



Devilishly Hers

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: He's a devil with deadly secrets. She's a scientist with a dangerous past. Their chemistry is explosive... and lethal.

Blair

The data doesn't lie—the Jersey Devil's temperature soars only for me, and his crimson scales darken when we touch. There's certainly nothing clinical about the heat that blazes between us every time his tail curls possessively around my waist.

But between the hunters closing in and the deadly toxin racing through his body, there's no time to analyze why every brush of his claws sets my blood on fire. If he discovers the details of my past, I'll lose more than my research subject. I'll lose the devil who's stolen my heart.

Dante

As she measures my responses with scientific precision, I imagine every brush of fingertips, scrape of teeth, and thrust of hips that will make her moan my name. Our mate bond strengthens with each touch, but the poison in my veins is spreading fast and I'm drowning in dark secrets.

When hunters threaten our sanctuary, I'll face an impossible choice: protect her heart or give in to the devil who craves her completely.

Buy Devilishly Hers, Book One in USA TODAY Bestselling author Alana Khan's Monster Mountain series. This scorching hot monster romance will leave you breathless. With a protective alpha hero, forbidden attraction, fated mate, touch-her-and-die intensity, and a fast-paced, slow-burn romance, this novel will set your pulse ablaze.

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Chapter One

Dante

The problem with breaking into a high-security research facility isn't the guards. Or the cameras. It's ignoring the searing pain in my injured wing while trying to pull off this rescue.

The wing brace helps, but each movement sends fresh pain jolting through my body. The toxin spreading through the membrane ensures it won't heal properly without specialized treatment. Not that I can tell anyone. I'll keep the source of that secret to my grave.

"Considering how much they spend on security, you'd think they'd invest in better coffee." I wrinkle my nose at the bitter scent wafting from the break room. "Though I suppose when your business model revolves around torturing sentient beings, quality control standards probably slip elsewhere too."

My attempt at humor falls flat as memories of our last rescue attempt flash through my mind—Dr. Andrews crumpling mid-stride outside the camouflaged entrance to Apex's facility, which is buried deep in an old mountain mine.

Dr. Andrews is an employee, or was an employee, of Apex who contacted us that she had information on what Apex was doing to the cryptids that were captured.

I'll never forget the black-clad security guards who rushed her with weapons drawn, the flash of light that took her down before we could get to her, or the thumb drive

she managed to drop, knowing we'd retrieve it. It revealed everything: Apex Evolution Technologies' torture chambers, their twisted experiments, and their heinous plans for the future of my kind—cryptids. She risked everything for us. Now she's at their mercy. We won't fail her again.

I can't help but wonder if Chelsea and her team are having better luck with their mission tonight. We've all broken into Apex's facility. Unlike me, Chelsea has a personal stake in retrieving Riven—something about a mate bond, though I'm not sure humans and cryptids can actually develop a true mate bond.

"Doctor's location confirmed," Volt's static-laced whisper crackles in my earpiece. "East wing. Third floor. Two guards at the checkpoint."

"Only two? I'm almost insulted." The quip helps mask how my injured wing throbs inside its brace. "Guess quality evil minions are hard to find these days."

"Focus, Dante." Volt's electricity makes my horns tingle even through the comm. "We've only got one shot at this. Riven's location is being handled by his mate Chelsea and the others, but Dr. Andrews is our responsibility. The sprites report movement near the loading docks. We may be running out of time."

I move forward on silent hooves, keeping to the shadows. The data Dr. Andrews smuggled out before her capture exposed military contracts worth billions—all aimed at turning cryptid powers into weapons. The thought makes my skin shift from crimson to obsidian.

A soft scrape—a boot sole on concrete.

I freeze, wings tucked tight, every muscle coiled. A guard turns the corner ahead, walking a lazy patrol with a rifle slung low. He's not alert, just going through the motions. Still, he's close enough that I could reach out and end this with one silent

swipe of my claws.

But stealth is everything. Bloodshed brings attention. And the sanctuary can't afford that—not tonight.

“Security cameras looping on my mark,” Volt rumbles. “Checkpoint clear in three... two...”

The lights flicker as his electricity disrupts the systems. I move fast, my hooves somehow silent on the polished floor. The checkpoint doors slide open with a soft hiss, revealing sterile white corridors and the smell of antiseptic and fear.

“East wing secured.” Volt's voice is tense, reflecting the danger inherent in this mission.

Although sarcasm is my default emotion, I shouldn't be so flippant. I'm rescuing the woman who risked her life to get us intel that could save us all.

“We've got movement in the labs. They're about to start another 'treatment' session.”

My tail lashes at his words. The surveillance footage Dr. Andrews leaked to us showed exactly what those “treatments” entail. Torture is the correct word. Just thinking about it makes my fangs ache with the need to tear something apart.

“Almost there, Doc,” I mutter, though she can't hear me. “Just hold on.”

The interrogation wing tries too hard to look medical rather than menacing. But I know what happens behind these doors. The scents of pain and terror linger despite the industrial cleaners.

Cell 23B. The lock doesn't stand a chance against Volt's precise electrical burst.

Inside, harsh fluorescent light illuminates a scene that makes my skin crawl with rage.

Dr. Andrews—Blair, according to her personnel file—looks smaller than I remember. Pale and still, with long strands of silver and lavender hair falling across her face. The unique coloring seems dulled under the harsh fluorescent light, but even in this state, it's striking against her pale skin. Dried tear tracks on her cheeks make something hot and violent explode in my chest.

“Found her.” I say through clenched teeth, not even trying to hide the rage in my voice. Moving quickly, I grip her wrist while my tail whips against the floor. “Pulse is steady but slow. They’ve got her on something heavy.”

Her eyes flutter at my touch, struggling to focus. “Nottelling...” The words slur together. “Won’t let you...”

“Easy, Doc.” Carefully, I remove the leads connecting her to the monitors that aren’t turned on. That’s the first bit of good news. If they were actively monitoring her, either turning off the monitor or removing the leads would have triggered an alarm. I keep my voice light despite the fury swirling in my gut. “Rescue party of one, at your service.”

A crease appears between her brows as her eyes blink several times, then focus on me. “You’re... a Jersey Devil?”

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“What gave it away? The devilishly handsome looks or the timely rescue?” My fangs flash in what I hope is a reassuring grin.

Her quiet laugh turns into a cough. “Sarcasm... matches reports...”

“My reputation precedes me.” Her attempt at humor, despite obvious fear, sparks unexpected warmth. “Think you can hold on if I carry you?”

She manages a tiny nod before her eyes roll back. Right. Time to go.

Gathering her carefully against my chest, I try not to notice how perfectly she fits. Or how her fingers curl into my shirt as though seeking safety even while unconscious. My wings curve forward instinctively, creating a protective shelter around her slight form despite the sharp pain in my injured right wing.

“Package secured.” Speaking quietly into my comm. “Exit route clear?”

“Two guards approaching via west stairs.” Volt’s warning carries urgency. “Take the maintenance shaft. And Dante? More company just arrived at the loading docks. Hurry.”

“Hear that, Doc? Looks like we’re taking the service entrance.” Adjusting my grip on the unconscious scientist. “Less glamorous, but I’ll try to make it memorable.”

No response. Her breathing stays steady but shallow against my chest. Whatever they gave her, it’s strong enough to keep her unconscious despite being jostled against me as I run. My injured wing protests as we navigate the narrow maintenance shaft, but I

barely notice the pain. Not when Blair burrows closer, seeking warmth or safety or both.

Something protective and fierce expands in my chest—an instinct I'll examine later. Much later. For now, there's a brilliant, mysterious woman to rescue. And if the price of success is enduring a little more pain, keeping a few more secrets?

Well, that's a bargain this devil is willing to make.

Chapter Two

Blair

Consciousness returns slowly, accompanied by the steady beep of medical equipment. Even before opening my eyes, my analytical mind begins cataloging what I can perceive. The steady rhythm of a heart monitor suggests my pulse is elevated. My breathing feels measured but shallow. Pain radiates through my body—not overwhelming, but enough to register on my internal scale.

I recall a deep voice, strong arms, and a wild, dangerous scent. Those details seem too vivid for a sedative-induced hallucination.

“Welcome back to the land of the living. Though technically you didn't miss much—it's only been about six hours.” That voice. The same one from my fragmented memories, now tinged with what my data-driven mind categorizes as Type B-3 sarcasm—deflective humor with 72.8% probability of masking genuine concern. I've never been good at detecting sarcasm, but I've developed a classification system through years of observation.

Forcing my eyes open, I blink until the world comes into focus. I'm in what appears to be an infirmary, though unlike any I've seen. Crystal formations stud the rock

walls, casting a soft ambient glow that's easier on my sensitive eyes than fluorescent lights.

The walls look like stone, the smooth surfaces polished to a subtle sheen. Medical equipment—a mix of modern technology and what appears to be crystal-powered devices—lines one wall, while shelves of carefully labeled herbs and compounds occupy another.

The examination table beneath me is surprisingly comfortable, padded with what feels like handcrafted cushions. The air carries a faint herbal scent, clean but not antiseptic, with notes of lavender and something earthier I can't identify. Several smaller crystal clusters pulse with gentle rhythms that somehow feel soothing to my frayed nervous system.

Through the fog of medication, tactical details surface unbidden—defensible position against the wall, natural concealment. The kind of location Dad would have approved of, once upon a time. I push the thought away, adding another tally to my mental count of unwanted memories.

Voices echo from somewhere nearby—muffled conversations about security protocols and surveillance. From what I can hear, they seem to be handling multiple situations simultaneously. The information organizes itself neatly in my mind: different teams with separate objectives, strategic resource allocation. Logical.

And there, lounging with deceptive ease in an overstuffed armchair beside my bed, sits my rescuer. Initial observation notes form automatically in my mind: Subject: Male Jersey Devil (classification Cryptid-D4 according to taxonomy).

Gray, ridged horns that hug his skull. Generally humanoid in appearance. Skin that shifts between deep crimson and something darker. Wings, currently folded, but impressive in span based on earlier recollection. Right wing secured in a supportive

brace. Black hair that is just short of his shoulders. Hooves, arrow-tipped tail, clawed fingers that are retracted like a cat's, human-like face, pointed ears, lush, full lips and intense garnet red eyes. His fangs are visible when he speaks—yet his smile holds no threat.

He's wearing a black vest and pants.

“So, the rescue wasn't a dream.” Rather than showing my relief, my voice sounds rough—too many days screaming in pain, I guess. Scientific detachment fails me as my silver hair falls forward. The lavender streaks are more pronounced in the crystal light.

I absently wonder why I let my cousin test her cosmetology skills on me with such an odd color combination. Then I realize my cognitive functions must be impaired if I'm focused on something so irrelevant.

“No. Not a dream.” His tail curls as he hands me a glass of water. “I tried to make it memorable.”

The casual snark doesn't quite mask the careful way he watches me drink, noting reactions and symptoms with an intensity that rivals my own analytical nature. Fascinating.

“I'm Dr. Andrews.” Then, because it feels too formal, given he literally carried me to safety, “Blair. But I guess you already knew that.”

“Dante.” His lips quirk. “Not many biochemists get the opportunity to study us.”

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The reference to my work with Apex makes me flinch. His skin alters in response—adding another data point to my growing collection of observations about his chromatic responses. Their color-changing properties fascinate the scientist in me, even as memories of what Apex planned to do with such abilities turn my stomach.

“How much did they...” The question sticks in my throat as I shudder at the idea that I may have told them things that would help them in their pursuit of capturing and torturing cryptids like Dante.

“Get from you?” His voice gentles and his eyes soften. “Not enough to matter. Your warning helped us prepare. I’ve been poring over the data we retrieved from the thumb drive you managed to get to us a few days ago. From what it looks like, the data shows you didn’t say much even though they kept increasing your medications and tor—” He cuts himself off, and his red gaze shies from mine. Interesting how a male who looks so devilish is squeamish about saying the word “torture.”

He deflects when things get personal. Classic avoidance. I’ll have to start a proper spreadsheet the moment I get access to a computer.

“I was just trying to right some wrongs.” My voice catches as fragments of memory surface. My hands reflexively clench and unclench, a habit formed during years of training I’d rather forget.

“When I found those military contracts, uncovered what they really planned to do with your abilities...”

My stomach rebels, though it’s empty. His fingers twitch as if to reach out, then they

pause. The restraint in the gesture catches my attention. He respects my space while staying close enough to help if needed.

“We don’t have to talk about that now... or ever. The data you provided will save countless lives.” His voice carries that mix of genuine concern and carefully measured distance that makes something flutter in my chest. Completely inappropriate response, I note, requiring further analysis.

I close my eyes and allow myself to breathe deeply, letting the gravelly sound of his voice and his unique scent calm my racing thoughts. Then I mentally scold myself for such an emotional reaction. Data. Focus on data.

“How’s your head?” The question comes with careful neutrality. “They had you pretty heavily sedated.”

I run a quick internal diagnostic. “Residual grogginess, mild disorientation. Nothing concerning given the probable combination of benzodiazepines and—” Catching his raised eyebrow, I clear my throat. “I’m fine.”

“You know, most people don’t analyze their symptoms quite so...” His lips twitch, and he finishes, “Thoroughly.”

“Most people aren’t biochemists.” My automatic defense makes him chuckle, the sound unexpectedly warm.

“Point taken, Doc.” The nickname should annoy me. I would never allow it in my lab. Instead, my chest warms at the hint of affection in his tone. I’ve never had a nickname before. Later, I’ll examine why that pleases me. Dangerous territory. Focus on facts, Blair, data, things I can quantify.

“Where exactly am I?” Crystal clusters pulse with soft light, their resonance patterns

suggesting some form of energy conductivity that demands investigation.

“Somewhere safe.” His tail curls in what I’m beginning to recognize as amusement. “Cryptid mountain. I have no idea how we’ve managed to evade all of Apex’s efforts to locate us, but as far as I know, our location is still a mystery to them.”

My thoughts fly with a thousand questions as I realize I’m now technically a fugitive. “Where will I go? How will I make a living? I only have the clothes on my back. I—”

He gently places his warm hand, claws carefully retracted, on my arm just long enough to interrupt my spiral of desperate worries.

“You deserve to rest and recover. Anything else can wait until you’re stronger.” His reassurance carries steel beneath the drawl.

“I’m perfectly capable of—” Trying to sit up proves him right as the room spins lazily.

Strong, warm hands ease me back against the pillows. “You were saying?”

“This is temporary.” But exhaustion drags at my limbs even as my mind races with questions. “The sedatives will metabolize within 24-48 hours, depending on...”

“Sleep, Doc.” His voice rumbles with something that might be fondness. “The biochemistry lesson can wait.”

I want to argue, to demand answers about what happens next. But my treacherous body is already responding to his suggestion, eyelids growing heavy. The last thing I register is the gentle brush of his wing on my cheek, barely there and gone so quickly I might have imagined it. Like his careful distance, the gesture reveals more than he probably intends.

Questions can wait. For now, there's safety in this strange place with its crystal lights and a Jersey Devil who tries so hard to mask kindness with sarcasm.

Chapter Three

Dante

"She's analyzing her blood work again." Volt's thunderous voice carries amusement as he lands beside me on the mountain ledge overlooking the Colorado valley. "Third time today."

Electricity dances between his golden feathers as I watch my friend settle his massive form. The Thunderbird makes our outcropping look small, his wingspan easily twice mine. "Let me guess—she's documenting the metabolization rates of every compound Apex pumped into her system."

Something warm and unwelcome stirs in my chest. Three days since the rescue, and Blair's turned her recovery room into a one-woman research station. "How's Riven holding up with his new human? Still doing that glowy-wing thing whenever she touches him?"

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"Their connection is... quite pronounced," Volt observes. "Not unlike certain temperature fluctuations I've been noticing around here."

My skin darkens. "I don't know what you're implying."

"Don't you?" He cocks his head, spearing me with a knowing look. "I've seen how the crystals respond when you two are in the same room. How you always seem to know exactly when she's approaching, even before she makes a sound."

"Coincidence," I mutter, though something deep within me stirs at his words—an ancient recognition I'm not ready to acknowledge.

"If you say so." His knowing rumble makes my tail lash with agitation. "Though she seems equally... attuned to you. I noticed her documenting it in that spreadsheet of hers. Column labeled 'inexplicable awareness.' Quite the scientific approach to something so primal."

Heat creeps up my neck. "Don't start with that mate bond nonsense again. Just because the Mothman found his perfect match doesn't mean the rest of us are susceptible."

"Sure," Volt drawls. "Which is why you haven't left the mountain since she arrived. Your excuse has been that 'Blair might need something.'"

My clawed hand instinctively touches her hair tie in my pocket. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

“To answer your other question, the doctor’s comparing her lab results to baseline human norms while theorizing about cryptid metabolic variations.” Electricity arcs through his plumage. “She asked if I’d consider providing samples for her research.” He chuckles, wings fluttering with amusement.

“She seems dedicated,” is all I say, hoping to change the subject that’s gotten a bit too focused on me.

“Speaking of research...” Volt’s massive form settles beside me, careful not to dislodge any rocks. “Your wing’s not healing properly.”

My skin darkens as I pull the injured appendage closer. “It’s fine.” The memory of that night flashes unbidden—desperate wings beating against rain, another Jersey Devil’s terrified eyes locked on mine as hunters closed in.

“Really?” Volt’s static electricity makes my horns tingle. “Because according to our resident biochemist, that kind of injury should show significant improvement by now. Unless there’s something you’re not telling us.”

Before I can deflect, Blair’s voice drifts to us from inside the cavern.

“The crystal formations’ resonance patterns suggest some form of energy conductivity, but without proper equipment to measure the frequencies...” Her voice carries that blend of frustration and fascination that’s become her default state.

“Perhaps if we adjusted the sensitivity settings?” That’s Marina, who’s appointed herself both nurse and research assistant. “We Water Sprites can detect subtle vibrations that most instruments miss.”

Peering inside, I watch Blair scribble rapid notes while Marina demonstrates something with her fins. The lavender in Blair’s hair catches the crystal light, and her

expression...

“You’re staring.” Volt’s knowing rumble makes my skin flush red.

“I’m monitoring a valuable asset.” The words come out more defensive than intended. “She has critical intelligence about Apex’s operations.”

“Uh-huh.” His wings create shadows that dance across the ledge. “That’s why you’ve barely left the mountain since we brought her here. Because you’re... gathering intel.”

“Someone needs to make sure she doesn’t push herself too hard. Her understanding of our security protocols seems surprisingly thorough.”

Yesterday she worked straight through dinner, analyzing data from her smuggled drive. I literally had to confiscate her tablet and stand guard while she ate the food I brought her. And just this morning, she tried to convince Cliff to let her study his Sasquatch healing abilities, despite barely having the strength to stand.

“Doesn’t push herself too hard, huh? That’s a convenient excuse.” Volt’s expression can only be described as smug. “Almost as convenient as your wing injury keeping you grounded here. With her.”

My fang-filled growl holds warning, but he just laughs.

“Fine, keep your secrets.” Rising, his wings spread wide. “But she’s sharper than most. You really think she won’t figure out something’s wrong?”

Before I can respond, he launches into the air, wings catching a current. This leaves me with uncomfortable thoughts and the sound of Blair’s voice drifting up from below.

“The energy transfer rates are fascinating, but there seem to be biological components we’re missing...” Blair’s bent over her notes, hair falling forward to frame her face. “If we could just isolate the variables...”

“Perhaps a break first?” Marina suggests gently. “You’ve been at this for hours.”

“Just a few more calculations.” But her valiant attempt at nonchalance can’t hide her exhaustion.

Time to intervene before she works herself into collapse. As I approach, Marina’s scales shimmer with knowing amusement. “I’ll leave you to it,” the Water Sprite says, sliding gracefully into her pool near our internal waterfall.

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“Your timing is suspect.” Blair doesn’t look up from her work. “Did you plan that interruption, or do you just have supernatural timing when it comes to ruining scientific breakthroughs?”

“Just encouraging basic self-care, Doc.” Leaning against a crystal formation, I study her pale features. “When’s the last time you ate?”

“I had...” Her brow furrows. “There was coffee earlier...”

“Coffee isn’t food.” But her confused expression holds such genuine bafflement that something in my chest clenches. “Come on. Cliff’s been stress-baking again, and the smells drifting from the kitchen are making my mouth water.”

“I’m in the middle of important calculations regarding crystal resonance patterns and their potential applications for—”

“Which will still be there after you eat.” When she protests, I add, “Unless you’d prefer I carry you to dinner like that first night?”

Her cheeks flush at the memory, but she sets down her pen with exaggerated care. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Shame.” The word slips out before I can catch it. When her eyes snap to mine, I add quickly, “The walk will do you good. Doctor’s orders.”

“You’re not a doctor.”

“No, but I play one on TV.”

Her startled laugh makes my wings flutter. It’s becoming addictive, finding ways to crack that analytical shell and draw out her humor.

“Fine.” Rising makes her sway slightly. My hand catches her elbow, skin darkening at the contact. “But I want to discuss the possibility of studying your healing rates. The delayed recovery of your wing suggests—”

“Dinner first.” Steering her toward the dining cavern. “Science later.”

She huffs but allows me to guide her, rattling off theories about cryptid metabolism that I only half follow. The important part is getting food into her before she passes out face-first into her research.

As we walk, her shoulders relax slightly under my touch, steps syncing with mine despite our physical differences.

Somewhere between rescuer and research subject, I’ve become something else in her carefully catalogued world. And judging by the way she looks at me when she thinks I’m not looking, she’s noticed, too.

Chapter Four

Dante

“The subject employs sarcasm as a primary deflection mechanism,” Blair mutters under her breath, but my cryptid hearing catches every word. Her fingers fly across her tablet—those same fingers that traced my wing membrane yesterday with devastating precision. “Frequency increases 43% when discussing wing injury...”

Heat creeps up my neck as I pretend not to watch her from my position near the hearth, but her scent—clean cotton and that subtle sweetness that’s purely Blair—drifts over anyway. Crystal light catches in her hair, those silver-lavender strands falling forward as she works.

Blair’s been documenting my responses for the past hour, and that furrow between her brows—the one that appears when she’s thinking hard—is doing things to me it shouldn’t.

“Fascinating.” Chelsea’s voice practically purrs with amusement. “And what happens when he uses that sexy little drawl?”

Chelsea’s curled up in Riven’s lap—typical for a mated pair. She’s the only other human here besides Blair.

“That lazy drawl he does?” Blair doesn’t look up from her tablet, but her cheeks flush pink. “He only does it when he’s dodging questions about his wing.” Her voice drops lower. “Makes me want to—” She cuts herself off, fingers tightening on her stylus.

“It correlates strongly with evasive maneuvers—”

“I do not drawl,” I growl, which only makes Chelsea laugh harder.

“Actually...” Blair finally looks up, and those gray eyes hit me like a punch to the gut. “That statement was 27% longer than necessary.” She bites her lower lip while typing. “Subject appears unaware of his own vocal patterns.”

My jaw clenches. Amusement wars with irritation and something dangerously close to hunger.

“You’re seriously making a spreadsheet about my sarcasm?”

“Of course not.” She still won’t meet my eyes. “I’m making a spreadsheet about your deflection patterns. The sarcasm just happens to be the most frequent indicator.”

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Riven's wings flutter—the bastard's enjoying this. “So, what are your findings so far?”

“Well...” She straightens—and damn if watching her slip into professor mode isn't the hottest thing I've seen all week. “Subject D demonstrates a clear correlation between perceived vulnerability and increased deflective humor.” Her tongue darts out to wet her lips. “For instance—”

She turns her tablet toward me, and the graph on the screen makes my skin flush dark crimson. “When I asked about your wing this morning, you made three sarcastic comments in—what was it—forty-seven seconds. Classic avoidance behavior.”

“Subject D?” Heat pools low in my belly as her gaze drops to my mouth. “Seriously?”

“Would you prefer a different designation?” Those gray eyes meet mine, all innocent curiosity, but there's something else lurking underneath that makes my tail twitch. “I considered ‘Subject JD’ but that seemed a bit species-specific...”

“Yeah, wouldn't want to offend my delicate Jersey Devil sensibilities,” I say, letting that drawl she's so fascinated by creep into my voice.

Her fingers fly across the screen. Documenting me in real time. The thought should irritate me. Instead, it's doing things to my body it shouldn't.

“What exactly did you just record?”

“Your theological reference.” She doesn’t look up, but I catch the tiny smile tugging at her lips. “That’s the fourth one this hour.”

Chelsea snorts.

I ignore them, but my gaze keeps drifting to the way crystal light catches in Blair’s silver-lavender hair, making it shimmer like moonwater.

“You know you might be overthinking this, right Doc?”

“I need to write everything down. My brain works differently. The need to record, analyze, and understand isn’t just habit—it’s how I function.” She adds another column—and damn, even her organizational skills are turning me on. “For example, your current skin color suggests mild agitation mixed with... something else I haven’t been able to categorize yet.”

The “something else” is an attraction so fierce it makes my injured wing ache with the need to wrap around her, pull her close, feel her heartbeat against my chest. But she doesn’t need to know that. Yet.

Instead, I move closer, peering from behind her at her tablet. My chest brushes her back as I reach around her, carefully extending my claws to grasp the crystal without scratching it.

The contact—the first deliberate touch in days—sends fire racing through my veins. The mate bond flares with recognition, with relief so profound it momentarily steals my breath. My skin shifts involuntarily to that iridescent shade I can never seem to control around her.

“You’ve created an entire taxonomy of my jokes?” I can’t suppress the incredulous tone of my voice.

“Preliminary classifications only.” She shifts to show me the screen. Her scent—all clean cotton and subtle sweetness—makes my skin darken. “I’m still gathering baseline data about your default sarcasm levels versus situational increases.”

“Fascinating,” I murmur, attempting to sound disinterested while moving closer. “And these ‘situational increases’?”

“Well...” She scrolls through her notes, apparently oblivious to how close I’m standing. “You demonstrate a 37% rise in deflective humor when discussing your injury, a 42% increase during medical examinations, and a striking 58% spike when asked about your feelings.”

“My feelings?” The word comes out rough as her hair brushes the back of my hand, which is innocently resting far too close to her on the back of the loveseat.

“Yes, though the sample size is still limited.” She frowns at her data. “You’re remarkably adept at changing the subject whenever emotional topics arise. It’s quite frustrating from a research perspective.”

“Terribly sorry to complicate your scientific method.” But my tail curls with unwanted warmth at her focused attention, even if it’s purely analytical.

“Case in point.” Her fingers fly across the screen. “Classic deflection pattern, accompanied by that particular drawl you use when—”

“When what?” I’m definitely standing too close now, my skin heating as she tilts her head to meet my gaze.

“When you’re...” For the first time, she seems to register our proximity. A flush creeps up her neck as she swallows. “That is... the data suggests...”

“Everything okay there, Doc?” My voice drops lower as her pulse quickens. “You seem a bit... distracted from your research.”

“I... that is...” Her fingers tighten on the tablet. “I should probably... document these responses...”

“By all means.” Leaning closer, I enjoy how her breath catches. “Don’t let me interfere with your scientific observations.”

A discrete cough from Chelsea breaks the moment. Blair practically jumps off the cushion, her cheeks pink as she buries herself in her data. My skin darkens at the loss of contact I definitely wasn’t craving.

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“I should...” She stands abruptly, tablet in hand. “That is... I need to review these findings. For science.”

Watching her retreat toward her chamber, my tail flicks with equal parts amusement and frustration.

“For someone documenting deflection patterns, she’s remarkably good at avoiding her own feelings,” Chelsea observes with a knowing smile.

“Perhaps you’ve found your perfect match,” Riven adds, his wings pulsing gently. “Someone equally adept at denying the obvious.”

“Don’t you two have somewhere else to be?” But my coloring betrays my embarrassment as I catch one last glimpse of Blair’s hair disappearing around the corner.

Some spreadsheets can’t capture every variable. Some feelings refuse to be classified. And some subjects are better studied up close.

Chapter Five

Dante

“For someone obsessed with documenting my every twitch, you’re awfully careless with your equipment.”

I lean against the doorframe of Blair’s lab, dangling her favorite pen between my

claws. Her makeshift infirmary has become increasingly organized over the past two weeks—medical supplies arranged with military precision, crystals positioned for optimal lighting, and her tablets neatly stacked beside her workstation. A space that perfectly reflects her methodical nature.

She glances up from her microscope, those silver-lavender strands falling across her face before she tucks them behind her ear. “I wondered where that went. Though ‘went’ implies accidental movement rather than deliberate acquisition.”

“Acquisition? That’s a rather clinical term for borrowing,” I counter, sauntering into her space and placing the pen just beyond her immediate reach. “Besides, you have three others.”

“Four, actually.” She doesn’t move to retrieve it, just watches me with that analytical gaze that somehow manages to be both irritating and captivating. “Though this particular model has an ease of writing perfect for detailed notations.”

“Detailed notations about me, no doubt.” My tail flicks with amusement as I settle onto the examination table without being asked. “Another spreadsheet documenting my many fascinating qualities?”

“Your deflection techniques, primarily.” She finally reaches for the pen, her fingers brushing mine longer than strictly necessary. “Though your tendency to evade direct questions is becoming a statistically significant variable worth tracking.”

“Evade? I prefer ‘strategically redirect’.” I spread my wings slightly, intentionally forcing her to step back. “Much like how you’re collecting data on my every mood swing.”

Her eyes narrow as she studies my wings, all scientific observation rather than an appreciation of their impressive span. “Speaking of which, that wing needs attention.

The discoloration has spread.”

“It’s fine.” My automatic response makes my skin darken instantly. Damn these chromatic tells.

“‘Fine’ is a subjective assessment with no quantifiable parameters.” She moves closer, tablet already in hand. “Objective observation indicates tissue deterioration inconsistent with normal healing patterns.”

I fold my wing protectively against my back, ignoring the twinge of pain the movement causes. “And here I thought we were having a pleasant conversation about your missing pen.”

“Deflection technique number forty-three: changing the subject when physically uncomfortable.” Her fingers move swiftly across her tablet. “Frequency of usage increasing by approximately twenty-seven percent over the past week.”

“You’ve numbered my deflection techniques?” I can’t decide whether to be impressed or disturbed by her thoroughness. “That seems excessive even for your scientific standards, Doc.”

“Categorization improves analytical efficiency.” She sets down her tablet and approaches with that determined look I’ve come to recognize—and dread. “Now, wing out. Full extension.”

“How about a ‘please’? Or perhaps ‘would you mind’?” But I’m already complying despite my sarcasm, extending the injured appendage with a wince I fail to hide.

Her touch is surprisingly gentle, despite her clinical tone. “The necrotic tissue is expanding along the primary membrane structures. And don’t bother with deflection technique number seventeen—making jokes when in pain. It’s statistically the least

effective of your repertoire.”

“I’m wounded that you think so little of my humor.” She examines the discoloration spreading across my wing. “Though apparently I’m wounded in more ways than one.”

“Humor as self-protection,” she murmurs, fingers tracing the toxic lines with disconcerting precision. “Consistent with established psychological coping mechanisms.”

“Are you psychoanalyzing me now?” My tail curls defensively around the examination table leg. “I thought biochemistry was your specialty, not psychology.”

“Pattern recognition transcends disciplinary boundaries.” She reaches for a jar of healing salve, the scent of aromatic herbs filling the space between us. “This formulation should slow the spread, though it’s treating symptoms rather than addressing the underlying cause.”

As she works the salve into my wing membrane, I notice the slight furrow between her brows—the one that appears whenever she’s puzzling through a particularly challenging problem. It’s becoming alarmingly familiar, that look of scientific determination mixed with something that might almost be concern.

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“You’re thinking awfully loudly for someone who hasn’t said anything for thirty seconds,” I observe, trying to ignore how good her gentle touch feels against my sensitive membrane.

“Toxin propagation patterns suggest targeted design rather than environmental exposure.” Her eyes meet mine with unsettling directness. “This wasn’t a random injury, was it?”

My skin shifts to obsidian so quickly it surprises even me. “I never said it was.”

“No, you said ‘patrol incident’ and let everyone assume.” Her fingers pause in their work, but don’t withdraw. “The injury pattern indicates a weaponized delivery system with specific cryptid targeting parameters.”

“And you know this how?” The question emerges sharper than intended, defensive in ways that only confirm her suspicions.

“I’m a biochemist with extensive study in molecular biology.” Her answer comes too quickly, too practiced. “Tissue degradation patterns create recognizable signatures.”

My claws extend against the table, betraying emotions my face tries to hide. “Fascinating expertise for someone who worked at a pharmaceutical research company.”

Her fingers resume their careful application of the salve, but something shifts in her expression—a flicker of something that might be guilt before professional composure returns. “The wing needs daily treatment if you want to maintain flight capability.

And don't bother with deflection technique number twenty-six—changing the subject when uncomfortable truths arise.”

“You really do have a spreadsheet for everything, don't you?” I keep my tone light despite the growing tension between us. “Very thorough.”

“Thoroughness improves outcomes.” She steps back, capping the salve jar with precise movements. “Something to consider when deciding how much truth to share about that wing injury.”

Our gazes meet across the space between us—scientist and Jersey Devil locked in an unspoken challenge. Both keeping secrets. Both recognizing the other's careful evasions.

“Tomorrow, same time?” I ask, folding my wing with careful movements that betray none of the pain each motion causes.

“Unless you'd prefer your wing to become permanently unusable,” she responds, returning to her workstation with a scientific detachment that doesn't quite mask the concern beneath.

“Such bedside manner, Doc.” My tail uncurls from the table leg as I stand. “You should consider something warmer. Might improve patient compliance.”

“Compliance metrics correlate more strongly with treatment efficacy than provider demeanor.” But there's the faintest curve to her lips as she says it. “Though I'll take your feedback under consideration.”

As I leave her lab, I can feel her gaze following me—analytical, concerned, and increasingly perceptive in ways that both intrigue and unsettle me. She's cataloging my secrets alongside my deflection techniques, systematically dismantling the

barriers I've spent decades constructing.

The most troubling part isn't her scientific persistence or her growing suspicions about my injury. It's how increasingly comfortable I feel under her scrutiny, as though being truly seen—even by someone who seems to know more than she should—might be worth the risk after all.

Chapter Six

Blair

"There's something I want to show you." Dante's skin shifts between crimson and obsidian as he leads me down a passage I've never traveled before. His wing brace catches the crystal light, reminding me how much research I still need to do on his mysteriously slow-healing injury.

The carved stone corridor descends gradually, opening into what appears to be a natural cavern that's been carefully modified. My breath catches at the sight.

Towering bookshelves line the walls, carved directly into the living rock. Crystal formations cast a warm, ambient glow that feels almost deliberately placed, creating pools of perfect reading light between the stacks. The air carries the familiar scent of old books mingled with something else—some kind of mineral tang that makes the space feel ancient and somehow sacred.

"The cryptid archive," Dante explains, his voice dropping to that low register that definitely doesn't affect my pulse rate. "Centuries of knowledge preserved by those who came before us."

Ancient leather-bound tomes share space with modern research journals. Delicate scrolls rest in crystal-lined niches. A magnificent oak table dominates the center of

the room, its surface etched with the same mysterious symbols I've seen throughout the mountain.

"This is incredible." Moving closer to examine the nearest shelf, I find texts in languages I don't recognize alongside technical manuals that look surprisingly recent. "How long have you been collecting these?"

"Generations of cryptids have contributed." His tail curls gracefully as he watches me explore. "Some were rescued from private collectors. Others were donated by families seeking sanctuary."

My fingers hover over a particularly ancient spine. "May I?" Heat floods my cheeks as our gazes meet and I notice for the first time how beautiful his eyes are, a color somewhere between garnet and ruby.

"Of course." He moves closer, reaching past me to retrieve the volume. His proximity sends another spike in his body temperature—something I've been noticing more frequently but haven't yet properly documented. "Though you might need help with the translation. It's written in an old cryptid dialect."

He picks up a small device and a single earbud from a nearby table. "You can use this scanner and earbud. It will translate what you scan into English. If, after you've listened to it, you want to keep any of the translated text on your datapad, I'll send you the app that will do that for you."

The book's leather binding feels butter-soft beneath my fingers. When I open it, the scent of age and knowledge wafts up, making my scientist's heart race. Diagrams of various cryptid species fill the pages, annotated in flowing script. For a moment, my knees actually feel weak at how special this moment feels, holding so much ancient wisdom in my hands.

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“Over here.” He guides me to one of several reading nooks carved into the walls. Plush chairs that somehow perfectly combine comfort and academic dignity cluster around small tables. “This section is my usual workspace.”

The desk holds neat stacks of books and what appear to be research notes in his elegant handwriting. A familiar glint catches my eye—a pen identical to the one I lost last week sits beside them. Before I can examine it closer, movement draws my attention to where his tail is hastily sweeping something into a drawer.

“You study here often?” The question comes out more breathless than intended as another wave of heat rolls through me.

“It’s quiet.” His skin darkens as he settles into what is clearly his usual chair. He looks... perfect there. An almost monstrous Jersey Devil persona combined with classic professorial elegance. “Good place to think.”

Looking around his chosen corner, I notice other signs of regular use. Well-worn books. A half-empty mug of what smells like coffee. Small personal touches like a small green velvet pillow lodged in the chair for lumbar support and an interesting cluster of crystals that emit the most beautiful seafoam-green light. It all makes this space feel lived-in, claimed.

“What do you research?” Moving closer to his desk, genuine curiosity about what captures a Jersey Devil’s scholarly interest burns through me.

“History mostly. Old texts about...” His voice trails off as I pick up one of his notebooks. “Cryptid lore. Legends. That sort of thing.”

The notes are meticulously organized, his handwriting precise despite his claws. Then I remember they retract, like cats, so they wouldn't interfere with writing or typing. Why, I wonder, does a picture of those nails clutching my naked hips barge into my thoughts?

It takes long moments for me to register what the pages contain. References to temperature regulation and energy transfer catch my eye before he gently reclaims the notebook.

"There are some interesting medical texts over here." He guides me toward another section, his wing curving around me. The gesture sends another surge of warmth through my system. "Ancient healing practices, crystal applications..."

"Anything about wing injuries?" I can't help asking.

His skin ripples with color. "Always the scientist."

"Someone has to be concerned, since you won't properly document your own condition."

"Maybe I prefer being a mystery." But there's something beneath the drawl, some emotion I can't quite categorize despite my increasingly detailed notation system.

"Science thrives on solving mysteries." Moving to examine the medical texts, I try to ignore how the temperature seems to spike whenever he stands close. "Though some subjects are more resistant to study than others."

"Speaking of resistance..." His wings twitch at my choice of words. "Perhaps some subjects deserve to be studied more... thoroughly." He reaches past me to retrieve a book, his chest brushing my shoulder. The contact sends electricity racing through my nerve endings. "These texts discuss cryptid biology. Might help with your

research.”

The book might be fascinating, but his proximity distracts me completely—the way his skin seems to darken and his temperature rises whenever our hands brush. My scientific mind itches to document these physiological responses.

“Thank you.” My voice is soft, almost breathy. “For sharing this place.”

His expression holds something I can’t quite read. “Knowledge should be shared. Even if some mysteries take time to unravel.”

The words remind me of my father’s lab, where knowledge was hoarded like weapons. Where I spent my childhood learning to identify cryptid vulnerabilities instead of playing with other children. The memory makes me turn away before Dante can see the shame in my eyes.

“Everything okay?” he asks, his tail curling with concern.

“Just... thinking about the past. Before Apex.” Forcing myself to meet his gaze. “My previous work wasn’t always... something I’m proud of.”

The words carry weight beyond their surface meaning, but before I can analyze them further, voices drift down from the main cavern.

“Duty calls.” His tailcurls as he steps back. “Feel free to study here anytime. Just...” A slight hesitation. “Avoid the bottom drawer of my desk.”

The request sparks scientific curiosity, but his tone suggests this isn’t the time to press. Now that bottom drawer is all I can focus on—what could he possibly be hiding that requires such specific mention? Instead, I clutch my new research materials and try to ignore how the temperature seems to drop the moment he moves

away.

Some libraries hold more than just books. Some secrets invite discovery despite better judgment. And some connections grow stronger with each shared moment, whether we're ready for them or not.

Chapter Seven

Blair

My fingers trace the slim crystal bracelet on Dante's wrist—a device of my own design that melds sanctuary crystals with modern biometrics. Holographic readouts stream constantly to my tablet, monitoring everything from his pulse to his body temperature.

“This monitoring device was necessary to track your healing,” I remind him, as the display flickers with new data. “Though your consistent attempts to remove it are quite revealing.”

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“Some might call constant surveillance invasive,” he drawls, though he hasn’t actually tried to take it off in days.

“Temperature elevated again,” I mutter, making another note in my research log. Dante’s skin ripples between crimson and obsidian. “That’s the third spike in an hour.”

“Maybe if someone wasn’t documenting my every breath...” But his usual snark lacks bite as his tail twitches in response to Volt’s thunderous approach down the corridor.

“Movement at the perimeter.” Volt’s alarmed voice carries through our communication system. “Three vehicles, heavily armed.”

Dante’s hands clench. “They’re getting bolder.”

“Apex?” I ask, anxiety spiking through me. “I thought they’d still be licking their wounds from the havoc you wreaked when you rescued me.”

“Nature abhors a vacuum, Blair. Apex has hunkered down, all their resources focused on building their new facility. No. We believe this new bunch of miscreants are cryptid hunters.”

“Hunters?” I keep my voice deliberately steady, though my hands clench around my tablet. Strange how a word that once meant safety, family, and purpose now fills me with such conflict.

“Hunters are freelancers mostly,” Dante explains, his tail curling with tension. “Some work for private collectors, others...” He shrugs, the movement making his injured wing twitch. “Some just enjoy the hunt.”

My fingers tighten on my tablet, muscle memory from years of weapons training making them ache for a different kind of grip.

I know, I want to say. I know exactly what drives them. Instead, I focus on my data, on the comforting precision of numbers and measurements, documentation and spreadsheets. “Your temperature just spiked again.”

“Really? With armed hunters approaching?” His sarcasm doesn’t quite mask his concern. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“They’ve got new tech.” Volt’s electricity audibly crackles through the communication system. “Energy detection equipment. More sophisticated than anything we’ve seen outside of Apex. And they’re not just scanning—they’ve breached the outer perimeter. They triggered the markers Marina placed.”

Dante’s skin shifts to pure obsidian. The monitoring device I convinced him to wear on his wrist beeps frantically as his temperature and pulse climb. “These readings are fascinating. The correlation between external threats and physiological response—”

“Doc.” His voice carries that mix of exasperation and affection I’m learning to recognize. “Maybe we table the research until we’re not about to be detected by hunters with fancy new toys?”

“Of course.” The relief of having a reason to change subjects makes me almost light-headed. “What’s the standard protocol for hunter incursions?”

His wings twitch at my choice of words, and for a terrifying moment, I wonder if I’ve

revealed too much. But he merely gestures toward the deeper passages. “First priority is securing our more vulnerable residents.”

Thank God for his injured wing—it gives me a legitimate reason to stay close as we turn toward the library door. Better he thinks I’m hovering out of medical concern than start wondering how much I know about hunter tactics.

“This way.” Taking my hand, he strides to the exit. “There’s a secure chamber—”

“Wait.” Pulling back, I grab a book that had fallen near his desk. The ancient text I’d been studying earlier, the one with passages about cryptid bonding patterns.

“Seriously?” But his tail curls with what might be fondness. “Only you would risk detection to gather research materials.”

“Some data is irreplaceable.” Clutching the book, I let him guide me deeper into the mountain’s maze-like corridors.

Through the crystal-lined passages, we can hear the others moving quietly to their designated safe zones. The organized response speaks of well-practiced protocols—the kind I used to help devise, but from the other side of the equation.

“Here.” Dante ushers me into what appears to be a natural cavern reinforced with crystal formations. “The mineral content in these walls blocks most scanning frequencies. And Volt’s ability to manipulate energy can probably make their fancy tech go haywire.”

“Your temperature’s still climbing.” I can’t help but note as the monitor continues its frantic beeping. “These readings are unprecedented.”

“Doc.” His drawl carries forced lightness. “Most people would be more concerned

about the heavily armed hunters than mysterious and probably unimportant temperature fluctuations.”

“Most people haven’t spent weeks documenting inexplicable physiological responses that only manifest in specific circumstances.” Looking up from the ancient text, I meet his gaze. “Like how your temperature only rises when you’re near me.”

His skin flickers between onyx and crimson. “Maybe we should focus on—”

“How these spikes correlate perfectly with moments of physical contact.” Pressing my advantage despite the surrounding tension. “Almost like some kind of biological resonance...”

“Blair.” Dante’s voice drops lower, rougher. “What exactly have you been researching?”

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I pause, my mind racing to come up with a lie before I divulge something I'm not ready to address.

"All clear." Volt's voice interrupts us. "They're moving off. I caught something about equipment malfunction over their comms. Between my weather manipulation and Marina's Water Sprites, we must have shorted out their sensors."

"We should..." Dante steps back, though his tail seems reluctant to uncoil from my waist. The fact that, again, I wasn't even aware his tail was there bears further consideration. "You're pale, Blair. Probably bone tired. Why don't you lie down while I check the perimeter?"

As we head back to the main cavern, I mentally review the information I learned in that ancient book, hoping it has another meaning than what seems obvious.

Some research requires careful observation.

Some data reveal unexpected patterns.

And some truths blaze hotter than any temperature reading could measure.

Chapter Eight

Dante

After checking that all of our surveillance cameras are still in order, I return to my desk. As I slip my hand into the bottom drawer, a small velvet pouch tumbles from

my hoarded collection, spilling a bracelet I definitely didn't steal from Blair's medical area.

My tail curls with guilt as I hastily tuck it away with her other missing items—a hair tie, two pens, a white lab coat, and various small trinkets I couldn't resist collecting.

The hoarding started small. A pen here, a notebook there. But lately, the urge to gather her things has become nearly impossible to control. The bottom drawer of my desk in the library is practically a shrine to her presence—filled with items that carry her scent, her essence.

“Your temperature is demonstrating fascinating patterns.” Her voice from the doorway makes me jump. “The spikes correlate perfectly with emotional stress indicators.”

Of course, she's documenting my physiological responses. Because that's safer than acknowledging what's really happening between us. My skin darkens as I casually close the drawer with my tail.

“More variables for your spreadsheets?” The words scrape out as she approaches with her ever-present tablet.

“The data suggests...” She frowns at her screen. “That is, the numbers indicate...” For once, scientific precision seems to fail her.

“Having trouble quantifying something, Doc?” My tongue emerges to wet suddenly dry lips as she steps closer.

“My research indicates the rapid temperature fluctuations may be related to whatever is going on with your wing. If I could draw a little more of your blood—”

“Please, Dr. Frankenstein, collect a few more gallons of my Jersey Devil blood. I do so enjoy being reduced to a fascinating specimen.” My tail lashes, betraying the tension beneath my sarcastic tone. “Should I pose dramatically for your research photos? Perhaps shed a few scales for your collection?”

It hits me now—she’s absolutely right. I use snark as a shield to keep people from getting too close.

“That would actually be quite helpful for the analysis,” she responds literally, already reaching for a sample container.

I can’t contain my surprised laugh. “You know, most people would recognize that as sarcasm.”

“Most people don’t have a cure to develop,” she counters, still holding up the syringe hopefully, her eyes scanning my wing with clinical precision.

I sigh but hold still as she sets down the needle and reaches for her salve instead.

“Your wound,” she observes, her voice carrying that blend of clinical interest and genuine concern that makes my skin heat. “The edges are still discolored, and the pattern is spreading in a way that suggests more than a simple injury.”

“Your observational skills continue to astound,” I snark, but hold still as she gently applies the salve she developed for me. Her proximity sends heat waves shimmering through me. “Next, you’ll tell me wings aren’t supposed to have holes in them. Please, dazzle me with more of your medical insights.”

“Actually, the discoloration pattern suggests—”

“That was rhetorical, Doc. Though your ability to miss social cues is oddly

endearing.”

Our gazes collide, her expression... confused. Could her almost obsessive preoccupation with spreadsheets be a coping mechanism, I wonder. Are facts and figures her way of quantifying her observations to understand human—and cryptid—behavior? This is her neurodivergent brain working hard to make sense of feelings and confusion.

“The healing patterns aren’t consistent with any documented cryptid injury response. I wish you would tell me what really happened with that wing injury. The tissue samples show traces of an unknown toxin, something that’s actively preventing healing. The chemical structure suggests something engineered, possibly weaponized. Whatever did this was designed to cause lasting damage.”

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Darkness creeps across my skin as my tail whips against the floor with a dejected thump. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters if it’s killing you.” The tablet trembles slightly in her grip as she shows me the latest test results. “The toxin is spreading, isn’t it? That’s why you’re losing strength in that wing, why traditional treatments aren’t working. Dante, the lab equipment here isn’t advanced enough to give me an accurate analysis of the toxin. I need to know what we’re dealing with to synthesize a toxin-specific antidote.”

“What you need is to drop it.” The warning growl in my voice doesn’t mask the shame burning beneath my skin. She’s too close to truths I’m not ready to face.

Her hand grazes my injured wing, making my entire body tense. “I can’t. Not when every test shows the poison spreading further into your system. Whatever you’re protecting—whatever secret you’re keeping—is it worth dying for?”

My wings snap open, the injured one trembling visibly now. “Better than living with...” I snap my jaws shut before I reveal my shame.

Turning away from her stunned expression, I stalk toward the door. The weight of her gaze follows me, heavy with questions I won’t answer. My collection of her things sits in my desk drawer, each item a reminder of something I don’t deserve to have.

Later, alone in my chamber, I stare at the small token I’ve kept hidden from everyone—a curved black horn, broken at the base. All that remains of the Jersey Devil I failed to save.

“I’m sorry, Kieran,” I whisper to the darkness. The poison in my wing pulses, as if responding to his name. The same weapon that took him is now slowly claiming me. Poetic justice, perhaps, for the one who got away while his brother in species died by Apex’s hand.

Some poisons run deeper than blood.

Some wounds resist all attempts at healing.

Some secrets are worth dying to protect.

Chapter Nine

Blair

The nightmare starts the same way it always does.

Cold metal against my back. Harsh fluorescent lights burning my retinas. The clinical beep of monitors tracking my vital signs as the sedatives flow through my veins.

“Tell me what you learned about the Sasquatch’s vulnerabilities, Blair.” Their angry disappointment cuts deeper than any needle. “Tell us about the cryptids.” The voice is always the same—detached, methodical. Professional. “Their weaknesses. Their hiding places.”

The scene shifts, fragments into pieces. Suddenly, I’m a child again, standing in my father’s laboratory as he shows me samples under a microscope.

“This is what killed your mother, Blair,” he explains, his voice tight with grief and rage. “This is why our work matters.”

The venom sample glows with an eerie bioluminescence I'll never forget—it spreads in the same pattern now radiating through Dante's wing.

Back in the Apex lab. My throat burns from screaming, but I won't give them what they want. Won't betray the beings I once helped hunt.

The needle slides into my arm again. Fire races through my veins as they increase the dose. Through the haze, I hear them discussing my "remarkable resistance" to their cocktail of drugs.

"Perhaps we should try a more aggressive approach..."

Terror claws at my throat—

The scene shifts and bursts into pieces like a kaleidoscope. Now I'm strapped to a chair while they show me images of cryptids being dissected. Living beings treated like specimens. The way I used to view them, before I learned the truth.

"Your father would be so disappointed." The voice changes, becomes familiar. "From what I hear, he raised you better than this."

Terror claws at my throat as I try to explain, to make them understand what I've learned. But the words won't come. They never do.

Then I'm back in the cell, alone in the dark, knowing what comes next. The door opens, bringing light and pain and—

"Blair!"

Strong hands grasp my shoulders as I thrash against phantom restraints. A familiar scent of leather and bergamot cuts through the nightmare's grip.

“You’re safe.” Dante’s voice, rough with concern, anchors me to reality. “I’ve got you.”

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My eyes snap open to find onyx skin inches from my face. Dante perches on the edge of my bed, wings curved protectively around me. Even his injured one stretches to shelter me despite the obvious pain it causes him.

“How did you...?” My voice emerges as a croak.

“I...” His gaze darts from mine. I wonder what he’s hiding, but his expression is so sincere, so pained; I can’t help but trust him. His skin flickers between crimson and black. “When I can’t sleep, I sometimes wander the hallways. I was passing your door and heard you shouting.”

“I’m fine,” the words come automatically—a lifetime of keeping emotions hidden. “The sedatives they used sometimes cause vivid recall of—”

“Stop.” His tail curls around my waist, solid and grounding. “You don’t have to analyze everything. Sometimes it’s okay to just... feel.”

Although he’s wrong about that, the gentle understanding in his voice breaks something loose in my chest. Before I can stop myself, I’m pressing my face into his shoulder, breathing in his familiar scent as tears finally come.

His wings tighten around me as I shake apart in his arms. No data collection. No clinical observations. Just the safety of his embrace as years of carefully maintained control crumble.

“Shh,” he murmurs, his tail wrapping more securely around my waist. “You’re safe now. No one’s going to hurt you again.”

The conviction in his voice makes fresh tears spill. My fingers clutch at his shirt, and I feel his sharp intake of breath at the contact. His temperature spikes—I should be documenting this, analyzing the physiological response patterns, but all I can focus on is how right, how safe, it feels to be in his arms.

“I keep seeing their faces,” I whisper against his chest. “Hearing their voices. The things they—” My voice breaks.

“Look at me.” His clawed finger lifts my chin, and his gaze—deep red as molten garnets—captures me. “You survived. You’re stronger than they could ever understand.”

Something in his expression makes my breath catch. The way he’s looking at me... it defies all my careful categorizations, all my attempts to quantify the connection growing between us.

“Will you...” I swallow hard, scientific precision deserting me. “Could you stay? Just until I fall asleep?”

His skin ripples with an emotion I’m too exhausted to analyze. Instead of answering, he shifts us both until we’re lying down, his uninjured wing draped over me like a living blanket. Though it looks like leather, it feels soft and velvety.

As his wing settles around me, a strange sense of rightness washes over me. The headache that’s been my constant companion all day suddenly eases, and my racing heart begins to steady itself. It’s not just comfort—it’s something physiological, something I should be documenting. Yet for once, I don’t reach for my tablet.

“Your heart rate is normalizing,” he observes softly. His scientific observation is laced with so much affection. “And your skin temperature is adjusting to match mine.”

“There’s a term for this phenomenon in human medicine,” I murmur, scientific curiosity briefly overcoming my exhaustion. “Co-regulation. Though this seems more... intense.” Searching for the right words. “It’s almost as if our bodies are communicating on a cellular level.”

He tenses slightly, then deliberately relaxes. “You should rest. Scientific theories can wait until morning.”

I nestle closer, seeking his warmth. Whatever is happening between us pulses with comfort, though I don’t know what it means yet. His arm curls around me, pulling me against his chest as his tail winds securely around my waist.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my fingers tracing the delicate veins in his wing where it shelters me. “For understanding. For not asking too many questions.”

“I know something about nightmares,” he says softly, his breath warm against my hair. “About memories that follow you into sleep.”

My scientific mind wants to catalog this new information, to ask him about his dreams, but exhaustion is pulling me under. Instead, I simply turn my face into his chest, breathing in his scent.

His free hand comes up to stroke my hair, claws carefully retracted as his fingers work through the silver and lavender strands. The gentle, repetitive motion soothes me more effectively than any sedative.

“Your temperature is normalizing,” he observes, his voice a low rumble I can feel against my cheek. “Heart rate decreasing to standard resting parameters.”

I smile against his chest. “Now who’s the scientist?”

His quiet laugh vibrates through me, and I feel his lips press briefly against the top of my head—so gentle I might have imagined it if not for the way his tail tightens almost imperceptibly around my waist.

“I’ve learned from the best,” he murmurs.

We fall silent then, his wing adjusting slightly to cover me more completely as a chill runs through the chamber. I’ve never felt so protected, so safe, despite knowing all the reasons I shouldn’t. The hunter’s daughter and the Jersey Devil—a statistical improbability in every way.

“Dante?” My voice is thick with approaching sleep.

“Hmm?” The sound vibrates through his chest beneath my ear.

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“I’m glad it was you. Who rescued me.”

His arms tighten around me for just a moment, and I feel something in him relax, some tension I hadn’t even realized he was carrying.

“So am I,” he whispers, so softly I almost miss it.

As my eyes grow heavy, I feel him wind a strand of my hair around one careful claw. The gesture feels possessive in a way that should probably concern me, but instead sends warmth flooding through my system.

The sound he makes—something between a purr and a growl—awakens feelings I can’t properly classify.

Just before sleep claims me, I feel him press his face to the crook of my neck, inhaling deeply. The tenderness in the gesture makes my heart ache with emotions too complex for any spreadsheet to capture.

Chapter Ten

Blair

After last night’s nightmares, I couldn’t bear the isolation of my lab, and even the library felt too secluded. I needed the comfort of open space and the quiet buzz of sanctuary life around me, so I’ve set up a temporary workspace in the great hall. The distant sounds of other cryptids going about their day provide a soothing backdrop that keeps the memories at bay.

The words I'm trying to read blur together. My mind keeps drifting back to last night—strong arms, the delicious scent of warm skin and spice, protective wings, and the way Dante's tail curled around my waist as nightmares faded into dreamless sleep.

Marina gives me a gentle smile as she glides past, her scales dripping shimmering droplets from a recent dip in the pool at the bottom of the waterfall. "Sleep well?"

Heat creeps up my neck as I remember waking alone, though Dante's lingering scent told me he had stayed most of the night. "Adequately," I manage, burying myself in my data to avoid further conversation.

The sound of wings makes my heart race, but it's only Volt landing in his usual spot. The massive Thunderbird's electricity ripples with barely suppressed amusement as he watches me pretend to work.

"Interesting readings this morning," he rumbles, gesturing to my monitoring equipment. "The crystal resonance patterns show unusual activity in the residential wing around 2 AM."

"Environmental anomalies," I protest weakly, though we both know what—who—caused those energy spikes.

"Of course." His feathers ripple with knowing humor. "Just like Dante was simply 'patrolling' the hallway just outside your chamber all night."

Before I can formulate a proper scientific response, familiar footsteps approach. My pulse quickens as Dante appears, carrying something wrapped in soft leather.

"Morning." His skin shifts between crimson and obsidian as our gazes meet. We both glance away quickly, the memory of shared vulnerability still too raw.

“Good morning.” My voice emerges steadier than I feel. “I should review these test results...”

“Always working.” But his tail curls near his feet with what might be fondness as he sets the leather bundle beside me. “I found something you might appreciate.”

Curious, despite my attempt at professional distance, I carefully unwrap the package. Inside lies an ancient leather-bound journal, its pages filled with precise handwriting and detailed diagrams.

“It’s a research log,” he explains, skin darkening as I reverently touch the carefully preserved pages. “Written by a cryptid scientist centuries ago. She was like you—brilliant, methodical, always seeking to understand. She developed a unique system for cataloging cryptid physiological responses...”

My scanner and earbud are in my pocket. I quickly insert the earbud, excitement making my fingers fumble, and run the scanner as quickly as it can translate.

My breath catches as I recognize the elegant organizational structure. The way she cross-referenced observations and created matrices for tracking multiple variables—it’s exactly how my mind works.

“I’ve been organizing the library,” he continues, watching my fingers trace the careful notations. “Found this in a section on biochemical analysis. Thought you might want to see how another scientist approached similar research questions.”

The gift isn’t just a book—it’s validation. Understanding. He’s seen how I process information, how I make sense of the world through data and patterns, and instead of dismissing it as cold or clinical, he’s found a way to honor it.

“Thank you.” The words feel inadequate for the warmth blooming in my chest. “This

is... perfectly organized.”

His tail brushes my arm as he leans closer, his horns gleaming in the citrine-colored gem light. His clawed nail points out a particularly detailed diagram. “She even developed her own notation system for tracking energy signatures. Reminded me of your spreadsheets.”

“The organizational methodology is fascinating.” Running the scanner slowly over the careful charts helps steady my racing thoughts. “The way she integrated multiple data streams...”

“Thought you’d like that.” His voice carries that mix of affection and amusement I’m learning to recognize. “She went on to make several important discoveries about cryptid biology. Her work laid the foundation for understanding how our abilities manifest.”

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Looking up, I find his face closer than expected. His temperature seems to spike as our gazes lock, and for a moment, the great hall fades away. There's only the warmth of his presence, the careful way he touches the precious book, the understanding in his eyes as he watches me explore its pages.

"I should..." His voice roughens. "That is, the perimeter needs checking..."

"Of course." But neither of us moves. His tail remains curled loosely around my wrist as I clutch the journal like an anchor.

"You two are adorable." Volt's thunderous whisper breaks the moment. "But maybe take the meaningful staring somewhere more... private?"

Dante's skin flushes darker as he steps back. "Right. Perimeter. Very important."

"Thank you," I say again, holding the journal close. "For... everything."

His expression softens into something that makes my pulse race. "Always, Doc."

As he disappears down the corridor, I open the journal with trembling fingers. A small note falls out, written in his elegant hand: "For the brilliant scientist who sees patterns others miss. Your mind is beautiful."

Something warm and bright explodes in my chest—an emotion too complex for any spreadsheet to capture.

My body is thrumming, my nipples pricked with wanting, my lips feel achingly

alone. I'm thunderstruck with the revelation that I want to kiss him.

Me, the girl who grew up believing in things others dismissed as flights of imagination. But I wasn't the kind of girl who fantasized about meeting one in person and discovering more about them. I had something more sinister in mind.

And yet, those dreams have evaporated into smoke. Now the only thoughts pulsing through my brain—and body—are of kissing his crimson lips, touching the gentle curve of his horns, and once again feeling the safety of being wrapped in the embrace of his leathery wings.

Some gifts speak louder than words.

Some understanding runs deeper than data.

And some desires, once acknowledged, can never be forgotten.

Chapter Eleven

Dante

The scent of healing herbs fills the infirmary as Blair prepares another wing treatment. Her movements are precise, methodical—everything laid out in perfect order, just like the ancient journal she's been studying since I gave it to her yesterday.

“The notations about cryptid healing patterns are fascinating.” She says without looking up when I enter the room. I wonder. Is she as attuned to me as I am to her?

With fascination, I watch as she measures ingredients with careful accuracy. “Though some of the terminology required cross-referencing with other texts in the library.”

My skin warms at her dedication. Of course, she's already diving deep into research, probably creating new spreadsheets to track her findings.

"Your enthusiasm for dusty old books is showing, Doc." My mock scold is gentle as my tail curls with fondness as she approaches with her supplies.

"These aren't just books." Her eyes light with that intellectual fire that makes my breath catch. "They're centuries of accumulated knowledge. The scientific methodology alone—" She catches my amused expression and flushes slightly. "Right. Treatment first, waxing poetic about research later."

The gentle brush of her fingers against my wing membrane sends electricity racing through me. Every touch feels magnified since that night she let me hold her through her nightmares. The memory of her trust, her vulnerability, haunts me.

"Thank you again for the journal." Her voice stays professional despite the intimacy of her touch as she works the healing salve into my injured wing. "It's helping me understand so much about cryptid physiology."

"Figured you'd appreciate someone else's analytical approach." I release a small moan as her hands find a particularly sensitive spot. The moment I sit on the exam table, my tail wraps around her waist of its own accord.

She doesn't pull away. Instead, her fingers trace the edge of my wing with devastating thoroughness. "These markings here..." Her breath catches as she discovers another scar. "This wasn't from the initial injury."

Darkness creeps across my skin. "It's nothing."

"It's not nothing." Her touch gentles further, though her voice carries steel. "The strange purplish discoloration along the membrane's edge concerns me more than the

obvious wound. It's unlike any bruising pattern I've seen in my research. Dante, what really happened?"

The concern in her expression makes my chest tight. If she knew the truth—about my failure, my shame—she wouldn't look at me with such care. My knees tense as I prepare to retreat.

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“Your skin is darkening again.” Her analytical observation somehow makes this moment more intimate rather than less. “And your temperature...” Her free hand brushes my face, then traces the curve of my horn in a gesture that steals my breath.

“Blair.” Her name emerges as a growl as I catch her wrist. “You shouldn’t...”

“Shouldn’t what?” Her pulse races beneath my fingers. “Shouldn’t care? Shouldn’t want to understand?”

“Shouldn’t want this.” Despite my words, my tail tightens around her waist, drawing her closer. “Want me.”

The room is silent long enough for my ardor to turn to terror. Did I overstep? Misunderstand what every part of me was beginning to believe? That she wants me? Not as much as I want her, perhaps, but her tells, her hints... have I imagined all of it?

Finally, her gaze collides with mine as she lifts her chin defiantly to ask, “Why not?” Her fingers continue their maddening exploration, trailing from my horn to my jaw. “Because you look different? Because you have secrets?”

“Because... I’m a monster.” The words scrape out of my throat. “A devil.”

“No!” The fierce certainty in her voice makes me look up. “You’re beautiful.”

The sincerity in her expression undoes me. With a sound that’s half-growl, half-surrender, I pull her tighter. Connection blooms between us, urging closer contact,

deeper connection. What I feel transcends anything I've felt before.

The first brush of my lips against hers is gentle, questioning. She tastes like honey and herbs, a mix so uniquely her it makes me burn even hotter. Her fingers tangle in my hair, carefully avoiding my horns as though she's memorized exactly where they curve from my skull. The delicate touch only inflames me further, especially when her fingertips graze the sensitive base where horn meets scalp.

When she sighs into the kiss, parting her lips, my control shatters. My wings curl around us both, creating a private world of shadow and sensation. The crystal lights filter through my wing membranes, casting her in a rosy glow that makes her look otherworldly.

Her quiet gasp as my tongue traces her lower lip sends fire racing through my veins. The sound she makes—somewhere between a whimper and a moan—nearly undoes me completely.

My tail tightens possessively around her waist as I deepen the kiss, drawing her fully against me until I can feel her heartbeat thundering in perfect counterpoint to my own. Her clever fingers find the sensitive junction where my wings meet my shoulders, and I can't suppress the growl that rumbles up from deep in my chest.

"Dante," she breathes my name against my lips, the single word carrying both wonder and desire. The sound of it ignites something primal within me, something I've kept carefully leashed until this moment.

My claws card through her unique hair, cradling her head as I angle her face to better claim her mouth. She responds with unexpected boldness, her tongue meeting mine in a dance that sends electric currents arcing through me. The crystal formations around us pulse with subtle light, responding to the energy crackling between us.

Her hands aren't idle—they explore with scientific curiosity and unmistakable passion, mapping the texture of my skin where scales meet flesh, discovering places that make my breath catch and my tail curl tighter around her. When her fingers graze the base of my horns, I shudder visibly, my skin shifting to that iridescent shade I've never shown anyone else.

She doesn't flinch from my inhuman features—not my sharp teeth that I try so carefully to gentle, not wings that must feel alien against her softness, not even my clawed hands that cradle her face like she's something precious and breakable.

Instead, she presses closer, her body arching into mine with a trust that steals my breath. I find the sensitive spot at the nape of her neck, drawing circles with my thumb until she melts against me, her scientific detachment completely abandoned.

The kiss transforms into something deeper, rawer—a communion of souls as much as bodies. Through half-lidded eyes, I watch her expression, memorizing every flutter of her eyelashes, the exact shade of peach that colors her cheeks.

The world beyond my wings ceases to exist; there is only this moment, only her mouth moving perfectly against mine, only the soft sounds of pleasure that escape her when I do something that lights her on fire.

My fangs graze her lower lip, carefully controlled yet unmistakably present—a reminder of what I am, what we are to each other. Instead of fear, I feel her respond with a soft moan that vibrates against my mouth. Her hands clutch at my shoulders, nails digging in slightly as if afraid I might pull away.

“You're trembling,” I murmur against her jaw, trailing kisses toward her ear.

“Scientific... observation,” she manages, her voice deliciously breathless. “Elevated neural responses to... unprecedented stimuli.”

I can't contain the quiet laugh that escapes me, warmth blooming in my chest at this quintessentially Blair response. Even now, with her pulse racing and her body pressed against mine, she reaches for scientific terminology like an anchor.

"Would you like more data points, Dr. Andrews?" I tease, my voice low as I press a kiss to the sensitive spot just below her ear.

Her sharp intake of breath is answer enough, but she surprises me by capturing my face between her palms and bringing my mouth back to hers with newfound confidence. This kiss is different—deliberate, exploring, her scientific mind clearly cataloguing exactly what makes my skin shift colors and my wings tremble.

Time loses meaning. There's only the silk of her hair against my palms, the sweet pressure of her mouth against mine, the way she trembles when my claws carefully scrape along her spine.

My injured wing aches from staying extended, but I barely notice the pain—not when she's making those soft sounds of pleasure, not when she's kissing me like she's discovering something miraculous.

Finally, the need for air forces us apart. She looks dazed, her lips slightly swollen, her cheeks flushed. The sight makes something possessive clench in my chest.

"Your skin..." She touches my face with wondering fingers. "It's iridescent. I've never seen that color before."

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Trust her to make scientific observations at a moment like this. But instead of breaking the mood, her analytical nature only endears her to me more.

“Must be a new variable for your spreadsheets.” My voice sounds as though I’ve swallowed gravel as I press my forehead to hers. The gesture is so intimate, she can’t suppress a shiver.

Her quiet laugh is a joyous sound I’ve never heard from her before. “I’ll need to develop entirely new classification systems.”

“Later.” I draw her close again, reveling in how perfectly she fits against me. “Science later. Kisses now. You taste like...” My mind is whirling in pleasure too swiftly to think of a word. I simply hum.

As our lips meet again, softer this time but no less intense, I know this changes everything. There’s no going back from this—not from the way she touches me without fear, not from how she sees past my monstrous appearance to something worth wanting.

Some kisses rewrite every hypothesis.

Some touches heal more than physical wounds.

And some moments of surrender mark the beginning rather than the end.

Chapter Twelve

Blair

The library feels different now. Maybe it's the way the crystal formations cast their soft light across ancient texts, or how the air still carries that mineral tang that makes the space feel sacred. Or maybe it's because I can't focus on anything except yesterday's kiss in the infirmary—how Dante's tail curled so tightly around my waist, how his temperature spiked under my fingers, how he tasted wild and slightly dangerous when he finally pressed his lips to mine. Even now, my skin tingles at the memory of being wrapped in his wings, sheltered from the world in our own private sanctuary.

Focus, Blair. I'm here for research, not daydreaming about a Jersey Devil's kiss.

But the ancient text before me only makes matters worse. My finger traces over a passage about cryptid bonding behaviors that's making my heart race in a most unscientific manner:

“When the rare connection forms between compatible souls, physical responses manifest beyond conscious control—shared temperature fluctuations, heightened awareness of proximity, instinctive collection of items carrying the other's essence...”

Collection of items. The phrase catches me like a hook. Suddenly, all those missing possessions over the past weeks form a pattern I can't ignore—hair ties vanishing from my workstation, my favorite pen disappearing, a lab coat I was certain I'd hung by the door. Things I'd attributed to my own absentmindedness during intense research sessions.

It takes a moment for an even more thunderous awareness to strike me. Is that why I picked up one of his shed scales? It couldn't be possible that this otherworldly... connection could go both ways? Could it?

“These ancient texts contain fascinating references to physiological connections between certain cryptids,” I murmur, trying to keep my voice steady as Dante reaches past me to retrieve another volume. His chest brushes my shoulder, sending electricity racing through my nerve endings. “Though many of the terms seem deliberately obscure.”

“These older dialects often obscure their meaning.” That rough edge to his voice makes my pulse quicken. It’s the same tone he used when he spoke during our kiss. “Particularly around more... sensitive subjects.”

“Like why some beings might experience unusual physical responses around specific individuals?” The words emerge more breathless than intended as his tail brushes my ankle.

“Perhaps.” His skin darkens beautifully. “Or why certain... compelling behaviors might manifest between them.”

My scientific mind whirs with connections forming too rapidly to dismiss. “Like your temperature rising precisely 2.3 degrees whenever you’re within three feet of me? Or how we both always seem to know when the other is approaching, even before any audible cues?”

His tail freezes mid-motion, then curls tightly against his leg. “You’ve been measuring that?”

“Of course I have,” I reply, unable to suppress a small smile at his surprise. “I measure everything. It’s what I do.”

“And what other... measurements have you been collecting, Doc?” His attempt at casual curiosity fails spectacularly as his skin shifts through deepening crimson shades.

“Physiological responses to proximity. Sleep quality metrics in relation to distance. Healing rates of your wing in direct correlation to duration of contact during treatment.” I tick off the data points on my fingers. “The patterns are statistically significant and consistent enough to warrant further investigation.”

His wing twitches slightly. “Just scientific curiosity?”

“Initially,” I admit, surprising myself with my candor. “But science requires following evidence wherever it leads, even when the conclusions are... unexpected.”

His movements falter as I examine the ancient text, his tail suddenly stilling against the floor. When I look up, I catch his expression—a revealing mixture of guilt and defiance that connects several puzzling dots in my mind.

“You’ve been collecting things that belong to me, haven’t you?” I ask, moving toward his desk with deliberate casualness as my heart races with realization. “My missing pens, that lab coat that disappeared after you walked me to dinner last Thursday... all the little items I thought I’d misplaced.”

His tail lashes with such sudden force it knocks a book from the nearby shelf. “I don’t know what you’re—” The lie dies on his lips as my eyebrow arches in perfect scientific skepticism. “Fine. Yes.”

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“Why?” I’m not sure why I ask, because I think I just read the explanation in a book about mate bonds.

“Because they smell like you,” he blurts, then immediately looks like he wants to sink through the floor. “I mean... that is...”

“Fascinating,” I whisper, taking a step closer. “The ancient texts mention olfactory triggers as part of bonding behaviors. Subjects collect items carrying the other’s scent as both comfort mechanism and territorial marking.”

“I’m not a ‘subject,’ Blair,” he growls, but there’s no real heat behind it. “And please don’t tell me you have a spreadsheet titled ‘Jersey Devil Hoarding Patterns.’”

“Of course not,” I reply primly. “It’s called ‘Proximity-Triggered Collection Behaviors in Cryptid Bonding Scenarios.’” The surprised laugh that escapes him makes my heart flutter in a way no scientific instrument could measure.

The humor fades away as our gazes lock for long moments. As though he just made a big decision, he glances at the bottom drawer—the one he always guards so carefully. After a long moment, his skin shifts through shades of uncertainty, and he murmurs, “Maybe... maybe you should look in there.”

When I hesitate, he adds softly, “Please. I need you to see.”

The vulnerability in his voice stops me cold. This isn’t just about missing pens or stolen lab coats. This means something to him—something profound enough to strip away his usual sarcastic armor.

With trembling fingers, I open the drawer at his invitation. “Blair, I can explain...”

Inside, I find a treasure trove of familiar items. Hair ties. Notes written in my handwriting. Small trinkets I’d assumed were simply misplaced. Each item carefully arranged, some bearing signs of being handled often.

“Oh,” is all I can manage, the single syllable completely inadequate to express the storm of emotion sweeping through me. This isn’t random collecting or casual theft. Each item has been carefully preserved, almost... cherished.

“It’s ridiculous, I know,” he says, voice rough with embarrassment. “Hoarding your belongings like some primitive creature. I tried to stop. I just... couldn’t.”

Reaching into the drawer, my fingers tremble slightly as I touch a hair tie I distinctly remember losing weeks ago. “It’s not ridiculous,” I whisper. “It’s confirmation.”

“Confirmation?” The confusion in his voice makes me look up.

“I’ve been researching what’s happening to us. There’s a name for it in those old books.”

“A mate bond,” he says, the words emerging like they’re being pulled from somewhere deep inside him.

My breath catches. “Yes. Exactly that.” Hearing him name it makes it suddenly, undeniably real. “I’ve been researching it for weeks, documenting all the signs—our synchronized temperature fluctuations, the awareness of each other’s presence, the physical discomfort when separated too long...”

“Wait.” His tail freezes mid-lash. “You knew? All this time?”

“I suspected,” I correct, precise even in emotional moments. “The evidence was compelling but inconclusive without... this.” I gesture to the drawer of collected items. “The final behavioral marker confirming the hypothesis.”

I pause as a thousand thoughts fly through my mind. That is followed by a storm of emotions as I register what this means.

“You’ve been hoarding my things.” The words come out soft, with wonder rather than accusation.

“I...” His skin darkens at the simple truth. “Yes.”

“And I’ve been cataloguing physiological responses, collecting data on our synchronized symptoms, and secretly tracking our mutual awareness of each other.” A small laugh escapes me. “We’ve both been studying this connection, just with different methodologies.”

Something shifts in his expression, vulnerability giving way to a crooked smile that makes my heart stutter. “So, what you’re saying is, we’re both ridiculous.”

“I prefer ‘scientifically thorough,’” I counter, feeling a smile tug at my own lips.

“Of course you do.” His tail uncurls slightly from its defensive position. “Always the scientist.”

“And you’re always deflecting,” I say, stepping closer. “Even when it’s something as significant as a mate bond forming between us.”

He lets out a rough breath, half-laugh, half-confession. “Yeah, well, it’s not exactly easy to admit my biology’s gone rogue—deciding you’re my perfect match, making me steal your hair ties and spike a fever whenever you’re nearby.”

Despite the humor, there's a raw honesty beneath his words.

“Seemed like the kind of thing that might make a rational scientist bolt.”

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“I’m not going anywhere.” The words come out before I can second-guess them. I take another step, closing the space between us.

He gives a crooked smile, voice edged with disbelief. “Sure. Just a normal day in cryptid mountain—stealing your stuff because my instincts have apparently decided you’re mine.”

That last word comes out in a low, possessive growl that sends a ripple of heat through me.

“Funny,” I murmur, voice barely above a whisper. “When you put it like that, it doesn’t sound so crazy.”

I reach into my pocket, my fingers closing around something I’ve been carrying for days. “I’m not exactly innocent in this... bonding behavior, either.”

His head tilts slightly, curiosity evident in the way his wings shift. “What do you mean?”

I withdraw a small object that was concealed in my lab coat pocket—one of his scales that had fallen loose during yesterday’s kiss. I’ve been carrying it, running my fingers over its smooth surface whenever I need to ground myself.

“You dropped this,” I explain, feeling heat rush to my cheeks. “During our... research session yesterday.”

His eyes widen as he recognizes the crimson scale resting in my palm, then narrow

with something that sends delicious shivers down my spine. “And you’ve been carrying it around? For what purpose, Dr. Andrews? More data collection?”

“Initially, yes,” I admit, scientific honesty compelling me despite my embarrassment. “But then I found myself... taking it out when we were separated. When my headaches started during your absence, it seemed to help stabilize my temperature fluctuations.”

“The mate bond,” he breathes, his voice dropping to that register that makes my knees weak. “It’s stronger than I thought if you’re already experiencing separation symptoms.”

“The symptoms are quite pronounced,” I confirm, somehow maintaining scientific precision despite the way my heart races as he steps closer. “Headaches, temperature instability, decreased concentration, persistent awareness of your location within the sanctuary...”

“And carrying a piece of me helps?” The wonder in his voice makes something warm unfurl in my chest.

“Statistically significant improvement in all measured parameters,” I report, then add more softly, “Though direct proximity...” I stop and breathe. “Being near you helps the most.”

His breath catches as I place the scale carefully in the drawer. “What are you doing?”

“Adding to our collection.” The word “our” makes his tail curl around my wrist, and I feel his temperature spike against my skin.

His skin lightens to that iridescent color I’ve only seen once before—during our toe-curling kiss. “Our collection,” he repeats, the possessive phrase clearly affecting him

deeply.

“Yes,” I confirm, scientific certainty providing courage. “If we’re experiencing a mate bond, then logically, the collection belongs to both of us. As does the research into its effects.”

“Have you considered that mate bonds can be dangerous?” His voice is low as his wings shift with subtle tension. “For both parties.”

“Dangerous?” I echo, my analytical mind immediately seeking clarification.

“Hunters have always known that the surest way to capture a bonded cryptid is to threaten their mate.” His expression darkens, tail lashing with agitation.

The implications settle heavily between us. For all my scientific fascination with the physiological aspects of our connection, I hadn’t fully considered the potential consequences.

“Does that scare you?” I ask, genuine curiosity overriding my usual caution. “Being... connected to me this way? Vulnerable?”

His tail stills, then curls toward me like it has a mind of its own. “Terrified,” he admits with surprising candor. “But not enough to fight it anymore.”

“That’s... not very scientific,” I observe, though a smile tugs at my lips.

“Neither is carrying my scale in your pocket,” he counters, closing the distance between us with a fluid grace that makes my breath catch. “Yet here we are, Dr. Andrews. Breaking all sorts of protocols.”

“Mmhmm.” Standing on tiptoe to brush my lips against his jaw, I catch the faintest

tremor in his wings. “I think we need much more data before drawing any conclusions. For instance, I haven’t properly documented the correlation between physical proximity and skin coloration. Or mapped the exact temperature variations when I do this...” My fingers find that sensitive spot at the base of his horns.

His growl of surrender vibrates through my bones as he pulls me close, his tail wrapping securely around my waist. “Your scientific method will be the death of me, Doc.”

“Not death,” I correct, delighting in the way his pulse quickens beneath my touch. “Just thorough experimentation.”

“Is that what we’re calling it now?” His drawl carries amusement tinged with something deeper. “Frankly, I’d prefer less talking and more research,” he murmurs, his hand cupping my cheek with impossible gentleness, despite the sharpness of his claws. “For a scientist, you sometimes overthink things.”

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“Overthinking is a fundamental research requirement,” I inform him primly, though my voice catches as his thumb traces my lower lip.

“Then maybe we should move on to the next phase of your research, Doc.” His face lowers toward mine. “For science, of course.”

“For science,” I agree just before his lips find mine, and all scientific observation temporarily gives way to pure, unquantifiable experience.

As his wings curve around us, creating that private world that belongs only to us, I make mental notes for future documentation—the exact temperature increase when his tail tightens around my wrist, the precise shade of his skin when my fingers trace his horns, the specific frequency of the growl that vibrates through his chest when I press closer.

Some data can only be collected through direct participation.

Some connections defy standard classification systems.

And some experiments are worth conducting again and again, regardless of what the spreadsheets say.

Chapter Thirteen

Dante

The first sign that something is wrong comes the next morning during patrol.

Marina's concerned glance at my wing lingers too long. Volt's electricity crackles with barely suppressed worry. Even Cliff's usually stoic Sasquatch expression shows alarm.

"Your wing." Marina's voice carries gentle concern. "That discoloration has spread past the membrane edge."

Twisting to examine it shoots fresh pain through my body. The strange dark lines that had been confined to the injury site now sprawl like toxic spiderwebs across my wing. The sight makes my skin shift to obsidian.

"It's nothing." The lie tastes bitter. "Just needs more time to heal."

Kieran's warning cry echoes in my memory—hunters' weapons firing as he tried to save me, the burning sensation when I was hit, the sickening realization that I'd escaped while he lost his life.

My stomach threatens to rebel when Volt interrupts. "This isn't normal healing. Blair should look at it."

The mention of her name makes my skin flash with heat. Last night's interrupted wing treatment left us both frustrated and wanting more. But there are more urgent matters than my growing attraction to our resident scientist.

"Fine." My tail flicks with barely contained tension. "But let's not create unnecessary panic."

Finding her proves easy. She's in her lab-turned-infirmery, bent over test results with that adorable furrow between her brows. My quiet footsteps don't startle her—she's attuned to me, always seems to know when I'm near. The mate bond.

“Your breathing pattern is elevated.” She doesn’t look up from her work. “Your crystal bracelet indicates your temperature just spiked 2.1 degrees upon entering the room.”

“Maybe I just enjoy watching you work.” But my attempt at deflection dies when I try to shrug nonchalantly, and fresh pain blasts through my wing.

This time, she does look up, her expression shifting from scientific interest to alarm. “Your wing—the toxin spread patterns have accelerated significantly.” Moving quickly, she gestures to the examination table. “Let me see.”

Her touch is gentle but clinical as she examines the damage. The contrast between her professional demeanor and last night’s heated encounter makes my skin flush darker.

“This is...” Her voicecatches as she traces one of the spreading lines. “The molecular structure must be evolving. Adapting to your system faster than your natural healing can combat it.”

“How bad?”

Instead of answering immediately, she grabs several vials and testing equipment. The efficiency of her movements can’t quite mask the tremor in her hands.

“The original infection site shows increased necrotic tissue.” Her voice stays steady through sheer force of will. “And these new patterns are following your wing’s primary energy channels. Almost like they were designed to—” She cuts herself off, but not before I catch the flash of recognition in her eyes.

“Designed to what?” My tail curls around her wrist, seeking connection even as suspicion prickles at my neck.

“I need to run more tests.” Pulling away, she mixes solutions with precise movements. “The spread rate suggests some kind of catalytic reaction, but the trigger mechanism...”

“Blair.” My voice comes out sharper than intended. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Her hands flutter so wildly now, she tucks them under her arms. For a moment, the only sound is the quiet hum of crystal formations and the thundering of our hearts.

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“These molecular patterns... They’re not from Apex—their bioweapons leave different markers. This is...this is something different.” She stops herself and busies herself with an empty test tube.

“You seem very certain about that.” Watching her face carefully. “Were you that familiar with Apex’s weapons?”

The implications hang heavy between us. How would a biochemist know about classified weapons development? Unless...

Fresh pain lances through my wing before I can pursue that thought. I gasp as fire races along the toxic lines spreading across my membrane.

“Dante!” Her arms catch me as I sway, all professional distance forgotten. The fear in her voice makes my chest tight. “I have some ideas for treatment, but I need you to trust me. What I’m about to try... I’ve never synthesized this particular compound before, but the theoretical framework exists.”

“You’ve been treating the symptoms all this time.” Managing through gritted teeth. “Why wait until now to mention you might know how to actually fight it?”

Her fingers tremble slightly as she prepares compounds for the injection. “Because until this moment, I honestly didn’t have a clear idea of what I was dealing with. But at least I have a better working hypothesis now.”

Something’s off. She’s avoiding eye contact, and now that I’m sitting comfortably, she’s turned her back to me to fiddle with a microscope.

“I’ve been analyzing blood samples, running tests, trying to get a solid grasp of the problem before I risk making it worse. This particular toxin...if you treat it wrong, it accelerates. I needed to be sure.” The raw honesty in her voice makes me want to believe her, even as questions multiply in my mind.

“Do what you need to.” Gritting my teeth against another wave of pain. “But your behavior makes me think you’re keeping something from me.”

Her fingers tremble slightly as she combines solutions and prepares an injection. “Right now, we need to focus on stopping the spread before it reaches your primary nervous system. If these readings are accurate...”

She doesn’t finish the sentence. Doesn’t need to. We both know what happens to cryptids who suffer catastrophic nervous system damage.

“Hey.” Nuzzling her with my face, my horns grazing her hair as I draw her closer despite the pain. “I don’t know what you’re hiding, but as crazy as it sounds... I trust you.”

There’s no explaining it—something in me believes her, all the way down to the bone. And I hope to hell I’m right, because my life’s on the line. The words seem to pierce her more deeply than any toxin. Her eyes fill with tears she quickly blinks away.

“I’m not sure you should.” The whisper is so quiet I almost miss it. Before I can respond, she straightens with renewed determination. “The first treatment will hurt.” I nod, then watch for the next hour as she prepares an injection, her attention fully focused on the compound she’s creating.

Finally, she asks, “Are you ready?”

Nodding, I let her position my wing for the injections. After the first needle slides home, her free hand finds mine. I clench it perhaps too tightly as liquid fire courses through my veins, sheathing my nails as I grip her more tightly.

“The antivenom should slow the spread.” Her voice anchors me through the pain. “But we need to find the source. The exact composition. Without it...”

“Later.” I squeeze her hand as another wave hits. “Science later.”

Her quiet laugh holds more worry than humor. “Now who’s deflecting?”

As she works, I can’t help noticing how her hands shake whenever she traces the spreading lines. This isn’t the clinical uncertainty of a scientist facing an unknown compound. This is the trembling of someone forced to confront something they never wanted to see. Something personal.

The implications terrify me almost as much as the toxin racing through my system. Almost as much as the way she looks at me, her eyes hooded with a secret. Whatever her connection to this weapon is, I don’t think it’s through her work with Apex. And somehow, that makes it even more frightening.

Some poisons spread beneath the skin. Some secrets refuse to stay buried. And some truths hurt more than any venom.

Chapter Fourteen

Blair

The crystal formations cast a soft glow across my research notes as I try to focus on the molecular analysis. But my mind keeps drifting to Dante’s deteriorating condition, to the weight of secrets pressing against my chest. The quiet of the library

offers no peace tonight.

Chelsea's voice drifts softly from her radio broadcast room down the hall, tonight's show a rerun about synchronicity, psychic phenomena, and remote viewing.

"You should rest." Even injured, Dante moves with such animal grace he almost snuck up on me. "It's late."

"I need to understand these binding patterns." But my hands shake as I adjust the crystal-powered microscope. "The molecular structure is unlike anything I've seen in Apex's files."

This poison was designed specifically to kill him. And I know exactly who made it.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:17 am

“Doc.” His tail curls around my wrist, gently drawing me away from my work. “You’ve been at this for hours.”

Looking up, I catch my breath at his proximity. The crystal light plays across his skin, turning it to liquid garnet. His injured wing trembles slightly with the effort of staying folded, and guilt claws at my chest. If I’d recognized the toxin sooner, if I’d been brave enough to admit what I know...

“I can’t stop.” My voice wavers. “Not when the spread patterns indicate—”

His clawed finger beneath my chin stops my scientific rambling. “Blair. Come here.” His voice is deep and filled with affection.

Before I can protest, he draws me into the circle of his arms. His wings curve around us, creating a private world that feels like safety and danger all at once. His masculine scent makes my knees weak.

“Your brilliant mind needs rest, too.” His words vibrate through his chest where I’m pressed against him.

“I can’t lose you.” The admission tears free before I can stop it. “Not to this. Not when I—” “I swallow the rest—not when I’m falling in love with you. Not when telling you the truth might destroy everything. Not when I see my father’s signature all over this toxin—elegant and devastating.

Not when it’s based on the same venom compound he extracted from my mother’s wounds, the formula I started in his lab that he has obviously perfected over decades

of obsession and grief, now weaponized against you.

I say none of that, though, because I know in my heart that if he knew even half the truth of who I really am, where I really came from, he would find a way to leave me—mate bond or no mate bond.

Instead of answering, he tilts my face up. His eyes hold warmth that steals my breath. When his lips meet mine, the kiss is achingly gentle—a stark contrast to his fearsome appearance. His tail winds more securely around my waist as I press closer, seeking a connection I don't deserve.

My fingers trace the curve of his horns, finding that sensitive spot at the base that makes him growl softly. His skin heats beneath my touch, shifting to that iridescent shade that seems to shout his affection for me. The kiss deepens as his claws card carefully through my hair.

“Your heart's racing,” he murmurs against my mouth. “Any scientific observations about that?”

“Several.” But coherent thought deserts me as his wings tighten around us, blocking out everything except the heat of his skin and the way he makes me feel precious and protected. “Though I may need more data...”

His quiet laugh vibrates through my bones. “Always the researcher.”

When he kisses me again, there's more urgency—like he senses my inner turmoil and wants to chase it away. His gentle dominance makes me melt against him, forgetting everything except how perfectly we fit together.

His wings create shifting shadows as the crystal light plays across our intertwined forms. Each brush of his heated skin sends electricity racing through my nerve

endings.

“Stay with me tonight,” he whispers against my hair. “Let me hold you while you sleep.”

The trust in his voice breaks my heart. If he knew what I was, who I came from... But I’m too weak to resist the safety of his embrace, the promise of comfort in his arms.

“Yes,” I breathe, letting him lead me toward his chamber. The weight of secrets can wait until morning. For now, there’s only this—his wings around me, his heart beating steadily against my back, his tail wound possessively around my waist.

As we enter, his chamber reveals itself in the soft crystal light—a space that is quintessentially Dante. Unlike the sterile laboratories I’ve grown accustomed to, his private sanctuary feels alive with his essence.

Carefully arranged crystal formations cast gentle illumination across the walls, their patterns shifting with our movements. The large bed nestled against the far wall is built into a natural depression in the stone, filled with soft blankets that look surprisingly inviting.

“It’s not what you’re used to,” he says, a hint of uncertainty in his voice as I take in the room.

“It’s perfect,” I reply, surprising myself with the sincerity in my tone.

As we settle onto his bed, his uninjured wing creates a canopy above us, sheltering us from the world beyond this moment. The silence between us holds all the words we’re not saying—the secrets I keep about my father’s weapons, the truth he hides about his injured wing. Yet somehow, lying here in his arms, those barriers seem less

insurmountable than they did hours ago.

“Your heart rate has stabilized,” he observes, scientific precision in his voice that makes me smile despite everything.

“Yours too,” I counter, fingers tracing gentle patterns across his chest. “Though your temperature remains elevated by approximately 1.2 degrees above baseline.”

His quiet laugh vibrates through me. “Always collecting data.”

“Some habits are difficult to break.” My hand stills over his heart, feeling its steady rhythm beneath my palm. “Even when other variables warrant prioritization.”

“Other variables?” His tail curls more securely around my waist.

Instead of answering, I press closer, my head finding that perfect spot on his chest that feels like it was designed specifically for me. His wing adjusts to cover us more completely. The painkiller I added to the injection I gave him is providing him relief from his pain.

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“You should sleep,” he murmurs, his voice a vibration I feel more than hear. “Scientific brilliance requires adequate rest periods.”

“So does healing,” I counter, careful not to touch his injured wing. “Especially for cryptids with stubborn deflection patterns.”

In the quiet that follows, I feel the weight of everything unsaid between us—questions unanswered, truths unacknowledged. Yet for tonight, this connection is enough. Tomorrow will bring its complications, its necessary confrontations. But here, sheltered in his wings with his heartbeat as my lullaby, I allow myself to believe that some bridges can be rebuilt even after trust has been broken.

Chapter Fifteen

Blair

I wake up disoriented—this isn’t my chamber, these aren’t my blankets. Then awareness floods back as I register the warm weight draped across my body, the leathery wing creating a protective cocoon around me, the steady rhythm of Dante’s heart beneath my ear.

We fell asleep fully clothed, his protective instincts drawing me close even in slumber. Sometime during the night, our bodies sought deeper connection. My leg has slipped between his, my arm curled possessively around his waist. Heat pools low in my belly as his chest presses against my back, his masculine scent making my pulse flutter against my throat.

I should move away. Create appropriate distance. Reestablish proper boundaries after allowing emotional vulnerability to temporarily cloud my judgment. Yet my body refuses to comply with logical imperatives, instead pressing closer to his warmth.

Through the haze of half-sleep, I register a hardness against my hip that sends unexpected heat coursing through me. The mate bond pulses between us, amplifying awareness of every point where our bodies connect. Scientific curiosity mingles with something more primal as I catalog his body's responses even while my own body betrays similar reactions.

His breathing changes, the steady rhythm of sleep giving way to something quicker, more deliberate. I feel the moment consciousness returns to him—the slight tensing of muscles, the careful stillness of someone trying not to disturb another's rest.

"I know you're awake," I whisper into the darkness, my voice husky.

His tail, which had been curled loosely around my ankle, tightens. "So are you." The words rumble through his chest beneath my ear, vibrations traveling directly to my core. "We should probably—"

Whatever suggestion of distance or propriety he might have offered dies as I shift against him, scientific methodology abandoned in favor of direct experimentation. The hard length pressing against me twitches in response, and his sharp intake of breath provides immediate data confirmation.

"Probably what?" I ask, emboldened by darkness and the lingering vulnerability of sleep. My hand moves before I make a conscious decision, fingers tracing the ridges of his abdomen through his shirt.

"Blair." My name emerges as both warning and plea, the conflict in his voice mirroring the tension in his body. "You don't... we shouldn't..."

“Empirical evidence suggests otherwise.” My analytical framing doesn’t quite mask the desire beneath. “Physiological responses indicate mutual attraction despite recent conflicts.”

His quiet laugh vibrates against me. “Only you would analyze arousal patterns in scientific terminology.” But his tail winds more securely around my leg, betraying emotions his words try to control.

“Observable data provides a framework for understanding complex emotional variables,” I explain, fingers continuing their exploratory path across his chest. “For instance, your current temperature elevation and accelerated heart rate suggest—”

His movement surprises me—swift yet controlled as he shifts our positions, rolling until I find myself beneath him, his wings creating a private world that blocks out everything except us. The crystal light filtering through his wing membranes casts his features in an otherworldly glow, emphasizing both his inhuman beauty and the very human desire in his eyes.

“What does your data suggest now, Dr. Andrews?” His voice drops to that register that makes something molten pool low in my belly.

Scientific vocabulary momentarily deserts me as his proximity overwhelms my senses. His spicy, masculine scent fills my lungs. The weight of him above me, carefully balanced on his forearms to avoid crushing me, feels like sanctuary rather than confinement. His rigid cock is nestled between my legs. Without conscious decision, my thighs spread to garner more of his delicious pressure.

“Inconclusive results,” I manage finally. “Further investigation required.”

The curve of his mouth—predatory yet tender—sends electricity racing along my nerve endings. “Very thorough research methodology.”

When his lips finally meet mine, the contact feels inevitable—as though all our conversations, all our circling of truth and secrets, have been leading to this moment of surrender. His fangs graze my lower lip with exquisite care, the danger inherent in their sharpness only intensifying the connection between us.

My hands rise to trace the curves of his horns, finding that sensitive spot at the base that makes his skin shift to that beautiful iridescent shade I've documented so carefully in my research. His quiet growl vibrates against my lips, the sound more felt than heard as his kiss deepens from tentative exploration to something hungrier.

“We should stop,” he murmurs against my jaw, even as his mouth traces a burning path toward my neck. “Before this goes too far.”

“Probability of successful cessation approaching statistical impossibility,” I counter, arching into him as his fangs scrape gently along my throat. “Given current intensity of stimuli.”

His quiet laugh warms my skin. “Making scientific observations during seduction should not be this arousing.”

“All observational data indicates otherwise.” My fingers card through his hair, careful of his horns as I guide his mouth back to mine. “Though further testing would provide more conclusive results.”

The kiss that follows abandons tentative exploration for something deeper, more raw, more urgent. His hand slides beneath my shirt, claws carefully retracted as his palm burns against my bare skin. “I need you,” he growls against my lips. “It's been too long since I've tasted you, touched you properly.” His other hand cups my breast through my shirt, thumb circling my nipple until it peaks beneath the fabric.

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“Then take me,” I whisper, raw need running through me like a raging wildfire. “Right here, right now. I don’t care if someone hears us.”

His tongue teases mine with deliberate skill that sends fire racing through my veins. My body responds with unexpected intensity, back arching to press more fully against him, legs parting further to cradle him even tighter.

Through layers of clothing, I feel every hard plane of his body against mine. This should terrify me—wanting something this much, this fast. But when his claws trace my spine, careful despite their sharpness, I arch into the danger of him like I’m already addicted. When his clawed hand slips beneath my shirt to trace patterns across my ribs, I can’t suppress the moan that escapes me.

“Tell me to stop,” he whispers against my collarbone, voice rough with restrained desire. “If this isn’t what you want.”

“Do your enhanced senses detect any hesitation?” I challenge. “Any reluctance in my physiological responses?”

His skin darkens to deeper crimson, tail coiling possessively around my thigh. “Always my analytical Blair.”

“Not always,” I admit. Vulnerability is easier in this private world, created under the shadow of his wings. “Not with you.”

His primitive satisfaction mingles with so much tenderness, it makes my chest ache with emotions too complex for any spreadsheet to capture. The sound that rumbles

from deep in his chest vibrates through me, sending liquid heat pooling between my thighs as his claws trace delicate patterns along my spine.

His movements grow more deliberate as he systematically dismantles my carefully maintained control.

“I want you to see me,” I whisper, my scientific composure completely gone. “Not the researcher. Just me.” His eyes darken with something beyond desire. “I’ve never seen anything but you, Blair. From the moment I carried you to safety.”

With surprising dexterity, his claws undo buttons and fastenings, each inch of exposed skin met with the focused attention of his hands and mouth. Scientific detachment gives way to raw sensation as he explores me with the same meticulous care I’ve applied to my studies of him.

“Your skin tastes like honey and sea salt,” he murmurs against my stomach, tongue tracing patterns that make me tremble. “I’ve wondered for weeks what you would taste like.”

“You’ve thought about this?” The question emerges breathlessly as his claws trace the curve of my hip with devastating precision.

“Extensively.” His admission carries no shame, only honest desire that makes my pulse race faster. “I’ve imagined cataloging every sound you make when pleasure overtakes scientific composure.”

“That’s...” My breathcatches as his mouth finds the sensitive skin of my inner thigh. “Very thorough research planning.”

His quiet laugh vibrates against my skin. “I learned from the best.”

He eases slowly downward, taking his time in such a controlled manner that I moan with unquenched need.

When his tongue finally makes contact with the center of my desire, analytical thought becomes impossible. He laps at me with deliberate strokes, his forked tongue finding every sensitive nerve ending as his claws grip my thighs, holding me open for his feast. The triple sensation of his tongue parting my folds while his fangs graze my inner thighs and his claws gently prick my skin sends electricity crackling through every cell in my body.

My fingers clutch at his horns, finding purchase as pleasure spirals through me with unexpected intensity. Each stroke of his tongue sends shockwaves racing through my core, my back arching off the bed as he devours me with single-minded focus.

“Oh God, Dante,” I moan, my voice breaking on his name. “Don’t stop, please don’t stop. Your tongue—it feels so good, so perfect.” The words spill from my lips without conscious thought, scientific composure shattered by the exquisite torture of his attentions.

The wet heat of his mouth combined with the gentle scrape of his fangs against my most sensitive flesh drives me to the edge of madness.

“You taste so fucking sweet,” he growls against my pussy, his voice muffled by my flesh. “I could eat you for hours, make you come on my tongue over and over until you’re begging me to stop.” His words vibrate against my clit, sending fresh waves of pleasure through me.

The mate bond amplifies every sensation—his satisfaction at my response, feeding back into my own pleasure until the boundaries between us blur.

His mouth moves with exquisite precision, his tongue tracing delicate patterns that

send electric currents racing through me. Each stroke, each deliberate caress, seems perfectly calibrated to drive me higher, as though he's conducting intimate research into exactly what makes me come undone.

His wings shift with barely contained desire, the membranes trembling slightly as he exercises exquisite control over his more primal instincts. His tail winds more securely around my thigh, holding me open to his exploration with gentle insistence that sends fresh heat coursing through me.

"Your taste exceeds all hypothetical projections," he murmurs against my most sensitive flesh, the vibration of his words adding a new dimension to the pleasure building within me. "I could conduct this particular experiment for hours."

"That would be..." My voice fractures as his tongue finds a rhythm that makes coherent speech nearly impossible. "Statistically significant... data collection."

His quiet laugh sends ripples of excitement racing along already overstimulated nerve endings. One finger, claws retracted, traces gentle patterns against my entrance, careful pressure that questions rather than demands. When I arch into the contact, silent permission granted through body language rather than words, he slowly presses inside with devastating precision.

His movements become more deliberate, his finger curling to find that perfect spot within me as his mouth continues its relentless attention above. When he adds a second finger, stretching me deliciously while his tongue circles my swollen clit, I cry out his name like a prayer. The rhythm he establishes—fingers pumping while his mouth sucks and licks—has me trembling on the precipice of release.

"I'm going to come," I gasp, my thighs trembling around his head. "Dante, I'm going to—" But words dissolve into incoherent cries as he doubles his efforts, his tongue flicking faster against my clit while his fingers press the sensitive hollow on my front

wall that makes my vision go white.

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The dual stimulation proves overwhelming. Pleasure crests with unexpected intensity. Every muscle in my body ripples in ecstasy as I greedily press against him, silently demanding even more pressure—which he eagerly delivers.

My back arches off the bed, my body tensing and trembling as waves of bliss wash through me. The climax builds and crashes through me, each spasm more intense than the last. I'm vaguely aware of the sounds escaping me—breathless moans and broken fragments of his name—as my hands clutch desperately at his horns, needing something to anchor me as I'm swept away.

The climax seems to last forever, wave after wave of pleasure crashing over me until I'm left trembling and gasping in his arms.

Through the haze of aftermath, I feel him press tender kisses to my inner thigh, my hipbone, my stomach—each touch reverent in ways that transcend physical desire. When he finally moves up my body to claim my mouth again, I taste myself on his tongue. The intimacy of it sends fresh heat coursing through my veins. The combination of his weight above me and the taste we share creates a new kind of intimacy—raw and unfiltered, with nothing hidden between us.

“Your chromatic responses during climax are fascinating,” he murmurs against my neck. The scientific terminology clearly meant to tease. “The correlation between pleasure intensity and skin flushing patterns warrants further investigation.”

“You’re mocking my research methodology,” I accuse with a smile, fingers tracing the sensitive edge of his wing where it joins his shoulder. The membrane feels like velvet beneath my fingertips, and he shudders at my touch, his control slipping just

enough to let me glimpse the desire he's barely containing.

“Merely applying your analytical approach to new subject matter.” His skin transforms to that iridescent shade that indicates profound emotion as my touch grows more deliberate. “Though my observational objectivity might be somewhat compromised under current circumstances.”

The confession of vulnerability—couched in scientific terminology that mirrors my own defense mechanisms—melts something in my chest. With newfound boldness, I push against his shoulder until he allows himself to be guided onto his back, wings spread beneath him across the bed.

“My research indicates thorough investigation requires examining all variables,” I inform him, straddling his hips with a deliberate movement that draws a hiss through his fangs. “Including reciprocal stimulation patterns.”

He releases a deep sound from the back of his throat, betraying emotions his carefully controlled expression attempts to hide. “Very thorough methodology.”

“Scientific excellence requires comprehensive data collection.” My hands make quick work of his remaining clothing, revealing the full glory of his inhuman beauty. Crimson skin transitions through darker shades as my fingers trace the defined muscles of his chest and the ridges of his abdomen.

Each touch reveals new textures—places where scales give way to smoother skin, ridges that catch the light, patterns that respond to my caress by darkening to deeper shades of crimson. His body is a landscape I'm determined to map completely, cataloging every reaction, every subtle hitch and shift in his breathing.

When my exploration reaches lower, my hand curling around the impressive evidence of his desire, his wings tremble visibly. The same crimson color that paints his skin

extends to his intimate anatomy, though here it seems more intense, almost luminous in the crystal light.

He's perfectly proportioned, substantial without being intimidating, and the warmth of him pulses against my palm. A bead of moisture forms at the tip, and I brush my thumb across it, fascinated by the way his entire body tenses at this simple touch.

When our gazes connect, I slowly reach my tongue between my lips and lap the drop of his essence from my fingertip. His head thrashes so violently, it's a wonder his horns stay on his head.

Closing my lips into a smile, while never taking my gaze off him, I grip his thick length, noting a subtle pulse that somehow matches the rhythm of my heartbeat—another manifestation of the mate bond, creating synchrony even in our most private connection. It's as though our bodies are speaking to each other on a primal level that transcends conscious thought, each touch echoing through both of us.

When I force my gaze to his face, I'm mesmerized for a moment. This male is handsome in an otherworldly way, but here, in bed together, with his crimson eyes unfocused and his fangs biting his bottom lip to maintain control, he's utterly beautiful.

The contrast fascinates me—such a powerful being willingly surrendering control, trusting me completely despite knowing I'm hiding something from him. His wings flare and tremble with each movement of my hand, his tail coiling and uncoiling against the sheets—all those powerful, inhuman parts of him responding to my human touch with unrestrained desire.

“The way you're looking at me...” His voice grates out over a raw throat. “Such desire.”

“You aren’t the only one who was impatiently waiting for this.” My fingers trace patterns along his length that make his skin darken further.

His quiet laugh turns to a groan as I lower my head. I trace my tongue along the sensitive underside of his arousal. The taste of him—exotic yet somehow familiar—sends such unexpected heat pooling between my thighs that I can’t suppress a moan.

He tastes like nothing I’ve experienced before—slightly sweet, with an underlying spice that makes my tongue tingle. I’m instantly addicted, lapping at his slit for more.

The sound he makes when I take him fully into my mouth is half growl, half desperate gasp, and the vibration of it travels through his entire body.

“Blair.” My name emerges as a reverent prayer as I take him into my mouth, his claws clutching the sheets with careful restraint that makes something primal within me purr with satisfaction.

His control is remarkable—even in this moment of intense pleasure, he keeps his claws carefully away from my skin, his strength perfectly measured. The knowledge that such a powerful being is holding himself in check for my safety only heightens my desire to push him further.

His color shifts beneath my ministrations, darkening to deep garnet, then lightening to bright crimson with each wave of pleasure—a visual representation of the sensations coursing through him. Something electric arcs between us, his pleasure feeding into mine until I can’t tell where he ends and I begin.

It’s an intoxicating circuit—his pleasure feeding into mine, which spurs my efforts, which then heighten his response. I can feel the tension building in his body as though it were my own, feel the edge of control fraying with each movement of my

lips and tongue.

His wings extend fully as pleasure builds, the membranes fluttering with barely contained response. Through the mate bond, I feel his mounting tension, his struggle to maintain control when instinct urges surrender.

His entire wingspan quivers, casting flickering shadows over the bed as sensation ripples through him, raw and unrestrained. My own body pulses with renewed desire, the bond transmitting his pleasure directly to my core.

The feedback loop of shared sensation heightens my own arousal as I take him deeper, my tongue exploring every ridge and sensitive spot. His tail winds more securely around my shoulder, guiding my movements with gentle pressure that somehow feels more like partnership than control. It's as though our bodies are having a conversation: give and take, lead and follow, each of us learning the other's responses with every touch and taste.

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“Blair,” he gasps, my name emerging as both warning and plea as his wings flutter. His claws card through my hair with exquisite gentleness, careful not to hurt me despite his mounting pleasure. The tenderness in this gesture, even as his body tenses with approaching release, makes my heart swell with emotions too complex to name.

I increase my efforts, hands and mouth working in tandem as I feel him approach the edge. His skin shifts through colors I’ve never documented before—deep crimson to obsidian, to that rare iridescent beauty that makes me feel cherished in a way I’ve never experienced.

His breathing grows ragged, his tail tightening around my shoulder, his wings fully extended and quivering. The crystal light catches on his skin, turning each droplet of sweat into a prism that scatters rainbow reflections across the chamber.

When release finally claims him, it comes with an intensity that vibrates through our bond. His wings extend to their full impressive span, his body arching as he surrenders completely to the pleasure we’ve created together. His thick length pulses against my tongue as I hollow my cheeks, taking him deeper until he hits the back of my throat.

“Fuck, Blair,” he growls, his usually controlled voice rough with need. “Your mouth is incredible. So hot, so perfect wrapped around my cock.” His claws dig into the sheets as I swirl my tongue around his tip, tasting the bead of moisture there. “I’ve dreamed of this—of you on your knees, taking me so deep.”

The salty-sweet taste of him mingles with his unique spice, and I moan around his shaft, the vibration making him buck his hips helplessly.

“Look at me,” he commands softly when my eyes flutter closed in concentration. “I want to watch you suck my cock, want to see those beautiful lips stretched around me.” The raw hunger in his voice makes me moan around his shaft, the vibration drawing a curse from his lips in a language I don’t recognize.

I stay with him through every pulse and shudder, feeling his ecstasy echo through me via our connection.

His taste is warm and not unpleasant—an ultimate act of intimacy.

Afterward, I move up his body to settle against his chest, his arms immediately enfolding me in warmth. His breathing gradually steadies as he holds me close, his wings creating a private sanctuary around us both. His expression is one of wonder and contentment as he gazes down at me.

“That was...” he whispers, seemingly at a loss for words as his claws comb through my hair. I smile against his chest, feeling unusually shy despite what we’ve just shared.

“We should probably rest a while,” I point out, my voice soft and drowsy as I nestle against him, feeling my boneless contentment. My body feels pleasantly heavy, satisfied in ways I’ve never experienced before. The gentle rise and fall of his chest beneath my cheek and the secure embrace of his wings create a perfect cocoon of warmth and safety.

His breathing gradually steadies as he holds me close, wings creating a private sanctuary around us both.

“We should probably rest between... research sessions,” I point out, trying to sound clinical and failing miserably.

“Always cataloguing.” But his voice carries nothing but affection as he presses a kiss to the top of my head. “Even in moments like this.”

“Would you want me any other way?” My voice sounds almost young; I wish I could hide my vulnerability.

His arms tighten around me. “No. I want exactly who you are, Blair. The scientist. The tactician. The woman who uses data to understand emotion, and strategy to navigate connection.”

The simple acceptance creates a tightness in my throat that has nothing to do with physical exertion. “And I want you, Dante. All of you—sarcastic deflections, protective instincts, Jersey Devil adaptations, and even the secrets you still don’t trust me with.”

I’m acutely aware of the hypocrisy of that statement and push the guilt to the back of my mind.

His skin flushes to warmer crimson, tail tightening slightly around my thigh. “Even the parts shaped by solitude and suspicion?”

“Especially those parts.” My fingers trace the curve of his horn with practiced ease. “Because they’re what shaped you into who you are now.”

As crystal light shifts to indicate approaching dawn, we remain wrapped in each other’s embrace, the mate bond swirling with contentment between us. I never expected this unlikely connection, but now that I have it, I can’t imagine how I could ever live without it.

Chapter Sixteen

Dante

The memory of our night together hangs between us like a phantom—intense and undeniable, yet somehow fragile in the harsh light of day. Our bodies still remember every touch, every intimate discovery, every moment of perfect connection.

The mate bond vibrates with echoes of that closeness even as we go about our daily routines.

The laboratory feels different tonight—colder, despite the constant temperature maintained by the crystal formations. Blair hunches over her workstation, mixing compounds with the precision that's become familiar over our weeks together. The mate bond pulses strongly between us, responsive to our proximity. I can sense her deep affection, but overshadowing is a strong feeling of...guilt? I'm filled with a feeling of foreboding.

"Your wing toxin shows peculiar molecular patterns." Her voice breaks the silence as I enter. "Specifically engineered to target flying cryptid physiology."

"More impressive scientific deductions," I drawl, settling against the doorframe. "Next, you'll tell me it was designed to cause maximum pain with minimal immediate tissue damage."

Her hands freeze above her equipment. "Actually, yes. How did you know?"

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“Lucky guess.” My skin darkens as our eyes meet.

Something passes between us—an acknowledgment that we’ve reached a breaking point. Too many secrets, too many careful evasions.

“Dante—” she begins, but I cut her off.

“You know, I’ve been wondering about something. How does someone with a pharmaceutical background recognize hunter weapons so easily? How does she know exactly which poison is spreading through my wing without the lab equipment that would provide extensive analysis?”

The monitor bracelet on my wrist beeps a warning as my temperature spikes. Her eyes flick to it automatically, always the scientist tracking her subject’s responses.

“I told you; I studied cryptid physiology—”

“Stop.” The word emerges as a growl. “No more half-truths. No more careful deflections. My life is literally on the line here, Blair. What aren’t you telling me?”

For a moment, I think she’ll retreat behind scientific terminology again. Instead, she sets down her equipment with deliberate care, shoulders slumping in what looks like defeat.

“My father.” The words come out barely above a whisper. “He... specialized in developing weapons designed to target specific cryptid species.”

The simple statement lands like a physical blow. My skin transitions to pure obsidian as implications cascade through my mind faster than I can absorb them.

“Your father.” My voice emerges unnaturally calm. “The biochemist.”

“The hunter.” Her correction comes with a quiet dignity that somehow makes it worse. “He’s been hunting cryptids for decades. After my mother was killed by a basilisk when I was four, my dad... changed.”

My wings pull tight against my back, defensive posture automatic as the revelation expands. “So, when you recognized the weapon signature in my wing—”

“It’s his work.” Her gaze doesn’t waver despite the tremor in her voice. “An improved version of something we were developing when I was still working with him. Before I understood what the consequences really meant.”

“Working with him.” Each word feels torn from my throat. “You were a hunter, too. Did you hunt us? Kill one, or dozens of us?”

She doesn’t deny it. “I grew up in his laboratory. By eight years old, I could identify fourteen different cryptid species by their biological markers alone. I was proficient with all the weapons he used, but our hunts focused on tracking and intelligence gathering. I never directly encountered a living cryptid in the field until I was at Apex. I never killed any of you.

“All this time...” My voice breaks as realization crushes me. “Your spreadsheets. Your observations. Your tests. You were what, gathering intelligence? Studying our weaknesses?”

“No!” The anguish in her voice would be convincing if my world hadn’t just been turned upside down. “That’s not it at all. I was taught that cryptids hunted humans,

and it was our job to track their movements and develop countermeasures to protect humanity. When I discovered what Apex was really doing—how they were treating sentient beings—I couldn't be part of it anymore.”

“Yet you kept it secret.” Betrayal burns hotter than the poison in my wing. “You let us believe you were just a scientist with a crisis of conscience.”

“Would you have trusted me if you'd known?” Her question carries no defensiveness, only sincere inquiry. “Would any of you have let me stay if I'd introduced myself as ‘Blair Andrews, daughter of William Andrews, whose life mission is hunting cryptids’?”

The truth of her assessment only fuels my anger. “So instead, you lied. Pretended to be something you're not, while documenting our every weakness.”

“I never lied about what I am now.” Her chin lifts with unexpected defiance. “Yes, I was raised to hunt. Yes, I grew up believing cryptids were monsters. But everything changed when I actually met one of you.”

“When exactly?” My tailslashes the air, the plated end making a high whistling noise. “When did this miraculous conversion happen? Before or after you helped develop weapons to destroy?”

Pain flashes across her face. “Three months into my position at Apex, they brought in a captured Sasquatch. For the first time, I was working with a living subject, not just samples or tales from my father.”

The clinical terminology only heightens my disgust. “A subject. Is that what I am to you? Another fascinating specimen for your research?”

“No!” Her voice breaks on the single syllable. “You're nothing like... Dante,

everything between us has been real. Everything.”

The words twist the knife deeper, because despite my rage, the mate bond still pulses between us, still recognizes something genuine in what we’ve shared.

“And yet you never mentioned your hunter background.” My voice is dangerously quiet. “Never thought it relevant to mention that your father creates weapons specifically designed to destroy us. Or to let it slip that you helped him for years, then willingly went to work for Apex after you got your degrees.”

“I was afraid,” she admits, the simple truth somehow more devastating than any excuse. “Afraid that if you knew, you’d only see the hunter’s daughter, not the person I’ve become. Not someone who would do anything to protect you and this sanctuary.”

My laugh holds no humor. “Protect us? With a father actively hunting cryptids? How convenient that hunter teams found our location so easily. Almost as if they had inside information.”

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Her face pales. “You can’t believe I’d betray the sanctuary. Not after everything—”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore.” The admission costs me, revealing vulnerability when I want to stay angry. “I trusted you, Blair.” A broken laugh escapes me. “With my heart.”

The monitoring device shrieks. Fire races through my veins—the poison responding to my spiking pulse, my emotional chaos. Temperature climbing. Dangerous territory.

“Dante!” Alarm replaces everything else in her expression as she lunges forward with a scanner. “The toxin is accelerating. I need to administer the new treatment now.”

“Of course you do.” Bitterness coats every word. “Fix the problem your father created.”

“This isn’t about him right now.” Her voice turns clinical, the scientist asserting control over emotional chaos. “It’s about keeping you alive while we figure out the rest.”

“Is there a rest to figure out?” The question emerges raw with pain that has nothing to do with my poisoned wing.

Instead of answering, she moves to her workstation with grim efficiency, preparing injections with trembling hands. “The molecular binding patterns require immediate intervention. Without treatment, the toxin will reach your central nervous system within hours.”

“Just do what you have to.” The defeat in my voice surprises even me. “But understand something.” I meet her gaze, letting her see the full weight of my betrayal. “After this? After you stop your father’s poison from killing me? You and I are done.”

Her eyes shine with unshed tears, rage and grief caught in her throat.

“How can you say that?” she breathes. “I come from a family of hunters. My father built the weapon that’s killing you.”

She takes a shuddering breath, voice cracking.

“I’ve lied. I’ve kept secrets. But the mate bond—”

“Is irrelevant.” The lie burns my throat, the mate bond howling in protest even as I speak the words. “Some betrayals can’t be overcome, no matter what biology demands.”

Fresh pain lances through my wing as she administers the first injection. Her free hand finds mine, as she offers the support and comfort I desperately crave and vehemently reject as I force myself to release her hand.

“I never meant to hurt you.” The words emerge broken with emotion I once would have treasured. “Everything between us—every touch, every kiss—was real, Dante. More real than anything in my life.”

“And now it’s over.” My voice remains steady despite the agony coursing through my body. “Save my life if you can, Doctor. It’s the least you owe me after everything.”

She works in silence then, tears falling freely as she completes the treatment. Each

touch that once brought comfort now feels like another small betrayal. The mate bond pulses between us, a cruel reminder of the connection we'd shared last night.

When the treatment concludes, I rise from the examination table with legs that threaten to buckle beneath me. The antivenom fights her father's poison, creating a battlefield in my body.

"You need to rest." Her professional mask slips back into place, though her eyes remain red-rimmed from crying. "The treatment requires at least eight hours to properly circulate through your system."

"I'll rest." Already moving toward the door, each step requiring more effort than it should. "Far from you."

"The mate bond strengthens the treatment's effectiveness," she calls after me, scientific certainty in her voice despite everything. "Proximity improves healing rates by nearly forty percent."

"Then I guess I'll settle for sixty percent effectiveness." My hand finds the door frame, steadying myself against a wave of dizziness. "Since the alternative is trusting someone who's been lying to me since the day we met."

"I never lied about my feelings for you." The words follow me into the corridor.

I pause without turning back, unable to leave without one final truth. "That's the problem with secrets, Blair. Once discovered, they poison everything they touch. Even truth."

The door closes behind me with quiet finality. In the corridor beyond, my legs finally give way as poison and emotional devastation take their toll. Leaning against the crystal wall, I feel the mate bond stretch painfully between us, protesting the

separation with physical agony that matches my emotional state.

Some betrayals cut deeper than poison.

Some bonds survive even broken trust.

And some loves hurt more than any weapon ever could.

Chapter Seventeen

Blair

The mountain's infirmary feels impossibly cold without Dante's heat nearby. For three days, he's kept his distance—physically present only for the briefest treatments, his eyes avoiding mine, his tail conspicuously coiled tight against his leg to prevent any accidental contact.

My microscope blurs as exhaustion claims another hour of focus. Sleep has become a luxury I can't afford, not when toxic lines continue their slow march across Dante's wing despite my best efforts. At least it hasn't progressed to his central nervous system. My hands tremble as I fumble with another slide.

My body aches with emptiness I can't explain through science. Each day spent apart from him brings increasing physical discomfort—headaches that won't relent, trembling hands, fluctuating body temperature. The symptoms match what the ancient texts described: a mate bond in distress.

"You look terrible." Marina's gentle voice startles me as she glides into the infirmary, her sparkling scales rippling with concern.

"I can't stop working, Marina. Not when the antivenom still isn't breaking down the toxin's core structure fast enough."

"And killing yourself through exhaustion will help?" Her scales shimmer as she settles beside me. "Your body temperature is concerning. Almost as concerning as his."

The mention of Dante's condition makes my chest tighten painfully. "I need to check his latest readings."

"I just came from his room. He's refusing treatment." The gentle delivery doesn't soften the impact of her words. "Said something about preferring the poison to... other alternatives."

My heart splinters at the implication. "He can't just—that's completely irrational! The toxin will spread to his central nervous system, and he'll die if we don't continue treatment."

"Perhaps you should tell him that." Her eyes hold compassion without judgment. "Rather than avoiding each other while you both suffer."

"I'm not avoiding him. I'm working." The defense sounds false even to my own ears. "And he made his feelings quite clear. He wants nothing to do with a hunter's daughter."

"Yes, he's told us all. Many times." Marina's scales shift in what might be the Water Sprite equivalent of an eye roll. "Though he seems to mention it less convincingly each time."

The monitoring bracelet on my wrist—synchronized to Dante's—interrupts with a series of urgent alerts. Heart rate erratic, oxygen levels dropping, temperature plummeting toward dangerous levels.

"I'll alert Volt," Marina says, already gliding toward the door. "He may need to carry—"

"No time." I grab my medical bag and am already moving, the mate bond pulling me toward Dante with unerring accuracy despite days of forced separation.

His chamber door stands partly open, unusual for someone so private. The sight that greets me steals my breath—Dante sitting on the floor, wings awkwardly spread, skin fluctuating between ashen gray and deepest obsidian. The toxic lines have progressed further than my worst projections, spreading toward his spine like deadly lacework.

“You stubborn, ridiculous—” The words catch in my throat as I drop to my knees beside him, hands already working to prepare an injection. “This is what happens when you refuse proper treatment protocols.”

“Excellent bedside manner, Doc.” His voice emerges as a rasp, but the familiar sarcasm sends relief coursing through me despite everything. “Very comforting.”

“Comfort isn’t my priority right now.” Sliding the needle into his arm with practiced precision. “Keeping you alive is.”

As the antivenom enters his system, his body shudders violently. Without conscious decision, I find myself supporting his weight against me, one arm around his shoulders to steady him through the treatment. The contact—our first real connection in days—sends warmth cascading through my system, easing the headache that’s been my constant companion since our separation.

I feel more than see his recognition of what’s happening—the slight stiffening before reluctant surrender to biological reality. The mate bond flows between us, amplifying the treatment more than I ever understood from mere documentation.

His proximity sends heat coursing through me that has nothing to do with healing and everything to do with the memory of his mouth on mine, his hands exploring my body with reverent precision. His dire condition does nothing to diminish the electric current that arcs between us every time our skin makes contact.

“The resonance patterns are accelerating cellular response,” I murmur, the clinical

words helping me maintain distance from the intimacy of holding him. “If we’d maintained proximity during previous treatments, the toxin’s spread would have been contained days ago.”

“Not worth... the cost,” he manages through clenched teeth, though his body betrays him by leaning further into my support.

“That’s not rational. It’s emotional.” I can’t keep the frustration from my voice.

His laugh emerges, pained but genuine. “Ever the scientist, even when holding a dying devil.”

“You’re not dying.” The words emerge fierce with conviction I hadn’t realized I still possessed. “Not while I have anything to say about it.”

Through our connection, I feel his vital signs stabilizing—temperature rising toward normal range, heart rate settling into a stronger rhythm, breathing easing as the antivenom counters the latest toxin surge. The improvement brings relief so profound that my own hands become steady for the first time in days.

“You haven’t been sleeping.” His observation lacks judgment, his eyes tracing the shadows beneath mine. “Working yourself to collapse.”

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“Someone had to find a solution while you were having your crisis of trust.” The words come out sharp, though I regret it. “The toxin doesn’t pause for emotional processing.”

His skin darkens at my tone, but he doesn’t pull away. “The mate bond affects you, too. You’re experiencing separation symptoms.”

“A biological reality.” Clinical terms feel safer than emotional vulnerability. “The ancient texts describe it accurately—physical weakness when separated, shared physiological responses, progressive strengthening over time.”

“Is that what this is to you? Just biology?” He studies my face, his question carrying genuine curiosity beneath lingering hurt.

My hands pause in their work, honesty surfacing before I can clothe it in clinical terminology. “No. It’s far more than that. Which is why your rejection has been... difficult to process.”

His skin shifts through shades I’ve documented extensively—crimson to obsidian to something between that indicates emotional conflict. “I’m still angry.”

“You have every right to be.” No defense comes to mind that wouldn’t sound hollow. “I kept essential information from you, information directly relevant to your safety and well-being.”

“Yes.” His agreement carries no satisfaction. “You did.”

“But I’ve never lied about my feelings.” The words emerge barely above a whisper. “Nor have I lied about what’s grown between us. About who I am now versus who I was raised to be.”

The monitoring bracelet beeps again, this time with improved readings. The antivenom, amplified by our proximity, fights the toxin more effectively than any previous treatment. Scientific evidence of what I’ve been trying to explain for days.

“You need to come to the infirmary.” I find my professional voice again, safer than vulnerable hope. “The treatment requires monitoring and follow-up protocols that aren’t feasible in your current location.”

For a moment, I think he’ll refuse—retreat behind anger and wounded pride despite medical necessity. Instead, he nods once, the movement slight but significant.

“Help me up.” The request costs him, vulnerability exposed despite his best efforts at stoic distance.

Supporting his weight as he rises unsteadily, I feel the mate bond strengthening with each moment of contact. My headache recedes completely, hands no longer trembling as we navigate toward the door. His wing brushes my arm—perhaps accidentally, perhaps not—and warmth cascades through my system at the brief contact.

In the infirmary, I help him settle onto the examination table, the familiar routine providing structure against the emotional chaos threatening my composure.

“Without aggressive intervention, permanent nervous system damage becomes statistically probable within forty-eight hours.”

“And this aggressive intervention requires proximity maintenance.” Not a question, but a recognition of unavoidable reality.

“The data is conclusive.” Gesturing toward the monitoring displays, where our vital signs have synchronized to nearly identical rhythms. “Treatment efficacy increases by approximately 43.7% when mate bond proximity is maintained.”

“I’ve noticed.” His tail uncurls slightly from its defensive position, the tip resting near my wrist without quite making contact. “My temperature has stabilized for the first time in days.”

“Mine too.” The truth feels easier now. “The separation was affecting us both physiologically.”

His gaze meets mine, those intense red eyes carrying emotions too complex for simple classification. “I believe you. About the bond. About what it does to us physically.”

It’s a small concession, smaller than I’d hoped for, but more than I deserve. The mate bond pulses between us, stronger in physical proximity despite emotional distance still stretching like a chasm.

“I understand now that the real monsters aren’t defined by species classification or biological markers.” My voice steadies with conviction born from years of painful growth. “That what my father taught me about cryptids was fundamentally flawed. That beings like you—”

I stop, emotion threatening to overwhelm the scientific composure I’ve relied on for so long.

“Beings likeme?” He prompts, something shifting in his expression.

“Beings like you deserve to be seen as individuals, not threats. As people, not specimens.” Finding the courage to meet his gaze directly. “As someone whose trust I

valued more than I realized until I lost it.”

His skin darkens at my words, but he doesn’t look away. “You realize how difficult this is. Trusting the daughter of someone who creates weapons specifically designed to destroy my kind.”

“Yes. I understand completely why my background represents significant security concerns for the sanctuary.”

“That’s not—” He stops, frustration evident in the lashing of his tail. “This isn’t about sanctuary security protocols. This is about us. About what was growing between us before I knew the truth.”

The simple directness of his statement steals my breath.

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“I thought everything was ruined.” The admission emerges barely above a whisper. “When you found out. When you looked at me and saw only the hunter’s daughter.”

“I’m still trying to reconcile who you were with who you are.” His honesty matches mine, painful but necessary. “The woman who’s trying to heal my wing with the child raised to hunt my kind.”

“They’re both me.” No point denying complex reality. “I can’t erase my upbringing or what I learned from my father. But I can choose how to use that knowledge. I have chosen, Dante. Every day since I realized the truth about cryptids.”

The monitoring bracelet beeps again, reminding us both of medical reality beyond emotional complexity. The antivenom continues its work, toxic lines receding slightly from their dangerous path toward his spine.

“We should continue treatment.” I retreat back to clinical safety. “The preliminary results show significant improvement, but more frequent antivenom administration will be necessary.”

“Always the scientist.” But there’s no bite in his observation, only weary acceptance of our intertwined fates. “Even when discussing matters of the heart.”

“It’s how I navigate uncertainty.” It’s all I know how to do. “Data provides framework when emotions prove... challenging to process.”

As I prepare the next treatment phase, his tail shifts slightly, hesitantly brushing against my wrist. The contact—barely there yet somehow monumental—sends

warmth cascading through my system. Not forgiveness, not yet, but acknowledgment that fighting this connection hurts us both.

“This doesn’t mean I trust you.” His voice carries no cruelty, only honest assessment. “Trust requires time to rebuild.”

“I know.” I don’t expect forgiveness to come easily. “I’m not asking for trust. Just an opportunity to demonstrate who I am now versus who I was raised to be.”

His gaze meets mine, the piercing stare carries challenge and something else I dare not name. “Then prove it, Dr. Andrews. Not with words or scientific explanations or emotional declarations. With actions.”

“I will.” My voice carries quiet determination. “For as long as it takes.”

As I continue the treatment, his wing settles under my hands—not pulling away, not leaning in. The mate bond hums between us, undeniable despite our fractured trust.

Some bonds strengthen through fire instead of breaking.

And sometimes, healing comes from knowing where you belong—even when broken trust makes that place seem impossible to reach.

Chapter Eighteen

Dante

The infirmary light seeps through my closed eyelids, crystal formations casting shifting patterns against the darkness. For three days, I’ve endured treatment in stony silence while our bodies betrayed us—the mate bond insisting on a connection that my pride rejected.

“Your wing is showing significant improvement.” Her voice carries professional detachment as she examines the toxic lines that have finally begun to recede. “The worst of the damage is finally reversing itself.”

“So, I won’t die after all. What a relief. Nice work, Doc.”

Her gaze flicks to mine, surprise evident at hearing more than monosyllabic responses for the first time in days. “Being near each other seems to be helping the healing process, whether we like it or not.”

“Biology has a funny way of ignoring our feelings on the matter.” My tail shifts restlessly against the examination table, betraying emotions my controlled expression attempts to hide.

“You should rest after this treatment.” Her focus remains on my wing, avoiding direct eye contact as she works the healing salve into my sensitive membrane. “Your body needs to recover.”

“That’s rich coming from someone who looks like she hasn’t slept since Tuesday. Cliff says you’ve been living on coffee and stubbornness.”

Her hands pause momentarily before resuming their careful ministrations. “I’ve been busy. Sleep can wait until you’re out of danger.”

“At this rate, I’ll recover just in time to attend your collapse from exhaustion.” My skin darkens with frustration at her stubborn self-neglect. “The irony would be delicious if it weren’t so irritating.”

“I’m fine.”

“Your ‘fine’ and my ‘fine’ must come from different dictionaries. How about a

deal?”

Her eyebrow rises with curiosity. “What kind of deal?”

“I’ll be the perfect patient—no complaints, no sarcasm, full cooperation. In exchange, you act like a human being with basic needs—actual meals, at least six hours of sleep, and occasionally seeing daylight outside this lab.”

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“You’re bribing me to take care of myself by offering to let me take care of you.” Her lips twitch with what might almost be amusement. “That’s...surprisingly clever.”

“I have my moments. Rare as they may be lately. Do we have a deal?”

She studies me with that analytical gaze. “Deal. But with one addition.”

“I’m listening.”

“When we’re together like this...we talk. Really talk.” Her voice carries unexpected vulnerability beneath her carefully controlled tone. “No hiding behind science or sarcasm. Just...truth.”

“Alright.” The word emerges slowly. This commitment can’t be easily withdrawn. “Truth for truth.”

She nods once, accepting the pact with characteristic directness. “I’ll start. I haven’t been sleeping because every time I close my eyes, I see your face when you found out who I was. What I was.”

“Your turn.” Her hands resume their careful work on my wing, eyes focused on the healing membrane rather than my face. “Fair’s fair.”

“I’ve been checking your vital signs through the monitoring system. Marina’s been my spy when you’re out of range.”

Her fingers pause momentarily, surprise evident in the slight widening of her eyes

before professional composure returns. “That’s...not what I expected.”

“You wanted truth.” My skin darkens with embarrassment at being caught in an act of concern despite my anger. “I can be furious with you and still not want you dead from exhaustion.”

“It’s complicated, isn’t it? Being angry at someone you still care about.” Her honesty doesn’t quite mask the vulnerability beneath. “Wanting to push them away and pull them closer at the same time.”

“Who knew mate bonds could be so infuriatingly inconvenient?” My tail curls with reluctant amusement. “Though I suppose humans have their own version.”

“We call it ‘emotional entanglement.’ Less poetic, but equally messy.” Her scientific precision carries a hint of warmth I’ve missed. “The data indicates separation is... suboptimal for both parties.”

“A very scientific way of saying we’re miserable apart.” My wings shift with grudging acknowledgment.

“Empirical evidence supports that conclusion.” She meets my gaze directly. “Though further data collection is warranted.”

“Is that your way of asking if we can try again? Despite everything?”

“Hypothesis: We function better together than apart.” The vulnerability beneath her analytical framing makes my chest tighten. “Pending your willingness to test the theory.”

My skin shifts through shades of uncertainty, but my tail moves without conscious thought, curling gently around her wrist. “I’m still angry.”

“As you should be.” No defense, just acceptance. “I won’t ask for trust I haven’t earned.”

“But?” I prompt, sensing the unspoken continuation.

“But I’d like the chance to earn it back.” Her fingers tentatively graze my tail. “One day at a time.”

The simple honesty of her request breaks through layers of protective anger. Not forgiveness—not yet—but possibility.

“One day at a time,” I agree, the mate bond humming with cautious hope between us. “Starting with you getting some actual sleep.”

Her smile, small but genuine, feels like the first ray of sun after an endless storm. “Deal.”

Chapter Nineteen

Blair

The sanctuary’s monitoring center pulses with tension as alarms flash across crystal-enhanced screens.

Recently, I met with Volt and the senior members of the Sanctuary to discuss how my knowledge of the hunters could help the next time they attack. I knew my father would never give up, and I wanted to help in any way I could.

It took some convincing to allow me in the video room that they use as the command center. Since there is no way for me to make contact with the hunters, they decided it would be safe to have me there.

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My hands fly over the keyboard, analyzing perimeter data while trying to ignore how every cryptid in the room glances my way. Their wariness is justified—I'm the hunter's daughter, after all. Trust comes slowly here, especially during a security breach.

“Three teams approaching from different vectors,” Volt announces, his massive form crackling with electricity as he studies the surveillance feeds. “Coordinated movement patterns. Professional equipment. These aren't random hunters—they're organized.”

My breath catches as I recognize the formation displayed on the screens. “They're using a modified Triquetra approach pattern.” The words emerge before I can stop them, drawing sharp looks from everyone present.

“A what?” Cypher, the Shadow Cat, materializes from a darkened corner, his amber eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“It's a specialized tactical formation,” I explain, keeping my voice steady despite my pounding heart. “Three teams moving in geometric patterns to triangulate a target while maintaining optimal coverage ratios.”

“And you know this how?” Marina's eyes narrow with unease.

Dante's hooves click against the floor as he moves closer to the screens. His wing looks better today—the toxic lines finally receding after our latest treatment breakthrough. But it's the wariness in his eyes that hurts most as he asks, “Is this your father's work?”

Instead of flinching from the question, I square my shoulders and face it directly. “Yes. It’s his signature approach pattern. He developed it specifically for cryptid tracking in mountainous terrain.”

The room falls silent. I can almost hear their thoughts—wondering if I secretly called him, if this is some elaborate trap I’ve led them into. The doubt is understandable, but we don’t have time for it.

“Which means I know exactly how to stop it.” I move to the main console and pull up a topographical map of the area.

“My dad trains his teams to keep the same distance from each other, no matter what’s in the way. That makes their movements easier to predict—especially in places where there aren’t many ways in.”

Volt’s electricity intensifies, making the air crackle around him. “You’re suggesting we use your insider knowledge of your father’s techniques against him.”

“Unless you’d prefer they reach the sanctuary’s main entrance.” My fingers trace potential interception points on the map. “They’re using third-generation thermal imaging modified for cryptid energy signatures. Standard blocking techniques won’t work.”

Dante steps forward, his crimson skin darkening as he studies the map. Our eyes meet briefly, and something passes between us—not forgiveness, not yet, but a tentative alliance born of necessity.

“What do you suggest?” His voice carries no emotion, but his tail curls slightly—a tell I’ve documented extensively.

Taking a deep breath, I point to three specific locations on the map. “These ridges

provide natural choke points. If we position countermeasures here, here, and here, we can force them to abandon the Triquetra formation and fall back to standard pursuit patterns.”

“Countermeasures such as?” Cypher’s claws flex with barely contained tension.

“Volt’s electricity can disrupt their equipment if focused through naturally occurring crystal formations.” My mind races through options. Years of training now turned to protection rather than pursuit. “Marina’s Water Sprites could create false thermal readings to confuse their tracking systems.”

Dante’s expression shifts almost imperceptibly. “You’ve thought about this before. Sanctuary defense against hunter tactics.”

Heat floods my cheeks as I nod. “Since the first week I arrived. Old habits... repurposed.”

Volt exchanges a look with Dante that I can’t quite interpret. After a moment of silent communication, the Thunderbird nods decisively. “We’ll try it your way. Cypher, alert the defensive teams. Marina, gather your sprites.”

As the room erupts into organized chaos, Dante remains beside me, his presence both comforting and unsettling. “Your father.” His voice drops lower, meant only for me. “You’re certain it’s him?”

“The pattern is unmistakable.” My fingers clench around the edge of the console. “But I don’t understand how he found this location. He shouldn’t even know I’m here.”

“Unless Apex shared information.” His tail lashes again. “Or perhaps you left a trail.”

The implication stings, but I meet his gaze steadily. “You carried me out of there unconscious in a hospital gown. How exactly would I have left a trail?”

His expression softens slightly, acknowledging the logic of my defense. Before he can respond, Volt returns with a crystal communications device. “Teams are moving into position. Marina’s already at the eastern ridge.”

For the next hour, we work side by side in tense silence—my knowledge of how hunters think and his grasp of the sanctuary’s defenses making us a solid team. Even with everything unspoken between us, the mate bond buzzes under the surface, keeping us tuned in to each other in ways we can’t ignore.

When Volt’s lightning scrambles the hunters’ comms, throwing them into confusion, Dante’s tail brushes against my ankle—a small touch, but the first he’s made outside of treatment in days.

That tiny moment sends a wave of warmth through me.

“Smart move with the crystal amplification points,” Dante murmurs, eyes still on the surveillance feeds. “Volt’s electromagnetic pulse hit a lot harder than usual.”

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“The crystals respond to emotion,” I say, keeping my voice calm even though his nearness still throws me off.

“Volt’s protective instincts gave them an extra boost.”

He shifts his wings. The injured one stretches out farther than it has in days—less pain now, at least.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time studying our defenses.”

“Yeah,” I admit. “To make them better. Old knowledge, new goal.”

He doesn’t say anything, but his tail stays close to my ankle—not touching, just there. And somehow, that feels like something.

An alert pings from the monitors. The hunters are moving again, regrouping and shifting their formation after the EMP took out their gear.

“They’re falling back to standard pursuit mode,” I say, hearing the relief in my own voice. “Exactly what they’re trained to do when the Triquetra pattern fails.”

“Think they’ll try again?” Volt asks, stepping up beside us.

I trace their retreat path on the screen.

“Not right away. My dad’s protocols call for a reset after any electromagnetic disruption. They’ll pull back, check their systems, figure out what went wrong before

trying something new.”

“How long do we have?” Dante asks. His tone is all business—focused on security, not whatever’s going on between us.

“Twenty-four hours at least,” I answer, watching the screen with eyes that have studied this kind of pattern my whole life.

“Maybe longer, depending on how bad the damage is.”

Now that the immediate threat has passed, the mood in the monitoring center shifts. The cryptids—who’ve been eyeing me with suspicion since the beginning—are starting to look at me differently. Still wary, but not as hostile.

I’ve spent my life learning how to hunt their kind.

Now I’m using that knowledge to help protect them.

Chapter Twenty

Blair

Later, as we check the eastern ridge defenses, Dante breaks the careful silence between us. “You knew exactly what they would do. Every step of the way.”

“I was raised on those tactical protocols.” My fingers trace the edge of a crystal formation that had amplified Volt’s defensive lightning. “I could diagram his approach patterns in my sleep.”

“Tell me about her,” he says unexpectedly. “Your mother.”

The question catches me off guard. I've shared fragments of my past, but never this—the origin point of everything that followed. His eyes hold genuine curiosity beneath lingering caution. There's no judgment in his gaze.

Taking a deep breath, I settle on a rock outcropping. "She was brilliant. A field researcher who believed in approaching unknown species with wonder rather than fear." A smile touches my lips at memories long buried. "My father was the methodical lab scientist; she was the one who dragged us into remote valleys and hidden caves, tracking creatures most people dismissed as legends."

"She sounds like you," Dante observes, settling beside me, close enough for comfort but maintaining a respectful distance.

"Actually, I think I'm becoming more like her," I admit softly. "Before she died, their research was pure documentation. No hunting, no weapons. She believed cryptids had complex societies worth understanding, not just studying."

"What happened to her?" His voice gentles, the question I've always dreaded somehow easier to face in this quiet moment.

"A research expedition went wrong. My father found her body." My voice catches. "The official report called it an animal attack, but he recognized the marks."

"A basilisk," Dante supplies. He remembered from our previous conversation.

I nod. "When his colleagues dismissed his findings, called him grief-stricken and delusional... something broke in him. The devoted scientist became obsessed with proving cryptids existed—and then with developing weapons against them."

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“And you followed his path.”

“I was four when she died. He raised me to see cryptids as threats, but...” I pause, the realization crystallizing as I speak it. “I think I was always trying to find my way back to her approach. To understand rather than fear things that were unfamiliar. I just took a very roundabout way to get there.”

His tail uncurls slightly, no longer held defensively tight against his body. “That explains why you changed so completely at Apex. You weren’t just rejecting your father’s beliefs—you were rediscovering hers.”

The insight strikes with unexpected clarity. “I never thought of it that way.”

“Sometimes we need distance to see patterns clearly,” he says, his wing brushing me in a gesture of understanding that sends warmth through the bond between us.

“My father still believes he’s honoring her memory through his work,” I continue. “That’s why he can’t accept my choices. To him, I’m betraying not just him, but her.”

“Yet you’re actually completing her research,” Dante observes. “Living among cryptids, documenting our societies, building connections rather than barriers.”

The simple truth of his statement catches in my throat. “Yes.”

We sit in silence as the sun begins its slow descent. The surrounding ridge bears evidence of the recent battle—scorched earth from Volt’s lightning, crystal formations still vibrating with defensive energy.

“Thank you,” Dante says finally, his skin shifting to a warmer crimson. “For trusting me with this.”

“I should have told you sooner,” I acknowledge. “About all of it.”

“You’re telling me now.” His tail moves cautiously closer to me. “That’s what matters.”

As we make our way back to the sanctuary, something shifts between us—not forgiveness, not yet, but understanding beginning to take root where only hurt had existed before. The mate bond resonates with quiet acknowledgment, stronger for having weathered the storm.

Some truths hurt to share, but heal in the telling.

Some connections strengthen through challenge rather than breaking under pressure.

And sometimes, the path forward becomes clearer only when we finally understand where we’ve been.

Chapter Twenty-One

Blair

“Is the pain less today?” I ask, carefully examining Dante’s wing as he stretches it on the examination table before me. The antivenom treatments are working—slowly but visibly—the toxic lines finally beginning to recede rather than advance across his membrane.

It’s still too slow. The venom I identified has been modified since I first worked with it in my father’s lab, but I adjusted the antivenom. With the mate bond augmenting

the benefits, it should be resolved by now. There's something I'm missing. I need more information.

His skin shifts between crimson and something lighter as I work the healing salve into the affected areas. "It's more of a dull ache now. Your latest formulation seems to be working better than the previous ones."

"I've been refining the molecular structure to target the specific binding patterns," I explain, focused on my work while noting his improved range of motion. The wing that once could barely extend now stretches with only minimal discomfort.

As I prepare the next injection, I prepare to ask the question that may destroy the fragile connection that we've rebuilt. "Dante, can you tell me exactly how you were exposed to this toxin? Understanding the initial transmission vector might help me refine the treatment protocols even further."

His wings pull tight against his back—a defensive posture I've catalogued extensively during our time together. His skin shifts through darker shades, settling into that deep obsidian that indicates emotional distress.

"Does it matter?" The deflection comes with a curl of his tail—another documented pattern when avoiding uncomfortable topics.

"It might," I say, keeping my tone soft. "The way the toxin got into your system could change how it behaves. A puncture wound reacts differently than something you breathed in or touched."

His expression closes further, but something in my careful scientific approach seems to reach him. After a long moment, he sighs—a surprisingly human gesture from someone so otherworldly.

“It was a dart.” The admission emerges reluctantly. “I believe it was designed to target wing membranes specifically.”

The clinical precision of his description sends a chill through me. Wing membrane targeting was one of my father’s specialties—he’d spent years studying the unique vascular structures of flying cryptids, identifying optimal injection points for maximum toxin distribution.

“This happened during a reconnaissance mission.” It’s not a question.

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His claws click against the exam table, betraying emotional turmoil despite his carefully controlled expression. “Not exactly.”

“Then what?” My professional detachment slips as frustration colors my voice. “I need to understand what we’re dealing with, Dante, and you’ve been evasive about this injury since the day I arrived.”

His gaze finds mine, and something in his expression shifts. For a long moment, we simply look at each other—scientist and Jersey Devil, both carrying secrets that have shaped us. The weight of his unspoken truth hangs between us, and I see the exact moment he makes his decision. Perhaps it’s the way I’ve trusted him with my own painful memories, or maybe it’s the mate bond urging honesty between us. Whatever the catalyst, his defensive walls crumble.

“You want the truth? All of it?”

The intensity of his gaze makes my breath catch. “Yes. Please.” Although I assume that telling me is going to be torturous for him, part of me feels relieved that he’s trusting me with what I assume is his greatest secret.

His wings shift restlessly as he seems to make a decision. “It wasn’t my mission. I wasn’t supposed to be anywhere near my location that night.”

“Then why were you?”

“Because I was meeting with another Jersey Devil.” The words emerge rough with emotion. “A young one, barely an adult. One of the few others of my kind I’ve ever

encountered.”

My heart constricts at the pain evident in his voice. Jersey Devils are notoriously solitary and rare, even among cryptid communities.

“It was a prearranged meeting?” I ask, setting aside my instruments to give him my full attention.

“I’d been tracking another Jersey Devil for months,” he admits, his skin darkening. “At first, it was just rumors, fleeting sightings in remote valleys. Then one night, I spotted him—young, skittish, watching me from a distance.”

“You made contact?” I lean forward, fascinated despite the tension between us.

“Eventually. Took weeks of careful approaches. Kieran—that was his name—was fearful of everything, even me.” A ghost of a smile touches Dante’s lips. “His parents were killed by hunters when he was eight. We mature faster than any other cryptid, but usually we leave the family territory to find our own when we are fifteen. He was so young, yet he survived. He’d been alone for years, never met another of our kind. Thought he was the only one until he caught my scent on the wind.”

The name resonates through me. Kieran. Not just “another Jersey Devil” but an individual with a name and story, someone who mattered to Dante.

“What was he like?” I ask softly, seeing the emotion ripple across Dante’s skin.

“Curious. Intelligent. Desperate for connection but terrified of trusting anyone.” His wings shift with remembered frustration. “I invited him to the sanctuary, hoping to convince him we could offer more than just safety—real community, a place to belong. It’s highly unusual for Jersey Devils to cohabitate, but after years on my own, I’ve come to appreciate this cave life and the safety, support and friendship I’ve

found here. But Kieran, after a lifetime of hiding, couldn't bring himself to follow me home."

I can see it clearly—Dante patiently building trust with this lonely creature, offering the sanctuary I now call home. A lifeline Kieran wasn't ready to grasp.

"So you kept visiting him," I suggest, seeing the pattern forming.

He nods, tail curling tightly against his leg. "I'd check on him regularly, bring supplies and information. He'd established a small camp in a hidden valley. We were building trust. Slowly."

"What happened?" I ask gently.

"After weeks of gradually increasing my visits, I arrived at his camp to find Apex vehicles approaching from the valley floor." His skin darkens to obsidian as he speaks. "I tried to warn him, but there were too many of them, already surrounding his hideout."

"How did they find him?" I ask, already suspecting the answer.

"Tracking equipment. Heat signatures, pheromone detectors—all the specialized gear I've seen them using around our perimeter lately. Maybe they'd been tracking me to him even though I came at different times and took different routes each time." His wings pull tight against his back with remembered anger. "I assume they'd been hunting him for weeks, narrowing down his location."

"You tried to help him escape," I say softly.

"I created a diversion, drawing their fire while Kieran attempted to flee. For a moment, I thought we'd succeeded. We were airborne, almost clear of their range..."

“Then the darts,” I finish for him, the tactical approach unmistakable.

“Kieran saw the hunter aim at me—this massive weapon, clearly designed for maximum toxin delivery. He could have kept flying, could have escaped clean since they were focused on me. Instead, he folded his wings and dove.”

Dante’s voice breaks slightly as memory overwhelms him. “He hit me like a battering ram, sending me tumbling through the air just as the weapon discharged. The dart meant for my chest—meant to deliver a killing dose directly to my heart—caught him instead, full penetration through his back.”

I can see it clearly now—two Jersey Devils in chaotic flight, the younger one making a split-second decision to sacrifice everything for a connection barely begun.

“The second dart caught my wing as I tried to shield him from more fire, but by then we were both falling. He was still conscious before we hit the treetops, toxin spreading through his system faster than anything I’d ever seen. The branches slowed our fall, but we both landed hard. I gathered him in my arms. He was burning up with fever, but shook so hard with chills it was like seizures. I tried to carry him, but my wing was failing, my temperature was rising, my limbs were trembling, and the hunters were closing in.”

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His claws click against the exam table as emotion threatens his control. “In his final moments, he wasn’t afraid. He smiled, actually smiled, and said, ‘At least I got to fly with family once.’ Then he pushed me away, begged me to go, said someone should live to tell others that connection among our kind was possible.”

The image of Kieran’s final smile, of a young Jersey Devil finding peace in his last act of connection, makes my chest ache with grief for someone I never met but now feel I knew.

Dante’s gaze meets mine, filled with a grief so raw it steals my breath. “I didn’t want to leave him,” he whispers. “But he begged me to save myself. The last thing I saw was hunters surrounding him as I escaped into the trees.”

The pain in his voice makes my chest ache. In that moment, I don’t see the powerful, sarcastic Jersey Devil who rescued me from Apex, but someone carrying a burden of guilt so heavy it’s been poisoning him as surely as the toxin in his wing.

He reaches into a small pouch at his waist, withdrawing something I hadn’t seen before—a curved black horn, broken at the base. “This broke off when he hit the ground. I went back to the crash site when it was safe. This is all that remains of him.”

The relic of another Jersey Devil—one he failed to save—strikes me with its significance. He’s been carrying this physical reminder of his failure all this time, even as the poison from that encounter slowly ate away at his system.

“That’s why you didn’t tell anyone the truth.” The realization comes with painful

clarity. “You blame yourself for his death.”

“I should have insisted he come to the sanctuary sooner, shouldn’t have let him stay alone out there.” His voice hardens with self-recrimination. “He wasn’t ready to trust, and I respected that instead of pushing harder. My patience cost him everything.”

My fingers tremble as I replace the cap on the antivenom vial. “I’m so sorry, Dante.”

As our gazes connect, it’s as though I can feel all of the pain swirling around his heart. Maybe it’s the mate bond, or maybe it’s just my affection that allows me to have such empathy for him.

I realize the injection I drew is still lying nearby.

Suddenly my divergent brain clicks into gear. Everything around me fades as realization hits me. The fever and chills aren’t a typical reaction to the venom my father was working on.

While I worked on venom formulations, he spent countless hours with viral samples, particularly the Nipah virus in fruit bats. I had questioned why he was so focused on accelerating viral mutation rates, but he’d been evasive, dismissing my curiosity with vague references to “expanded applications.”

He designed his weapon not just to wound, but to ensure slow, inevitable death.

No wonder I’m not getting the results I’m expecting. The microscope I have here isn’t powerful enough to see a virus. But a general antiviral combined with the antivenom should work.

The world comes back into focus as I become aware of Dante calling me. “Doc, can you hear me?”

“I can hear you,” I assure him.

“What happened? You look like you zoned out on me there.” Worry is evident in his voice and the look in his garnet eyes.

“Now that I understand what happened, the symptoms you just described indicate that a virus was used with the venom formula. That’s what I’ve been missing. You just gave me the final piece of the puzzle. I can reformulate your injection. Once I give it to you, the antivenom/antiviral should begin working immediately.” My clinical words fail to mask the relieved emotion beneath.

His clawed hand reaches for mine, catching my wrist before I can retreat behind science again. “We’re fighting your father’s poison,” he says quietly. “But we’re also fighting for Kieran’s memory. For what he believed was possible.”

“Connection,” I whisper, understanding dawning. “He was searching for others like you. For belonging.”

“And died trying to protect the first one he found.” Dante carefully returns the broken horn to its pouch, but his hand lingers there. “I won’t let his sacrifice be for nothing.”

The broken horn. The hunter’s poison. The Jersey Devil and the scientist who spent her childhood learning to destroy his kind. Unlikely allies in a battle that feels increasingly personal for us both.

“Your father doesn’t know what he’s created,” Dante says finally, his skin shifting to that unique iridescent shade I’ve never seen him display with anyone else.

“The toxin?” I ask.

“No.” His eyes meet mine with unexpected intensity. “Us.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Dante

The map of the mountain spreads before us in the war room, each defensive position marked with glowing indicators that pulse in rhythm with the sanctuary's heartbeat. Though tension still lingers between us after Blair's revelations about her hunter background, we've found an uneasy alliance in our shared purpose of protecting the sanctuary. The tactical planning has given us neutral ground where our expertise complements each other, even while personal trust remains fragile.

I stand across from Blair, my wings partially extended as I study the terrain model she's created. I can't stop my skin from shifting between crimson and darker shades as I absorb the tactical information she presents.

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“I believe my father’s teams will approach from these three vectors,” she explains, fingers tracing the likely paths. “Based on his standard protocols, he’ll establish observation posts here, here, and here before committing to a full approach.”

“How can you be so certain?” Marina asks, her scales rippling with barely concealed skepticism.

“Because I’ve run these drills with him since I was twelve.” Blair’s admission seems to come easier now, days after revealing her past. “He believes in predictable patterns, controlled variables. It’s both his strength and his weakness.”

My tail lashes thoughtfully against the stone floor. “So we exploit the predictability.”

“Exactly.” She adjusts a nearby crystal to put more light on the detail of the southwestern approach. “If we position countermeasures based on where he expects us to be, we can create strategic advantages here and here.”

For the past three days, we’ve worked together improving the sanctuary’s defenses. The hunters’ retreat after our last encounter bought us more time than we expected, but we all know they’ll return, and next time they’ll be better equipped and better prepared. Her father never abandons a target, a trait she’s explained with a mixture of respect and resignation.

Volt’s massive form shifts, electricity crackling between his golden feathers. “These adjustments to the crystal arrays require precise calibration. Particularly the ones designed to disrupt their tracking equipment.”

“I can handle the technical aspects,” Blair offers, her eyes already taking on that focused look I’ve come to recognize when she’s calculating something complex. “My father’s tracking systems operate on specific frequency ranges I’m familiar with.”

As the meeting continues, I can’t help but watch her—the confidence in her movements, the precise way she explains technical details, the slight furrow between her brows when she’s thinking deeply. The mate bond feels like a silken cord between us, responsive to our proximity despite the emotional distance we’ve maintained since my revelation about Kieran and her confession about her father.

When the council adjourns, cryptids disperse to implement our defensive strategies. Blair gathers her tablet and notes, preparing to begin work on the crystal calibrations. Before I can second-guess myself, I approach her.

“I’ll help you with the eastern array,” I offer, my voice steadier than I feel.

She looks up, surprise evident in her expression as she finds me standing closer than I’ve been in days. I have to focus to keep my tail from reaching for her ankle, a habit that formed so naturally before everything changed.

“The calibration requires precise adjustments,” she warns. “It’s delicate work.”

“Good thing I have steady hands.” I extend my claws, then retract them with practiced control. “Besides, two people working will cut the time in half.”

Her logical mind can’t argue with the efficiency, though her expression tells me my sudden willingness to work closely with her has caught her off guard. We’ve been professionally cordial since my revelation about Kieran, but our personal connection has remained in limbo—neither fully broken nor properly mended.

As we walk through crystal-lined corridors toward the eastern ridge, silence stretches

between us. Not uncomfortable, exactly, but heavy with unspoken words that press against my tongue. The mate bond pulses with each step we take together, making it harder to maintain the careful distance I've enforced since learning about her past.

"You're different," I say finally, breaking the quiet as we reach the first crystal array. "When you talk about tactical operations. More confident. Decisive."

"Old training," she admits, kneeling before the crystal formation. "My father believed hesitation was weakness. In tactical situations, I learned not to show it."

My tail curls thoughtfully as I observe how easily she shifts between scientist and tactician. "It's not just that. You seem more... integrated. The scientist and the tactician working together rather than one hiding the other."

She pauses in her adjustments, though she doesn't look up at me. "I spent most of my life keeping parts of myself hidden. First, from colleagues who would have questioned my objectivity if they knew my background. Then from the sanctuary residents who would have feared me if they knew who raised me."

"And now?" My wings shift restlessly, casting shadows across the stone walls as I struggle to articulate what I'm seeing in her.

"Now there's no point in pretending." Her hands tremble slightly as she adjusts the crystal alignment. "Everyone knows exactly who and what I am."

"Do they? Do you? I think you are evolving, melding your past and present and have been trying very hard to prove to us, to me, that who you are now is more than who you were raised to be."

Her eyes meet mine with a startled mix of vulnerability and relief. I see the weight of judgment she's placed on herself—heavier than anything I or the sanctuary residents

could impose.

“They know I’m the hunter’s daughter,” she says quietly. “That I grew up learning how to track and capture beings like you.”

“And they know you’ve used that knowledge to strengthen our defenses instead.” My tail moves closer to her ankle, not quite touching but needing the proximity I’ve denied us both for days. “That you’ve stood with us against the very hunters who trained you.”

Working together, we calibrate the crystal array, our movements finding unexpected synchronicity. She calculates frequencies while I adjust the physical alignment, each of us playing to our strengths without needing discussion. Through it all, the mate bond resonates between us, growing stronger with each moment of cooperation, each shared purpose.

My skin keeps betraying me, shifting to warmer crimson whenever she explains something with that passionate precision that first drew me to her. The scientist in her is fascinating, but this hybrid creature—tactical and analytical, passionate and calculating—is mesmerizing in ways I wasn’t prepared for.

As afternoon turns to evening, we move from one defensive position to the next. Each successful calibration improves the sanctuary’s protection—her knowledge of hunter technology paired with my understanding of cryptid energy creating something neither could achieve alone.

At the final array, high on the eastern ridge where crystal formations jut from the mountainside like frozen flames, she struggles with a particularly stubborn alignment. The crystal refuses to lock into position, slipping from the frequency she’s trying to establish.

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“Let me,” I say, moving closer without considering the implications. My chest brushes her back as I reach around her, carefully extending my claws to grasp the crystal without scratching it.

The contact—the first deliberate touch in days—sends fire racing through my veins. The mate bond flares with recognition, with relief so profound it momentarily steals my breath. My skin shifts involuntarily to that iridescent shade I can never seem to control around her.

“Guide my hands,” I murmur, my voice dropping lower than intended as her scent surrounds me. “Tell me what you need.”

“Thirty degrees clockwise, then stabilize at the central axis,” she instructs, her voice impressively steady despite the rapid increase in her heart rate that I can feel through our contact.

Together, we manipulate the crystal into alignment. When it finally locks into place, glowing with completed connection, I can’t bring myself to move away. My chest remains pressed against her back, my wings partially curling around us both in a protective gesture that feels as natural as breathing.

“I’ve missed you,” I admit, the words scraping raw against my throat. “Even when you’ve been right beside me, I’ve missed what was growing between us before...”

“Before you learned who I really am.” Her voice carries resignation that makes my chest ache with regret for how quickly I judged her.

“No.” I need her to understand that it wasn’t her past that frightened me, but my own reaction to it. “Before I let fear make me forget what I already knew about who you are.”

She turns to face me, uncertainty and hope warring in her expression. It strikes me how brave she is—always facing truths head-on, even painful ones.

“I’ve spent years defining myself by what I’m not,” she says, scientific precision failing to mask the vulnerability beneath. “Not my father’s willing apprentice. Not Apex’s obedient researcher. Always running from what I was instead of embracing what I could be.”

“And now?” My tail finally makes contact, curling gently around her ankle in a tentative touch I’ve denied us both for too long.

“Now I’m trying to integrate all the pieces instead of denying them.” The simplicity of her answer strikes me with its honesty. “Using what I learned from my father to protect instead of hunt. Applying scientific methods to understand mate bonds and sanctuary defenses rather than cryptid weaknesses.”

“That integration suits you.” The words come easily, genuine appreciation warming my voice. “The hunter’s daughter and the brilliant scientist. Both real. Both valuable.”

As evening light bathes the ridge in amber, her expression shifts toward something both resolute and vulnerable. “I thought I could treat your wing without having to tell you, but he changed the formula and added the virus. I should have told you about my background sooner. About my father. About recognizing components of his toxin in your wing.”

“Yes,” I agree without rancor, knowing honesty serves us better than false comfort.

“You should have.”

“I was afraid.” The admission seems to cost her more than any scientific analysis or tactical assessment ever could. “Not just of how others would react, but of acknowledging that part of myself. Of accepting that I’ll always carry pieces of the world that shaped me, even as I reject what it stands for.”

Her words mirror my own journey so precisely that my skin ripples with recognition. “We’re all shaped by our origins, Blair. Even when we fight against them.”

“You’ve been fighting yours too,” she observes quietly. “Carrying Kieran’s horn like a punishment rather than honoring his memory.”

My skin shifts to obsidian at the direct reference, the familiar shame rising before I can stop it. But I don’t retreat as I once would have. “It’s easier to focus on failure than to accept that some things lie beyond our control.”

“Like a mate bond forming between a Jersey Devil and a hunter’s daughter?” The unexpected lightness in her tone catches me off guard, warmth spreading through my chest at her willingness to acknowledge what still pulses between us.

My tail tightens fractionally around her ankle. “Statistically improbable, according to your research.”

“Highly improbable,” she corrects, that delightful scientific precision returning. “Yet empirically undeniable based on documented physiological responses.”

A laugh escapes me, genuine and unguarded for the first time in days. “Always the scientist.”

“It’s how I make sense of things that feel too big for words.” Her hand rises

tentatively, hovering near my face without quite touching. “Like how much I’ve missed you, too.”

The crystal array pulses with completed connection, bathing us in soft light as dusk settles over the mountain. In this moment of fragile rebuilding, I resist the urge to pull her closer, to reclaim everything we’d begun to build before secrets and revelations complicated our path. This tentative new understanding feels too precious to rush, too important to risk with impatience.

“We should head back,” I say finally, though my tail refuses to release her ankle. “The others will be wondering if the calibration was successful.”

“It was.” Her eyes meet mine with an understanding that transcends the technical achievement. “More successful than I anticipated.”

As we make our way back toward the sanctuary’s main caverns, our steps find natural synchronicity. The mate bond hums between us, steady and present despite the caution that remains in both our hearts.

My wing occasionally brushes her shoulder as we walk, each casual contact sending ripples of warmth through my skin. I no longer try to hide these reactions, letting her see how she affects me. Her scientific mind has undoubtedly catalogued every chromatic shift, every temperature fluctuation, but there’s something different in the way she observes me now—less clinical, more connected.

“Your color just changed again,” she notes, her voice warm. “That particular shade appears when you’re feeling contemplative.”

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I can't help but smile. "And here I thought I was being inscrutable."

"Hardly." The quick quirk of her lips makes my heart race. "Though I will need to update my documentation with these new observations."

As we reach the corridor leading to the library, our pace slows by mutual, unspoken agreement. Neither of us seems ready to rejoin the others just yet.

"We still have work to do," I say quietly, acknowledging the fragile new understanding between us. "Trust doesn't rebuild overnight."

"No," she agrees. "But we've established a foundation for progress. A starting point."

Her practical assessment of our emotional state makes me chuckle. "Only you could make reconciliation sound like a scientific experiment."

"Isn't it, though?" Her gaze meets mine with unexpected warmth. "Hypothesis, variables, careful observation—seeing what works and what doesn't?"

"When you put it that way..." My tail reaches for her wrist, hesitating just shy of contact until she closes the distance herself.

As her fingers brush against my tail, I feel a sense of cautious hope settle between us. Not perfect resolution, trust not completely restored, but a path forward we'll navigate together—one step, one day at a time.

Blair

The data on my tablet blurs as exhaustion finally catches up with me. For hours, I've been analyzing the final calibrations of our defensive perimeter, ensuring every crystal array will respond properly when triggered. Outside my lab window, night has long since fallen, the mountain wrapped in darkness, broken only by the soft glow of sanctuary crystals.

When I sense his presence, I glance up to see Dante standing in the entrance, holding a steaming mug and what appears to be a plate of what must be Cliff's newest obsession, shortbread cookies.

"Working late again?" His voice carries that familiar drawl that never fails to warm me. "Some might consider that statistically significant evidence of workaholic tendencies."

"Statistical significance requires properly established baseline parameters," I counter, unable to suppress my smile as he approaches. "Besides, these defensive calculations won't complete themselves."

His tail curls with amusement as he sets the provisions next to my workstation. "I thought scientists required adequate nutritional intake for optimal cognitive function."

"Is that your scientific way of telling me to eat something?" I raise an eyebrow, though I'm already reaching for a cookie.

"Merely an observation based on empirical evidence." His wings shift as he settles into the chair beside mine, and the proximity calms something inside me. "You function better when not experiencing hypoglycemia."

The casual normalcy of our banter feels like slipping into familiar clothes after

wearing something uncomfortable. The mate bond pulses between us, stronger now after our work on the ridge yesterday, after those first tentative steps toward rebuilding what secrecy and revelations had damaged.

“I’ve been thinking about Kieran,” he says suddenly, his skin darkening to that deep crimson that indicates emotional intensity.

I set down my tablet, giving him my full attention. “Tell me.”

His claws trace patterns on the table, careful movements that betray his inner turmoil. “I’ve been carrying his horn like a burden. A reminder of failure rather than... what he represented.”

“Which was?” I prompt gently when he falls silent.

“The possibility of connection.” His gaze meets mine, vulnerability evident in his gaze. “He was searching for others like himself, risking everything for the chance to not be alone. And I’ve been dishonoring that by hiding his memory away, by treating it as shame rather than courage.”

My hand reaches for his without conscious thought. “What would honor him, then?”

“I want to create something.” His fingers turn, accepting my touch as his tail curls tentatively around my ankle. “A memorial garden, perhaps. Not hidden away, but somewhere beautiful. Something that celebrates what he was seeking rather than mourning what happened to him.”

The idea strikes me with its perfect rightness. “That’s... wonderful, Dante.”

“Would you help me design it?” The request comes with unexpected shyness. “Your scientific understanding of crystal properties could create something truly special.”

“Of course.” The simple agreement feels significant, a commitment to building something together beyond defensive systems and sanctuary protocols. “Perhaps we could incorporate elements that create wing patterns in the morning light. Something that changes with the seasons, evolves rather than remains static.”

His skin shifts to that beautiful iridescent shade that indicates deep joy or connection. “Exactly that. Not a monument to what was lost, but a living space that celebrates possibility.”

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The conversation flows naturally from there—ideas for the garden, crystal configurations that might create special effects, plants from Jersey Devil habitats that could thrive in the sanctuary’s unique environment. Without discussing it directly, we both recognize this represents more than just a memorial for Kieran. It’s Dante finding peace with his past, and us creating something meaningful together.

As we talk, the space between us gradually diminishes. His wing brushes my shoulder, my knee presses against his leg, and our hands remain connected across the table. The mate bond pulses with every touch, strengthening with the closeness we’ve denied ourselves for far too long.

“I’ve missed this,” I admit during a natural pause in our planning. “Just talking with you. Working together on something that isn’t directly related to immediate survival.”

His tail tightens around my ankle. “I’ve missed you. All of you—your scientific precision, your analytical approach to everything, even your color-coded spreadsheets tracking my mood changes.”

The teasing reference to my research brings unexpected heat to my cheeks. “Those spreadsheets contain valuable data about mate bond manifestations.”

“I’m sure they do.” His claw gently traces patterns on my wrist that send electricity racing through my system. “Though I wonder if they capture everything.”

“What do you mean?” My breath catches as his touch becomes more deliberate.

“Certain... variables might be difficult to document through conventional observation methods.” His voice drops to that lower register that always makes my pulse quicken. “Emotional responses, for instance. Or... physical reactions.”

The heat in his gaze makes my scientific composure crumble completely. “I need you,” I whisper, my voice barely audible. “I’ve been aching for you, Dante. The separation—it’s been torture.”

His skin flushes deep crimson, and I see his pupils dilate with desire. “Blair,” he breathes, my name sounding like a prayer on his lips. “Are you sure? After everything—”

“I’m sure if you are.” I stand, closing the distance between us until I can feel the heat radiating from his skin. “There isn’t a doubt in my mind.”

His wings spread slightly, an unconscious display of his arousal that makes my breath catch. When I reach up to trace the curve of his horn, he shudders visibly, his skin shifting to that beautiful iridescent shade I’ve documented so carefully in my research.

“Your touch,” he murmurs, his voice rough with need. “It sets me on fire.”

“Then let me burn with you,” I whisper, my hands moving to the fastenings of his shirt. “Let me feel that fire.”

His claws carefully help me with the buttons, each brush of his fingers against my skin sending electricity racing through my nervous system. When my shirt falls away, his gaze travels over my exposed skin with such reverence that I feel beautiful, desired, perfect in ways no scientific measurement could quantify.

“You’re stunning,” he breathes, his skin shifting to deeper crimson. “Every inch of

you.”

His wings curve around us, creating a private world that blocks out everything except the heat building between us. The mate bond pulses with increasing intensity, urging us closer, demanding deeper connection.

“I need to taste you,” I whisper. “I need to feel you on my tongue, taste your essence.”

His breath catches, and I feel his cock harden against my hip. “Blair,” he warns, his voice strained. “If you keep talking like that...”

“What?” I challenge, emboldened by the effect I’m having on him. “You’ll lose control? Show me what you really are beneath all that careful restraint?”

Something wild flashes in his eyes, and suddenly I’m pressed against the lab wall, his mouth claiming mine with desperate hunger. His fangs graze my lips with exquisite care, the danger inherent in their sharpness only intensifying the fire building within me.

“You want to see what I really am?” he growls against my neck, his fangs scraping along my pulse point. “You want to know what it’s like to be claimed by a Jersey Devil?”

“Yes,” I gasp, my body arching into his touch. “Show me. Claim me. Make me yours completely.”

His tail winds around my waist, lifting me effortlessly as his wings spread to their full impressive span. The display of his inhuman strength and power sends a thrill through me that has nothing to do with fear and everything to do with desire.

“My chamber,” he growls, his gravelly voice pure Jersey Devil now. “I’m going to

worship every inch of your body until you scream my name.”

He carries me through crystal-lit corridors with inhuman speed, his wings creating shifting shadows that dance across the walls. Other sanctuary residents we pass give us knowing looks—apparently our desperate need for each other is obvious to everyone.

Inside his chamber, he sets me down with surprising gentleness, his wings creating a canopy above us that filters the crystal light into beautiful patterns across our skin. But there’s nothing gentle about the hunger in his eyes as he slowly circles me, his hooves clacking against the rocky floor as he takes in every detail of my form.

The space feels alive with anticipation—crystal formations casting gentle illumination across walls lined with books and artifacts collected over centuries. The large bed nestled against the far wall looks exactly as I remember, but tonight feels different. Tonight feels like crossing a threshold we’ve approached but never passed.

“Strip,” he commands softly, his voice carrying an authority that makes my knees weak. “I want to see all of you. Every beautiful inch.”

My hands tremble slightly as I comply, scientific precision abandoned in favor of pure sensation. Each piece of clothing that falls away reveals more skin to his heated gaze, and his skin darkens with arousal as more of me is exposed.

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When I'm finally naked before him, he makes a sound that's half-growl, half-purr. "Perfect," he breathes, his claws carefully tracing the air just above my skin without quite touching. "Absolutely perfect."

"Your turn," I whisper, my voice husky with need. "I want to see you, too. All of you."

He strips with fluid grace, revealing the full glory of his inhuman form. His cock stands proud and thick, darker than his skin, with ridges along the shaft that make my mouth water with anticipation. Everything about him is designed for pleasure, for claiming, for marking his mate thoroughly.

"Come here," he commands, settling on the edge of his bed with his wings spread wide. "Show me what that brilliant mind of yours has been fantasizing about."

I approach slowly, deliberately, letting him see every curve and valley of my body as I move. When I reach him, I don't hesitate—I drop to my knees between his spread thighs, my hands stroking up his muscular legs to frame his impressive arousal.

"I've dreamed of this," I confess, my breath warm against his skin. "Of having you at my mercy, of making you lose control completely."

His wings tremble as I lean forward, my tongue tracing the ridged underside of his cock from base to tip. The taste of him—exotic, spicy, uniquely Dante—makes me moan with genuine pleasure.

"Fuck," he breathes, his claws digging into the bedding as I take him into my mouth.

“Your mouth is incredible. So hot, so perfect.”

I work him with deliberate precision, using everything I’ve learned about his body to drive him wild. The ridges along his shaft create fascinating textures against my tongue, and I explore each one thoroughly while his tail lashes with barely controlled need.

“I never thought I’d find this,” he whispers against my skin. “Connection that transcends origin or species or expectation. Someone who sees all of me and stays anyway.”

His words touch something deep within me, making my heart swell with feelings I never thought possible.

“Until now.” His eyes meet mine with a certainty that dissolves every remaining barrier. “Until us.”

“Blair,” he warns, his voice strained. “If you keep that up, I’m going to come down your throat.”

I pull back just enough to meet his eyes, my lips still wrapped around his tip. “Then come. I want to taste you. All of you.”

His control shatters completely. With a roar that’s pure Jersey Devil, he tangles his claws in my hair and holds me still as he slides all the way back in and empties himself down my throat. The taste of his release—salty and exotic with that spicy undertone that’s uniquely his—makes me moan around his pulsing shaft.

When he finally releases me, I sit back on my heels, licking my lips with deliberate slowness. “Delicious,” I purr, watching his skin flush even darker.

“My turn,” he growls, scooping me up and depositing me on the bed with gentle force. “My turn to make you come apart.”

His mouth finds my breast, his tongue creating sensations no human lover could replicate. The stimulation makes me arch beneath him, my hands clutching at his horns as pleasure builds within me.

“These,” he murmurs against my skin, his fangs grazing my nipple carefully. “I’ve been dreaming of these perfect breasts. Of marking them as mine.”

His mouth moves lower, leaving a trail of kisses and gentle bites that make me writhe beneath him. When he reaches the apex of my thighs, he pauses, his breath warm against my most sensitive flesh.

“Spread your legs,” he commands softly. “Let me see how wet you are for me.”

I comply without hesitation, my thighs falling open to reveal my glistening arousal. His approving growl vibrates through his chest as he takes in the sight of my need.

“So beautiful,” he breathes, his claws tracing delicate patterns on my inner thighs. “So ready for me.”

When his tongue finally makes contact with my core, I cry out his name loud enough to echo through the chamber. The dual sensation of his tongue parting my folds while his fangs graze my sensitive flesh creates pleasure so intense it borders on overwhelming.

“Dante!” I gasp, my hips bucking against his mouth as he devours me with single-minded focus. “Don’t stop, please don’t stop!”

His tail winds around my thigh, holding me open to his feast while his tongue works

magic between my legs. The combination of textures—smooth tongue, gentle fangs, firm tail—creates sensations that defy description.

“You taste like heaven,” he growls against my flesh, the vibration sending fresh waves of pleasure through me. “I could eat this sweet pussy for hours.”

His crude words push me over the edge. With a scream that probably alerts the entire sanctuary to our activities, I come apart beneath his mouth, my body convulsing with pleasure so intense it steals my breath.

Before I can recover, he’s moving up my body, his cock hard and ready again. The recovery time of a Jersey Devil is apparently much shorter than human males.

“I need to be inside you,” he growls, positioning himself at my entrance. “I need to claim you properly.”

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“Then claim me,” I whisper, my legs wrapping around his waist to pull him closer. With my palms on his firm ass cheeks, I murmur, “Make me yours.”

He enters me in one smooth thrust, his impressive girth stretching me deliciously as he fills me completely. The ridges along his shaft create friction that makes us both gasp with pleasure, and I feel every inch of him as he claims me thoroughly.

This is different from our previous intimacies—crossing a threshold we’ve approached but never passed. As our bodies join for the first time, there’s a moment of perfect stillness, of recognition that this step transforms everything between us.

“Mine,” he growls, his wings spreading wide above us as he begins to move. “My mate, my Blair, mine forever.”

“Yours,” I confirm breathlessly, my nails digging into his shoulders as he sets a rhythm that drives me wild. “Always yours.”

What follows transcends mere physical pleasure. The mate bond flares between us, creating a feedback loop of sensation that makes us both cry out with overwhelming intensity. I can feel his pleasure as if it were my own, and he experiences mine with equal intensity.

“I can feel you,” I gasp, my body arching to meet his powerful thrusts. “Through the bond—I can feel how good it is for you.”

His response is a possessive growl as he claims my mouth in a kiss that tastes of my own arousal. “Then you know how perfect you feel wrapped around my cock. How

you were made for me.”

The rhythm becomes frantic, desperate, as we both chase the completion that waits just beyond reach. His tail winds around my waist, holding me in place as he pounds into me with inhuman strength.

“Come for me,” he commands, his voice rough with need. “Come on my cock like the good little mate you are.”

The combination of his words, his relentless thrusts, and the overwhelming sensations from our bond send me spiraling into climax. I scream his name as my inner walls clamp down on him, milking his cock as waves of pleasure crash through me.

His own release follows immediately, triggered by my climax. With a roar that shakes the chamber walls, he buries himself to the hilt and fills me with his seed, marking me as his in the most primal way possible.

We collapse together, our bodies trembling from the intensity of what we’ve shared. For long moments, neither of us can speak, can barely breathe. His weight settles over me, careful not to crush me but unwilling to break our connection.

“Mine,” he breathes against my neck, his body still trembling from the intensity of our joining. “My mate. My everything.”

“Yours,” I whisper back, my body still pulsing with aftershocks. “Completely yours.”

In the aftermath, as we both struggle to catch our breath, the mate bond pulses between us with new intensity. This wasn’t just sex—it was a claiming, a completion of something that began the moment we first touched.

His arms tighten around me as our breathing gradually returns to normal. The mate

bond shimmers between us with a new depth, as if what we've just shared has strengthened every fiber of connection.

"The mate bond," I observe, my scientific mind automatically analyzing even in this intimate moment. "It's stronger now. The neural pathways are more established."

His quiet laugh vibrates through his chest where my head rests. "Only you would analyze our mating while still catching your breath."

"Our mating," I repeat, tasting the word. "Not just sex. Mating."

"Yes," he confirms, his voice serious now. "What we just shared was Jersey Devil mating behavior. You're mine now in every way that matters."

The possessive certainty in his voice sends another shiver through me. "And you're mine," I reply, my fingers tracing the scales along his chest. "My Jersey Devil. My mate."

His skin shifts to that beautiful iridescent color, and I feel him twitch inside me, already beginning to respond again. The mate bond pulses between us, demanding more connection, deeper bonding.

"Again?" I ask, though my body is already reacting to his renewed interest.

"The bond won't be satisfied until we're completely joined together," he explains, his hips beginning to move in slow, deep strokes. "Until every cell in your body knows you belong to me."

"Then don't stop," I whisper, my legs tightening around his waist. "Bond with me completely."

What follows is slower, deeper—less frantic need and more reverent worship. He moves within me with deliberate precision, each stroke designed to pleasure rather than claim. The mate bond pulses between us, growing stronger with every shared breath, every whispered endearment.

When release takes us this time, it's with a gentle intensity that leaves us both glowing—literally, in his case, as his skin shifts through the entire spectrum of his emotional palette.

“I love you, Blair.” I’ve never seen him this serious, this earnest. “I love you from the depths of my heart. You’re perfect. This...” He glances at where our bodies are still joined, “is perfect.”

“We belong together.” As I say it, the truth strikes me like a thunderclap. “When I look at the unlikelihood of us being together, it’s as though the universe conspired to put us together.”

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“Whoever or whatever conspired to put us together has quite the sense of humor. We were certainly forced to work for this.”

“Mm-hmm,” I sigh. “Lucky, lucky us.” I nuzzle his cheek with my nose and add, “I want you. I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you as often as you need to hear. I accept you. All of you—sarcastic deflections, protective instincts, Jersey Devil adaptations, devilish good looks, and all your lingering guilt about things you couldn’t control.”

His skin shifts to warmer crimson, tail tightening slightly around my waist.

My fingers trace the curve of his horn with practiced ease. “And Dante?” I wait for his gaze to find mine. “I love you, too.”

As crystal light shifts to indicate approaching dawn, we remain wrapped in each other’s embrace, the mate bond dancing with contentment between us. Outside these walls, hunters still lurk and dangers wait. My father’s obsession remains unsatisfied, the threat still hovering at the edges of our sanctuary. Yet in this moment, wrapped in Dante’s wings with his tail secure around my waist, those threats feel distant compared to the connection we’ve reclaimed.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Dante

I shouldn’t be replaying the life-altering intimacy I shared with Blair last night, especially since I’m certain my smile is so wide that my friends are all aware that we’ve mended all fences.

“Message intercepted from Frost Analytics frequency,” Volt announces, electricity crackling through his golden feathers as he strides into the room. “Addressed specifically to Blair.”

My skin shifts to obsidian as the Thunderbird places a crystal communication device on the stone table. The sanctuary’s senior council members exchange wary glances.

Blair’s expression remains carefully neutral, though the mate bond contracts with sudden tension between us. “What does it say?”

Volt flicks it on and the device projects a holographic message into the air. William Andrews appears—tall, distinguished, with silver-streaked hair and piercing eyes that hold an uncomfortable resemblance to Blair’s analytical gaze.

“You have my daughter. I demand her immediate release or an army will descend upon your mountain and will wipe out every creature in it. I’ll be at our old research outpost in the western valley tomorrow at midday. Allow her to come. Alone. Or suffer the consequences.”

The message ends, leaving heavy silence in its wake. My jaw tightens, betraying emotion I can’t fully suppress.

“Absolutely not,” I break the silence first, wings pulling tight against my back. “It’s obviously a trap.”

Blair’s eyes find mine across the table. “Probably.”

The council members debate the strategic implications, the risks of an invasion, the risk to Blair. Through it all, Blair remains silent, her analytical mind visibly processing options.

“I won’t go,” she finally says, setting her tablet down with deliberate precision. “He’s bluffing. I don’t believe he has an army at his disposal to rescue me, nor do I believe he knows the exact location of this sanctuary. The risk to the sanctuary is too great if he’s somehow using the meeting to confirm our location.” She rises, gathering her materials with practiced efficiency. “The subject is closed.”

Later, I find her at the eastern outlook—a rocky ledge overlooking the valley where crystal formations catch the afternoon light.

“Your father has impeccable timing,” I say, announcing my presence. “Just when we’ve finally found our way back to each other.”

“He always did have a talent for disruption.” Her voice carries forced lightness.

Moving closer, I let my wing brush her shoulder—gentle contact that sends warmth cascading through our bond. “You surprised them back there. They expected you to want to go.”

“I’m afraid,” she admits after a long silence, the confession clearly costing her. “Not of hunters or weapons. But of standing before him and declaring who I’ve chosen to be. Who I’ve chosen to love.”

The last word emerges so quietly I might have missed it without cryptid hearing. My skin shifts instantly to that iridescent shade I can’t control when I’m around her.

“Blair...”

“Don’t get me wrong, Dante, I’m not ashamed of you. I’m incredibly proud of you, and the mate bond we have is the best thing that has ever happened to me. I guess there will always be the little girl in me that still wants her father’s approval, the love he was never able to show me after my mother died.”

She stands staring off into the distance. All I can do is to wrap my now fully healed wing around her while my tail finds her waist, supporting her while I let her brilliant brain process these strong, conflicting emotions.

“I’m going to meet him,” she says suddenly. Her expression is set—the kind that says her mind’s made up and there’s no use arguing.

“You’ve changed your mind?” My skin darkens with immediate concern.

“I need to face him. To finally stand before him, not as his apprentice or his daughter, but as the person I’ve chosen to become.” Her voice strengthens with each word. “To tell him directly that I choose this life, this community. You.”

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“You want closure,” I observe, recognizing the need beneath her strategic framing. “To say the things you couldn’t.”

“I want to stand before him as the person I’ve become,” she acknowledges. “Not running or hiding or pretending. Just... me. The scientist. The tactician. The woman who loves a Jersey Devil.”

That declaration makes my skin shift to iridescent wonder again, words temporarily beyond me.

“That woman,” I say finally, wings curving more fully around her, “is the most formidable being I’ve ever encountered. And if she believes she can face William Andrews on her own terms, with proper sanctuary protection, then I trust her judgment.”

Relief washes through our bond, her shoulders relaxing as she leans into my embrace. “Thank you.”

We quickly establish safety measures—I’ll be part of the security detail, close enough to intervene if needed, and she’ll wear monitoring equipment with emergency extraction protocols. By the time we return to the sanctuary with our decision, the mate bond hums with shared purpose—not perfect agreement, but mutual respect for each other’s concerns.

Her hand finds mine as we walk, fingers intertwining with casual intimacy that heats my skin. “The statistical probability of a positive outcome has increased significantly with our integrated tactical approach.”

“Is that your scientific way of saying we make a good team?” My tail curls around her wrist, drawing a small smile from her.

“Empirical evidence supports that conclusion, yes.” Her eyes meet mine with unexpected softness. “Though further data collection is always warranted for comprehensive verification.”

“Always the scientist.” There’s only affection in my observation as we prepare to face whatever comes next. As a team.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Blair

The western valley spreads before me, bathed in midday light that does nothing to warm the chill in my bones. Behind me, concealed among the rocks and trees, sanctuary defenders maintain silent watch. Somewhere among them, Dante waits—close enough to intervene, but hidden from view.

The monitoring device beneath my clothes transmits vital signs while a crystal earpiece connects me to Volt.

William Andrews approaches with measured precision—each step deliberate, calculating. His silver-streaked hair catches the sunlight, and the lines around his eyes have deepened since I last saw him.

“Blair.” My father stops several meters away, his analytical gaze sweeping the terrain. “They let you come. Apex told me you had a mental breakdown, and they were treating you when the cryptids captured you.”

“Apex was torturing me for information. I wasn’t captured. I was rescued.” Keeping

my voice steady requires more effort than I anticipated. “I’m here of my own free will.”

“You’re not alone, I presume.” He gestures vaguely toward the ridgeline. “Your... friends... are watching.”

“Basic tactical precaution.”

He ignores my comment about Apex entirely. Denial? Or does he think I’m lying?

His lips twitch slightly. “Still thinking in scientific frameworks, I see. Some things don’t change.”

“Many things have.” Meeting his gaze directly feels like a small victory. “That’s why I’m here.”

He studies me with the same intensity he once applied to specimen samples. “You look... different.”

“I am different.” The simple truth emerges easier than expected. “Not the person you trained me to be.”

“Because of them.” Not a question—an accusation tinged with genuine bewilderment. “Because of the cryptids you’ve chosen over your own kind.”

“I haven’t chosen one species over another.” Scientific precision helps me maintain composure. “I’ve chosen compassion over prejudice. Connection over isolation. Truth over comfortable lies.”

My father’s expression tightens. “Truth? You think living among monsters represents truth?”

“They’re not monsters.” The words emerge with quiet certainty. “They’re people with different evolutionary paths. Different adaptations. But no less deserving of respect than humans.”

“They killed your mother.” His voice drops, harsh with old grief that never properly healed. “Have you forgotten Eleanor? What that basilisk did to her?”

The familiar ache rises, but it no longer carries the burning rage he stoked for decades. “I remember her every day. But one basilisk’s actions don’t define an entire class of beings. Just as one human’s cruelty doesn’t make all humanity evil.”

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His hands clench and unclench, agitation breaking through his controlled demeanor. “This isn’t the daughter I raised. My Blair understood the threat these creatures pose. She helped develop methods to contain them, to study them, to ensure humanity’s protection.”

“Your Blair was a child following her father’s lead.” The blunt assessment makes him flinch. “A girl so desperate for connection after losing her mother that she’d believe anything if it meant keeping you close.”

His steps falter. “I taught you to think critically. To follow evidence.”

“Yes. And that’s exactly what led me here.”

“They’ve manipulated you.” His scientist’s certainty remains unshaken. “The more advanced species use pheromones, electromagnetic influences—”

“Like the Jersey Devil?” The question slips out quietly.

Something shifts in his gaze—calculation mixed with what might be genuine concern. “The male specimen exhibits particularly dangerous adaptation capabilities. His influence over you is especially concerning given the physiological bond that’s forming.”

Ice floods my veins. “How do you know about that?”

“I’m still a scientist, Blair.” Professional pride colors his tone. “There’s been a Jersey Devil seen flying these mountains. I’ve researched everything we know about them.

The symptoms are distinctive for anyone who knows what to look for.”

“The bond isn’t what you think.” Choosing words carefully. “It’s not manipulation or control. It’s connection. Mutual recognition.”

“It’s dangerous.” My father steps closer, genuine concern breaking through scientific detachment. “You’ve been in close proximity to a Jersey male—his pheromones are potent. The neurological alterations are likely already affecting your cognitive function.”

“Or perhaps it’s allowing me to understand another being in ways traditional science never could.” The calm certainty in my voice seems to unsettle him.

“Listen to yourself.” Frustration edges his words. “This isn’t scientific reasoning. This is emotional justification.”

“Maybe both are necessary for true understanding.” Meeting his gaze directly. “Maybe that’s what your research has been missing—recognition that empirical observation without empathic connection provides incomplete data.”

His expression hardens. “You sound like her.”

The simple statement hits with unexpected force. “Mom?”

“Eleanor believed in connection, too.” Old grief shadows his features. “Insisted that understanding cryptids required approaching them with openness rather than defensive protocols. Said we could learn from them as equals rather than subjects.”

New understanding dawns with startling clarity. “That’s why she was alone that day. Without security measures.”

His silence confirms my realization. My mother hadn't been killed because she was careless—she'd been implementing her own research methodology, attempting connection rather than capture. The approach I've independently rediscovered decades later.

"She was wrong." His voice hardens with conviction built on decades of grief. "Her openness got her killed. And now you're making the same mistake."

"Or finishing what she started." The possibility creates unexpected warmth. "Finding the truth she never had the chance to document."

"Come home, Blair. Let me help you. Whatever neurological alterations the male is attempting to create, we can reverse them. Return your mind to proper function."

"My mind functions perfectly." Calm reply. "It's my perspective that's changed, not my cognitive ability."

"Because of him." The realization crystallizes as he speaks. "The Jersey Devil specimen. He's the focal point of the bond."

In my ear, Volt warns, "Your heart rate's elevated. Maintain distance."

"His name is Dante," I say quietly but firmly. "And yes, we share a connection neither of us expected nor sought. But it's real and valuable and genuine."

"You can't possibly—" He stops, something like horror dawning. "You have intimate relations with this creature?"

The disgust in his voice should hurt more than it does. Instead, I find unexpected strength.

“I love him.” The simple declaration emerges without scientific qualification. “Not because of pheromones or neurological manipulation, but because of who he is. His courage. His humor. His capacity for growth and change and compassion.”

“This is worse than I thought.” My father runs a hand through his silver-streaked hair. “The neurological alterations must have progressed further than preliminary analysis indicated.”

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“There are no ‘alterations’.” My frustration breaks through scientific detachment. “Just growth. Just recognition of the truth your grief hasn’t let you see.”

The accusation hits its mark. His composure cracks further. “Don’t you dare invoke grief as though you understand—”

“I understand perfectly.” Standing straighter, I feel Dante’s presence through the mate bond, giving me strength. “You lost Mom, and instead of processing that loss, you channeled everything into hunting cryptids. Into teaching me to fear and hate them. Into building weapons instead of bridges.”

“I protected you!” His raised voice echoes across the clearing.

“And I love you for wanting to protect me.” The truth surprises us both. “But I don’t need protection from Dante or the sanctuary residents. I need you to see them as I do—as people deserving of respect and dignity. As the family I’ve chosen.”

The word “family” makes something shift in his expression. “Family. You consider these creatures your family now?”

“Yes.”

His shoulders straighten with resignation. “Then I’ve truly lost you.”

“Not lost.” Taking a careful step forward. “Just watching me become someone different than you expected. Someone who carries your scientific precision and analytical mind, but applies those gifts to building understanding rather than

weapons.”

For a moment, conflict wars in his expression—the scientist recognizing logical argument versus the father who can’t accept his daughter’s choices. Then his face hardens into familiar resolve.

“This conversation is over.” He steps back, hand reaching toward his coat pocket. “I see now that direct dialogue won’t be effective.”

The gesture triggers immediate alarm. In my ear, Volt’s voice comes sharp with warning: “Defensive positions. Possible concealed weapon.”

“Dad.” My voice carries both warning and plea. “Don’t do this.”

“I’m sorry, Blair.” And he does look genuinely sorry, which somehow makes it worse. “But sometimes protection requires difficult measures.”

As his hand emerges with a small device, movement explodes from the tree line—Dante landing between us with wings fully extended, his normally crimson skin pure obsidian with protective rage. My father stumbles back, momentarily shocked.

“That’s far enough,” Dante growls, tail lashing with barely contained fury. “Whatever you’re planning stops now.”

“The specimen himself.” My father’s scientific assessment returns, eyes narrowing. “Fascinating territorial display. Exactly as the research predicted.”

“His name is Dante,” I say again, moving to stand beside him rather than behind his protective wings. “And this isn’t territory he’s defending. It’s partnership. I’m his mate. By choice, not biological imperative.”

“We’re not your research subjects.” Dante’s voice carries controlled rage that ripples across his skin in waves of darkness. “And whatever weapon you’re reaching for won’t work this time.”

“Not a weapon.” My father holds up a small crystal device. “A recording device. Evidence of what I’ve observed here for further analysis.”

I recognize the lie immediately. “Crystal harmonics disruptor. Designed to temporarily incapacitate cryptids through nervous system interference. But it won’t work, Dad.”

I produce a small black box from my pocket—something Volt and I created in anticipation of this exact scenario. Pointing it at his crystal, I activate my disruptor, rendering his device inactive.

Surprise flickers across his face before professional admiration replaces it. “Very good, Blair. Your observational skills remain impressive despite neurological alterations.”

“And your tactical approaches remain predictable despite decades of field experience.” Stepping fully beside Dante, I make my position unmistakably clear. “This meeting is over.”

Around us, sanctuary defenders emerge from concealed positions—a show of force without direct aggression.

My father calculates odds he’ll find unfavorable. The scientist in him recognizes defeat even as the father in him rebels against it.

“This isn’t finished,” he says finally, pocketing the device as he steps back. “Whatever you think you’ve found here—whatever connection you believe you’ve

formed—it isn't real. It isn't sustainable.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” My hand finds Dante’s, fingers intertwining despite the claws he’s carefully retracted. “What I’ve found is more real than anything I experienced in your laboratories. More sustainable than a life built on fear and revenge. I love him, Dad, and he loves me.”

Pain flashes across his features before scientific detachment reclaims him. “When you come to your senses, Blair, I’ll be waiting.”

“I have full control of my senses.” My words are quiet, forceful. “More than I’ve ever had. Goodbye, Dad.”

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As he retreats toward the tree line, Dante's wing curves protectively around my shoulders. The crystal monitoring device confirms what the mate bond already tells him—my elevated heart rate, the adrenaline flooding my system, the emotional turmoil beneath my calm exterior.

“Are you alright?” His voice drops to that register meant only for me, concern overriding the protective rage that still darkens his skin.

“I will be.” The honesty comes easier than expected. “He's not ready to hear me. Maybe he never will be.”

“But you said what you needed to say.” His tail curls gently around my wrist, grounding me in the present moment. “You stood in your truth without apology or compromise.”

Looking up at him—at crimson skin slowly returning from protective obsidian, at garnet eyes that see me completely, at wings that shelter without confining—I feel certainty settle bone-deep within me.

“I chose well,” I say simply.

His skin shifts to that iridescent beauty that affirms his love. “We both did.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Dante

The sanctuary hums with unusual energy as we return from the confrontation with Blair's father. Crystal formations pulse with gentle blue light, responding to the collective relief flowing through the gathered cryptids.

"Tactical assessment suggests minimal immediate threat," Volt announces, relief showing on his hawklike features. "Andrews withdrew with limited support personnel. No evidence of secondary forces positioned within tactical strike range."

My skin shifts to obsidian as the memory of William Andrews' parting words echoes in my mind: "When you come to your senses, Blair, I'll be waiting."

"He withdrew too easily," I murmur to Blair as the council disperses. "Tactical retreat rather than strategic abandonment."

"I noticed." Her eyes meet mine with shared understanding. "His acceptance of my truth and easy retreat seemed almost... perfunctory."

The observation sharpens my unease. William Andrews is many things—manipulative, dangerous, obsessive—but never careless or unprepared. The confrontation felt incomplete, as though setting the stage for something else.

"We should maintain heightened perimeter surveillance," I suggest, scanning the celebrating cryptids with growing concern. "At least until we're certain he's truly departed the region."

"Already implemented," Blair confirms, showing me the security protocols on her tablet. "Triple sensor arrays along all approach vectors, with particular emphasis on thermal imaging and biometric identification filters."

My wing curves around her shoulders, unable to suppress my protective instinct despite her obvious competence. "Always thinking three steps ahead."

She leans against me, a silent show of acceptance and trust. Our bond is stronger than ever.

As evening falls, the sanctuary's celebration grows more animated. Brownies distribute freshly baked sourdough while Water Sprites create dancing light patterns across crystal walls. The cryptids who once viewed Blair with suspicion now raise glasses in her honor.

"To standing your ground," Marina calls, her body undulating in the glowing light. "And choosing your own path!"

Cheers echo through the great hall, but I can't shake the sense of impending danger. My gaze continually darts toward the monitoring crystals, searching for any sign of unusual activity beyond our walls.

As the celebration continues around us, neither of us fully relaxes. Through our bond, I feel her lingering vigilance beneath scientific composure—analytical mind processing tactical possibilities even as she accepts congratulations from sanctuary residents.

When we finally retire to our chamber hours later, I have no intention of going to sleep—not yet. Crystal formations cast shifting shadows across Blair's face as she reviews security protocols one final time.

"All perimeter defenses functioning at optimal parameters," she reports, setting down her tablet with deliberate precision. "Sanctuary residents secured in appropriate chambers with enhanced protection metrics."

"And yet..." I leave the thought unfinished, tail lashing against the stone floor.

"And yet," she agrees, understanding without explanation. "I don't trust him."

Neither of us has to name him out loud. We know who the enemy is. Blair's hand finds mine in the crystal light, scientific precision giving way to simple connection. "Whatever comes, we face it together."

As sanctuary crystals dim for nighttime conservation, my gaze remains fixed on the darkness beyond our mountain walls. Something waits out there—patient, calculating, and inevitable.

The hunter isn't finished with us yet.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Dante

The sanctuary alarms shatter the predawn silence, crystal formations pulsing with urgent crimson warning. I'm instantly alert, wings extending as Blair bolts upright beside me.

"Perimeter breach!" Volt's voice thunders through the communication system. "Multiple incursion points detected. Sophisticated camouflage technology circumventing standard detection protocols."

My skin shifts to pure obsidian as protective instincts surge. "Location?"

"Eastern approach primarily, with secondary vectors from north and south ridges." Volt's electricity intensifies, creating a visible current that races through the crystal arrays. "Coordinated assault pattern consistent with military precision."

"My father's tactical signature," Blair confirms, instantly shifting from sleep to combat readiness. "The meeting was simply misdirection. Gathering intelligence while positioning forces for primary assault."

We race through crystal-lined corridors as the sanctuary erupts into organized chaos. Young and elderly cryptids rush toward secure chambers deep within the mountain, defenders move to predetermined positions, and technologists activate crystal barrier systems.

“Confirmed infiltration.” Cypher materializes from the shadows near the main entrance, amber eyes blazing with unusual agitation. “Advanced weapons technology detected. Not standard hunter equipment.”

The monitoring center’s displays show an alarming development—hunter teams with advanced equipment moving through our defensive perimeter with unprecedented ease. Technologies neutralizing our sensors, targeting specific vulnerabilities with precision that speaks of insider knowledge.

“They’ve studied us,” Volt observes grimly. “They seem to know our defensive protocols, our species distribution, our security parameters.”

“Because I helped design those systems.” Blair’s voice carries controlled fury. “My father likely analyzed my tactical approaches, anticipated my security implementations.”

My wings extend fully as I prepare to join the defense. “Then we need unpredictable response patterns. Volt, coordinate non-standard defensive formations. Marina, deploy Water Sprites in counter-intuitive configurations. Cypher, shadowform reconnaissance beyond established parameters.”

As defenders rush to implement revised tactics, the crystal arrays pulse with increasing urgency. Hunter teams approach the main sanctuary entrances with coordinated precision that speaks of extensive preparation.

“They’ve neutralized the outer crystal barriers,” Marina reports, her voice filled with tension. “Approaching secondary containment protocols now.”

“I should never have agreed to that meeting,” Blair says quietly, fingers flying across control interfaces to strengthen remaining defenses. “This is my fault.”

“Later,” I tell her, wings already extending for flight. “Self-recrimination after survival.”

Her hand catches mine with surprising strength. “Be careful,” she says, scientific detachment momentarily abandoned. “If my father is true to form, now that he knows we are bonded, their weapons are likely recalibrated for Jersey Devil physiology specifically. In addition, he saw Volt, Marina and her Sprites, and Cypher. He has a better idea what he’s up against.”

The truth in her assessment sends ice through my veins. “I’ll keep myself safe,” I promise, tail curling briefly around her wrist before I move toward the exit.

“Dante.” Her voice stops me again. When I turn, her expression holds none of the analytical precision she typically maintains in a crisis. Just raw emotion that vibrates through our bond. “I love you.”

My skin shifts instantly to that iridescent shade I reserve only for her. “I know,” I reply simply. “That’s why I’ll come back.”

I grab an earbud that will allow me to maintain communication with the command center while I do aerial reconnaissance. Right behind me, Riven grabs an earbud, his moth-like wings quivering as he races in the opposite direction. “Be safe, brother.” He calls over his shoulder as he disappears around the corner.

Brother. He’s right. We are family. Today I’m going to fight for my mate and my family.

The eastern corridor trembles with impact as I join Volt near the entrance. Crystal formations splinter under concentrated disruptor fire, their protective glow flickering dangerously.

“They’re well-equipped,” the Thunderbird observes, his emotions so high that his electricity crackles loudly. “Specialized weapons, tactical formation optimized for cryptid containment rather than elimination.”

“They want captives, not casualties,” I confirm, recognizing the approach pattern. “Particularly specific targets.”

“You and Blair,” Volt concludes grimly. “A mate-bonded pair presents a high-value research opportunity.”

The clinical assessment makes my skin darken further, tail lashing with protective rage. “They’ll have to get through me first.”

“Precisely what they’re counting on,” Volt warns. “Protective response patterns are predictable, exploitable.”

The first wave of well-equipped hunters breaches the inner defensive perimeter before we can implement full countermeasures. The sanctuary again erupts into controlled chaos—defenders executing revised tactical formations, cryptids using natural abilities to counter advanced technologies, battles erupting throughout crystal-lined corridors.

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I launch myself into the fray, wings carrying me above the initial assault team. From my aerial vantage, patterns become clear—hunters moving with specific objectives rather than random aggression. Teams designated for capture, for containment, for specific targets identified through careful intelligence gathering. I relay the information back to the command center.

Through it all, I maintain awareness of Blair's position through our bond. She remains in the command center, coordinating defensive responses with tactical precision.

Water Sprites create disorienting mists; Sasquatches deploy surprising strength, tossing huge boulders down embankments and hurling tree trunks like javelins; Shadow Cats materialize from darkness to neutralize advanced equipment with targeted strikes. Despite our resistance, the hunters advance with methodical determination. Their equipment neutralizes many cryptid abilities, their tactics account for defensive formations, and their objectives remain focused despite our attempts at misdirection.

“They’re approaching the command center,” Volt warns through our communication crystal. “It’s a primary strike team with specialized containment equipment.”

Anger surges through me as my blood runs cold. This isn’t a random assault but a targeted extraction—with Blair as the primary objective. Abandoning my current position, I launch toward the central chambers, wings straining for maximum speed.

The command center comes into view just as hunter teams breach its outer defenses. Crystal barriers shimmer and fail beneath concentrated disruptor fire, security

protocols are systematically neutralized by technologies clearly designed for this purpose.

Inside, Blair coordinates defensive responses, her analytical mind processing tactical information with remarkable efficiency despite the approaching danger. Through our bond, I feel no fear from her—only focused determination and calculated response patterns.

As hunters bring specialized weapons to bear on the final barrier, I dive toward their position, abandoning stealth for direct intervention. My wings extend fully, talons prepared for precise strikes against equipment rather than personnel. But before I can reach them, a familiar figure emerges from the assault team's center.

William Andrews steps forward, specialized weapon in hand that doesn't target the barrier—but tracks my approaching form with unsettling precision.

“Predictable response patterns,” he observes with clinical detachment that echoes his daughter's scientific tone. “The mate bond creates exploitable behavioral vulnerabilities.”

The weapon discharges with pinpoint accuracy. I twist midair, evading the primary trajectory but feeling a searing pain as the projectile grazes my wing membrane. Unlike my previous encounter, this toxin spreads immediately, fiery agony racing through tissue faster than anything I've experienced before.

Behind the barrier, Blair's eyes widen with recognition. “Improved neurotoxin delivery system,” she analyzes with a professional assessment that doesn't mask her horror. “Accelerated propagation parameters.”

“Precisely.” Her father's voice carries pride in scientific achievement despite the context. “Specifically calibrated for Jersey Devil physiology based on recent

assessments.”

Pain blurs my vision as I fight to maintain flight, wings struggling against rapidly spreading numbness. I sputter to the ground, unable to keep myself aloft.

“Blair. This is over. Come with me. We can study the Jersey Devil together.”

Through our bond, I feel Blair’s sudden shift from tactical assessment to desperate resolve. The barrier between us pulses with failing energy as hunter teams prepare their final breach.

“Secondary containment protocols engaged,” Andrews instructs his team, weapon still tracking my increasingly erratic flight. “Prepare for subject extraction with minimal damage. I’ll administer the antivenom when we have him contained.”

As another projectile launches toward me, something impossible happens. The barrier shatters outward rather than inward, and Blair lunges through the opening—directly into the weapon’s trajectory.

Time slows with crystalline clarity. The projectile meant for me grazes her shoulder as she moves between her father and me. Not a direct hit—the reflexes honed through years of hunter training allow her to avoid the worst of the impact—but enough to tear fabric and break skin. Enough for the toxin to enter her system.

“Blair!” Her father’s scientific detachment shatters completely, horror breaking through as his weapon strikes his daughter instead of its intended target.

I catch her before she can fall, wings curving protectively around her smaller form. The toxin from my own injury burns through my system, but the mate bond energy surges with a protective intensity that temporarily overrides the pain. Her body trembles against mine, the toxin designed for cryptid biology creating an immediate,

more devastating, response in human physiology.

“Get her out of here,” Marina calls from nearby, Water Sprites creating a disorienting mist that momentarily renders the hunter teams sightless. “We’ll cover your retreat.”

William Andrews stands frozen, weapon lowered, expression locked in horrified disbelief at what his perfect tactical planning has wrought. “Blair,” he whispers, the hunter’s cold detachment abandoned in the face of paternal terror.

I don’t wait for his recovery. Body straining against growing toxin paralysis, I launch toward the sanctuary’s deeper chambers, Blair cradled against my chest. Behind us, sounds of battle continue, but with a subtle shift in intensity—hunters disorganized by their leader’s obvious distress, defensive teams exploiting the momentary tactical advantage.

“Secondary escape route,” Blair manages through gritted teeth, face pale but eyes clear despite toxin’s effects.

I follow her directions, navigating crystalline corridors toward the sanctuary’s deeper chambers, where medical facilities offer temporary safety. Each step becomes more difficult as the toxin spreads, but I refuse to falter while she’s in my arms.

“The toxin...” she analyzes, professional detachment providing a framework for processing her own symptoms. “Modified neural pathways... accelerated delivery system...”

“Save your strength,” I urge, lungs burning with each powerful stride. “Analysis after treatment.”

Her smile holds pain but genuine warmth. “Always the pragmatist.”

The infirmary appears ahead, crystalline doors opening at our approach. Inside, Cliff already prepares treatment protocols, massive hands moving with surprising gentleness among medical supplies.

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Through the communication crystal comes unexpected news—hunter forces retreating in disarray, coordinated assault transforming into tactical withdrawal. William Andrews reportedly ordered immediate disengagement after Blair’s injury.

As I lay her carefully on the examination table, our eyes meet with perfect understanding. In one desperate moment, she chose me over everything else—just as her father, faced with the consequences of his obsession, finally chose her.

Some bonds run deeper than science can explain.

Some loves prove stronger than any weapon can destroy.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dante

Consciousness returns to me in waves, each one bringing a fresh surge of burning pain. The toxin my wing absorbed was designed to destroy Jersey Devil physiology, and it’s doing its job with ruthless efficiency. Through blurred vision, I make out the infirmary ceiling, the soft blue lights pulsing in rhythm with my labored breathing.

“He’s waking up again,” Cliff’s voice rumbles nearby. The Sasquatch appears in my field of vision, his massive form bent over me with surprising gentleness.

“Blair,” I try to say, but my throat feels scorched. The memory of her stepping between me and her father’s weapon sends a jolt of panic through me. “Where is she?”

“Next bed,” Marina answers, her blue eyes narrowed with concern as she glides into view. “The toxin affected her differently. It was designed for your physiology, not human systems.”

Struggling against the burning in my limbs, I force myself to turn my head. There she lies, just feet away, her face pale but chest rising with steady breaths. The sight of her sends relief washing through me, momentarily dulling the pain of the toxin.

“How long?” I manage to ask.

“Eight hours since the attack,” Cliff tells me, checking some monitoring device with a worried frown. “The toxin is spreading faster in your system than hers. Your body is the blueprint it was designed to destroy.”

My tail flicks weakly with the effort of moving. “Need to be closer to her.”

Marina and Cliff exchange a concerned glance. “You’re both in critical condition,” Marina explains. “Moving either of you could accelerate the toxin’s spread.”

The rational part of my mind understands their caution, but something deeper—the mate bond—pulses with desperate certainty. “The bond... strengthens healing,” I insist, each word a struggle against the fire in my veins. “Need proximity.”

“Blair’s been documenting that evidence for weeks. I’m surprised I didn’t think of it before,” Marina says.

Before they can move me, alarms suddenly blare throughout the sanctuary. Volt’s voice thunders through the communication system: “Priority message intercepted! Medical protocols incoming!”

Within moments, the Thunderbird bursts into the infirmary, electricity crackling

around his golden feathers with unusual agitation. “William Andrews has sent complete toxin formulations and antidote compounds,” he announces. “Transmission received just minutes ago with explicit delivery instructions.”

“Her father sent the antidote?” I struggle to comprehend this turn of events. The man who has hunted cryptids for decades, who engineered the very poison now burning through our bodies, has offered salvation.

“Not just sent it,” Volt confirms, his electricity dancing with excitement. “Included detailed synthesis protocols specifically calibrated for both Jersey Devil and human physiologies. He must have worked on it immediately after the attack. The instructions are to make the antidote and administer it within ten minutes for maximum efficacy.”

As Cliff rushes to analyze the data and prepare the antidote, Marina and Riven shift my bed next to Blair’s. The instant we’re close enough, I extend my trembling hand to find hers. When our skin connects, the bond flares with sudden strength, a current of energy flowing between us that momentarily dulls the poison’s burn.

“Your vital signs are stabilizing with physical contact,” Marina observes with amazement. “The mate bond is creating some kind of shared resistance.”

Through our connection, I feel Blair’s consciousness stirring. Her fingers tighten almost imperceptibly around mine, and her eyelids flutter with the effort of waking.

“Dante?” Her voice emerges as barely a whisper.

“I’m here.” My tail manages to curl weakly around her wrist, the familiar gesture bringing comfort to us both. “Your father sent the antidote.”

A small furrow appears between her brows as she processes this information.

“Statistically... unexpected,” she mumbles, scientific terminology asserting itself even through the haze of toxin.

Despite everything, a rough laugh escapes me. “Always the scientist.”

Her lips curve into the faintest smile before pain clouds her expression again. “The toxin... spreading patterns indicate accelerated neural pathway degradation. You must be experiencing significantly worse effects.”

Even dying, she’s analyzing data. The thought fills me with a fierce tenderness that temporarily overcomes the burning in my veins.

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“I’ve synthesized the first dose of antidote,” Cliff announces, approaching with two injection devices. “According to Andrews’ notes, we’ll need multiple treatments over the next twelve hours to fully neutralize the toxin.”

The first injection burns like liquid fire, drawing a hiss through my clenched teeth. Beside me, Blair flinches as she receives her dose, her fingers tightening around mine. Through our bond, I feel the antidote beginning its work—fighting the poison molecule by molecule, the battle itself causing fresh waves of pain.

“Rest,” Cliff instructs us both. “The antidote needs time to circulate. We’ll administer the next dose in two hours.”

As the Sasquatch and Water Sprite retreat to monitor our conditions from a respectful distance, Blair’s scientific mind continues working despite her weakness.

“His weapon was specifically calibrated for Jersey Devil physiology,” she murmurs, eyes finding mine with effort. “When I saw it hit you, I lost my mind.”

“Your beautiful scientific mind,” I pause to grab a deep breath. “I don’t want to lose you because you jumped in front of a weapon meant for me.”

Her quiet laugh turns into a pained cough. “The mate bond has impacted our decision-making processes by 41.8 percent.”

“Is that your scientific way of saying love makes us do crazy things?” My tail tightens around her wrist.

“Perhaps.” Her eyes hold mine with unexpected intensity, despite the pain evident in her expression. “Though ‘love’ seems an inadequate term for a neurobiological connection of this magnitude.”

That statement is so perfectly her that warmth spreads through my chest, momentarily dulling the toxin’s burn.

“Rest now,” I murmur, fighting my own exhaustion. “Scientific terminology can wait until we’re both conscious enough to appreciate it properly.”

As the antidote continues its work, we drift in and out of consciousness, always maintaining physical contact. The mate bond is like a living thing between us, creating a shared resistance that the monitoring devices register with increasing optimism. Each time we wake, the pain has receded slightly, the toxin’s hold weakening against the combined force of the antidote and our connection.

Hours later, after the third dose of antidote, Volt returns with news that makes my skin color flicker with surprise.

“William Andrews has withdrawn all hunter forces from sanctuary proximity,” he reports. “No surveillance equipment detected within monitoring range. It appears his daughter’s injury has... altered his tactical priorities.”

“He chose her,” I realize aloud, understanding dawning despite lingering suspicion. “When forced to choose between his obsession and his daughter, he chose her.”

Blair’s expression shifts with complex emotions. “Paternal connection overriding scientific obsession,” she murmurs, analytical framing providing emotional distance. “A fascinating prioritization shift.”

“He loves you,” I translate, my tail finding her wrist with practiced ease. “Enough to

save our lives and let you go, at least for now.”

As night deepens around us, the sanctuary quiets to a peaceful hum. The antidote continues its work, each dose bringing increased relief from the toxin’s grip. Though recovery will take days, the immediate danger has passed.

In this moment of fragile peace, I find myself watching Blair as she sleeps, her face relaxed despite what we’ve endured. She stepped between me and certain death without hesitation, risking everything to protect someone she was raised to hunt. The courage of that choice—the love it represents—humbles me in ways I’m still learning to understand.

Whatever challenges lie ahead—whether renewed threats from Apex or the uncertain future of her relationship with her father—we will face them together. The hunter’s daughter and the Jersey Devil, bound by a connection neither of us expected but both now fight to protect.

Some bonds prove themselves through fire rather than breaking under pressure. Ours has emerged from this trial stronger than before, tempered by sacrifice and sealed with shared survival.

As sleep claims me once more, my wing extends just enough to shelter her sleeping form, an instinct as natural as breathing. Whatever comes next, we will heal together.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Blair

The memorial garden takes shape beneath my hands as I carefully position the final crystal in the central formation. Three weeks have passed since I intercepted the dart meant for Dante—three weeks of healing, planning, and creating this space that

honors memory while celebrating connection.

“The alignment is perfect,” I murmur, stepping back to assess the geometric precision of the arrangement. “When morning light strikes the primary crystal at precisely 7:42 AM, it should create the wing pattern across the eastern wall.”

Dante’s skin shifts to appreciative crimson as he surveys our work. “Scientific precision meets artistic vision. Very us.”

The simple observation makes warmth bloom in my chest. The garden combines both our strengths—his understanding of Jersey Devil habitats and symbolism, paired with my knowledge of crystalline structures and light refraction. Together, we’ve created something neither could have managed alone.

The space nestles against the eastern ridge of the sanctuary mountain, partially sheltered by natural stone formations but open to the rising sun. Native plants from the pine barrens of New Jersey—carefully transplanted and nurtured by Cliff’s gentle hands—cluster around natural pathways. Small pools shimmer with crystal-purified water, Marina’s contribution to the memorial. Throughout the garden, crystalline formations pulse with subtle energy that responds to visitors, particularly those with Jersey Devil signatures.

But the heart of the memorial waits at its center—a beautifully carved stone pedestal where Kieran’s broken horn will finally rest. Not hidden away in shame, but honored in light.

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“Are you ready?” I ask, watching Dante’s skin darken as he approaches the pedestal, the horn cradled carefully in soft leather.

His wings shift restlessly, tail lashing with emotions no spreadsheet could fully categorize. “I’ve carried this for months—as a burden, as punishment, as a reminder of failure.” His voice roughens. “It feels strange to finally let it go.”

“Not letting go,” I correct gently. “Transforming. From hidden guilt to visible honor.”

His gaze meets mine, those beautiful red depths carrying complex emotions our bond transmits with perfect clarity. Without words, I move beside him, my hand finding his as he carefully unwraps the leather bundle.

The horn gleams in the afternoon light—obsidian-dark yet somehow iridescent when caught at certain angles. Similar to Dante’s, but with subtle differences in curve and texture that marked Kieran as uniquely himself.

“He never knew sanctuary,” Dante murmurs, claws carefully tracing the horn’s edge. “Never experienced belonging or community. Yet he sacrificed himself to protect another Jersey Devil he barely knew.”

“Because he recognized connection,” I say softly. “Even without experiencing it fully himself, he understood its value.”

Dante nods, the simple gesture heavy with acceptance of the truth he’s fought for months. With careful reverence, he places the horn upon the pedestal. The moment it makes contact, the surrounding crystals pulse with gentle resonance, responding to

the energy signature it still carries.

“Sleep well, brother,” he whispers, words not meant for my ears yet shared through our bond’s intimacy. “Your search for connection lives through me now.”

As he steps back, wings partially extended in formal salute, sunlight breaks through passing clouds. The effect transforms the garden—crystal formations catching and amplifying the light, casting wing-shaped patterns across stone walls just as we designed. Not by scientific accident, but perfect intention.

“It works,” I breathe, my analytical mind momentarily yielding to simple wonder. “Even without morning’s specific angle.”

“Because this place is alive,” Dante explains, his wing curving around my shoulders. “Responding to intention and energy rather than just physical parameters.”

The observation strikes me with its perfect accuracy. For all my scientific calculations and precise measurements, the true magic of this space comes from something less quantifiable—the emotion poured into its creation, the memories honored within its boundaries, the connection celebrated by its very existence.

The sanctuary’s crystal formations pulse with gentle approval, resonating with the garden’s energy in ways I’m still learning to understand. Throughout the sanctuary, residents have contributed to this space—Marina’s Water Sprites tending the pools, Cliff’s careful landscaping, Volt’s electrical currents powering subtle illumination for evening visitors.

“What do you think he would have made of all this?” I ask, genuinely curious about the young Jersey Devil I never had the chance to meet.

Dante’s skin shifts through thoughtful shades before settling on warm crimson. “I

think he would have been overwhelmed at first—too much connection after a lifetime of isolation.” His tail curls with fond remembrance. “But then fascinated. Especially by you.”

“Me?” The prediction surprises me.

“A human who studies cryptids with respect rather than fear. Who measures and documents with passion rather than clinical detachment.” His wing tightens slightly around my shoulders. “Who loves rather than hunts.”

The simple assessment warms me from within. “I wish I could have known him.”

“You honor him through this,” Dante says, gesturing to the garden around us. “Through continuing what he sought—connection across differences, belonging despite origins.”

As evening approaches, we remain in the garden, watching crystal light shift from golden to silver. My head rests against his shoulder, his tail wound securely around my wrist, the mate bond humming between us with familiar comfort.

“Thank you,” he says finally, voice rough with emotion he no longer tries to hide from me. “For understanding why this mattered. For helping create something beautiful from pain.”

“Always,” I reply simply, the word carrying promise beyond its syllables.

Around us, the memorial garden pulses with gentle light—not mourning what was lost but celebrating what remains, what grows, what connects despite all odds against it. Like us. Jersey Devil and scientist, hunter’s daughter and cryptid, unlikely mates who found each other against impossible odds.

Tomorrow will bring new challenges, new research, and new possibilities for the sanctuary we both now call home. But today, in this garden of memory and promise, we simply exist together. Connected. Whole.

Epilogue

Two years later

Blair

The memorial garden blooms with new growth as spring settles over the mountain sanctuary. Two years have passed since the night my father attacked—two years of healing, rebuilding, and strengthening both our defenses and our community.

I stand at the edge of the eastern ridge, enjoying the way sunlight plays across the valley below. The monitoring bracelet on my wrist—now modified to act as a simple communication device rather than a medical tracker—glows softly as Dante approaches.

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“Data collection complete?” he asks, wings partially extended in the warm breeze. His right wing has finally healed completely, the toxic lines now faded to the faintest silver traces that shimmer only in certain light. Battle scars with beauty of their own.

“Environmental calibrations logged and analyzed,” I confirm, showing him my tablet with its neatly organized spreadsheets. “Spring growth patterns are 27% above projected estimates.”

“Always the scientist,” he observes, tail curling with affection as he settles beside me on the ridge. “Though I suspect Cliff’s new fertilization techniques deserve some credit for the statistical anomaly.”

The gentle teasing warms me from within. So much has changed since that night he rescued me from Apex—since I first documented his deflection techniques and categorized his sarcasm patterns. What began as clinical observation has evolved into something far deeper, a connection neither science nor mythology fully explains.

“The sanctuary is thriving,” I say, watching Water Sprites dance across the pools below. “Despite everything.”

Or perhaps because of everything. The attack brought unexpected outcomes—not just in my father’s retreat, but in how it unified the sanctuary community. Boundaries between species have softened. Trust has strengthened. What was once a refuge has become something more profound: home.

The memorial garden represents this transformation most visibly. What began as Dante’s tribute to Kieran has evolved into a community space where all cryptids

gather. Crystal formations pulse with gentle energy, responding to visitors with subtle light patterns. Plants from various cryptid homelands grow together in harmony, tended by many hands.

Marina's children bring me their scraped knees to heal now. Cliff asks for my input on his greenhouse designs. Volt trusts me with the sanctuary's most sensitive security protocols. I'm not just Dante's mate—I'm their daughter, sister, friend.

"Volt says the southwestern patrol returned with no unusual sightings," Dante reports, his wing brushing my shoulder in a gesture that sends warmth cascading through our bond. "Third consecutive week without hunter activity in any quadrant."

"Consistent with established withdrawal patterns," I agree, analytical mind automatically processing tactical implications. "Though prudent surveillance protocols should remain in place."

His quiet laugh vibrates through me where our shoulders touch. "Did you just use scientific terminology to say 'better safe than sorry'?"

"Perhaps." My own teasing smile breaks through. "Efficient communication parameters, which translates into: 'just checking that you're paying attention.'"

Dante's skin shifts to that beautiful iridescent shade I've documented countless times, yet never tire of seeing. The color that appears only in moments of profound connection between us.

The last message from my father came six months ago—not a threat, but a single photo of my mother's research journal with a note: "She would be proud." It's not forgiveness, not yet, but it's acknowledgment. Perhaps even the beginning of understanding.

“Come on,” he says, rising with fluid grace. “Everyone’s gathering for the solstice celebration.”

We make our way down crystal-lined passages to the great hall, where sanctuary residents prepare for the evening’s festivities. Brownies arrange platters of freshly baked bread while Water Sprites create dancing light patterns across stone walls. Sasquatches hang flowering vines from ancient beams as Shadow Cats test security parameters one final time—protection and celebration in perfect balance.

Volt’s massive form dominates the center of the hall, golden feathers crackling with excitement as he coordinates the final preparations. “The crystal amplification array is calibrated,” he announces upon seeing us. “Should produce quite the spectacle at sunset.”

The solstice celebration marks a new beginning—the first major sanctuary gathering focused on joy rather than remembrance or survival since the attack. A deliberate decision to honor what we’ve built together rather than dwell on threats that chased us here.

“You’re not wearing your monitoring equipment,” Marina observes as she glides past, scales shimmering with subtle humor. “Abandoning scientific documentation for one evening?”

“Modified observation protocols,” I reply, though my cheeks warm slightly at being caught without my usual research apparatus. “Sometimes direct experience provides more comprehensive data than instrumental analysis.”

“She’s learning to live in the moment,” Dante translates, his tail finding my wrist with practiced ease. “Though I suspect she’ll create three new spreadsheets tomorrow to compensate.”

The teasing carries no sting—only affection that wraps around me as surely as his wing. He knows me completely, accepts both scientific precision and emerging spontaneity with equal appreciation.

I still keep spreadsheets—not of his deflection patterns anymore, but of the sanctuary’s growth, the small daily miracles of our life together, the research projects we’ve begun developing. Some data is worth preserving, even if the most important truths can’t be quantified.

As sunset approaches, cryptids gather on the eastern terrace where Volt’s crystal array awaits the solstice light. I find myself studying not just the technology but the faces around me. Beings I once would have catalogued as specimens are now friends and family in every way that matters.

Dante stands beside me, his wing creating shelter that feels like safety rather than confinement. The antivenom developed from my father’s formula has worked better than either of us dared hope, healing damage we once feared might be permanent. The mate bond pulses between us, stronger for having weathered threats that might have broken a lesser connection.

“Any scientific predictions about tonight’s display?” he asks quietly, crimson skin warming as our hands connect.

“Probable light refraction patterns suggest optimal visual manifestation,” I begin, then catch myself. With deliberate choice, I simplify: “It’s going to be beautiful.”

His smile—the one I’ve documented in countless observations yet still find breathtaking—curves his lips as his fangs peek out. “Like you.”

Before I can formulate an appropriate response, the first rays of the solstice sunset strike Volt’s crystal array. Light explodes across the terrace in spectacular

patterns—colors no human technology could replicate dance across stone walls and gathered cryptids with ethereal beauty.

As sanctuary residents gasp with collective wonder, I find myself cataloguing not wavelengths or refraction angles but emotions—the shared joy, the collective resilience, the simple miracle of different species gathered in harmony despite everything that sought to divide us.

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Dante's wing curves more securely around my shoulders, his tail wound gently around my wrist. Through our bond, I feel his contentment mirroring my own—scientist and Jersey Devil finding unexpected paradise not in isolation but community.

Sometimes I catch Dante watching me with such naked adoration it steals my breath. This male who once hid behind sarcasm now tells me he loves me a dozen times a day—as if the words might disappear if he doesn't use them. And I, who once trusted only data, now leap into each morning knowing that love is the only certainty I need.

We've talked about expanding the sanctuary, creating research partnerships with sympathetic human scientists. Building the bridge my mother dreamed of. Making a world where cryptids and humans can coexist openly, where beings like us will never have to hide what they are.

Our story is already becoming a sanctuary legend—the hunter's daughter and the Jersey Devil who proved that love transcends every boundary. Young cryptids ask me to tell it at bedtime, their eyes wide with the possibility that they, too, might find their perfect match across impossible odds.

“Happy?” he asks, the single word carrying depth beyond its simple syllables.

For once, I don't analyze or quantify or create methodological framework for my response. Some data requires no spreadsheet, no careful documentation, no scientific precision.

“Yes,” I reply simply. “Completely.”

As the sunset fades into twilight and crystals continue their mesmerizing dance, I rest my head against Dante's shoulder. Whatever challenges tomorrow brings, whether echoes from my father's world or new obstacles we cannot yet imagine, we will face them together. The hunter's daughter and the Jersey Devil, bound by a connection stronger than either of us ever thought possible.

As crystal light shifts to indicate approaching dawn, we remain wrapped in each other's embrace, our future stretching before us bright with possibility. Tomorrow will bring new joys—perhaps expanded research, perhaps new sanctuary residents, perhaps the family we've begun dreaming of creating together. My father's world of fear feels like a distant memory now, replaced by this abundance of love and belonging I never knew was possible.

No spreadsheets could capture this moment. No scientific terminology could adequately describe the feeling of his hand in mine, his heartbeat steady against my ear, our family surrounding us with love that defies every probability calculation.

Some things don't need to be analyzed—just lived, felt, cherished.

And finally, beautifully, completely—I'm home.

Some bonds defy probability calculations. Some loves transform rather than merely endure. And some families are created rather than born—chosen connections that prove stronger than blood or species or origin.

Just like ours.