the bench and closed my eyes, panting.

The back of Liam's hand met my forehead, and he swore under his breath. "I don't think you should be this hot yet."

"I'm—fine." I had to take a deep breath between the words. I was getting dizzy, too.

"Don't lie to me."

"Not—lying." My protest didn't exactly come out right. Or believably.

"You can't push yourself this hard during heat." His hand left my forehead, and I felt more than heard him stand. I didn't need to look to feel him towering over me, probably glaring down at me too.

"The wards—are—shit. Slowing—down—would be—bad." I was sucking in deep breaths when I finally finished talking.

I needed water.

And food.

Soon, preferably.

Liam grabbed me by the waist and hauled me into his arms. The world swayed and spun as he strode away from the anchor, holding me tightly in his arms.

“You’re too fucking stubborn,” he gritted out.

“Should’ve—realized—that—before you—claimed me.”

“I need to be feeding you more.”

“Watering too.”

He tried to scoff, but it came out a snort. “I’ll plan on more food and drinks tomorrow. Unless you’re ready to seal the bond, so you don’t have to keep putting yourself through this.”

“That’s a hard—pass.” I was finally starting to catch my breath a little, though everything still felt like it was spinning.

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“You’re going to wait as long as you can, aren’t you?”

“Obviously.”

Liam grunted. “There’s no reason to draw it out pointlessly.”

“It’s not pointless to me.”

“The longer it takes, the more intimate things will get between us.”

“I don’t think it gets more intimate than having sex to seal the bond.”

“You don’t think letting me eat you out is more intense than just fucking fast and hard?” he asked.

It was a good thing my entire body was already flushed, or I would’ve blushed hard core. “I think all of it is more intimate than I want it to be. And I’m not ready for more.”

Liam grunted again.

I could hear people’s voices getting closer, so I opened my eyes. Everything was still spinning a little, but I could see that we weren’t headed straight for a restaurant or the tower, like I’d assumed we were.

Instead, Liam carried me toward a bungalow on the beach. It was small, but not tiny, and done in a coastal style. Surrounded by plants, it looked like a tropical getaway.

Though it was identical to most of the other bungalows I'd seen on the island, the way Liam headed toward it told me it was the one he used for storage.

He typed a code into the door's lock—it definitely wasn't 8888—and opened it.

When he did, the smell of cleaning supplies made my nose itch.

I looked around, expecting to see boxes and tarps everywhere, but nothing was there.

Just comfortable-looking furniture, making the small living area and kitchen feel cozy and spacious.

"I decided to pay someone to clean it," Liam said, closing the door behind me.

"You let someone else go through your stuff?"

"Harv offered to move it up to my room in the tower."

"You trust him." It wasn't a question, but an observation.

"Yes."

"You know he's sleeping with Bailey, right?"

"Of course. It's the worst-kept secret on the island."

"Then why are they keeping it a secret at all?"

"They think I'll worry they're going to try to overthrow me."

My eyebrows shot upward. "Will they try to overthrow you?"

“You know as well as I do what will happen to this place if someone kills me.”

He was the one holding the wards together, so... yeah. Trying to take the leadership position from him would be a terrible idea. The resort would cease to be safe instantly.

“Right.”

“Besides, killing me at all would be nearly impossible. My magic heals me as soon as I’m injured.”

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“Won’t people try to use me to get to you after we’re bonded?”

“Probably.”

“Then you shouldn’t be trying to jump into the mate bond either.”

“Clove, if they kill you, it doesn’t matter what happens to me. The resort will fall. You saw the state of the wards. We only had a few weeks left when you got here. Losing you isn’t an option, and a sealed mate bond is the best way to prevent that.”

He didn’t want to lose me. Not because I was his mate, but because I was a blood witch.

That kind of sucked.

But at the same time, it wasn’t surprising. He hadn’t ever pretended to want me for anything but my magic.

The media told some big-ass lies about romance. I still hadn’t seen a single flower or chocolate, or heard a heart-shattering monologue about how much Liam burned for me.

And I still barely liked the guy, so... yeah.

Romance was bullshit.

But I did need to repair the wards, or we were both going to be toast. Maybe Liam

didn't burn for me, but the Supernatural Resort would if I didn't fix it.

Liam set me down on the bed in the house's single bedroom. It was a large bed, the same size as the one in his room in the tower. The bedding was white and soft, looking more expensive and modern than the rest of the coastal-style décor.

"Tomorrow, I want you to put your own wards on the bungalow. I need a place where I know you'll be safe when we're apart," he said.

"Nice to know you think I can protect myself," I drawled.

"It has nothing to do with your power level. I already told you that you're my weakness now."

He sure as hell hadn't put it like that before.

Guess you're my weakness was going to be our version of I burn for you.

Yay.

"I can rune it in the morning. Until I have a spellbook, I probably won't be able to fix any of the other spells anyway. Unless you have your mom's grimoire laying around here somewhere."

He grimaced. "No, she told me on her deathbed to burn it. She thought my magic could keep the wards alive and healthy indefinitely."

Considering his magic could heal him physically, assuming he could keep magic stable and running didn't seem like a stretch.

It didn't work that way, though.

“I’m going to order food while you shower,” Liam said, stepping out of the bedroom. He closed the door behind himself, leaving me alone.

I must’ve smelled truly horrible, because he didn’t make the shower sound optional. A quick sniff of my pits nearly made me gag.

I definitely smelled horrible.

I didn’t waste any time before peeling my clothes off and going into the bathroom. When I saw the gigantic bathtub, I basically dived into it.

Leaning back against the tub, I sighed.

The water I was filling it with wasn’t hot at all, and the chill of it helped ease the heat I radiated.

I relaxed for a while, dozing on and off in the tub.

I wasn’t sure how long I’d been asleep when someone tried the doorknob. My body was much hotter by then, and I was having dream-flashbacks to what happened in bed the night before. Heat’s effects always seemed to get worse when I slept.

“Clove?” Liam called out.

“Still Sage,” I mumbled back. “Just a minute.”

I dunked my head beneath the water to rinse the sweat from my hair. There was no shampoo or any other soap on the ledge of the tub, so I gave up on washing my hair and unplugged the drain.

Everything spun some more when I slipped out of the tub, so I sat on the edge with my eyes closed for a minute.

Liam knocked again. “What’s going on?”

“Just drying off,” I lied.

He waited while I sat for another minute. After I grabbed the towel and finally wrapped it around myself, I opened the door. I’d been able to see into the empty closet from the bathtub, so the towel was all I had. I wasn’t putting sweaty clothes back on.

“You’re steaming again,” I murmured, slipping past him.

My entire front brushed his arm, but the towel prevented skin-on-skin contact. He was shirtless, and though I wasn’t sure why, I wasn’t about to ask.

He muttered something like, “Usually am when it comes to you.”

I ignored the comment. Mostly because I was absolutely exhausted, and not positive I hadn't imagined it.

"Did Harvey bring the clothes Bailey gave me?" I asked.

"No. I need to make a trip for them."

I walked into the kitchen. When I saw the two boxes of food sitting on the counter, I plopped down in front of one of them, still holding the towel.

"Here." Liam put a bundle of fabric on the counter beside my food before taking the seat next to mine.

Unfolding the fabric, I stared down at the t-shirt he'd been wearing earlier. Unlike mine, it wasn't damp.

"You don't sweat," I said.

"No."

Because he steamed.

Lucky bastard.

I pulled the shirt over my head and let the towel fall to my hips. The shirt would cover me completely, but I was already sitting on the towel, and far too lazy to lift my ass at the moment. "Thanks, Steam."

"Yeah."

I opened my box and dug into my food, but Liam's stayed closed. When I was

halfway through mine, I finally looked over at him.

His ears were slightly red, and he was steaming much more than usual.

“What?” I asked, holding a french fry halfway to my mouth.

“Nothing.”

I gave him a dead-panned stare and popped the fry in.

He watched me chew.

His ears went redder, and he shifted slightly in his seat.

“Are you always like this?” I asked.

“Like what?”

“Like you don’t say what’s on your mind unless someone bugs you repeatedly.”

“No one has ever bugged me repeatedly to find out what’s on my mind before.”

Oh.

Well, that was kind of sad.

“Not even your mom?” I asked.

“No. She always said that if someone doesn’t offer you their thoughts freely, they’d like to be left to them.”

“My mom likes to say that people are like eggs. They don’t taste good unless you get inside the shell.”

Liam snorted. “Is she still alive?”

I nodded. “If the coven realizes she knew what I am, she’s going to come here.”

“We’ll have room for her, of course.”

“Thank you. She can help with the wards or something.”

“Is she a spell witch?”

“Oh, fuck no. She’s a potion witch. They’re known for their supreme friendliness and lack of a filter. They’re horrible gossips. Spell witches are more like your mom sounds. Quiet. Secretive. Content to do their own thing. Potions are perfected with the help of other witches, unlike spells.”

“I didn’t realize there was a culture around the different specialties.”

“Mmhm.”

“What are rune witches like?” Liam asked.

I eyed him. “You’re trying to crack me now?”

“Like an egg.”

I couldn’t hide a smile. “Rune witches, like charm witches, are between the extremes of spell and potion witches. Charm witches are usually more fun though, and rune witches are usually more laid-back.”

Liam studied me.

I ate a few more fries.

“You never told me what you were thinking,” I pointed out.

His ears reddened again. “Yesterday, when the female demon touched me. You walked away.”

I nodded, popping another fry in my mouth.

“I just wanted to make it clear that she’s never touched me before. None of the

women in the resort have. Any time a dragon touches a woman at all, he risks creating a mate bond. So he doesn't. I didn't know if the same rules applied to me, but I was never willing to risk it. That's what I was thinking. That I hoped you knew."

"I didn't. Thanks for telling me." I popped another fry into my mouth. "You seemed pretty experienced last night."

His ears reddened again.

More steam came off his arms.

"The concept isn't difficult. Neither is the anatomy."

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“So my anatomy is what you were thinking about when you had your hand between my thighs?”

His eyes narrowed. “What would you rather I thought about, Clove? The weather?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It was the heat of the moment. Emphasis on the heat. Maybe I imagined you wouldn’t be thinking at all.”

“I had your wet, silky clit on my hand for the first time in my life. I was trying my damndest to make it good for you while fighting like hell not to fill your hot little cunt with my fingers or cock. Every part of me was very much aware of every part of your anatomy.”

My cheeks went red with his words. I was still working on ignoring the slickness between my thighs, and it got much more difficult when he said things like that.

I ate another french fry. “Guess that’s what I get when I try to crack you.”

He barked out a laugh.

An actual laugh.

It was rough and gritty in a way that said he didn’t make the sound often.

“Guess so.” Liam finally opened his box of food. “I had someone from the tech team set up a phone for you, and I sent someone else to the store for new clothes. We can return whatever you don’t want. They should be delivering everything in the next

hour or two. Think you can stay up that long?"

I was pretty sure that if I went to sleep, heat was going to get worse. But staying awake would be really, really difficult.

So... we'd see.

"I'll try. You can just wake me up when they get here, if I crash. It would be nice to figure out the clothing situation tonight."

Liam nodded.

"Does sleeping make heat worse for you?" I checked.

"Not really. In general, the magic doesn't seem to affect me the same way it affects you. I just feel an intense need to take care of you," he explained.

"That doesn't make sense."

"It's a magical mating process made to end with you accepting me as your partner for the rest of our lives. I don't think it was designed to make sense."

I made a face.

"Is it worse for you at night?" he asked.

"Maybe."

He narrowed his eyes. "Don't hide the truth from me, Clove."

"It's still Sage, Steam. And it's not nighttime that makes heat worse. Not that I can

tell, anyway. Sleep seems to be a much bigger trigger.” I ate the last of my fries.

Interest lit his gaze. “You dream of me?”

“I think I’ve shared a lot more than you tonight, don’t you?” I stood up, ignoring the warmth on my cheeks as I took my empty box to the trash bin. The kitchen wasn’t new or luxurious, so there wasn’t a drawer or cabinet or anything to conceal the bin.

“What do you want me to share?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really know you.”

“I’ve spent most of my energy for the last few decades trying to hold the wards together. It hasn’t left much time for hobbies,” he admitted.

“What did you do before they started falling apart?”

Liam shrugged. “The same things everyone else does for fun on this island. Surfing. Swimming. Water sports. Eating good food. Playing cards.”

“Sounds like a dream,” I admitted.

“Feels like one these days.”

“Do you like to stay busy, or relax?” I checked.

“Relaxing isn’t an ability I possess.”

“Should’ve guessed.” I leaned over the countertop, resting my weight against it. I really needed to sleep. “I guess you could come surfing tomorrow. As long as you don’t act like a weird, jealous boyfriend.”

“Mate, not boyfriend.”

A yawn stretched my lips.

“You should sleep,” Liam said, looking slightly concerned.

“Probably.” I eyed the couch. “If I sleep there, maybe heat won’t hit me as hard.”

“Maybe.” Liam didn’t look any more convinced than I felt. “I can wake you up when everything gets here.”

“Sounds good.”

I shuffled toward the couch. Liam met me a few steps away, slipping my arm over his shoulders and wrapping his around my waist.

“I don’t need help,” I mumbled.

“You’re exhausted because you’re repairing the wards and going through heat at the same time. Both of which are my fault. The least I can do is help you to the couch.”

“When you put it like that...”

He eased me down to the cushions. “Do you usually refuse to let anyone else help you?”

“Obviously. I’m a rune witch.”

“Clove, you’re abloodwitch. You can choose which stereotypes apply to you.”

“Except being mated to a phoenix.”

“That’s going to keep you alive.”

“So you say.” I closed my eyes, rolling onto my side in an attempt to get comfortable.

“If I make weird noises, just ignore me. And don’t touch me.”

“You drive a hard bargain.”

“It’s not a bargain.”

“If I play by your rules, you’ll play along with the mate bond. Correct?”

I sighed. “Maybe it’s a bargain.”

He brushed a few damp strands of hair off my face. “Get some rest. I’ll let you know when the clothes get here.”

His fingers brushed my face again, lightly, before I fell asleep.

seven

SAGE

My body was flushed againwhen Liam woke me. I couldn't remember my dreams, but when I opened my eyes and unintentionally met his gaze, there was no denying that he had been the star.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:56 pm

“The clothes are here,” Liam murmured. “You wanted me to wake you up.”

“Mmhm.” The noise came out sounding more strangled than anything else.

“Come on, Clove.” He sat next to me and eased me to a seated position.

I slumped against him, sweaty and hot all over. “I’ll try them on tomorrow.”

“Alright.” He helped me stand, lifting my entire weight and basically carrying me as we moved through the bungalow and into the bedroom.

When he lowered me to the mattress, I clung to his arm. “Come to bed with me.”

He smoothed hair out of my eyes. “I need to put things away. It’s still early.”

“Do it tomorrow.”

My eyes closed, but my grip didn’t loosen. Liam waited a moment before he finally eased his body over mine to take the space next to me without removing his arm from my grip. The bed was small enough—or he was big enough—that we had no choice but to be pressed up against each other.

His presence didn’t ease heat’s intensity, unfortunately. But he did still feel good.

I closed my eyes and let out a long breath.

“Hot?” he murmured.

“You have no idea.”

He pulled me closer. “Let me know when you want me to take the edge off. Wake me up if you need to. I don’t mind at all.”

“Glad you don’t mind touching me,” I grumbled.

“You want the truth?” His lips brushed my ear. “I fucking crave it. I sleep like shit because I’m so eager to have my hands on you again. I look forward to the day that touching doesn’t satisfy the bond, and you tell me I can taste you.”

My body flushed hotter. “You can’t say things like that while I already want you this much.”

“I can, and I will.” He nipped my earlobe lightly, and I swear, it went right to my clit. “Sleep well.”

“You’re an asshole,” I breathed.

“Never said I wasn’t.”

I pushed lightly on his arm, but he didn’t move it.

Instead, he pulled me closer, so my body was flush against his.

“The closer I am to you, the sweatier you’re going to get,” I warned.

“I like your sweat.” He leaned down to my throat and slowly licked a bead of it off my skin. His chest rumbled in satisfaction, and I couldn’t stop a quiet groan.

“You can’t do things like that.”

“I’m your mate, Clove. If I want to taste your sweat, you can be damn sure I will.”

“Such a bastard.”

He made a noise of agreement.

I closed my eyes again with another groan. “Fine, just touch me so I can sleep.”

“Can I get a please?”

“Fuck you.”

He chuckled, the sound low and rumble and ridiculously sexy. His hand was smoothing up my inner thigh a moment later, and the relief was so strong, I could’ve cried.

Liam’s entire hand slid over my core, my body so slick that there was barely any friction. He dragged his palm lightly over me, and I pressed it harder against my skin.

He got the memo, and when he ground the heel of his palm against me, it felt so good I had to suck in a breath.

“You like it rough, Clove?” His voice was so low in my ear, it sent goosebumps down my arms.

“Guess so.”

“Want to take my fingers rough tonight?”

“Don’t even think about it.”

He nipped my earlobe again, and his fingers finally brushed my clit.

I came instantly, gasping as my hips jerked with pleasure. Liam continued working my clit through my climax. When I pushed his hand away, he set it on my inner thigh.

“That’s enough,” I panted.

“You’re going to be up again in an hour or two,” he warned.

“I’ll be fine.”

His hand stayed on my thigh, pulling one of my legs over the top of his knees as he settled me against his chest. The motion left me with my legs parted, but I needed the airflow at the moment.

“We’re not sleeping like this every night,” I warned him, my energy giving way to exhaustion quickly as heat died down.

“Alright, Clove.” He licked another bead of sweat off my throat. “Sleep well.”

“I’m going to keep calling you Steam if you don’t give up the terrible nickname.”

“Go ahead.” He kissed my throat, where he had licked it. The spot was sensitive to his breath thanks to the small, damp patch he’d left there.

I fell asleep quickly, feeling warm, comfortable, and safe.

Liam was right. I was up again two hours later, swearing and panting as I sweated through another sex dream. When I put his fingers on my core, he got me off twice before letting me fall sleep again.

Three hours after that, I was waking him up yet another time. When I apologized, he growled. And bit my throat lightly while he got me off.

The sun wasn’t even rising yet when I woke up for what felt like the dozenth time, a little before 5 AM.

I rolled out of bed with a huff of frustration and padded into the bathroom.

Liam's footsteps were silent as he followed me in, but I could feel him behind me.

He didn't say a word while I turned the shower on, stripped my clothes off, and stepped beneath the water.

"Whatever you have to say, just spit it out," I grumbled at him.

"I thought you'd prefer a little time with your thoughts."

"If you want me to have time to keep being pissed with you for starting this mate bond, sure. I'd love time."

He studied me while I grabbed soap off the side of the shower. Someone had stocked the toiletries after my bath yesterday. Probably Liam.

Screw him for being thoughtful.

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Instead of speaking up after a few minutes, he stepped out of his shorts and boxers.

I glowered at him and his ridiculously massive cock and his perfect body. “What are you doing, Steam?”

“Spitting it out.” He stepped into the shower with me.

I took two big steps away, but he covered them in one large stride.

His legs were stupidly long. And strong. And sexy.

But dammit, I wasn’t supposed to be checking him out.

“The bond doesn’t just want you to orgasm, Clove. It wants you with me. In my arms. Connecting with me.” He closed the rest of the distance between us. I sucked in a breath, plastering my breasts to his chest as he pinned me to the shower’s wall with his body. His hands cradled my face, pulling my forehead to rest against his bare skin. My arms wrapped around him of their own volition.

The tension in my shoulders finally began to dissipate just a little. “Heat is ridiculous,” I mumbled against his skin.

“It is. And it’s happening faster than it should. Faster than it does for the dragons.”

I sighed. “Of course it is.”

“That could just be fate, though.”

“You said a bond would start with anyone you touched.”

“Theoretically.”

“What do you mean, theoretically?”

“I’m the only phoenix shifter. Who’s to say that there’s more than one female fate would be willing to let me pair off with?”

I scoffed. “If the dragons don’t have fated mates, I don’t see how you could.”

“I know a dragon who does have a fated mate. And I told you, I knew the moment I felt your magic that you were mine. Even if I hadn’t touched you, the mate bond would’ve eventually found a way.”

“It’s easy to say that now.”

“Maybe. I’m right about the touching, though, aren’t I?”

His hug was helping. But I was awake, which usually seemed to help too.

“Too soon to say. And we have been touching. Clearly.” I wouldn’t be forgetting the way it felt to have his hand between my thighs any time soon.

“Only where necessary. You always stay clothed.”

“To avoid making it any more intimate.”

“Right. But it seems like the bond can only be satisfied with intimacy.”

“Fuck that,” I grumbled against his shoulder.

“Just keep an open mind. If we take things further next time, I think it will help.”

I lifted my middle finger against his back, but he didn't respond. Must not have noticed.

He finally nudged my ear with his nose, and my head tipped to the side without hesitation. “Are you feeling better, or do you want me to touch you again?”

My face flushed. “I'm fine.”

It was only half true. His hug was helping, but it wasn't fixing me. Not enough.

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But if today worked like yesterday, the worst of heat's effects would fade as I woke up completely.

"Let's just get out of here and start our day," I said against his chest.

"Alright."

When I pushed him lightly, he took a step back. I slipped out from beneath him, fighting like hell not to look at his gigantic erection while I rinsed shampoo from my hair and slathered it with conditioner.

Liam grabbed some soap and ran his hands over his chest and arms. I tried not to watch—and drool—but mostly failed.

Maybe I should've taken him up on the offer.

That had to be heat speaking, though.

"Will you fly with me today?" Liam asked, breaking me out of my filthy thoughts. He must've noticed me staring at him and decided not to comment on it.

"Um... I guess. You could fly me to the surf lesson."

He nodded. "We can grab breakfast afterward, unless you have plans with your friends. The spellbooks should be delivered by the time we're done eating."

"Sounds good."

We finished showering pretty quickly, and I wrapped a towel around myself before I dried my hair with an extra one. Liam returned to the room with a pair of massive clothing bags as I stepped out of the bathroom.

He leaned against the doorway, his towel tied around his waist. The man was so attractive, it should've been a crime. It took everything I had to look away after I snagged the bags from him.

"Thanks for the clothes."

"We can return whatever doesn't fit. If you don't like any of it, I'll send for a new batch."

"I'm not that picky."

"You can be. I'll buy you whatever you want. Your friends were right, I can afford it. My mate isn't wearing second-hand clothes."

I rolled my eyes. "It's not that serious."

"It makes a statement. I've hired the best security our world can offer, so making sure you have something decent to wear is a necessity. Otherwise it looks like I care more about my resort than I do about my mate."

I opened the bag and peered inside. "I didn't realize you were that particular about your image."

"I'm not. Bailey is in charge of that shit."

"So Bailey is the one who sent someone out after these clothes."

There was a beat of silence.

I'd nailed the truth on the head.

"I paid for them," Liam finally said.

I bit back a snort. "Well, thanks."

He didn't say anything.

I organized the clothes by what they were—underwear, swimsuits, coverups, shorts, and tops. All of the coverups were mesh, which was much preferred while heat was going on.

"Are you just going to sit there and watch me try clothes on?" I asked, shooting him a dirty look over my shoulder.

He met my gaze without a shred of embarrassment. "Can't think of anything I'd rather be doing."

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“I could just go into the bathroom for privacy.”

“You could. But you’d miss your chance to make me as horny as heat has been making you.”

I studied him for a moment before finally looking down at the swimsuits again.
“Touché, Steam.”

I grabbed the first bikini off the pile. It was a skimpy little floral thing that was like the new and improved version of my thrift store find. I immediately loved it, and the size told me it would probably fit.

I dropped my towel and stepped into the swimsuit bottoms, facing away from him.
“What would you have done if you hadn’t felt drawn to me when I stepped beneath the wards?”

He didn’t answer.

“Liam? Hello?” I looked over my shoulder as I pulled the bikini top on.

“Hmm?” He peeled his gaze off my ass, looking like he hadn’t heard a single word I said.

Maybe he liked looking at me as much as I liked looking at him.

“What would you have done if you hadn’t felt drawn to me when I stepped beneath the wards?” I repeated.

“I always planned on mating with a blood witch, if one showed up at my door. I was in the process of trying to find a powerful spell witch to proposition, because I didn’t think I’d find someone like you. I wasn’t sure a spell witch could fix a blood witch’s wards, though.”

“No, she couldn’t.” I paused, putting what he’d said together silently. “So even if you weren’t drawn to me, you would’ve tried to mate with me anyway?”

“Mmhm.” His eyes lowered back to my ass.

“Romantic.” I grabbed a swimsuit coverup off the pile and walked into the bathroom so I could see how the clothes looked.

He followed me. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad it was you.”

“It’s not worth much. You don’t know me.”

“You don’t know me either.”

“Which is why I didn’t say I’m glad it’s you.”

He made a noncommittal noise. “It looks good. The swimsuit.”

“I could tell.” The tent in his towel would’ve given it away if his face didn’t. And his face did.

I tugged the coverup over my head and looked at it in the mirror. It was nice. I liked how it looked, but I probably would’ve kept it even if I didn’t, purely for the airflow.

I pulled it off as I went back to the bed, and grabbed the rest of the coverups. Might as well try them on with my new favorite swimsuit.

Liam stopped at the bed and grabbed another piece of fabric before following me into the bathroom again. “You’ll want this for surfing.”

I took the fabric and opened up the cropped, long-sleeve swim shirt. “Is there a risk of my tits popping out?”

“In that? Yeah.”

“What will you do if that happens?” I countered.

“I don’t think either of us want to find out.”

It was a valid point.

I pulled the dark teal top over my head and checked it out.

Kind of sexy, in a sporty way. Too bad I wasn’t sporty.

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“I might only try surfing once,” I said.

“I don’t care. Keep it.”

My gaze met Liam’s in the mirror. He was steaming again. “How does it look?” I asked, just because I wanted to know how he’d respond.

“Really fucking hot.”

It went back over my head, but I left it on the countertop so I could put it on before I left.

Four of the five swimsuit coverups worked, and I put the one I didn’t want back in the bag.

I tried on the rest of the bikinis too, and most of them were fine. None were as cute as my floral one, and the fabric on most of them was simpler than I preferred, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. I kept four, only returning the two that didn’t even somewhat fit.

Liam made a noise of irritation when I put the plain bikinis in my keep pile.

I ignored him—but he was at my side a moment later, pulling them out.

“You clearly don’t like these,” he said.

“They fit me.” I tried to take them back, but he lifted them out of my reach. Since he

was so freaking tall, that wasn't difficult for him to do.

"If I'm buying the clothes, I'm buying shit you actually want, Clove. We're not keeping them just because they fit."

I huffed. "Fine."

He tossed the bikinis back into the bag from the store.

I was pickier when I went through the rest of the things, only choosing the ones I really did like. I put back one of the swimsuit coverups, too.

When I was done, I pulled my single new bikini on and grabbed both a coverup dress and the swim shirt. My hair was still damp, hanging tangled around my shoulders. I hadn't seen a brush, so I grabbed my one remaining hair tie off the bathroom countertop and threw the strands in a quick bun at the base of my skull. Two of the pins I needed to work my magic went in, too.

Liam had the same pair of shorts on that he'd been wearing earlier when I stepped out.

Guess we needed to stop at his room in the tower before we went to the beach. I still had two hours until the surf lesson Madison, Vera, and I had signed up for, so I wasn't in a rush anyway.

We spent thirty minutes outside the front of the bungalow while I runed the place to keep everyone else out, tying the magic to our blood and the plants around the building. Liam didn't flinch when I wove his blood into the runes too. It felt good to use magic I was actually good with—unlike spells.

I'd need to hold onto the feeling when I started comparing spells in a book to the

intricate ones Liam's mother had created.

eight

LIAM

"Are you sure this is safe?" Sage asked for the second time, as she adjusted her position on my back. Her hands were buried in my feathers, and her thighs were squeezing the hell out of my shoulders.

The dragons I'd spoken to said that flying with their mates on their backs felt right, but so far, I didn't agree.

I nodded again.

She gripped tighter. "Alright. Let's get this over with."

I grimaced inwardly.

While I could adjust to pretty much anything as far as a mate bond was concerned, I didn't think I could adjust to rarely flying.

Or to dragging my reluctant mate onto my back whenever I wanted to be in the sky.

I'd just have to deal with it.

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Sage's grip was painful when I took off.

Thankfully, it was a short flight to the tower.

I landed on the balcony, and she let out a relieved breath before sliding off my back.

"That could've been worse," she said, forcing cheerfulness into her voice as she clung to the balcony's railing.

I shifted back, squeezing her hip lightly before I stepped past her.

I probably should've come up with something supportive to say, but I didn't have a damn clue how. Particularly when I was trying not to get frustrated about spending the rest of my life on the ground.

Harv had left a couple empty duffel bags near the door for me, so I grabbed one and started filling it. Sage joined me, taking another into the bathroom.

It wasn't long before we were done packing my things and the duffel bags were sitting on the balcony, ready to be carried down.

Sage stepped back out on the balcony, eyeing the drop.

"We can take the elevator," I forced myself to say.

I hated the fucking elevator.

“Oh, no. I can handle the heights.”

“I don’t want to scare you.”

“I’m not scared of flying. I don’t love it, but I can handle it. I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

She lifted a shoulder. “It sucks that the mate bond won’t let you fly on your own. I might be able to fix it.”

“What do you mean, fix it?”

“Well, I know you think magic can’t change magic, but that’s not necessarily true. Yes, witch magic can’t actually prevent you from shifting, or heat from making me horny. But there might be a loophole for flying.”

“Spit it out, Clove.”

She flashed me a look. “It’s still Sage.”

“What do you have against nicknames?”

“Nothing, I just—” She huffed. “Do you want to hear my idea or not?”

“Yes.”

“With a combination of runes, I could basically enchant something with enough of my blood to trick the bond into thinking I’m with you all the time. That should make it possible for you to fly without me.”

I had no idea how she would pull that off, or if it was possible, but the concept made sense.

“If you can make that happen, I know a bunch of dragons who will pay you a ton of money,” I said.

“Then why haven’t they asked anyone to do it before?”

“That would require admitting their secrets, which dragons don’t do.”

“Ah. Would they even let me do it, then?”

“Being my mate brings you into the fold, so yeah. You’re probably the only witch they would go to for anything other than forcing each other to keep their secrets.” I stepped up behind her.

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“I can start sketching out a few ideas for runes over the next few days, but I need to repair some more of the wards before I get to it.”

“Of course. The wards are the priority.”

I shifted, and she climbed on my back slightly easier than she had the first time.

Her grip was still just as tight, though.

We dropped the duffel bags off at the bungalow before going back to leave the shopping bag of clothes to be returned at the front desk. Cecil was off duty—I’d moved the bastard to custodial for being an ass to my mate—and the current receptionist was polite.

“I got a message during the night that the demons are on their way. We expected them about twenty minutes ago, so they should be here any time now,” the receptionist said.

“Thanks. We have a few minutes to wait for them.” I headed toward a couch near the front desk, and Sage walked with me.

“The demons?” she asked.

“The Villin brothers are a family of demons that protect humans from asshole supernaturals,” I explained. When I took a seat, she sat with me. “I let one of them stay here for a few years a couple decades ago when they got in trouble with the Supernatural Government. When I got word that your coven is headed this way

yesterday afternoon, I called in a favor with them.”

Sage’s eyebrows shot upward. “The coven is already coming here?”

“Guess they checked everywhere else off their list.”

“Fuck.” She shoved a hand through her hair, pushing it off her face. “You should’ve told me right when you found out.”

“You were asleep in the bathtub.”

She opened her mouth to protest. Then closed it and nodded. “I need to focus on repairing the most important protective wards as soon as possible. Runing them to make them stronger will have to wait. Surfing can wait too.”

“There’s no point in postponing your lesson. The spellbooks aren’t here yet.”

“Tell me as soon as they are,” she warned.

“I will.”

Without a sealed mate bond, I couldn’t protect her completely, so she could be damn sure I would tell her. We needed all the help we could get.

I felt a ripple of magic as the Villin brothers entered the parking lot.

Rafael’s magic was unmistakable.

“The Villins are here,” I said.

Sage and I crossed the lobby and met them out in front of the resort.

“Just so we’re clear, they know they were hired to protect a blood witch, right? And that what I am puts all of us at risk of being hunted by a whole coven?” Sage murmured.

“Yes. They’re staying for free as long as they want after everything’s over. And I agreed to let their mates take over one of the island’s coffee shops. Guess they want to sell candy there too.”

“Candy?” She frowned.

“Demons can’t get enough of it. Their mates sell it in their coffee shops. There was a longer explanation, but most of it didn’t process.”

Sage snorted. “I should’ve figured you wouldn’t be a candy person. Or sugar in general, huh?”

“I have nothing against it, I just don’t usually want it. I do eat pastries on occasion.”

“Like what, once a year?”

“Twice. Christmas and Easter.”

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“Should’ve guessed. Well, I’ll try their candy. I’m not afraid of sugar.” She flashed me a playful look.

“Liam,” a familiar voice called, and I turned to see Rafael approaching. He had his arm draped over the shoulders of his mate. They’d been together a few years, from what I had heard.

I nodded at Rafael, wrapping an arm around Sage’s waist. Though we weren’t used to the contact, I felt an urge to claim her physically in front of the other male.

“After fifty-two years of friendship, I still get this stone-faced welcome,” Rafael teased. He had dark hair and light brown skin, and thankfully, he was smart enough not to go in for a hug. I wasn’t hugging that bastard. Particularly while I was steaming because of heat’s magic.

“This is my mate, Tatum.” Rafael gestured to the woman under his arm. She was average height and size, with dark blonde hair, light skin, and an expression much more laid-back than her mate’s. She gave us a quick smile.

“Tater-tot, this is my old pal Liam, and his mate, Sage.” Rafael introduced us to his mate like he knew my witch personally. It irked me, but I didn’t let it show.

“Holy shit, I could see your lust from the parking lot!” a cheerful, curvy blonde woman with tan skin called out. She was holding hands with a grumpy-looking guy who was almost identical to Rafael. “Are you going through heat? You’re half dragon, right? I’ve never seen anyone burn like that except my brothers and their mates when they were going through it.”

My eyes narrowed.

“This is Brynn. She’s August’s sister,” Rafael explained. “I’m sure you’ve met him.”

I had. He was my only real contact with the dragons.

“I didn’t know he was mated,” I said.

“It’s pretty new,” Brynn offered. “This is Bash, by the way. Don’t take it personally if he glares at you.” She winked at Sage, who managed a small smile in return.

I was fairly confident my witch was in relationship overload. She’d never been around mated couples before.

“So... heat?” Brynn checked.

Sage’s cheeks reddened slightly. “Yeah, unfortunately.”

A tiny, pale woman with a ton of curly black hair and another guy who looked like Rafael came walking up behind the others.

The small woman was coughing. “What is that smell?”

My arm tightened around Sage as she stiffened.

“Heat,” Brynn teased. “It’s in the air.”

“I smell horrible to vampires. And all other supernaturals,” Sage explained quickly. “Sorry.”

I barely suppressed a growl. The woman smelled fucking delicious—why didn’t she

believe me when I told her that?

“It’s not horrible, just strong.” The tiny woman coughed again. “Like... pepper.”

I was going to fucking kill the woman.

“Let’s maybe not discuss how the phoenix’s mate smells while he’s steaming, Miles,” Rafael’s newest brother said under his breath.

“It wasn’t an insult. Everyone likes pepper in small quantities.”

Rafael cleared his throat. “This is Zander and Miley. They’re going to stop talking before they end up dead.”

“Right. Sorry.” Zander gave us a quick salute. “We’re going to check in with your tech team and get to work.”

“I’m starting on the shop,” Miles reminded him.

“After we check in with the tech team, Sweetheart.” He walked her toward the doors, hands on her hips as he called out, “Nice to meet you! Pepper is great!”

Tatum snorted. “Sorry.”

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“It’s fine. I’ve already got a bunch of vampires in the resort wanting to kill me, so what’s another one?” Sage’s voice was tight, though she tried to sound upbeat.

My mate couldn’t lie to save her life. I had no idea how she’d hidden what she was from the other witches for so long.

“Miles won’t kill you with anything but math and sarcasm,” Tatum said. “And no one is better with the tech side of security than Zander. He won’t let any vampires get to you. Including his mate.”

“She’s addicted to his blood anyway,” Brynn added. “All of us smell and taste bad to her too.”

“We’ll get to work as well,” Bash said, leading his cheerful mate away.

“So will we. There’s chocolate to make and people to threaten,” Rafael agreed. “We’ll have to hit the waves together one of these mornings.”

I made a noncommittal sound as he and his mate walked away too.

Thank fuck they were all getting to work, because I couldn’t handle any more idle chitchat.

Particularly not while my mate was both uncomfortable and in danger.

nine

SAGE

I distinctly remembered inviting Liam to join my surfing lesson—after making it clear that he wasn't invited—but he sprawled out on the sand on his ass instead. His scowl was trained on the ocean as I struggled through my first class.

Vera was basically a professional, and she did her own thing away from our class during the lesson. Madison was as new as I was, so I figured we'd be at the same level, but the woman was a freaking beast. She picked it up fast while I crashed over and over again.

After a particularly bad fall where I smashed my head on the board, I took a break to catch my breath.

Liam waved me toward him, and relief rolled through me.

The spellbooks must've been there.

I had an excuse to end the lesson early.

Finally.

I apologized to the instructor, who didn't look like she gave a fuck that I was leaving. She told me to have Liam teach me everything else. I was pretty sure she hated my smell as much as the vampire chick I'd met earlier.

Deciding not to let myself be offended, I waved to my friends on my way out of the water.

"The spellbooks are here?" I called out, retying my bun at the back of my head as I crossed the sand.

“They were just delivered, but that’s not why I called you over. The first witch was spotted outside the wards.”

The blood drained from my face. “Who?”

“The Villins are still trying to identify her. Your people aren’t exactly open with their information.”

“What does she look like?”

“Pale skin, white hair, extremely unhappy.”

“Hattie. Fuck.” I ran a hand over my forehead, then started walking quickly toward the anchor. Guess the time for fun was over. “She’ll be scoping out the wards, trying to figure out how difficult it will be to get through them. This is bad.”

“We should seal the bond.”

“No, that will take time we don’t have. They’ll definitely get through the wards if we do it. What we need are the spellbooks, and coffee. A lot of coffee. I’m going to have to fix the existing spells as fast as possible. Reinforcing them will come later, but if I can get more of them repaired, we’ll be safe for at least a few weeks.” We wove down the path through the jungle as we spoke.

Liam dipped his head. “Someone’s on the way with the books and breakfast. What else do you need?”

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“Small clippings of all of the plants in the greenhouse. I’ll need to send someone for more after I identify which ones I need for each spell.”

“I’ll get it done. What else?”

We reached the anchor, and I sat down. “We need paper, too. I can draw a few spells, and you can help me search the books.”

He sat down beside me. “Alright. I’ll send a message.”

The spellbooks and food were in our hands a few minutes later. By the time we were done eating, the pad of paper was too, and we got to work.

We spent the next fifty-two hours straight comparing his mom’s unique, tailored spells to the ones we found in books while consuming obscene amounts of food and coffee. Slowly, I got almost all of the crumbling wards back into a strong, healthy condition.

The few I couldn’t fix had disintegrated to the point of no return. We couldn’t identify them at all, but they were so much thinner than the others that it was clear Liam’s mother hadn’t put much effort into making them strong.

They couldn’t have been important, which made me feel slightly better about not being able to recover them.

When I finally sat back against the bench with a sigh of relief, Liam’s arm went over my shoulders. My body felt like a freaking heater, and I was coated in both dried and

fresh sweat along with the saltwater that still clung to my skin after my horrible surfing lesson. My hair was tied up in a bun I couldn't remember fixing, and my heart raced from the ridiculous amount of caffeine I'd consumed.

Thankfully, I didn't burn through caffeine it at anywhere near the same speed a shifter would've.

"Done?" Liam asked, though he had to know that I was. The man had been beside me through every minute of the spellwork, only dozing for the last few hours while I finished up.

"Yeah. Finally."

Liam tucked a few escaped strands of my hair into my bun.

Guess I knew why I couldn't remember fixing it.

"You are really fucking impressive, Clove," he said quietly.

"I know."

He almost smiled, and my lips curved upward.

I was joking, and we both knew it. I'd reminded him repeatedly over the last few days that I was clueless about spells, and any real spell witch would be able to do what I was doing in a fraction of the time it took me.

Without him finding the spells while I worked, we would've been sitting there for a lot longer.

But on the other hand, the spells did all require blood magic. So technically, I was the

only witch who could fix the magic. Anyone else would've had to take down Liam's mother's magic and remake it in their own way. Even Hattie couldn't have touched the wards.

So maybe I was impressive after all.

I could think about it after I had time to sleep. Assuming I could calm myself down after all that caffeine. I felt like a livewire. An exhausted, sweat-soaked livewire.

"Alright, come on." Liam lifted me off the bench, hauling me into his arms.

I made a noise of protest, but it was a weak one. I wasn't sure I could walk on my own anyway.

I fell asleep against his chest on the way to the bungalow.

He woke me up long enough to make me eat a quick meal, then dragged me into the shower. I didn't complain when he stripped my clothes off me, or when his huge, rough hands scrubbed the salt and sweat off my body.

His fingers felt incredible on my scalp. I'd successfully ignored heat while I worked on the wards, but the magic flared painfully in my lower belly while he massaged my head.

I fought like hell to ignore it. And won, for a few minutes.

Liam's lips brushed my ear when the need was growing unbearable. "I feel your hips rocking, Clove. You're not going to be able to sleep if you don't let me take care of you."

"I'm fine," I whispered, but the lie was stupidly obvious.

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“So you don’t want my hand between your thighs?” He nipped my earlobe.

A groan escaped me, my arms tightening around him. “No. Just want to get out of the shower.”

“Alright.” He started to slowly walk me toward the wall, his erection against my lower belly.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“The water shutoff is over here.”

Right.

He turned it off, gathering my hair behind my head and gently squeezing water out of it.

My legs were shaking.

Maybe my whole body was.

Liam was much steadier than me.

Maybe he was right.

...okay, fine.

Hewasright.

Heat was messing with me, and it wasn't going to stop when I went to sleep.

I wasn't sure how to admit that, though.

Liam grabbed a towel and dried my body slowly. The slickness between my thighs wasn't going anywhere. He squeezed more of the water from my hair before dropping the towel and walking me across the bedroom.

"You're right," I finally admitted, as he untucked the blankets on the bed and helped ease me beneath them. "Heat's not going to go away."

"It's not," he agreed, sitting down beside me on the bed. I was propped up on a pillow, lying down on the mattress. "But you know I won't force you to do anything."

"No, but heat will."

"Eventually."

I let out a long breath and closed my eyes. "I don't want to wait for the magic to take over."

Liam brushed a few strands of hair off my face. "That's not a decision you should make while you can barely hold yourself up, Clove."

"Well I'm not going to be able to sleep if we don't seal it."

"Let me handle that."

I met his gaze.

His eyes were hot, and it didn't pass my notice that we were both naked. Naked, and turned on.

He was asking for permission to have his way with me—without taking it all the way and sealing the bond.

After a moment's hesitation, I nodded.

“I'm going to need you to be clearer than that,” Liam said.

If I wasn't already burning up, I would've flushed. “Do whatever you want to me, Steam. Just make the heat go away.”

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His chest rumbled in satisfaction, and he pulled away the blankets he'd just tucked me beneath. My abdomen tensed as he lowered himself between my thighs, his face just above my core.

Liam stared down at me intensely, taking me in before he lifted his gaze back to mine. "Last chance to change your mind."

"I'm not changing my mind," I said.

He inhaled deeply, giving me another rumble before he finally dragged his tongue slowly over my clit.

I sucked in an unsteady breath at the sensations.

Wet... hot... smooth...

"Fucking hell, you taste even better than you smell," Liam growled against me.

I buried my fingers in his hair, dragging his mouth back down to me.

He licked me again, and my back arched.

Again, and my toes curled.

Again, and I finally shattered, gasping and swearing as I came down from the fast, hard climax. "Holy shit."

He growled against me, circling my clit with his tongue. “We can do better than that.”

I swore again as the tip of his finger met my entrance. “I’ve never...” I trailed off, not wanting to finish the sentence.

His eyes met mine again. “Not even with a toy?”

I shook my head.

The fire in his eyes blazed brighter. “I’ll go easy on you.”

I swatted his head, and he grinned.

Then slid his finger inside me.

My humor faded, and I sucked in a breath as he filled me with it. There was a tiny bit of pain before he reached the back, but he gave me a moment to adjust before he pulled his finger out and added a second.

My toes curled as he worked my clit with his tongue and slowly fucked me with his hand.

I swore, arched, and gasped. My toes curled before I came again, squeezing his fingers with the force of my pleasure.

He feasted on me, bringing me back to the edge and shattering me again and again, until I pushed his face away weakly. Exhaustion had me closing my eyes as he settled beside me on the bed.

Liam’s lips brushed the side of my throat, and he murmured something I didn’t quite hear as I dozed off.

ten

SAGE

I managed to sleep eighteen hours before hunger and the need to pee woke me with a vengeance. Liam mumbled a complaint as I pushed his arm off of me so I could get out.

After a stop in the bathroom, I grabbed a pair of panties and a tank top before making my way into the kitchen.

I checked in with my mom really quick—she was fine, and no one suspected that she knew about my magic anymore—then glanced at the phone Liam had given me. Madison and Vera wanted to meet up before their vacations ended. I texted back that I'd figure it out soon and let them know.

A peek at Liam's phone told me that the Villins had secured the perimeter, and there hadn't been any more signs of Hattie or any other witches in the past twenty-four hours.

Also, Bailey and Harvey needed to talk to Liam about some vampires looking into witches. I was fairly sure Cecil had something to do with that.

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Even though I'd learned the code to Liam's phone while we were working on the wards, I didn't want details, so I didn't type it in.

Everything could wait until after breakfast. Err, dinner. The sun was already setting.

I could've just stopped at one of the restaurants for food, but I was craving pancakes. The homemade kind.

So, after I finished rubbing my eyes, I dug around for ingredients.

And came up empty-handed.

Liam shuffled into the kitchen and sat down at the table while I was searching the cabinets. "What are you looking for?"

"Pancake ingredients." I glanced over my shoulder. "Any chance you know if we have anything? The only food item I found was an expired can of beans."

"Beans don't really expire."

"They definitely do."

He leaned back in his seat. "We don't have anything. I don't cook."

"You don't like to, or you don't know how?"

"The latter."

My eyebrows shot upward. “You can’t be serious. You’re ancient, aren’t you?”

“Not ancient. And I live in a resort. There’s good food in the restaurants. I never needed to learn.”

“The restaurants are good, but it’s nice to cook for yourself sometimes. If we pick up some ingredients—or if someone does it for us, I guess, since I’m kind of being hunted—I can show you.”

“I’ll arrange it.”

“Thanks.” I dragged a hand through my hair. It was a tangled mess, but it would’ve been much worse if Liam hadn’t washed it for me. “And thanks for helping me shower last night. I was pretty wiped out.”

“You don’t need to thank me for that.” His ears went red.

I was starting to like it when he was embarrassed. “Well, I did anyway.” My stomach rumbled loudly.

“I’ll order food.”

“I should see if Madison and Vera want to meet up for dinner instead. They’re both leaving in a few days.”

Liam’s expression changed. I had no idea what he was thinking or feeling, but he was clearly thinking and feeling something.

“Okay,” he said.

“That’s not an okay face.” I turned toward him, folding my arms over my chest. His

eyes lowered to my breasts, and I knew my transparent tank top was giving him plenty to look at. Considering how things had gone the night before, it definitely wasn't anything he hadn't seen before.

Liam didn't respond.

"Crack the egg, Steam," I said, bringing up our conversation about sharing your thoughts.

He let out a quiet breath. "It doesn't matter."

I stared at him, eyes narrowed.

Liam waited another minute before he grudgingly admitted, "I was hoping we could talk about the bond over dinner."

I blinked. "Like a date?"

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“No. Just like... two people talking.”

Wow.

Maybe he was even less interested in romance than I thought. Or even worse at it.

Or my perspective was just really freaking screwy after spending so much time watching human TV shows and movies. It would make sense if most relationships weren't like romcoms or dramas.

“Okay. We can do that,” I said.

Liam ordered food—he convinced them to make me pancakes for dinner—and led me out onto the bungalow's back porch to wait for it.

I'd known it existed and seen a little of it on our way in and out of the place, but I had never been out there before. The front of the bungalow faced the resort, and the back faced the ocean. My runes worked just fine on the front of the house, so we hadn't bothered walking around.

My jaw nearly dropped at the sight of the large patio that was almost as big as the building itself. There was a nice firepit, a gorgeous outdoor sectional, and a stunning view of the sun setting over the ocean. A wooden pergola was built over all of it and wrapped in twinkling lights.

“Damn. I can understand why you picked this place,” I said, staring at the waves.

“Did you sit out here a lot?”

“Yeah. With my mom, sometimes. She would sit on the beach just to think for hours every morning. I always wondered what she was thinking,” he said. “Guess I should’ve tried to crack her.”

“She was probably thinking about spells, at least a lot of the time. Spell magic is really complex, and you can’t learn it through trial and error in a lot of situations.”

“Why not?”

“Did she ever tell you about the differences between the types of magic?” I asked.

He shook his head.

That was a lot to keep from her own son.

I couldn’t help but wonder why. He might not have magic in the way witches did, but the man was a powerhouse, and witch magic was his heritage too. A simple explanation wouldn’t hurt anything, or anyone.

I took a seat on the sectional, and Liam sat across from me.

He was definitely uninterested in romance.

“Do you want me to explain it?” I checked.

“If you’re comfortable.”

I rolled my eyes. “If we’re going to be mates, you’re going to need to understand witches.”

“Alright.”

“So, you know the four types of magic. Potions are pretty self-explanatory. You add the ingredients in specific ways, at specific temperatures. It’s a science. Runes are a simplified version of that, though they’re complicated in their own way. The tiniest change of a symbol can result in an entirely different effect, or no effect at all.”

Liam nodded. “Makes sense.”

“Well, spells and charms are entirely different. Creating a spell is like building a wall. You have to put everything in the right place, and you have to know exactly how you’re going to do it before you start or the whole thing will fall apart. It’s an art, and one most people fail at. If I had to create your mom’s spells from scratch rather than just repair them, we would’ve been screwed,” I said matter-of-factly.

“But you could achieve a similar effect with runes?”

“Yes, and no.”

His forehead creased.

“There’s no rune to create a bubble spell like the one around this place.” I gestured to the sky. “I would need to build one of those in spell form if I was making my own wards, but it would be doable. Using the bubble as the base, I could achieve similar effects to your mother’s wards with my own runes.”

“What about charms?” Liam asked, his forehead creased.

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“Oh, that’s easy. A spell is like a brick wall, but a charm is like a ribbon tied around an object. You can’t build a charm without a physical item to wrap it around and anchor it to, and they have to be compatible. Charms and runes are sort of sister magics, though runes can be used on people and charms can’t.”

“What drew you to runes?”

I smiled. “They were the easiest kind of magic I could do without blood. I could make weak runes much easier than I could make weak potions or spells. I could’ve gone with charms, but I knew if I ever wanted to use my blood, kickass runes were more useful than kickass charms as far as protecting myself and other people.”

Liam studied me. “What were you most interested in?”

“Potions,” I admitted. “But potions only affect people, so mastering them wouldn’t help me stay alive. Runes were my second choice anyway. I have fun with them.”

Someone showed up to drop off our food, temporarily pausing the conversation. We ate in peaceful quiet, with the sound of the rolling waves keeping us company.

Liam finished his food before I did, leaning back against the couch’s cushions. His gaze was focused on me, which was a little confusing considering his apparent disinterest in sitting close to me.

When I was done with my food, I set the box down beside me and followed his lead, resting against the back cushions of the couch more comfortably. Meeting his gaze, I waited for him to bring up whatever he wanted to talk about.

Was I excited to discuss our bond?

Not really.

Which is why I was making him take the lead, even though talking about his thoughts and feelings was clearly not something he'd had much practice with.

Or any practice with.

A long moment passed.

Then another.

His ears reddened again.

Finally, he cleared his throat.

I'd totally won our stare-off.

"We need to talk about the bond," he said.

"You already said that."

"Right." He cleared his throat again. "I may have left a few details out when I described heat."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Like what?"

His ears reddened more. The color spread to his cheeks, too. "I wasn't sure which aspects would apply, given that I'm not a full dragon."

“Liam,” I warned. “If you’re dancing around the truth again, I swear on the wards that I will walk away right now.”

“I’m not trying to dance around it. I just—I don’t know exactly what’s going to happen. Most of the dragon stuff doesn’t seem to apply to us. But I do need to warn you that the longer heat goes on without being sealed, the more it usually affects the dragons.”

“The dragons, meaning the men.”

He dipped his head.

My eyes narrowed. “What happens to them, exactly?”

“They sort of... lose their minds.”

I blinked.

He watched me warily.

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“Lose their minds how?” I finally asked.

“They didn’t explain the details, but I guess it grows more difficult to think as your mate’s pain gets worse, and harder to ignore the sexual need as well. With you being turned on instead of in pain, I imagine my need will continue getting worse. I don’t expect I’ll lose my mind, but I doubt anyone does.”

“I thought you didn’t feel the same need I did,” I said, staring daggers at him.

The red of his blush spread to his cheeks. “I don’t expect anything from you.”

“So you do feel it.”

He dipped his head in a nod.

I tilted mine back against the couch cushions, letting out a long breath. “Do you ever admit how you feel about anything, Steam?”

His lack of an answer was the only reply I got.

Nope.

“So if we keep fighting it, you’re going to go crazy and just what? Attack me?”

“It usually doesn’t get that far before people give in.”

A bitter laugh escaped me. “That’s just great.”

“I’m not saying we have to seal the bond,” he began, “But?—”

“That’s exactly what you’re saying. Don’t bullshit me.”

There was a moment’s pause. “Alright, that’s what I’m saying. We should consider sealing the bond before it gets much worse.”

I lifted my head, and found him red-faced.

He was embarrassed.

Or uncomfortable.

Or... maybe he’d realized he didn’t want a mate any more than I did.

“Do you even want this?” I asked.

Liam looked surprised by the question.

“Do you even want this?” I repeated. “Me? A mate bond? If we do this, we’re going to be stuck together for the rest of forever, whether we like each other or not. If you don’t want this, we need to fight it. We can at least try to resist heat. We?—”

He leaned forward, his forearms resting on his knees. “Why the fuck would you think I don’t want this?”

“You just told me this wasn’t a date. You didn’t try to sit by me. You’re possessive, but you said that’s just instinct. You only wanted a mate to save your resort. You?—”

“I want this,” he growled. “And I didn’t only want a mate to save the resort. I was tired of being alone all the time. I wanted someone to take care of. Someone to spend time

with.”

“You could accomplish both of those things by adopting a dog.”

“I’m a fucking phoenix. I wasn’t adopting a dog. I wanted a mate. A partner. And I wanted it badly enough to claim you even when you were completely uninterested and against me. That’s why I’m sitting over here.”

He gestured between us. “And I don’t consider this a date, because that would imply that we’re testing the waters. We’re not. We are going to be mates. Only one dragon has ever successfully made it through heat without giving in, and he only did it because his mate’s life was on the line if he didn’t. They fell in love along the way.”

“But do you even want us to be in love?” I countered. “I’m sure mates can be just friends, but I don’t want that. If we’re going to be bonded, I don’t want a half-assed relationship. I want love. And dates. And a mate who sits next to me because he can’t stand not to.”

Liam’s nostrils flared. “You think I don’t want to?”

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“You’re as far away from me as you can be right now.”

He stood and crossed the distance between us, kneeling in front of me and taking my face in his hands. “Clove, I want you so badly I can hardly breathe. I’m trying to be patient. I’m trying to stay in control. I’m trying to give you your fucking space.” He dragged my mouth down to his, kissing me roughly.

The sudden lip lock caught me off guard. When his tongue parted my mouth, I opened for him.

I’d never kissed anyone before.

It was... soft.

Warm.

Wet.

Blissful, honestly.

I forgot to breathe when I kissed him back, and had to pull away to suck in a few deep breaths. Liam’s hands were on my face, his eyes scorching.

“You want me,” I said.

“Hell yes.”

“I don’t know where we go from there,” I admitted.

“I don’t either.”

I bit one of my lips to fight a smile. “You should’ve picked someone with experience.”

“I don’t give a fuck about experience, Clove. Just you.”

He kissed me again. It lasted longer, because I forced myself to breathe through my nose while our tongues got to know each other.

I hadn’t realized how intimate it would feel. Kissing. It had always been one of those romantic movie things, but I’d never actually considered how it would affect me.

I’d never expected to be kissed at all.

It wasn’t a bad surprise, though. Not at all.

Maybe I liked it.

Hell, maybe I loved it.

My fingers buried in his hair as I pulled Liam closer. He dragged me to the edge of the couch cushion, tugging me to his chest and holding me fiercely as we made out.

When I pulled away again, I had to suck in deep breaths. His chest was rising and falling rapidly too, which made me feel better about my own lack of air.

“We should probably make some kind of a plan,” I said.

“We’re going to be lost in each other for at least a few days when we seal the bond, so it would be better to do that sooner rather than later. Dragons barely come up for air for two weeks.”

“I have a few days’ worth of work on the wards to really make them solid. They’re healthy now, but they’ll be much stronger when I add runes to them.”

“Are runed spells harder to break through?”

“Much. They should become impenetrable. I can add some more runes in other places to lock the island down even better afterward.”

“So we’ll take the next few days to work on the wards. I’ll work on the dates when there’s time,” Liam said.

“You don’t work on dates.”

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“Then what do you do with them?”

“I don’t know. I think you just go on them.”

He dipped his head. “Then we’ll go on dates.”

“We don’t have to.”

“Of course we don’t. But if it’s what you want, I want to.” He kissed me again, and I kissed him back.

Without hesitation, this time.

Eventually, the makeout session ended with Liam and I sitting together on the couch, staring out at the ocean. His side was pressed against mine, his hand on my thigh.

It was nice.

Peaceful, even.

I hadn’t expected to find peace in the Supernatural Resort, but I was glad to have been wrong.

eleven

SAGE

We slept in the next morning, finally leaving the bungalow when it was almost time to meet Madison and Vera for lunch at the restaurant on the beach.

“I can get my own table,” Liam said, as we walked down a stretch of sand. His hands were in the pockets of his board shorts, and he was shirtless.

We’d been more comfortable since our conversation and makeout sessions the night before. And since he got me off on his mouth and fingers again in the middle of the night.

But there was still some uncertainty. Which Liam seemed to deal with by putting physical space between us.

I was planning on taking a dip in the ocean before going back to the wards, so I was wearing a bikini and a coverup. I felt hotter than I had the last few days, but I was ignoring that. We’d figured out some things, but not everything. Not to the point where I would tell him every time I was horny.

The beach was fairly busy, but we both wanted to walk next to the ocean rather than taking the paved paths, so we braved the crowd.

After so much time spent on a bench while we worked on the wards, the beach was glorious. The breeze was nice, and the water felt amazing every time it washed over our feet.

“Why would you get your own table?” I didn’t flash him the look I wanted to. The one that would tell him he was crazy.

I had learned enough about Liam to realize that his line of reasoning usually made no sense to me, but there was logic behind it.

Logic I didn't agree with, but still. Logic.

"So you have space to talk to your friends," he said.

Ah.

Actually, that did make sense.

It just wasn't necessary.

"Thanks, but it's fine if you come with us. You probably know more about them than I do."

"That's unlikely."

"Do you know what they shift into?" I countered.

"Of course. I wouldn't let them into the resort if I didn't."

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“Then you know more than me. All I know about them is that they’re both hiding from their fiancés. Apparently both of their families agreed to arranged marriages for them when they were kids.”

“I’ve heard that happens for rare breeds of shifters. Particularly the females. The men offer a lot of money for a mate that’s like them, and there are always a lot more male shifters than females.”

“Arranged marriage is bullshit,” I said, but gave him a side-eye. “I bet you would’ve been worth a lot of money on that mating market.”

“Probably. Hybrids are nearly nonexistent. Unfortunately for you, it’s too late to try to sell me to another woman. Our bond isn’t going anywhere.”

I snorted. “Did you just make a joke?”

“No. I don’t joke.” His lips were curved upward, though. Just slightly.

“Bullshit.”

“I’ll admit to nothing.”

I rolled my eyes. “Can you tell me what kind of shifters they are, or would that go against some kind of rules? They’d probably tell me if I asked, but I don’t know the etiquette, and I don’t want to be rude.”

“Shifters aren’t usually secretive about what they are. They probably assumed you

could tell because of your magic. No one knows much about witches.”

“Good point.”

“The blonde one is a kelpie. The redhead is a kitsune. As far as I know, they’re both the only living female shifters of their breed. The kelpie was born to a shocked pair of wolf shifters. The kitsune’s father was like her, and I think her mother is or was human.”

My eyebrows shot into my forehead. “Vera’s a kelpie? Aren’t they water monsters?”

Liam lifted a shoulder. “Aren’t all supernaturals monsters?”

“Good point.” I let out a puff of air. “Guess that’s why she’s so good at surfing.”

“Probably has something to do with it. Are you going to sign up for another class?”

“Oh, no. The lady teaching the class totally hates me. She thinks I reek. And she kept looking at you, so she probably has a thing for you.”

Liam’s eyes flashed. “How many times do I have to tell you that you smell fucking incredible?”

“For the rest of our lives, probably. If you really want to be my mate.”

A pair of surfer guys came out of the water in front of us. Their eyes lit up when they saw Liam.

“Hey, man. You finally hitting the waves again?” one of them asked.

He was a vampire. I could tell by his magic.

The other guy was a wolf shifter.

“Not today. Headed to breakfast with my mate.” Liam flashed me a look that said he had absolutely emphasized the “mate” part for a reason.

“You could go surfing while I eat with Madison and Vera,” I said.

Liam glanced out at the ocean.

He totally wanted to. Keeping the wards running had been his whole life for so many years.

“I can sit at one of the tables outside. You would be able to see me the whole time,” I pointed out.

“We’re having breakfast,” Liam said after a painfully long beat of silence.

“No, you’re not. You’re going surfing.” I pushed him toward the water. He didn’t budge, of course. He was definitely strong enough that I couldn’t move him unless he let me.

“Clove,” he warned.

“Your first lover’s spat,” the werewolf teased. “How romantic.”

“Go.” I pushed Liam toward the ocean.

“I don’t have my board,” he grumbled, but I could tell I was winning.

“Take mine. We’ve got similar preferences. I’ll go grab yours while you guys head out. I need a break anyway,” the vampire said.

“Fine.” Liam agreed reluctantly, looking at me. “Sit in my line of sight.”

“No problem.” I gave him a quick smile.

He hesitated before pulling me in for the world’s shortest hug. His lips brushed my forehead too, before he released me. “Have fun.”

“You too.”

I padded down the beach, waving when I saw Madison and Vera already taking a seat at a table you could see from the sand and water. There was a pillar next to it, giving them a little shade.

I took a seat in the sun and made eye contact with Liam. He held my gaze for a minute before dipping his head toward me and turning to the ocean, finally leaving the beach.

“You look happy,” Vera teased. It was still weird to know that she was a kelpie. And Madison being a kitsune... well, that was crazy too, but not as crazy to me as the kelpie thing.

I dragged my hair out of my eyes. “I guess arranged marriage does that to some of us.”

Madison snorted. “Don’t include me in that.”

“Or me. In a perfect world, I meet my fated mate in the next two days,” Vera agreed.

“Is that when you’re headed home?” I checked.

“Yep. The day after tomorrow.” She sighed. “It’s going to be hell.”

“When are you leaving?” I asked Madison.

“Tonight.” She made a face. “Back into the belly of the beast.”

“How did you guys get stuck in these situations?” I asked. “We all know how it happened to me.”

Someone came by to take our order and fill our water glasses, temporarily pausing the conversation. Madison and Vera both went with mimosas, and since my life wasn’t in ultimate danger at the moment, I did the same.

The alcohol would affect me more than it affected them, thanks to their shifter blood, but I’d drink mine slowly.

“My dad promised me to the bastard when I was a kid,” Vera said bluntly. “He had been terrorizing the pack for years. Everyone thought my mom slept with him, but a

DNA test proved I was their kid. After he nearly killed one of the teenagers in the pack, my dad finally offered me to him to keep the peace. He hasn't attacked anyone since."

"At least your dad hesitated. Mine had already promised my hand in marriage before I was born. The moment he found out I was female, he traded me for power. He's been buddy-buddy with our skulk's leader since." Madison leaned back in her chair, folding her arms.

I assumed a skulk was a group of foxes, since she was a kitsune.

"How long until you're officially mated?" Vera checked.

"Only a few weeks. This is basically my last hoorah."

"What would happen if you refused and ran?" I wondered.

Vera laughed. "You'd have to be stupid to run from a shifter, Sage. Nothing thrills us more than a hunt."

"And when a shifter catches you, he bites. Hard," Madison agreed. "My skulk is ancient and has resources. They could find me no matter where I tried to go. There's no way out—I'm well and truly fucked."

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“My fiancé has my scent. My pack told him I was headed here, but he would be able to find me anywhere. The only way out of my bond is by finding my fated mate, which is why I’ve been flirting with everyone on the island,” Vera added.

“How long do you have left?” I asked.

Vera smiled humorlessly. “A few months. I’ll be visiting cities that are heavy on supernaturals before then, but I already told my mom to start planning my funeral. She wasn’t amused.”

“Fuck him,” Madison grumbled.

“Yeah. Fuck your fiancé too,” Vera agreed. “In a not-fun way.”

Madison slouched back in her seat. “That bastard can go straight to hell for all I care.”

Someone dropped our drinks off, and we all took sips.

“At least your situation isn’t as shitty,” Vera said, forcing herself to be upbeat as she looked at me. “And your mate can surf. That’s cool.”

I looked out at the ocean, and watched Liam catch a wave like a pro. Or whatever it was called.

“I’m sure yours can surf too,” Madison pointed out.

“You would hope.” Vera drained the rest of her glass and cleared her throat. “Alright, we need something less depressing to talk about. No more forced fiancés. Or mates. We can?—”

The single empty chair at our table was suddenly filled by a tall man.

I stiffened when I recognized him.

Cecil.

He dropped a bag of blood in front of me on the table.

I looked back at the ocean to see if Liam had noticed the intrusion, and realized a problem immediately.

Cecil was completely hidden by the pillar.

Liam wouldn't have any clue that the vampire who hated me had joined us for lunch.

“Why is there a bag of blood on our table, mosquito?” Madison drawled.

“I'm just paying my debt. The resort's fearless leader told me I owed his blood witch.” Cecil gestured toward the bag, leaning casually against the back of his chair.

“Which required coming here and doing this whole manspreading thing because...” Vera trailed off, waiting for him to finish.

“Because the phoenix's blood witch needs me,” Cecil said simply.

“How do you figure that?” I asked, my eyes narrowed.

“We’ve all heard about the witch who was outside. I’m sure she’s still out there somewhere. We also know that the wards are now fixed, which means we have at least another century of security,” he said.

“So...” Madison prodded.

“So it’s in the best interest of everyone in the resort to get rid of Sage now. Before she and Liam seal their bond.”

Shit.

“How do you figure that?” Vera wondered.

“Without the sealed bond, Liam goes back to being his absent, uninterested self and consistently patrols the island. The resort remains his first priority. The witches don’t break down the wards. We?—”

“I get it,” I said flatly, cutting Cecil off. “What do you want?”

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The bastard had me, and he knew it.

Madison and Vera's silence told me they knew it too.

"Nothing big," Cecil said.

"That sentence is always followed by something big," Vera pointed out.

Cecil gave me a humorless smile, all wicked-sharp teeth. "Just a few bags of blood. I've been reading up on witches, and I hear you taste better than you smell."

My eyes narrowed. "No."

"Wait, why not?" Madison leaned toward me. "That's actually not a big ask from a vampire."

"I'm a blood witch. My blood has power in it. Which is why he wants it." I gestured toward Cecil. "And if Liam finds out you asked, I'm pretty sure he's going to kill you."

"Change pretty sure to damn confident," Vera said.

"That's fine. You don't have to agree." Cecil stretched his arms out behind his head. "But I've got more than a dozen vampires positioned throughout this restaurant."

I looked around, and found multiple sets of eyes trained on our table.

The magic they all possessed confirmed what he said.

They were vampires.

“At this point, you can give me your blood willingly. Or we can take it, and hand you to the witches afterward,” Cecil finished.

“After you’ve had my blood, you won’t hand me to a witch. You’ll be addicted,” I said bluntly.

“You can hope,” Cecil said confidently.

“Fine.” I had to grit the word out.

He was right; what other choice did I have? Even with a bag of his blood, I couldn’t take down a dozen vampires. I’d need a hell of a lot more than the ten seconds I’d have to craft any kind of magic.

Sometimes, being a witch fucking sucked.

“Don’t do it. We can handle them,” Vera urged.

Madison coughed, clearly taken aback by the kelpie’s statement. “Uh, yeah.”

Maybe Vera could fight, but Madison clearly couldn’t. Neither could I.

Cecil ignored them straight-up. “My phlebotomist is going to set up right here and get the first few bags. At the first sign of any of you trying to flag Liam down, we take Sage to the witches.” He stood, flashing me another grin. “Pleasure doing business with you. If any of you tell Liam anything, we’ll hand you back to your coven in a heartbeat.”

“Fuck off,” Madison growled.

Vera met my gaze as Cecil strode away. “You don’t have to do this.”

My gaze tracked him. “I think I do.”

There was no way around giving him my blood. Not at the current moment.

But if Liam was going to keep running things, and if we were going to seal a mate bond, I needed to make it clear to everyone in his resort that I could protect myself.

Not in a fight, obviously. I lacked those skills completely.

I had other gifts, though.

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Magical ones.

I'd have to be smart about how I used them, but if there was one thing you learned as a witch, it was how to think outside the box.

Or to be extremely creative inside it, I supposed.

Vera and Madison glared at the man who sat down in the seat Cecil had taken moments earlier. The phlebotomist had a bunch of equipment—needles, blood bags, and so on.

It didn't take long before he was wiping my inner elbow with alcohol and pulling out a needle.

I casually slipped a pin from my hair. The moment he slid the needle into my skin, I pricked a small cut on my outer thigh, away from everyone's view.

His nostrils flared at the scent of my blood, but I knew I'd timed it right.

Vampires were experts when it came to blood, but I had plenty of my own experience.

While he slowly filled a bag, I sketched a careful rune on my leg, anchoring it to the slice of orange hanging on the glass of my barely touched mimosa. Edible plants were rarely used as anchors, but they did work.

The parts of the rune were simple, but together, they created complex magic.

Most witches would never even consider needing to achieve what I was crafting.

I finished the final aspect of it just before the man sealed the first bag, handing it to someone who came over to take it.

He filled another bag.

And another.

And another.

Every vampire who worked with Cecil was going to have a very rude awakening, because I was pretty damn sure he wouldn't be keeping all of the blood for himself. Not on an island that was full of people running from both human and supernatural law enforcement.

Whether or not they had ever been criminals, they wanted to use me and hand me over to the other witches. That would literally cost me my life. So, I didn't feel bad for the karma that was about to hit them.

I could barely see straight when they finally walked away with all of the bags of my blood. I felt drunk—super drunk—and was leaning heavily against the armrest of my chair.

One by one, the vampires in the restaurant slipped away. As soon as they were gone, Madison and Vera were both at my sides, holding me up.

"I'll get food and water," Vera said. "Can you keep her steady?"

"Of course."

Vera rushed away.

Madison's forehead creased as she saw the rune on my leg. "What's that?"

"The vampires will find out soon," I mumbled.

Madison barked out a laugh. "Fuck, yes."

Vera was back with a massive plate of food pretty quickly, and a few glasses of water and juice.

They went back to their seats when I slowly started eating, though they both watched me closely.

"Can we tell Liam?" Vera asked.

"Nah. He'll find out." I sagged against the back of my chair, unable to finish even half of the food she'd brought out. When I slid it across the table, the other women gave me a minute to change my mind before they dug in too.

I fought off sleep, waiting quietly in my chair.

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Soon enough, every vampire on the island was going to know exactly who they shouldn't mess with.

twelve

LIAM

My nostrils flared when I took the empty seat at Sage's table. I'd spent too long in the water, but it felt great, and I'd been able to see my mate every minute I was gone.

"Why the fuck do I smell your blood?" I inhaled again. My sense of smell was horse shit next to a dragon's, but still better than any human's. "And... Cecil?" I was on my feet again in a heartbeat, but Sage caught my wrist.

She gave me a tired smile. "Don't worry about it."

"Like fuck am I not going to worry about it," I snarled. "What happened? Why do you look like you're about to fall over?"

"Cecil showed up and took a bunch of her blood after threatening to give her to the witches outside the wards," the redheaded shifter said bluntly.

"What?" I nearly roared the word.

Giving her to the witches would be signing her death sentence. I would've seen him take her—but I may not have gotten to her in time. Not without my wings.

The fucking mate bond was going to get my female killed, and there was nothing I could do to stop it except stay by her side for every minute of every day.

“I handled it,” Sage said calmly.

Too calmly.

I opened my mouth to say something else, but my attention caught on a small smear of blood extending over the side of her thigh. Leaning over, I took in the rune. “What did you do?”

“Plenty.”

“Clove,” I growled. “I am not in the mood for secrets.”

“They were willing to kill me, so I returned the favor.”

“Give me the details, woman.”

She rolled her eyes. She looked so wiped out, the gesture made my stomach clench. “I made my blood incompatible with vampires for a while. They can drink it, but it’ll poison them. How much it affects them will depend on how much they drink.” She watched me closely for a reaction. “A few of them will probably die, but I wasn’t going to let them think they can attack me whenever they want. If I’m going to live with criminals, I have to make it clear that I’m as dangerous as they are.”

My chest rumbled.

As much as it pissed me off that my mate had to protect herself, I was really fucking relieved that she could.

“You shouldn’t have had to do anything... but it was a good call,” I said grudgingly.

She smiled.

Then tipped sideways, just a little.

I grabbed her to keep her upright. “How much blood did they take?”

“Too much,” the blonde shifter said. “You should probably take her home to rest.”

“I don’t need any more sleep,” she mumbled.

“You can at least spend the day watching movies on the couch or something,” the redhead pointed out.

Sage waved a hand, dismissing the idea. “I’m fine.”

“You clearly aren’t.” I lifted her out of her chair.

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“At least let me hug them goodbye. They’re leaving soon,” she protested.

I obliged, and after a few hugs, was finally hauling my mate down the beach again.

If I saw any of Cecil’s vampires on the way, I’d kill them before my mate’s magic could finish the job.

Sage fell asleep on the couch while I was turning a movie on. A knock at the door had me crossing the room, absently wondering where I’d left my phone.

Anyone who knew me well was aware that I lost it as often as I didn’t. I’d been trying to hold on to it so I could stay in touch with the security team, but with the wards healthy again, I hadn’t bothered to bring it with me that morning.

A glance out the window showed Harv and Bailey on the doorstep together. They rarely spoke to me at the same time. I suspected they were worried I’d catch on to the relationship they thought they were hiding if I saw them together very often.

They took a quick step away from each other when I pulled the door open.

“What happened?” Bailey asked. “We have a dozen vampires crowded in the medical room, and no idea why they’re so sick. The most coherent one said they drank magic blood.”

Technically, he was right.

They just hadn’t bothered to make sure it was safe magic blood.

And they'd underestimated my mate, which wasn't going to happen again.

I was fairly confident I could end their suffering and let at least a few of them live by washing the rune off Sage's leg, but I wasn't going to do that. If a dozen vampires died the first time someone attacked her, there wouldn't be another attack. Period.

Which was ideal, obviously. I didn't want my mate to be at risk in our home.

"Cecil cornered Sage in one of the restaurants. He took enough of her blood to wipe her out completely." I opened the door wide enough for the couple to see my mate curled up on our couch, then angled it to hide her again. "He threatened to give her to the witches outside the resort if she refused, so she didn't. She charmed the blood they took instead."

Technically, she had runed it. Not charmed it. But they wouldn't know the difference.

I didn't want anyone to understand exactly how my mate's magic worked unless she decided to explain it to them herself.

"Your calm little witch poisoned them?" Harv asked, his expression almost incredulous.

She definitely didn't come across as violent. Or murderous. And she wasn't—she was smart. She knew where she was living and how to protect herself.

"Yes."

Bailey whistled. "She's totally badass. I should've done that years ago. Your mate's going to take out Cecil and his entire inner circle in one go."

Harv grunted. "We can hope."

“Some of them might recover,” I said. “Regardless, word will spread that she’s more dangerous than she looks.”

“We should emphasize that. I can spread the word and get people to start talking about it,” Bailey offered.

“Good call.” I glanced backward when Sage made a sound of pain. Between exhaustion, blood loss, and heat, she was in bad shape.

I needed to use my magic to heal her, but I wasn’t sure how a dose of my fire would affect the heat already burning in her veins. The last time, it was intense for her.

“We’ll get going,” Harv said, stepping back. I didn’t miss the arm he put around Bailey’s waist, gently pulling her back with him.

She took another step away from him quickly, and there was no ignoring the frustration that crossed his face.

I had no idea how they hadn’t mated yet. They’d been together for decades, so they had to genuinely believe that I was going to have issues with their connection. Considering he was a werewolf, they must’ve been fated mates or something.

I needed to have a conversation with them about them not hiding their relationship, but for the moment, it wasn’t a priority. My mate was unconscious on the couch, and that was what mattered.

“Good luck with Sage,” Bailey said, forcing a smile.

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I dipped my head and closed the door.

They could deal with their own shit for a little longer.

I found my phone in the kitchen and scrolled through the messages from Bailey and Harv, asking if I was involved in what happened to the vampires. When I was satisfied there was nothing new to deal with on that front, I checked in with the demons.

Everything was good with the security team, so I replied to a few messages about random resort stuff before eyeing Sage again.

She was paler than usual, and definitely still asleep.

I still wanted to heal her... but maybe food would help just as much.

Though I wanted to sit next to her on the couch, I was worried about pushing myself on her when she was barely conscious, so I didn't.

I sent in an order for food, and satisfied my need to be closer to her by sitting on the arm of the couch while I waited for it to arrive. There was a movie playing, but my attention lingered on my mate.

On the rise and fall of her chest.

On the way her hair clung to the sides of her clammy face.

On how fucking gorgeous she was.

My entire body ached for her.

Sealing the bond was the only way to solve that.

When my phone buzzed to let me know the food had arrived, I answered the door again before going back to the couch.

I had to sit next to Sage to help her in case she was too weak to eat. That was a good enough reason to take a seat next to her, wasn't it?

Despite my justification, I took a seat across the cushion from her.

Pushing her wasn't necessary. I'd already taken enough liberties.

I woke her with a hand on her shoulder. Her eyes were bleary when she lifted her head, her cheeks still intensely pale.

"You need to eat," I said.

"I'm not hungry," she whispered.

"Eat anyway. The vampires took too much of your blood."

Sage sighed, but lifted a hand for her box of food.

Her fingers trembled.

Her palm did, too.

I wanted to turn her down and tell her I'd be the one feeding her, but I knew the outcome of that conversation wouldn't be what I hoped.

So I put the box on her lap, opening it up for her too.

"It's too bad you can't fix my blood loss like you healed my bruises in the lobby when we met," she mumbled, struggling to hold her fork normally.

"I can," I said.

Her eyes lifted to mine.

"I'm not sure how it would affect you," I explained. "Probably the same way it did when I healed you on the bench."

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She nodded. "I need to rune the wards before we risk sealing the bond."

"That would be ideal."

If the alternative was risking her life, I could wait as long as I had to.

She struggled to pierce a vegetable with her fork.

The itch to take the box and feed her myself grew stronger.

"How are you feeling?" she asked me.

The question caught me off guard. "What?"

"How are you feeling?" she repeated, meeting my gaze. "I know the bond is pushing you, and I haven't done anything to make it easier for you. I can't imagine seeing me struggling this much is helping anything."

It sure as fuck wasn't.

"I can handle it," I said instead. "Don't worry about me."

She rolled her eyes. "If we're going to be mates, worrying about you will be part of the bond."

"Even when it's sealed, you don't need to do that." I finally snagged the fork from her shaky fingers and stabbed the broccoli for her. "I can take care of both of us."

“Sounds lonely.”

“I don’t get lonely.” I lifted the fork to her lips.

Sage studied me for a moment before she gently pushed my arm away. “If I don’t get to worry about you, you don’t get to feed me.”

I growled. “You’re my mate.”

“And you’re mine. Right?”

“Yes. So let me feed you.”

“I haven’t touched you,” she said.

I blinked. “I hold you every night. Your hands are on me when I do.”

“Not like that.” She held my gaze.

Oh.

Fuck.

My cock throbbed hard.

“You’re so weak you can’t lift a fork, Clove. That’s out of the question.” My voice came out sounding gravelly. “Just eat the damn food.”

“I will,” she said, but batted the fork away again when I lifted it back to her lips. “If you do something for me in exchange.”

“Sure.” I just wanted her to eat, so she could get her strength back.

“Take your shorts off.”

I blinked once.

And again.

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A third time, too.

“Don’t look so shocked. You’ve seen me checking you out when you’re naked,” she said.

I let out a harsh breath. “Clove...”

“Fine, don’t do it.” She snagged the fork I was holding and lifted the broccoli to her mouth, taking the bite herself.

My gaze lingered on her lips, and my cock throbbed again. Harder.

If I did what she wanted, she would see exactly how she affected me. And if she saw that, I wasn’t sure how she’d feel or react.

Staying dressed sounded safer, even if I did enjoy the way she had stared at me the few times we’d showered together.

Sage tried to spear another chunk of broccoli with her fork, and struggled.

I had to clench my hand in a fist to stop myself from taking it back and doing it for her.

I just wanted my mate fed and healthy. Was that too much to ask?”

“Stop looking at me like I’m going to break,” Sage warned. “I’m fine. If I can’t eat, I’ll just go back to sleep and recover a little slower. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is to me.”

She lifted an eyebrow.

The skepticism in her eyes told me she was thinking that if it was a big deal to me, I’d just strip. It wasn’t like I was shy about nudity.

With another harsh breath out, I stood and shucked my shorts. Her gaze lingered on my cock when I sat back down and stole the fork again. I took the box too, and loaded the utensil with pasta. She needed something more substantial than broccoli if she was going to get her energy back.

“You’re huge,” she said. “Do you think sex between us would even work?”

My cock jerked in response, and she made a noise of surprise. “Yes. You take a few of my fingers just fine. It’ll be a stretch at first, but you’ll adjust.”

When I lifted the fork to her lips, she took the bite.

Some primal part of me was intensely satisfied while I watched her chew and swallow. It took me a second to get the next bite ready, because I couldn’t look away.

“Do you mind if I just brush my fingers against you? I’ve never touched a guy before.”

I throbbed again. Repeatedly.

The fact that she wanted to touch me satisfied my inner caveman as much as feeding her did.

“Go ahead.”

Her gaze was on my cock as she took the next bite I gave her. Her fingers brushed my length, just barely, and I jerked violently.

“Does it feel good?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

That was a fucking understatement.

I continued to feed her as she kept teasing my cock, far too gently. It jumped for her anyway, every fucking time.

When she finally brushed the underside, I had to clench my teeth and abdomen to stop myself from reacting any further.

She watched me, curious. “It’s more sensitive here?”

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I dipped my head in a harsh nod.

She accepted the next bite. She was clearly still weak, but her hand was growing slightly steadier as she ate.

“Do you mind if I...”

“I’m yours.” The words were gruff, but the slight curve of her lips told me she didn’t care.

She wrapped her hand around my cock, and I gritted my teeth on a curse.

Forcing myself to focus on her health, I continued feeding her while she squeezed me.

Stroked me lightly.

Watched my expression and reaction to her touch.

My body felt like a fucking livewire. I was closer to losing control entirely with every movement of her hand, no matter how hard I fought it.

We were nearing the end of her meal when I finally gritted out a curse and grabbed her hand, holding it still on my erection before she could take me over the edge.

“What?” Sage’s gaze was on my face. I could feel it, though my eyes were closed.

“Need a minute.” I had to grind out the words.

My cock was throbbing, and her hand was slick with my precum. Feeling it on her skin made me fucking desperate.

“Why do you need a minute?” Her question was unabashed.

“Going to come.” I barely managed all three words.

“Oh.” She paused a beat. “Do you not want to get off?”

“No. You weren’t touching me for that.”

“I wasn’t?”

My forehead creased. I opened my eyes and met her dark, sexy gaze. “You were exploring.”

“Am I not allowed to explore and make you come at the same time?”

The crease in my forehead deepened. “I guess.”

“You guess I am or am not allowed?” she countered.

There was something in her eyes. Something almost playful.

It held my attention, and her lips curved slightly.

“How about you just let me do what I want, Steam?”

I blinked.

“If you’re uncomfortable, stop me,” she added.

I wouldn’t be?—

“Fuck,” I choked out, when she dragged her hand slowly over the head of my cock. Mine moved with hers, holding her hand to my length.

She’d clearly figured out what I liked during her exploration, because she was no longer hesitating as she rolled her palm over the slickness at my tip, teasing the underside of my cock’s head.

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My hips jerked, and I lost control. Squeezing and moving her hand, I took over as I cursed and gasped, coating her fingers in my cum.

“Fuck,” I said again, panting as my climax ended and I released my grip on her hand. I had never felt so relieved in my fucking life. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have?—”

“That was hot, Liam. Don’t apologize.” She let go of my cock, lifting her fingers to her mouth and licking my pleasure off one.

I had to clench my jaw to stop myself from groaning at the sight.

“Tastes a lot better than I expected,” she remarked.

Closing my eyes, I forced myself to breathe slower. Slow enough that I didn’t lose my shit and pin her to the couch so I could fuck her like an animal.

“So can you only get off once, or...” she trailed off, waiting for an answer.

“All supernatural men can have multiple releases,” I gritted out.

“Cool.”

Cool?

This woman was going to be the death of me.

I was going to lose my mind and beg her to let me take her long before heat made me

insane.

thirteen

SAGE

Liam made me eat his food too, after we got cleaned up. He ordered more, and I sketched ideas for runes that could potentially help him fly without me.

I was fairly confident he didn't want to let me work on the wards for the rest of the day. I wasn't going to go along with it, but I figured eating and taking a break on the couch would be my best shot at convincing him to let me leave the bungalow before the sun went down.

So, I brainstormed while casually watching a romcom I'd seen a dozen times already.

It wasn't as heartwarming now that I knew it was lying to me on the romance front, but it was still relaxing.

Maybe I'd feel less jaded about that after Liam and I adjusted to each other a little more, too.

He still left too much space between us when he sat down next to me with his food. I figured maybe he wanted extra distance while he ate, so I didn't bring it up. But when he finished his food and threw it away, he sat back down in the same spot.

The man was clueless.

Completely and utterly clueless.

I was either going to have to be blunt about what I wanted, or clever about getting

him to do it.

That was kind of annoying... but also kind of sweet.

He hadn't given me the chance to turn him down when fate paired us together, but he was trying to let me choose how our relationship progressed.

Maybe that counted for something.

Or maybe it didn't.

But if my options were blunt or clever, clever was more my style.

I considered a few possibilities before settling on one. After a few more minutes of sketching through the movie, I winced slightly. Moving a little, I changed my positions like I was uncomfortable.

“What’s wrong?” Liam’s question was immediate.

“Nothing.” I went back to sketching.

“Clove,” he warned.

“I’m fine,” I insisted.

“Is heat causing you pain?”

“No. I told you, I’m fine,” I repeated.

He growled and scooted closer, until his side was pressed up against mine.

It took everything I had not to grin.

Considering the way he’d forced me to be his mate, a few little tricks to get him to figure out how I wanted to be treated seemed totally fair.

Especially after our blunt conversation hadn’t changed it permanently.

“Does that help?” he asked.

“A little. Thanks.”

He nodded.

I gave it a few more minutes. He was definitely looking over my shoulder, reading my messy handwriting and taking in the sketches I’d done.

“What does that one do? You didn’t label it.” He pointed to the base.

“That ignites the rune. Every piece has it. It’s not necessary to label it, because I don’t need the quick reminder to figure out what I’m missing to make the rest of the rune work.”

“Hmm.”

Liam kept studying the rune.

I moved a little more, changing positions to make it seem like I was uncomfortable again.

Liam growled under his breath and leaned closer, draping his arm over my shoulders.

Letting out a soft breath of feigned relief, I refocused on my rune. The movie was still playing, but I didn’t particularly care.

It was terrible, but I was totally going to train Liam to stop giving me space.

“What is it missing?” he asked me.

“I’m not sure yet.” I went over the parts silently. “I’ll probably need to rune something to figure out if it works. Like a dog tag on a chain. Do you have anything like that?”

“I can find it. You shouldn’t do magic today, though.”

“If I don’t go out and work on the wards, everyone will think the vampires beat me.”

Liam scowled. “They’re dying. No one thinks they won.”

“I do. They caught me off guard in a restaurant.”

“That was my fault, not yours.”

“You’re insane if you think you can protect me every minute of every day, Steam.”

“I’m your mate.”

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“Not my bodyguard,” I agreed.

His scowl deepened. “I wouldn’t need to be your bodyguard if I could still access my wings.”

“Good thing I’m working on that, then.” I tapped my pencil on the paper. “As soon as we grab a couple of plants and necklaces, I can start testing it out. It wouldn’t be the end of the world to work on that today and save the runes for tomorrow.”

Assuming I didn’t give in to what I’d been thinking about and just seal the bond with him.

After getting him off earlier, I wasn’t nervous about sex anymore. I was actually kind of excited.

But I did need to work on the wards a little more before we could get to that. So, my excitement was going to have to wait. Maybe I could get Liam used to sitting by me before we took our bond to the next level, too.

“How likely is it to work?” he asked.

I flashed him a look. “I might not be the best witch, but I know how to work runes. It’s going to work. Maybe not the first or second try, but still soon.”

“I wasn’t suggesting your runes wouldn’t work. I just don’t know what the chance is that your magic can actually fool the mate bond.”

Oh.

That was a better question. Especially from a shifter point of view, because their magic was innate and always worked properly.

“Mate bonds are unbreakable, but not infallible. I know witches who’ve been paid multiple fortunes to charm blood to taste like a fated mate’s for a vampire who was trying to wean themselves out of a blood addiction. They pay, because it works. Tricking your side of that should be simpler than that, because you’re not actually consuming anything.”

Liam nodded slowly. “But it might not.”

“Well yeah, nothing is guaranteed with magic. I’d say there’s about a ninety-five percent chance it’ll work though, given everything else.”

He eyed me. “Did you just pull that number out of your ass in an attempt to make me feel better?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Want me to roll over so you can check?”

He snorted.

I bit back a grin.

His sense of humor might have been hard to reach, but it did exist. I’d keep teasing it out, slowly but surely.

“Do you know what plants you want?” he asked.

“Mmhm. Want to go find them for me? You know I’m safe in here, thanks to the

shitload of runes on the building.”

“Yeah. I can find the dog tags, too.”

I flipped to a blank page and tore it out, taking a minute to sketch the plants out for him. I added their names and their locations in the greenhouse, just to make his search easier.

After I handed it over, he slipped out.

He was excited about the possibility of the runes giving him access to his wings without me again, and we both knew it.

“Want me to bring back anything else?” Liam asked on his way out.

“Fancy coffee from the demons’ shop?” I checked. “And chocolate?”

He nodded. “I’ll make it quick, so you don’t get too uncomfortable.”

My forehead creased.

“Heat.” He gestured to me. “It was causing you pain.”

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Oh.

Right.

“You’ll probably have to sit by me when you get back, but I’m sure I’ll be okay,” I said.

He agreed, and slipped out.

I was definitely terrible... but it was working, so who the fuck cared?

I sketched and watched the movie for half an hour or so. Though I was still sweaty, the air conditioning was blasting—pretty sure my mate was to thank for that—so I was fine. I ended up trading my bikini for a loose tank top and a pair of comfortable shorts, and life was even better afterward.

The movie ended right before Liam got back, and I turned another one on just so I had something playing in the background. I had a few good ideas as far as the runes went, so I figured I’d just go with the best option first and the others if it didn’t work.

Liam stepped inside the bungalow with a tan fabric bag full of plants on one shoulder, a mostly-empty tote hanging from the inside of his elbow on the other arm, a coffee cup in one hand, and a box of chocolates in the other.

“Stop right there,” I said, grabbing my phone.

He froze, his eyes scanning the house for threats. “What? What happened?”

“Nothing.” I lifted my phone and snapped a few photos.

His forehead creased. “Are you taking pictures of me?”

“Yeah. I need this evidence for the next time I wonder why you’re not romantic enough. Note to self: he will bring chocolate and dessert drinks if requested. Cannot read minds”

His ears reddened. “Dragons can usually communicate mentally with their mates when they seal their bond.”

“Oh, wow. Really?”

“Yeah.” He handed the drink and chocolates over and set the bags down on the coffee table. “I doubt it will apply to us though. I tried reaching out to you mentally when we flew together, which works for dragon couples, but I don’t think you heard anything.”

“Nope, but I’d rather not have anyone in my head. It’s loud enough in there as it is.” I took a sip of the drink and nearly groaned.

Chocolatey bliss.

Questions about calorie counts would not be asked.

“Did you try this?” I checked.

“No. How are you feeling?” He eyed the seat next to me on the couch.

The big, sexy dummy was still not sure where he should sit.

“Totally fine,” I said honestly. He wouldn’t expect me to tell him the truth, though.

He scowled and sat down right next to me, draping his arm over my shoulder.

“Here. Try it.” I handed him the cup.

He took it reluctantly. “It’s yours.”

“And I offered to share. Just taste it.”

He grumbled, but lifted it to his lips. When he took a slow sip, he actually did groan.

“Fuck. That’s incredible.”

“Right?”

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He tried to hand it back, but I waved him off. “Drink some. I told you I was sharing.”

Though he seemed a bit reluctant, he took another sip.

“What’s their shop called again?” I asked. “I feel like I’ve heard of it.”

“Coffee and Toffee. The cheerful blonde said one of their locations is called Coffee and Toffee and Cake. Guess they bought out a bakery in Wildwood.”

“Isn’t Wildwood full of wolf shifters?”

“Mmhm. And a couple of blood wolves, I guess.”

“Holy shit, really? Who made them? Does the supernatural government know?”

“One of them is mated to the Alpha, so I’m sure the government knows. I don’t know who made them, though. I can’t imagine the demons have heard who created them either.”

“Probably not.” I stole the cup and took another sip before I handed it back.

Making blood wolves was a horrible process. Only the worst witches would be willing to try it, and only the extremely powerful could actually accomplish it.

I pulled out a couple of plants and the first of the dog tags. The resort’s logo was on one side, but the other was empty. A small, sharp tool was at the bottom of the bag, and I assumed it was for engraving.

“Making hybrids of any kind is considered unethical, isn’t it?” Liam asked.

“Oh, yeah. Some are definitely worse than others, though. You can’t make a blood wolf in the womb.”

“What would my mother have had to do?” Liam asked.

I eyed him sideways as I sat up with all of the stuff I’d gathered. Or that he’d gathered, I supposed. “I thought you didn’t want that information.”

“I didn’t want to ask my mom.”

“She probably didn’t share things like that anyway, did she?” From what he’d told me, the answer was a loud no.

He shook his head and took another sip. “What the fuck did they put in this?”

He was changing the subject for his comfort.

I was totally figuring him out.

“Chocolate, cocaine, and lust magic probably,” I said. “They are demons.”

“Since when is lust magic transferrable?”

“Pretty much anything is transferrable if you have the right tools.” I wiggled my fingers, then focused on setting the plants out on one of my thighs. The dog tag went over my other one, and I checked out the thing I’d be using for engraving.

Liam held the cup toward me, and I took a long sip before I handed it back.

“How many tags did you bring?”

“The shop had a dozen, so I grabbed all of them.”

That was probably a good call. I was used to drawing runes on weird surfaces, but I wasn't sure how long it would take Liam to get more if I blew through the supply without any success.

“Sweet.” I pulled a pin out of my hair and pricked the back of my hand, absently picking up a piece of each plant so I could dab blood on each of them to tie them into the magic. The runes would be bound to the plants they originated from, so as long as some of the plants were alive, they could help keep the rune stable.

“How draining will this be?” Liam asked.

“I'm not going to pass out again, if that's what you're wondering.”

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“Did you pass out last time?”

“It was close, in the restaurant. But no.”

He let out a rough breath. “I think you’re determined to drive me insane, Clove.”

“Probably. Just drink your chocolatey lust.”

“Yourchocolatey lust.”

“If we’re mates, what’s mine is yours.” I finished with the plants and set them down, picking up the dog tag and eyeing the rune I was trying first.

I traced the tag and set to work sketching it out in the size I’d need it, so I had a reference. It was quick, mindless work.

“Are you sure you want me to tell you about hybrids?” I asked.

“Yeah. About me specifically, if you can.”

“It would only be an educated guess.”

“That’s a hell of a lot more than I have to go off of.”

I nodded. It was a fair point. “The easiest explanation would be that your mother was in love with a dragon and wanted her son to be a combination of both of them. But, considering what you know about dragons ending up mated to anyone they touch or

sleep with, that seems extremely unlikely.”

“It’s not a possibility. My mom was complicated, but she wouldn’t have left someone she loved. The dragon would’ve definitely been mated to her in that situation, too.”

“Right. So outside that, the only real conclusion is that she paid or traded a dragon for his semen.”

Liam took a long sip of our drink. “I’m going to need to buy you another one of these.”

“I can stop talking about it if you’re not comfortable.” I finished the sketch and looked at him.

He shook his head. “I’d like to know.”

“Witches get lonely. We live apart from other supernaturals, but we’re still people. Some of us want kids, even if we don’t want mates. And even when we have mate bonds, we’re not very fertile, so most of us who want children go through fertility treatments. We usually use human sperm, for a bunch of reasons. But the main reason is that when a witch gets pregnant with a male embryo, she almost always miscarries. Only two male witches have ever existed, and they were really weak.”

Liam’s eyebrows shot upward. “Why?”

“We’re not sure. It seems like they’re not compatible with our magic. It’s heartbreaking, so we usually use IVF to avoid the possibility. We have plenty of magic to trade with the human doctors who do the procedures, so the treatments aren’t a huge deal despite the long, arduous process.”

“Then how do I exist at all?” Liam asked.

“If I had to guess, I would imagine that your mom either didn’t test the embryos for gender—which seems unlikely for a spell witch, considering they are extremely detailed planners—or you were her only viable embryo, and she wanted you desperately. Desperately enough to do whatever it took to make sure you made it. Including creating a new species of hybrids, knowing she would expose herself as a blood witch and put a price on her head.”

Liam let out a slow breath. “Are you sure?”

“No. Maybe she had an affair with a mated dragon and wanted to keep it a secret.”

“Not a possibility.”

“I’m as sure as anyone can be without having a conversation with her. It isn’t anywhere near 100%, but it’s a lot higher than zero.”

Liam gave me the cup for a moment. After he took it back, he stayed quiet while I slowly engraved my first attempt with the runes. They were detailed, so the drain on my energy wasn’t slight, but I didn’t let Liam see how they affected me.

If he did, he’d make me stop.

When I finished, I set my tool down and studied it closely, turning it to check every angle.

“I hope you’re right,” Liam said, when I finally looked up from the rune.

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I gave him a small smile. “Would it hurt anything to decide that’s the truth, even if I’m not?”

He studied me for a moment before finally shaking his head.

“Here you go.” I handed it over. “I’ll need you to describe how your magic interacts with it when you try to shift.”

He helped me to my feet and handed me our nearly-empty cup before we headed outside.

fourteen

SAGE

Liam let out a long breath and stretched his shoulders. I drained the rest of the sugary drink, watching his muscles flex.

He was insanely strong.

“Stay there. I have to move further so you don’t interfere with the magic,” he told me.

I gave him a thumbs-up, and watched his ass move as he walked away.

The warmth I was feeling grew worse when he went farther.

Probably because I was checking him out. And thinking about touching him again.

Liam stopped a few yards down the beach. There were a couple of other people around, but they didn't try to talk to him.

He turned toward me, and I watched closely as a burst of fire magic rolled through his body. His shift was as sudden as the blaze of magic, and his thick, muscular body was replaced quickly by a massive bird. His feathers were red, orange, and gold, and fire dripped off of them constantly.

He'd been able to turn off that fire when he flew me to the tower, but now he had no reason to.

He squawked at me, and I figured a loose translation was something along the lines of, "STAY THERE".

I gave him another thumbs-up, and he spread his monstrous wings.

They were gorgeous, and dripping flames wildly.

It was fascinating to see.

And it was a really good thing I'd factored a fireproofing rune into the dog tag.

With one fierce motion, his wings propelled him into the sky. Sand blew everywhere, and I closed my eyes against the barrage.

At least I'd finished the drink. I wouldn't have been able to stop sipping the thing even if it was full of sand. It was that good.

I looked up at the sky as soon as the sand died down, and a wave of pride hit me when I saw Liam soaring over the island.

I'd done it.

My runes worked.

I wasn't as weak as everyone always said. Fuck them for making me feel bad about it, and fuck me for letting them make me feel bad.

Liam was on the sand again two minutes later. His clothes were gone when he shifted back, but I should've expected that.

He strode toward me as soon as he landed, capturing my face in his hands and kissing me hard.

I clutched his arm with my free one, returning the kiss just as passionately. He tasted like smoke and chocolate, and I doubted I could ever get enough.

Liam lifted me off my feet as we made out, taking the coffee cup from my hand and tossing it aside. He wrapped my thighs around his waist and walked me back toward our bungalow.

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We had bigger things on our minds than littering.

Like his cock, pressed against my center.

Fuck, I wanted him inside me.

My back met the bungalow's outer walls lightly, and Liam tilted my head back so he could kiss me deeper. With his body against mine and his tongue ravaging my mouth, I had officially found heaven.

Screw romance.

Screw flowers and dates.

I just wanted Liam.

I had no idea how long we'd been making out when he finally tore his lips away from mine, his chest heaving and his eyes blazing.

"Thank you," he said. There was a ton of emotion behind the words. I knew he liked flying, but I couldn't understand what it was like to be grounded after spending so much of your life in the sky.

"No problem." My chest rose and fell even faster than his.

He kissed me again, but didn't drag it out. "I need to let you rest."

“I’m fine, Steam.”

“You’re shaking again.”

“It’s because I’m horny,” I lied.

He shook his head at me, but I saw the tinge of humor in his eyes.

He liked it when I teased him, even if he didn’t want to admit it.

After letting me down and making sure I was steady, he went back for the coffee cup and carried it back inside the bungalow when he led me in again.

It took a massive amount of convincing to get Liam to let me leave the bungalow so I could get a little work done on the wards that evening. He only agreed if I was going to drink a full cup of the chocolatey coffee myself, so he didn’t have to worry about me running out of energy and passing out.

I agreed to the huge sacrifice of drinking an obscene amount of sugar. And I enjoyed every minute while we walked back to the anchor of the wards with our cups of chocolatey lust. Plus a few plant clippings that corresponded with the wards I’d be working on, of course.

“If the candy is as good as these drinks, I can see why the demons’ mates have so many shops,” I remarked, as we reached the bench.

“No kidding. I don’t even like sugary drinks,” Liam grumbled.

“You just needed a little more sugar to convince you.”

“Apparently.” He took a swig of the drink and shook his head. “It’s a fucking liquid

orgasm.”

“When you let a demon make your coffee...” I sat down on the bench, and Liam sat next to me.

“I’m only giving you two hours,” he warned. “Then you need food and sleep.”

“Yes sir.” I gave him a quick salute with the hand that wasn’t on my coffee cup.

After I finished my drink, I pulled up the anchor and got to work adding runes to the weaker parts of the second biggest spell.

I was exhausted and ready to call it quits about the same time Liam scooped me up off the bench and carried me away.

Instead of hauling me to the bungalow, he headed down the path. Toward the tower.

“Where are we going?” I checked.

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“I’m taking you on a dinner date.” He didn’t stumble over the words, though I could see a little uncertainty on his face. “We can’t leave the resort, but I don’t think you’ve eaten on the rooftop restaurant.”

“I haven’t.”

“It has a nice view and the best chefs. Only a few vegetarian options, but they’re all good.”

“Sounds like fun.”

He made a noise of agreement.

“I can walk there,” I pointed out.

“I can fly us there,” he countered.

“Guess you can carry me.”

He chuckled. “Really not a fan of the sky, huh?”

“It’s okay. I just prefer to feel the ground beneath my feet.”

“I think most witches do. You need nature to perform magic.”

“I don’t really have to have it, but using it makes my magic more powerful. I think growing up in the coven’s compound makes being away from plants and nature feel

sort of wrong.”

“It’s normal to dislike anything that makes you weaker. I’ve been uncomfortable beneath the weight of the wards since I took them over, and I’m half witch.”

“Technically, you’re not half anything. You’re a full phoenix.”

“What would our kids be, if we ever wanted them?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” The answer was honest. “If it was a boy, he’d be a phoenix. It could probably go either way if the baby was a girl. Unless the magic in your genes is crazy strong, which is a possibility. If that’s the case, she’d definitely be a phoenix too.”

Liam nodded.

He set me down on my feet when we reached the elevator, and I leaned against him as it carried us up.

Exhaustion and heat had me craving his touch.

He didn’t hesitate to wrap his arm around me and pull me close.

“Maybe we should make this a quick date,” I murmured.

He eyed me. “We can just take the food back with us. You look like you’re going to pass out again.”

“I never actually passed out, remember?”

Liam made a noncommittal noise.

“Maybe we should just eat and run?” I suggested.

“Agreed.”

When we reached the top floor, we were immediately tucked away in a table as far from everyone else’s as possible. They were probably trying to avoid putting too many eyes on us, but it failed.

Everyone stared.

“Do you think the word spread about Cecil?” I whispered.

“Yup.” Liam actually looked kind of pleased about that.

“Is he dead?”

“Yeah. All but two of his inner circle, too.”

I whistled. “Don’t tell me how many of them I took out.”

“Alright. You did well, though.”

“I did what I needed to. I wish I didn’t have to, but that’s just life.”

“Especially here.”

I nodded. “It’s basically the wild west of the supernatural world. Minus a few tumbleweeds, plus a bunch of gigantic palm trees.”

His lips curved, just the tiniest bit.

Someone came to take our orders, and I went ahead and got a fancy mixed drink. Might as well, right? I was too wiped out to care what I ate, so I had Liam pick the meal for me since he knew what was good.

“Do you like alcohol?” he asked me as the waiter walked away.

“I don’t know. Haven’t tried much,” I admitted. “Do you like it?”

His leg brushed mine, and remained resting against the side. “I don’t have any real feelings about it. My system burns through it too fast to feel any effects.”

I supposed being a creature of fire would make that happen.

“It must be weird to have fire burning through your veins alongside the blood,” I remarked.

“It must be weird not to have fire burning through yours.”

“That’s fair.” I leaned back in my seat, looking out at the resort. The sunset bathed everything in golden light, making it look magical. “I guess if I’m going to be trapped somewhere for the rest of my life, it could be a lot worse than here. And with you.”

“You were basically cursing my name a week ago.”

“I’m adapting.” I flashed him a smile, and the softness in his expression made me warm.

Then again, that could’ve been heat. I was usually warm.

We were both quiet as they brought out our drinks, followed quickly by the food. I knew the kitchen would consider us their first priority, given Liam’s status. And the rumors that were undoubtedly spreading about what I’d done to Cecil and his buddies.

We ate quickly. Feeling all those eyes on us wasn’t incredibly pleasant, but it was nice to watch the sunset.

Liam’s arm went around my waist as we made our way down to the hotel’s lobby, then out toward our bungalow. There weren’t many people on the paved paths, but the ones we passed gave us plenty of space.

“I haven’t seen that demon woman again since she flirted with you,” I remarked as

we neared the house.

“She was removed from the resort.”

I blinked. “Wait, what?”

“She knew what would happen when she touched a mated male without his permission. Particularly me. I did the same thing the one other time it happened, before I met you. Both women were lucky I didn’t burn them to a fucking crisp.”

Wow.

“That’s intense.”

“Clove, if you hadn’t killed Cecil and his friends for what they did to you, I would’ve done it myself. Mated pairs are off limits—and even if they weren’t, that shit doesn’t fly in my resort.”

“The wild west has a sheriff,” I murmured.

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He snorted.

Didn't that make twice in one day that I'd made him laugh? Or three times? I couldn't remember, but it had to be a new record.

When we reached the bungalow, I tugged Liam toward the patio wordlessly. The sun was about to disappear completely, and I wanted to watch the last shred of it fade into the horizon.

Not in the mood to tease him into sitting next to me, I just pulled him down with me when I took a seat on the couch. He didn't protest, sitting down right beside me. I curled up against him, draping my legs over his thighs, and he pulled me closer.

We sat quietly and watched as the world was slowly bathed in darkness. With the steady sound of the waves acting as white noise, my eyelids grew heavier.

I was vaguely aware of Liam carrying me to bed and curling up on the mattress with me, but I was so comfortable that sleep came quickly.

It was a major sacrifice, but I survived another night of being woken by heat—twice—and having Liam's face and hands on my body to take care of the need.

When morning came around, we headed out bright and early to work on the wards. There was still no sign of the other witches, thankfully.

I took it easier than I had when death was imminent, but made a ton of progress. Though I'd already said my official goodbyes to Madison and Vera, we texted a few

times on and off throughout the day.

Things were more comfortable between me and Liam, too, which was nice.

The next two days passed similarly, until I was finally done adding runes to the wards.

Harv stopped by the bungalow the night I finished. He needed to talk about something related to the resort, I guess.

Liam and I were curled up on the porch together with drinks we had ordered in celebration. He was shirtless, wearing just a pair of swim trunks, and I had on my usual floral bikini and a mesh coverup. A box of chocolates from the demons' shop sat on the couch beside us, completely empty.

After checking to make sure I was good with it, Liam waved Harvey closer.

My runes caught him off guard when he tried to step through them.

"Just walk slowly," I called out. "And think peaceful thoughts. If you want either of us dead, the magic will kill you."

Harv's eyebrows shot upward. "I think I'm good out here."

I rolled my eyes.

Liam waved him forward. "It's fine. Sage's magic isn't going to kill you."

"Cecil and his buddies didn't think so either."

"They wanted me dead," I pointed out.

Harv took a slow, reluctant step forward.

When the runes didn't electrocute him immediately, I knew he didn't want to kill us. That was good.

He shuffled through the magic, letting out a breath of relief when he finally reached the edge of the sectional and plopped down on it. "Your power packs a punch."

"I'm sure yours would too if we could feel it," I said easily.

He was an alpha werewolf, after all.

He made a noncommittal noise.

"Where's Bailey?" Liam asked casually.

"On the beach." Harv's response was instant, and his recovery was terrible. "I, uh, assume. She said she usually spends her evenings watching the sunset."

"You guys don't need to lie about your relationship," I said. "Liam doesn't care."

Harv blinked once.

Then again.

And a third time.

He finally looked at Liam. “You know?”

“Of course I know. I’m not blind. You’ve been together for decades.”

Harvey dragged a hand through his overgrown hair. “I told her you wouldn’t mind. She was convinced you’d be worried that we wanted to take over the resort or something.”

Liam lifted an eyebrow. “How would you keep the wards going?”

“That’s what I said.” Harvey gestured toward Liam. “Are you opposed to us sealing a mate bond?”

“Why would I give a damn? It’s your life.”

“Thank fuck.” Harv stood up abruptly. “She’s going to want to hear it from you. I’ll bring her back.”

He moved through the wards much faster on his way out. His mind was obviously more occupied with what we’d discussed than it was with my magic.

I yawned. “How far do you think she is?”

“Probably a few minutes down the beach. Or less.”

Sure enough, they were back two minutes later.

Bailey looked nervous, but Harv was holding her hand firmly.

After we rehashed the fact that Liam didn’t care about their mate bond twice, just to convince Bailey, the couple took off. His arm was around her waist, her side pressed tightly to his as she leaned against him.

“Think they’re going to be mates by tomorrow?” Liam asked me.

“Definitely.”

“Think we’re going to be mates by tomorrow?” There was something almost playful in his voice.

I loved it.

“Depends how you play your cards.”

“Does it?” He pulled me closer, and I leaned against him. With his arms wrapped around me like that, I felt blissful.

“Mmhm.”

He pulled me onto his lap, his arms still around me as he held me close. His nose brushed my throat as he pressed his face to it, and I closed my eyes.

Between the ocean and the man behind me, I didn't think life could get any better.

"Which card should I play?" Liam asked. "The one where I kiss you until you're dizzy?" His lips met my throat lightly. "Or the one where I slip my hand under your swimsuit so I can feel your slickness on my fingers?"

He ran his hand lightly over my core, with the bikini bottoms still covering me. "Maybe I should go with the one where I kneel in front of you and eat you while you come over and over again."

Yes.

Just yes. To everything.

"Maybe you should play all of them," I said.

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“I could.” He kissed my throat again. “But out here, anyone could see us.”

Thrill and nerves raced down my spine. “You know, I’m pretty uncomfortable in this coverup. Let me just...” I maneuvered it over my head and tossed it aside before sitting down on Liam’s lap in my bikini. “That’s better.”

“Much.” He dragged a hand over my bare abdomen before grabbing my hips and pulling me backward.

His bare skin felt amazing against mine, one of his hands resting on my abdomen and the other on one of my thighs.

I tilted my head sideways, giving him better access to my throat as he kissed and licked his way down it slowly.

“If I was a dragon, I’d bite you here,” he murmured.

“Do you want to try it?”

“No. I don’t have that instinct.” He nipped me lightly. “I just want to fuck you.”

“We’re on the same page there.”

He dragged a hand over my core again, touching me lightly through my swimsuit.

“Think you can be quiet?”

“Yes.”

He slid his fingers beneath the waistband and dragged them over my clit.

I bit my cheek to stop myself from moaning at his touch.

“You’re fucking soaked,” he said into my ear, his forehead pressed to the side of my head.

“It’s because of heat,” I breathed.

“I’ll make you this wet daily.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Fucking count on it.”

My hips rocked, and I sucked in a breath as he dragged his fingers around my clit slowly.

“Easy, Clove. Anyone could walk by, and your pleasure is for me alone to see.”

“Maybe we should go inside.”

“After you come on my hand.”

I hissed out a breath, biting my cheek on another moan. “Thought I was going to do that on your cock.”

“Many times.” He nipped my throat again, then sucked lightly. “After I’ve gotten you ready.”

“You say that like I’m a—Steam.” I choked on his nickname as he filled me slowly

with three of his fingers.

It was more than I'd ever taken before, and it was fucking huge.

Almost as big as his cock.

Getting me ready suddenly made a lot more sense.

“Are you going to squeeze my cock like this?” He sucked my throat again. The skin was so sensitive there it might've been bruised, but I didn't give a damn.

His thumb teased the side of my clit lightly, and a strangled cry escaped me.

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“Stay quiet or this ends, Clove.” Liam kissed my throat lower. “And neither of us wants that.”

I made a desperate noise that might have resembled an agreement.

With a hand on my hip, he lifted me off his lap so my weight was on my knees. The motion changed the angle of his fingers, giving him more space too.

My knees trembled a little, and he slowly pulled out before filling me again while he continued rubbing the side of my clit lightly.

I gasped out a curse, hips rocking as a soft, sudden climax rolled through me.

Fuck, that felt good.

I sat back down on his lap, panting as I recovered from the pleasure.

It wasn't enough.

I wanted more.

“Let's go inside,” I said, chest still rising and falling quickly.

Liam rumbled, sliding his hand out of my swimsuit bottoms slowly. “You sure?”

“Definitely. Come on.” I stood up, and he moved with me, hands on my hips.

A surprised laugh escaped me when he scooped me up honeymoon-style.

“What are you doing?”

“The guy did this in your romance movie.” He flashed me a small grin.

He was so freaking sexy.

And he was mine.

I’d never wanted a man before... but now that I had one, I was going to enjoy the hell out of it.

“You watched that?”

“On and off.”

He pushed the door open with his elbow and arm, hauling me in. It shut hard behind us, but my ass was already on the edge of the mattress, my thighs parted and my swimsuit bottoms below my knees.

I gasped as Liam’s mouth met my clit, licking me slow and rough.

My fingers tangled in his hair, my grip desperate.

He dragged me slowly back to the edge—then met my gaze from between my thighs.

“Ready, Clove?”

“Just fuck me,” I breathed.

His expression was wicked as he stood up, dropping his board shorts and reaching back to undo my bikini top. “After I take you, we’ll be insatiable for at least a few days. It could last two weeks.”

“So I can finally get you out of my system?”

“Not likely.” He pushed me lightly, and I dropped to my back on the mattress. My legs were still dangling off the ledge, but I didn’t care.

Liam positioned himself over me, his eyes blazing. The fire that had been flickering in them since we met would go out after our bond was sealed, and I looked forward to seeing him without it.

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“You might not believe me, but I am glad it’s you,” Liam said, dragging his fingers through my hair as he lowered his mouth to mine and kissed me hard.

I kissed him back, tasting myself on his tongue before pulling away and meeting his gaze again. “I believe you, Steam.”

His eyes blazed, and the head of his cock met my entrance. My mind went silent as he lined himself up with me and thrust lightly.

My lips parted as the tip of his erection stretched me. I went still, and he did too. Our eyes were still locked.

“You okay?” His voice was low.

“Perfect,” I breathed.

Liam gave me a few more seconds to adjust before thrusting in deeper.

My head tipped back, my breathing shallow.

He was huge, and hot, and... incredible.

The feeling was surreal.

“Clove,” he growled a warning.

“I’m good. Really good.” I hooked a leg around his ass and tried to pull him closer, to

take him deeper. He didn't let me move him, though.

"It's tight but feels amazing. Stop waiting," I said, trying again to drag him closer.

He didn't let me, but after a few more seconds, thrust a little deeper.

A moan escaped me, and that must've encouraged him because he filled me the rest of the way in one smooth, slow motion.

My grip on him was iron as I breathed through the sudden fullness.

Liam was everywhere.

He was everything.

And he was mine.

He wasn't what I'd wanted when I came to the resort, but he was what I'd needed, and more.

Emotion swelled in my chest, and when my grip loosened, Liam finally pulled out a little and thrust back in.

I gasped.

Arched.

Moaned.

The sensations were insane, and I never wanted them to end.

Pressure built inside me with every slow, shallow motion until I came with a scream. Liam lost control completely, driving into me harder and rougher as he went over the edge with me. The way his cock throbbed inside me with his climax dragged my pleasure out for what felt like forever.

Magic blazed through me, and I felt the bond between us click into place as if it was a real, tangible chain.

The fire in my veins had been simmering since heat started—but now, it was at a full-blown boil. Desperate need took me over completely, and it did the same to Liam.

As soon as our pleasure ended, he was thrusting slowly again, his eyes burning into my soul.

We didn't speak, but we didn't need to.

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The passion and magic between us said plenty.

fifteen

SAGE

An entire week passed in a blur of heat.

There were endless amounts of intense sex.

Delicious chocolates, drinks, and food were delivered to our doorstep.

In the moments we weren't screwing or eating, we were showering together.

Or cuddling on the couch, with me on Liam's lap while I sketched out ideas for runes that would make the resort even more secure.

Or making pancakes together.

Liam really did suck at cooking, but he tried. I gave him points for that, at least.

It was bliss.

But honestly, when the last of his fire finally left my veins, I felt better.

I was still warmer than I remembered being before, but I was chalking that up to the fact that we lived on an island. What was the alternative?

“It feels so good not to be sweating,” I said as we made our way down the beach. It was my first foray out of the bungalow in a week, and it was nice to get out. Liam had gone flying for an hour that morning, so he’d already been outside, but I hadn’t.

Hopefully, we could maintain some of our bliss even without heat to boost it. Liam hadn’t acted any different since the magic faded, so that seemed like a good omen.

“I can imagine.”

I flashed him a look. “No, you can’t.”

“Alright, I can’t. But when your magic got me back in the sky, I probably felt similarly.” He gestured to the chain around his neck.

“Fair point.”

“Any response from your mom yet?” he asked,

My stomach clenched. “No. It’s only been an hour since I texted her though, so I’m hoping she’s just in the middle of something.”

It had only been two days since we last messaged each other, and everything had been fine then.

Now, I was trying not to worry.

Despite our planning, my mom and I had always known that the coven might try to use her against me when the truth about what I was came out.

“If they threaten her...” I trailed off.

“We’ll kill them,” Liam said simply.

I knew him well enough that I should’ve expected that answer.

It wasn’t that simple for me, though. I had always known the witches would want me dead for what I was, so I kept some distance between us, but they had still been family to me before they knew.

But if they were willing to hurt my mom...

Well, the situation was a nightmare.

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I'd figure something out, though. I would have to.

Liam and I spent the rest of the morning in the water. He was trying to teach me to surf, and though I was absolutely shitty at it, we had a good time. We both ended up laughing far too much.

The worry about my mom lingered, but I pushed it aside.

She was going to be fine.

I had to believe that.

I still hadn't gotten a message back when we made it home that night.

"Any word from the security team?" I asked, curling up on the couch. My hair hung over my shoulders, damp from our shower. Though it was slowly soaking my tank top, I couldn't have cared less.

"They still haven't seen any sign of the witches." Liam pulled me onto his lap, holding me close. There was nothing sexual about the contact, and I appreciated it more because of that.

He just didn't want me to feel alone.

"If they have her, we'll hear from them soon," I said quietly.

"We'll wait up as long as we need to."

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for being your mate, Clove. I didn’t exactly give you much choice in the matter.”

My lips curved upward just a tiny bit. “I’m glad you didn’t.”

“So am I.”

Liam and I waited on the couch, talking quietly about the possibilities until exhaustion won out around 3 AM.

The ringing of my phone woke us up.

My eyes were blurry as I grabbed it, taking in the unknown number on the screen.

I looked at Liam, meeting his hazel eyes in the room’s darkness. He gently took the phone, putting it on speaker as he pressed the button to answer.

He didn’t say hello.

We both knew that wasn’t necessary.

“We have Tess,” Hattie said into the phone.

My stomach clenched. I’d been almost positive that was the case, but it was still awful to hear.

“What do you want?” I asked.

We all knew the answer.

Me.

They wanted me.

“Destroy the resort’s wards, and we’ll let her live. You have thirty minutes,” Hattie said, before the line went dead.

My throat swelled.

“They know I won’t be able to rebuild them,” I whispered. “If I take the wards down, they win. They’ll kill me.”

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“They won’t get to you. I’m here,” Liam said firmly. “My magic will keep you alive, and you’ll rebuild your own version of the wards.”

“You don’t know that.” I squeezed my eyes shut, leaning against the couch cushions. “I don’t know if they’ll even really let her go.”

“I can ask Harv or Rafael to meet the witches. They’re both strong and have connections. If the witches killed either of them, there would be massive consequences.”

“I can’t risk someone else’s life to save mine, Liam. They have mates. Friends. Families.”

“And you have me.” Liam’s voice was low, but there was no room to disagree. I couldn’t, even if I wanted to. Our mate bond may have started in a strange way, but it was real. We had each other, no matter what else happened.

“I’ll meet them at the edge of the wards,” Liam finally said. There was no question that he didn’t like the idea. Hell, maybe he even hated it.

“You don’t have to do that,” I said quietly.

“Clove, you’re mine. That makes her family. I’ll get a security team to protect you. We can stay on the phone while you takedown the wards and they free your mother. As soon as I have her, I’ll fly her into the resort. I can get to you faster than any of the witches could.”

I bit my lip. “I don’t know.”

Liam took my face in his hands. “We’re going to make it through this.”

“You can’t know that.”

Instead of arguing, Liam kissed me hard and fast.

If we were going with his plan, which was our only real option, we needed to get moving. Immediately.

“Don’t kill them unless you have to,” I warned Liam, standing up.

There was no time to change, so I’d be breaking the resort open in my pajamas.

Yay.

At least I wasn’t sweating anymore.

“I won’t. You’d better watch your back. If anything happens to you...” The way his eyes darkened as he trailed off told me there would be carnage.

Or ash, at least.

I nodded.

On that subject, there was no point in trying to change his mind. If the other witches hurt me, they would burn.

Everything else might too.

Liam made a quick call to the security team. The Villin brothers were sleeping, so whoever was in charge of their overnight team answered, and promised to have protection meet me at the anchor in ten minutes.

It wouldn't take me that long to get there, but I needed to wait until Liam met up with the witches before doing anything permanent anyway.

My heartbeat picked up as Liam threw his phone and his shorts in a bag. I knew he would abandon both after my mom was safe, so he could get to me as fast as possible. Until then, he needed a way to stay in contact.

He gave me one more hard, fast kiss before warning, "Keep your phone on, and don't leave the bungalow until you hear from me."

I nodded.

"It might be too early, but I love you, Clove. Be careful." After a final kiss, he disappeared out the door.

My heart was officially pounding.

Love was... a lot.

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But I was going to have to think about it later, because right now, that was the last thing I needed on my mind.

I was about to risk our lives to save my mother, and the witches could still kill her.

The next five minutes passed slower than I ever could've imagined. Eventually, my phone rang again.

I didn't breathe as I answered Liam's call.

"Hey, Clove. I'm with your mom and five other witches right now. I'm sure there are others sneaking around, but she's fine," he said.

My eyes stung. "Can you put her on the phone so I know it's her?"

"Sure. Sage wants to make sure it's you, Tess." There was a quiet noise of motion before my mom's voice met my ears.

"Hey, sweetie. I'm okay," my mom said calmly. "You don't need to take down the resort's wards. I'd rather make sure you?—"

The stinging in my eyes morphed to burning at the sound of her voice, even though someone took the phone from her to cut her off.

"You're down to fifteen minutes, Sage," another woman said flatly. It was Jill, the coven's most powerful charm witch. She was our unofficial leader, though she was too abrasive to be well-liked.

More motion sounded in my ear, and Liam was the one who spoke next. “It’s me again. I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Ready for what?” one of the other witches demanded, her voice muffled with her distance from Liam.

None of them would dare try to steal the phone from him. They were far too smart for that, and he was far too big.

“I’m on my way.” I said, slipping out of the bungalow.

My gaze scanned the resort around me, looking for anything abnormal or out of place.

For once, the ocean’s consistent roll felt foreboding, not relaxing. Every sound had me on edge, waiting for something to go wrong or someone to jump out at me.

“Where are you?” Liam asked.

“Just reached the path,” I said softly.

“Good. Anyone outside?”

“No.”

“She had better be taking down the wards,” Jill snapped.

“Bitch,” I whispered.

Liam gave a rumble of agreement. To anyone who didn’t know him, it would’ve sounded threatening.

“I see the security guys,” I said. “Three of them. They’re wearing the usual uniform. One of them just waved at me. I recognize him, so they should be legitimate.”

They looked threatening, as usual, but that was kind of the point.

“Give the phone to whoever is in charge. Please,” Liam said.

I put the call on speaker and looked between the guys. I didn’t feel like it mattered who I picked, so I handed the device to the guy who had waved. The one I recognized.

“I’m starting now,” I told Liam. “It won’t take long. Let me know if I need to stop.”

“Will do.”

My heart was still pounding as I took a seat in the same bench I had spent countless hours sitting on. Pulling up the anchor and looking at the sphere full of centuries-old magic was instinctual.

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The thought of destroying all the work, time, and brilliance that had gone into the resort's wards made me nauseous.

Hell, thinking about destroying all that lovedid too. Liam's mother had created those spells to protect him. She'd blown up her life and ultimately been killed because of the love that still existed in those wards.

The magic had history in ways I couldn't even fathom, and I was just supposed to destroy it?

Fuck, that would make me feel like a monster.

"Are you sure, Liam?" I asked quietly. "Your mom created this magic for you. If I take it down, there will be no way to recover it."

"Clove, I don't give a damn about the magic. You're what matters. She would understand."

"Alright. Last chance to change your mind."

"Do it."

I nodded and took a deep breath in.

I had no idea what was going to happen when I was done, but I was going to find out.

I pulled a pin from my hair and focused on the bubble spell. With the sharp end, I dug

into the skin on the back of my hand.

And finally, I drew a single rune.

Unravel.

It wasn't complicated, but it didn't need to be.

One by one, the magic untied every sealing and strengthening rune I'd placed on the bubble spell. It picked up speed as it continued, and I felt my nose sting at the sudden, harsh drain on my magic.

"She's bleeding," I heard one of the security guards say to Liam.

He growled back, "Where? How badly?"

"Her nose. It's slow."

I didn't hear whatever he said next. My gaze was fixed on the magic in front of me.

The final strengthening rune on the spell finally vanished, and the bubble popped.

My heart beat in my ears. Sweat dripped down my back as the rest of the spells followed. They were all tied to the bubble, and without it, my rune tore through them like tissue paper.

I was breathing heavily when the final spell disintegrated. My mind was fuzzy and my emotions were a mess as I watched the sphere that had held them fade too, undone by a simple piece of magic.

Vaguely, I noticed commotion behind me.

Liam was snarling something on the other side of the phone call.

I was once again wiped out by my magic, and my mind wasn't working like it should've been as a result.

Rising shakily to my feet, I forced myself to push through the exhaustion. Everything swayed a little, but my heart flew into my throat when I saw two of the security guards on the ground, unconscious. My phone was on the dirt beside them, the screen lit up with an incoming call.

The third guard's hand landed on my shoulder. When my gaze jerked up and met his, his eyes gleamed with magic.

One of the witches was controlling him. Probably with a charm.

Fuck.

There would be no reasoning with him or changing his mind. The only thing that mattered to the witches was the magic literally embedded in my blood, powering me in ways theirs never would.

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I didn't register the knife in his hand until it was in my chest, and I was staring down at the hilt protruding from my heart.

And suddenly, my entire world was engulfed in flames.

sixteen

LIAM

The moment the wards came down, the witches exploded into action.

One of them shoved Tess into my arms while another threw her hands up in the air. Spells burst into being, winding around us.

I shifted, snarling into the phone as one of Sage's security guards yelled something.

Tess grabbed the phone off the ground and yelled something back, but the line was already dead.

The magic still weaving into place around us was already really fucking strong.

There wasn't any time to waste.

I shoved Tess to the ground with one of my talons and channeled every ounce of energy I possessed into the flames blazing over my wings. I'd never tried to destroy magic before, but there was no other option at the moment.

At first, the fire just burned.

But when I pushed it harder, it finally started to blaze through the power around me, slowly destroying and consuming the magic.

“What the hell?” one of the witches breathed.

“Keep going!” another one screamed.

My fire turned the magic to ash, and I left Tess safely on the sidewalk as I surged toward the other witches.

Sage had asked me not to kill anyone, but that wasn’t going to happen.

They were fucking dead. Other than her mom, of course.

None of them had made a run toward the resort, so they must’ve had others headed for my mate. There wasn’t time to deal with them the way they deserved, so I just slammed into them.

Their bodies were ash moments later.

I looked at Tess, but she waved me toward the resort. “Find Sage! I’ll go inside!”

Leaving her behind wasn’t the best idea, but I didn’t have time to try to regain control of the flames blazing over my wings so I could take her with me.

She would be safe in the tower.

That was going to have to be enough.

I launched myself into the sky, my eyes scanning the resort for signs of another witch.

When I saw one, I dove down and killed her the same way I had the others.

They were here for my mate. They would all fucking die.

seventeen

SAGE

The firearound me faded quickly, and metal clanged against the bench.

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I stared down at the dagger in shock.

There was no blood on it, but it had been in my heart a moment earlier. I knew it had.

I looked at my chest, and found my skin bare.

I had definitely been on fire.

Definitely.

And I'd been stabbed.

Unquestionably.

So why did I feel fine?

My gaze jerked to the man who had been in front of me. The one who stabbed me.

He was gone.

Dead, on the sidewalk. I looked away quickly rather than taking in the burns on his skin.

The wind picked up suddenly, and I looked up at the sky as Liam dove toward me in his phoenix form. He shifted just as he landed, and surged toward me, grabbing my face.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“Someone tried to kill me, and I think I burst into flames,” I said, a little dazed. “Is my mom okay? You’re steaming a lot.”

“I’m still burning, and she’s fine,” Liam growled. “The rest of the witches are dead.”

“Cool.”

His eyes were narrow as he watched me.

I swayed a little. “I think I might actually pass out this time.”

Liam’s magic flared on his hands, and the delicious warmth of his healing magic licked my skin.

I closed my eyes as a feeling of security and a burst of energy replaced the overwhelming fear and exhaustion.

“Better?” Liam asked me.

“Much.” My words were still quiet. “Even if you killed a few of the top witches, the coven isn’t going to back down. I need to start the new wards as soon as possible. I think I can make a passable bubble spell, with a couple of hours and a couple of plants. Adding runes to it would be the easiest way to protect the island.”

“Alright. Where do you want to put the spell?”

My eyes went to the bench.

It had seen a lot of magic... and history.

But if I was going to choose to spend a ton of time somewhere, I didn't want it to be on a hard bench in the forest.

I wanted it to be in the comfort of my own home.

“In the bungalow,” I admitted.

Liam agreed.

His arm went around my waist, but I only leaned against him a little when we walked down the path and back toward our house.

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“Are you sure my mom’s okay?” I asked.

“Positive.”

“Alright. Let’s go home.”

Liam kissed my forehead as we continued on our way.

When we made it back, he helped me settle on the couch. Stepping outside, he grabbed clippings from a few plants around the outside of the building while I tried to clear my mind. My thoughts were a mess, and exhaustion weighed heavily on me. Liam’s magic had helped, but he couldn’t create this spell.

I was the only one who could.

Closing my eyes, I focused my magic.

I’d spent so much time with Liam’s mother’s bubble spell that recreating one the same size wasn’t as impossible as it would’ve been otherwise. I was definitely copying her magic, but considering her son was also protected by it, I knew I’d have her blessing.

The first brick was the hardest.

It took a serious amount of effort to wrangle my magic, blood, and the anchor plants to do what I wanted. Building magic in that way was far from my specialty.

But after my past few weeks spent focused completely on spells crafted by an expert, it was doable.

The second piece of the wall went much faster.

The third was faster than that.

With every additional bit of magic and the spell, it all came together just a little easier.

Brick by brick, I slowly built a bubble ward like the one Liam's mother had left.

Sweat didn't drip down my back.

I sipped water when I needed to, and ate when Liam put small snacks in my hand, wordlessly telling me I needed to eat them.

My mom's whispers almost brought my entire spell down when my eyes started stinging.

She was there. She was fine.

And she had a better chance of staying that way if I focused on my magic until my spell was finished.

So, I built the wall.

Brick.

By brick.

By brick.

It was the middle of the night when I finally slumped against the back of the couch, panting with the effort of sealing the magic with one final piece.

It was done.

It wasn't going to keep anyone out yet... but it was over.

And for the moment, that was enough.

"That was incredible," my mom exclaimed, dropping onto the couch beside me and throwing her arms around me.

My eyes stung again as I hugged her too. The feeling of her beside me was absolutely surreal.

“You’re okay,” I said.

“And you’re amazing, sweetie!” Mom squeezed me so insanely tight. “How did you learn to make a spell like that?”

“I had a pretty good teacher.” My gaze met Liam’s over my mom’s shoulder, and I saw emotion in his eyes. He knew I was talking about his mom. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“So am I.” She squeezed me tighter before finally releasing me and pulling away enough to give me a bright smile.

“I want to hear about everything that happened since the last time we talked, but I need to make sure the resort is secure first,” I said, looking at Liam again. “Any sign of the coven?”

“No. I sent them a warning, though,” he said.

“What kind of warning?”

“The video of you being stabbed and my magic healing you. The cameras they had trained on the bench at the anchor came in handy.”

So they knew killing me wasn’t going to be easy. At all.

“Don’t forget the messages,” my mother added.

“What messages?”

Liam crossed the room and picked his phone up off the coffee table. He pulled up a group text thread, and handed it to me. Other than him, I could see all three of the Villin brothers in the group. Our demon security team was involved, apparently.

Though I didn't recognize any of the other phone numbers, I knew the area codes.

Most belonged to my coven.

It wasn't hard to imagine that he could get the numbers for the most powerful of us.

The video of me was the first message, followed by two more.

Liam

If you ever try to kill another blood witch, I will personally hunt you down and end everyone involved.

Sebastian Villin

We will have our connections watching and listening. There are few things more disgusting than murdering your own children, and we won't stand for it. Change your traditions, or we will become enemies. I'm sure you've heard how well that would work out for you.

No one had responded, unsurprisingly.

They were probably scrambling, though. Liam had told me that the demons were known for hunting supernaturals who hurt humans, so it wasn't a stretch to imagine them trying to protect young blood witches.

My throat swelled at the thought that maybe the next girl wouldn't have to spend her life hiding her magic and fearing for her life the way I had.

I set the phone down, and Liam took a seat beside me on the couch. His arm went over my shoulder, and I leaned against his side.

It definitely didn't surprise me that he was taking a stand for blood witches. We were rare, but there was a good chance that any daughter he and I had could be a witch herself.

And if she was, there was a really good chance that she would be a blood witch.

My mom's gaze flickered between us, a look of adoration in her gaze. "You guys are cute together."

"Thanks." I gave her a quick smile.

Then yawned, widely.

"I can get coffee and more food," mom offered. "The Villins showed me their shop when I was in the tower earlier. It would be fun to go back and talk to them again."

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My mom was possibly the most social person I'd ever met, so I had to imagine she was ready to talk to someone other than Liam. My phoenix was great, but he wasn't chatty.

"That would be perfect. Thanks, mom."

She smiled. "Text me what you want."

"Alright." I gave her one last hug before she headed out.

When the bungalow's door was shut behind her, I leaned against Liam's chest and closed my eyes. "Are your ears still functioning?"

"Barely."

I smiled.

He pulled me a little closer. "You weren't kidding about witch stereotypes. She's more different from my mom than I would've ever imagined."

"She'd be happy talking and laughing all day every day," I agreed. "She'll keep making potions, but she'll want to find a place to do it that's really social here to keep her from going crazy without other witches around."

"I can find her a spot to work near a restaurant or something."

"That would be nice."

Liam kissed my temple. “After watching that video... I think some of my fire must’ve stayed in your veins when heat ended. I’m so fucking glad you’re okay.”

“Me too. Would’ve been shitty to die right after claiming my mate.”

“Is that what happened when we sealed our bond, Clove? You claimed me?”

“Mmhm.” My lips curved upward at the rumble in his chest.

“Damn, I’m lucky.”

“Yep.” I closed my eyes. “You’re sure there are no other witches in the resort?”

“Positive. I torched too many of them. They’re probably regrouping.”

There was a good chance he was right.

“Do you know where my notebook is?” I checked.

Liam leaned over the table, picking up both my grimoire and the notebook on top of it that I’d been using for brainstorming.

I hadn’t noticed them there, but he’d obviously realized I was going to need them.

I’d have to come up with a hell of a lot more rune ideas now that mine was going to be the only magic protecting the resort, but I could handle it.

Probably.

Hopefully, at least.

And hey, even if I couldn't handle it, I'd try to have fun with it.

"You can tear out the pages with information about my mom's spells and start fresh," Liam remarked, as I opened the grimoire and flipped through the first few pages.

"Are you kidding? I wasn't joking about learning from the best. Her wards may as well have been legendary. I'm going to need the information from them to come up with decent protective magic of my own."

"She was pretty incredible," he admitted.

"I wish I had the chance to meet her."

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“So do I. Though I have a feeling you would’ve been weirded out by her quietness.”

I smiled. “Nah, I’d get it. Spell witches need peace. You’d totally be one of them too, if not for all your fire.” I nudged his side playfully.

“Probably. I’d rather have you crack me than deal with any more peace, though.” He tickled my hip, making me laugh as I jerked away from him.

“Peace gets old.”

“It does.”

I met his gaze, and found his eyes soft. He wasn’t smiling, but he was happy. I’d spent enough time with him to see that loud and clear. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad it’s you too, Liam. And I love you.”

Emotion flooded his eyes. “It’s worth a whole fucking lot.” He lowered his lips to mine and kissed me.

Rather than letting it get intense, he pulled away and kissed my forehead too. “What kind of rune are you going to start with?”

I turned to a blank page in my grimoire and grabbed my pencil. “A simple one. Any rune big enough to affect the entire island is going to cost an assload of energy, which I’m lacking right now. Complex runes would take more.”

I sketched out the simple arches and lines that made up one of the first runes any

witch learned.

Stop.

“That’s the same rune you put on our door in the tower,” Liam said, studying it closely. “What is it?”

“A command. It stops whatever you apply it to in its tracks. You can use it to lock a door... or to stop anyone from coming through a bubble spell. And other things, of course. But that’s what I’m using it for.”

“So anyone who tries to come in will basically hit a wall?”

“Yeah. I’ll adjust the rune over the next few days, and add others of course, as we figure out exactly what we want to happen when someone new gets here. I just don’t have the power left to make something more complicated.”

“If it’ll keep the witches out, that’s all that matters,” Liam agreed.

“What happened when you went to meet my mom?” I asked. “I don’t think you told me.”

He gave me a quick summary. Though he offered an apology for killing the witches who’d attacked him, I told him not to feel bad.

They deserved it.

They had literally tried to kill me, and they had to have realized death was a large possibility when they attacked a phoenix.

After Liam finished his explanation, I showed him the rune ideas I’d sketched out

earlier. He'd seen them before, but now that we were actually discussing necessary protection for the island, everything was more important.

So, we workshopped my ideas without deciding on anything.

When my mom came back with coffee and food—and a smile that told me she'd spent at least a while chatting with someone—we all talked while we ate.

Mom was always friendly enough that awkward conversations weren't a thing, so it was a good time.

She told us excitedly that the Villins' mates had offered to let her manage their coffee shop, as well as sell her potions there, after learning about her career with the coven. They were going to talk about ideas, but they were thinking about calling it Coffee & Toffee & Potions, which I loved.

It didn't surprise me in the slightest that she'd already started forging her own place in the Supernatural Resort after less than twenty-four hours. My mom was a badass in her own cheerful, friendly way.

The caffeine helped a little with my energy, and when we were done eating, mom gave me one last hug before heading to the room she'd been given in the tower.

I returned to my bubble spell.

It was strange to think of it as mine, but it was.

I wasn't as weak as I'd always had to pretend—and now, any witch who came to the resort would see that.

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The rune took hours, but when I finally collapsed against the couch cushions in relief, I felt incredible.

The resort was safe again.

And I was completely and utterly exhausted.

Liam lifted me onto his lap, and I rested all of my weight against him.

“Can you have someone check to see if it works?” I mumbled. “It should stop people from leaving from our side, too.”

“Of course.”

He made a quick call to Harvey.

I dozed against Liam’s chest while Harv and Bailey made their way to the edge of my bubble spell.

I woke up when Liam lifted me off the couch as he stood.

“Is the spell working?” I asked.

“It’s perfect. They couldn’t get through. I had Harv ram it a couple times, just to see if he could affect it, and it didn’t budge.”

More relief had me sighing. “Good.”

And I promptly fell back asleep.

eighteen

SAGE

The next few weeks were a blur.

Liam and I focused on the runes that made up the resort's main wards. It was a hell of a lot of work, but I enjoyed it.

I decided I'd make a few secondary groups as well, for extra protection. But it would be months, if not years, before I got to that.

Ultimately, the resort was already safe enough that I didn't need to spend all of my time working on the magic.

Just most of it.

The Villin brothers and their mates stayed on the island as guests, since there was no longer any need for a security team. We hadn't heard a peep from the witches after Liam and the demons threatened them.

I spent every morning chatting with my mom over sugary caffeine in Coffee & Toffee & Potions. And every evening on the porch with Liam, watching the sun set over the ocean. Usually, with fruity drinks. I was developing an affinity for them, and Liam was happy to join me in it.

I knew he liked sugar more than he had realized.

Everyone did.

Not the healthiest of addictions, but it could've been worse. There were some dangerous drugs that affected supernaturals, after all.

Weeks turned to months, and I finally finished the main set of runes.

"How's your mom?" Liam asked as he dragged me down the sidewalk and toward the beach.

"She's thriving, as you know."

He made a noise of agreement.

My mom had admitted to me a few weeks ago that she had a lot more fun living at the resort with other kinds of supernaturals than with the coven. I had been worried about her giving up her life, so I was relieved to hear that.

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“Now, we just need to get you there too,” Liam said.

I flashed him a look of surprise. “What do you mean? I’m totally thriving. Have you seen my wards? They’re fucking gorgeous, Liam. And I’m finally making plans for the first secondary set, so?—”

“We don’t need secondary wards right this second, Clove. You need to relax.”

“Did I just hear our resident workaholic tell you to relax?” Bailey called out. We stopped to wait for them, and she and Harv caught up to us easily. Their legs were longer than mine.

They were holding hands, and had been inseparable since sealing their mate bond. I didn’t blame them. They had hidden their connection for way too long, and had lost time to make up on.

“You did,” I said. “He’s going crazy, right?”

“Yes, I’m out of my mind for wanting my mate to slow down and enjoy life a little more,” Liam drawled.

Bailey blinked.

Harv did too.

I just rolled my eyes at him. “I enjoy life plenty.”

“Did he just tell a joke?” Bailey asked.

“I think he just used sarcasm,” Harv said. “Pinch me.”

She did.

Then she looked at me. “Since when does Liam joke?”

I shrugged. “Since me.”

Bailey blinked again. “Damn.”

“If you didn’t believe in fate before...” Harv trailed off, nudging his mate’s arm.

“No kidding,” she agreed.

“We’re going surfing,” Liam said. “Whether she likes it or not.”

With that, he threw me over his shoulder and carried me down the beach.

“I’m terrible at surfing!” I protested.

“You were making progress during our lesson before the wards came down.”

“Barely.”

“I’ll teach you. It’ll be fun.”

“Promise?” I checked.

“Yes, Clove.” He squeezed my ass. “After you’ve spent a few weeks getting damn

good at surfing, I'll let you think about the secondary wards again."

"You'll let me?" I tossed back.

"Yup." He didn't bother pretending he wasn't being bossy.

And I didn't bother pretending I didn't like it.

We both knew I didn't have a problem with him taking charge.

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“I told the Sky brothers I’d make them necklaces so they can fly without their mates when they need to. Am I allowed to work on those?” I asked.

“Nope. The dragons can wait.”

“You’re an asshole,” I said with a sigh.

I wasn’t really disappointed.

Yeah, I wanted to work, but I knew where he was coming from. And I did want to enjoy life, even though I didn’t want to surf.

“Never said I wasn’t.” He squeezed my ass again. “You’ll like surfing.”

“You’ll surf circles around me.”

“If I was a kelpie. My magic doesn’t work that way.”

“It was a figure of speech.”

“I’ll take it easy on you.”

I sighed again, more dramatically, and he smacked my ass. I couldn’t help but laugh at that.

My second surfing lesson with Liam ended up going surprisingly well. I was still absolute shit at it by the time we made it out of the water, but I didn’t mind.

All of the falling, struggling, and swimming was exhausting in a good way. I hadn't realized how tired I was of being wiped out by my magic, and it felt nice to wear myself out through physical activity and sunshine for once.

"My sunburn is going to be so bad," I laughed, feeling twenty pounds lighter as Liam and I walked across the beach, headed for the bungalow.

"I'll rub it better."

I snorted, and he flashed me a small grin.

"It's a damn good thing supernaturals can't get skin cancer," I said. "And that we heal fast. Can you imagine being burnt for days like some humans?"

"No. Sounds horrible."

I made a noise of agreement.

Liam opened the bungalow's door, and we sprayed our feet off with the hose before making our way inside.

"I'll make pancakes after we shower," he said, locking the door behind us.

"I'll make them. You can watch."

We reached the bathroom, and Liam turned the shower on. We were both still wearing our swimsuits, and definitely sandy. "It almost sounds like you don't believe in my cooking skills, Clove."

"I said no such thing... but I don't."

Liam didn't bother closing the shower door as he grabbed me by my hips and dragged me beneath the water. I laughed as he nipped and kissed my throat, tickling my sides with his bare chest to my back.

"Take it back," he warned, his voice growly but playful.

"Or what?"

"Or I'll make you." He grabbed my center with one thick, hot hand, grinding the base of his palm against my clit slowly.

"I'd like to see you try," I breathed.

He pressed harder against my clit as he walked me slowly to the wall of the shower, pinning my front to the cool tile. With his free hand, he undid the double-knot on the back of my bikini top, freeing my breasts.

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His palm skimmed them before he tugged the fabric over my head, still working my clit slow and rough through my swimsuit bottoms.

“What are you waiting for?” I asked, my cheek pressed against the tile.

“You’re supposed to take it back.”

“You know I can’t do that, Steam.”

“Then I guess we’ll stay like this forever.” He nipped my throat again, and I shuddered.

My body rocked in response to the way he teased my clit and rolled my hardening nipples between his fingers.

I couldn’t take it back, of course.

That would put an end to the game.

And though I wanted an end... maybe I wasn’t done yet.

I pushed my ass backward, and he was the one who growled when I ground against his erection. The motion bought me enough space to turn around, forcing him to move his hand away from my core.

Sinking to my knees, I untied his board shorts quickly and tugged them down his gigantic thighs.

He stared down at me with hot eyes when I took the base of him in my hand, leaving my mouth just a breath away from the head of his cock.

I met his gaze. "Tell me I'm right."

"You're right."

"What am I right about?"

"I fucking suck at cooking." He slipped his hand into my tangled hair and eased my mouth closer. "You win."

"What do I win?"

"Anything you want, Clove."

"Hmm." I pretended to consider it before saying, "I want you on our porch tonight, while the sun goes down. Naked on the couch, beneath a blanket."

His eyes blazed. "You want me to fuck you with nothing but a piece of fabric to hide it?"

"Yep." My lip brushed the head of his cock, and it jerked violently.

"Deal." He lightly pulled my head closer, and I wrapped my lips around his erection. The motion earned a fierce growl that made me hot. "Put your hand on your clit and make yourself come while you suck me off."

I moaned, slipping my fingers between my thighs and working myself while I bobbed slowly over his cock, taking him deeper with every motion.

We groaned and gasped together until we both lost control. The taste of his pleasure flooded my mouth as I went over the edge, and it made my climax so much more intense.

He cradled my head as I pulled away, both of us breathing heavily. “You’re too good at that,” he rumbled.

“Guess you taught me too well.”

A sharp laugh escaped him as he helped me to my feet and pulled me to his chest. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He kissed me, not giving a single fuck about the salt of his release on my tongue. I held him close, though I had to end it quickly so I could keep catching my breath.

Liam cleaned both of us quickly—and when we got out and dried off, I realized why he was in a hurry.

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The sun was going down, and I'd propositioned him.

I pulled one of his shirts over my head, leaving my hair in wet, tangled strands that fell around my shoulders and over my tits.

He pressed a kiss to my lips before pushing me toward the back door lightly. "I'll grab a blanket and make our drinks. Wait for me on the couch."

"Yes sir."

He smacked my ass, and I laughed as I padded across the bungalow.

The sunset outside was a masterpiece of bright oranges, reds, and pinks that reflected on the ocean's surface. My feet dangled off the ledge of the couch as I leaned back, taking in the beauty of the island.

I couldn't leave the Supernatural Resort safely, but honestly?

I had no desire to.

The island was gorgeous. The food was amazing. The people were rough around the edges, but we respected each other, and the lifers had accepted me into their fold. The people I loved were there, too.

And how could I ever beat watching a sunset that beautiful on my own porch, with my mate sitting beside me?

I had never even imagined that life could be so good.

Liam came out of the house in a pair of loose shorts, with a blanket in one hand and two tall, skinny glasses in another. I took the drinks while he sat down, and I bit my lip to hide a grin when he dropped his shorts beneath the blanket.

He hauled me onto his lap as soon as he was naked, and I leaned against his chest as he kissed my shoulder lightly.

“You look good in my shirt, Clove. And you feel even better.”

“I can make you feel even better than that,” I murmured.

Liam pulled me further onto his lap, his hand finding my core beneath the blanket. His fingers brushed my clit, and I tipped my head back against his shoulder, biting my lip to keep myself quiet.

“Already soaked, huh?” he murmured against my ear.

“Feeling your erection against my ass tends to do that to me.”

He stroked my clit slowly. “If anyone walks by, say something about the weather.”

If anyone walked by, they’d probably smell exactly what we were doing. But it was rare for anyone to walk by—and if they did, they’d probably catch a whiff and turn the other direction rather than approach.

“Mmkay,” I said instead of pointing any of that out.

His lips brushed the side of my throat, then my shoulder, as he dragged his finger around my clit. “I’m going to fuck you slow tonight, Clove. Through the rest of the

sunset. You can watch the fire in the sky while I drive you insane.”

I barely bit back a moan.

He kept touching me.

Stroking me.

Until I was on the edge of my pleasure—and his fingers stopped moving completely.

“Liam,” I protested.

“You know I’ll take care of you.” He sucked lightly on my throat. His free hand went under my shirt, skimming my breasts. He teased my nipples with his fingers, and my heartbeat picked up.

“Please,” I breathed.

“You don’t beg me, mate.”

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I let out a soft curse when he pinched my clit lightly.

He was right.

I didn't beg him.

We were equals.

I lifted my leg over his other thigh, lining him up where I wanted him before I sat down.

Slowly.

The blanket was a necessary annoyance, so I held it in place as I took him inside me.

A soft moan escaped me when I sat down on his lap completely, my ass on his thighs and my back to his chest.

"Quiet, Clove." Liam's voice was low in my ear. "You belong to me."

"You belong to me too."

His chest rumbled, and he grabbed my hip. "That's right."

I clenched my jaw to stop myself from gasping as he lifted me up and pulled me back down, taking me even deeper.

My hands went to his thighs as I fell forward a little, and he lifted my knees to rest on the couch cushions so I was kneeling over him instead of sitting.

Liam lifted me again—and pulled me down harder.

I nearly cried out in pleasure.

He stopped suddenly, his hands frozen on my body.

“What are you—” I started, but he shushed me.

A couple walked past our bungalow. They were so far in front of us that I couldn’t make out who they were, but they lifted their hands in greeting as they walked along the edge of the ocean, hand in hand.

Liam stroked my clit as I waved back, my jaw clenching harder.

He gritted his teeth. “You havegotto be quiet, Clove.”

“You love that I’m shitty at that,” I whispered back.

“Yeah, but if anyone else sees your face when you get off, I will fucking lose it.”

“I’ll do bett—shit.” I gasped out the curse as he lifted my ass again, slamming me down on his cock slow and rough.

His teeth skimmed my throat.

He drove into me again, and my body clenched around him. He went still, and stayed that way until I came down from the edge.

“You’re the worst,” I whispered.

“I know.”

He repeated the motion, and waited while I nearly came once again.

“I’m going to kill you, Steam.”

“Go ahead and try.”

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He fucked me slow.

I swore at him.

Threatened him.

Begged him.

He smacked my ass for that last one, and made me wait longer when it almost got me off. The man really wasn't a fan of begging.

The sunset's colors blended into a fire in front of me as Liam edged me over and over. He refused to let me come until the last sliver of red was gone, and the sun was entirely hidden by the ocean.

Finally, he fucked me hard.

His hand covered my mouth when I came with a scream. His snarl of release drowned out the muffled sound of my pleasure, and we were inside the bungalow before I even came down from the high.

Liam draped me over the ledge of the bed and pulled out, taking a step back.

"What are you doing?" I groaned, lifting my chin to my shoulder and trying to see him.

"Looking at you. Open your legs wider."

I did what he wanted, and earned a noise of satisfaction that was pure, carnal pleasure.

I could feel our combined release dripping slowly down my inner thighs, so I was sure he could see that. Along with everything else. The t-shirt I'd stolen from him was up around my waist, so my entire lower half was on display.

“Like what you see?” I asked, though I knew the answer.

He stepped back up to me and smoothed his palms over my bare ass. “You have no idea how much.”

He lifted one of his hands, and spanked me lightly. A jolt of pleasure raced down my spine. “I’m not done with you, Clove.”

“You’d better never be done with me.”

He smacked my ass again, a little harder. The sting made my lower half clench, and I ached to have him inside me again. “You know what I mean.”

“I don’t. Show me.”

His fingers dug into my ass as he drove into me hard.

There would be no taking it slow, this time.

He would take what he wanted and give me what I needed, hard and fast.

And fuck, I would love every minute of it.

Not just the sex—but our lives.

I had everything I could ever need, and so much more.

epilogue

LIAM—AT SOME POINT IN THE FUTURE

“Don’t make me fire you,” the sassy, four-year-old brunette threatened me, her palms facing me in warning.

“You would never—aghhh.” I feigned pain as her flames blazed over me, and collapsed to the sand like I was in agony. Her fire was a few degrees colder than mine, but I’d never tell her that. “You’ve killed me,” I rasped. “Tell your mom that I loved her.”

“Never!” She hit me with another blast of flames, and I closed my eyes, going limp.

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“I got him, mommy!” Emma exclaimed, and I heard her little feet pound the sand as she ran a few steps away.

“Nice work, Em.” Sage high-fived our little girl.

“High-five, Hudson!” Emma lightly high-fived Sage’s massive belly, turning off her flames just before she did. Sage was fireproof, but we’d taught Emma to control her magic from the earliest we possibly could.

“How many days until he’s here again?” Emma checked, stepping back and plopping down next to the sandcastle she had smashed a few minutes earlier. We’d rebuild it a dozen more times before the day was over.

“Four days until he’s due, but he could come at any time,” Mia, Sage’s adopted sister said from behind her book. She was sitting in a chair next to Sage’s.

Mia was a blood witch that the Villin brothers and I had rescued from a coven up north about fifteen years earlier, after a tip from one of the witches inside it. Sage’s mom had been thrilled to have another daughter to raise, and Mia had thrived since she came to the resort.

“I hope he comes today,” Emma said with a sigh.

Sage ruffled Emma’s hair, and Emma pushed her hand away, making a face.

I sat down in the chair next to Sage’s, putting a hand on her belly.

Neither of us was entirely prepared to bring another kid into our family, but we were excited. We loved Emma fiercely, and had done our best to get everything ready for her.

Sage's stomach tightened, and I flashed her a surprised look. Her grimace was deep. "Are you having contractions?"

"Maybe."

I narrowed my eyes at her.

"Okay, yes. But they're still five minutes apart, so I don't need to worry yet."

I grabbed her phone off her thigh and sent a quick text to our doctor, letting her know what was going on.

"They're probably going to stop," Sage insisted.

"Clove," I said in a low voice, meeting her gaze as I set her phone back down on her leg. "He's going to come soon, and it's going to be fine."

"You don't know that for sure," she whispered.

"Sure I do. I'm your mate."

"That doesn't make you all-knowing."

"No one is all-knowing. You just have to trust fate sometimes. Like I did, when I made you mine."

Sage snorted, like I knew she would. "It wasn't fate you were following, Steam."

She didn't have to look at my cock to tell me what she was insinuating.

"Fate speaks in many ways."

"Sure it does." Sage winced.

I took her hand. "Now, are we having a baby today?"

"I think we are," she admitted.

A grin split my face. "I can't fucking wait."

I kissed my mate—my whole fucking world—and scooped our daughter up away from the sandcastle she was building.

I was the luckiest fucker on the planet.