



Ellie 3

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Ellie's life seems about to fall apart every time she turns around and finds another problem waiting to pounce on her. From the board trying to take over her hospital to her father showing up to sell her off again—the list is endless.

And there is only so much one person can take. There are only so many battles she can fight on her own and keep swimming.

Ha-joon is fighting his own family struggles and issues when the woman he loves is drowning. All he wants is to give her what she needs and be with her. He just doesn't know how when there are still secrets she keeps and she won't open her heart to him fully.

But if there was ever a person who could make the centuries-old vampire finally learn to trust enough to love, it's the Alpha wolf who adores her like she deserves, right? That can be enough to be the happy for their ending?

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Ellie

“This was definitely not on my BINGO card for this year,” I said as I locked gazes with the person I was meeting.

Aurora Reed gave an elegant snort. “And your disgusting father showing up after decades to try to sell you yet again was?”

“This year? No, but I always knew Kenneth would poke his head out again and try for me,” I answered as I sat down in the private dining room I’d arranged for this meeting. “He will never change, and the gods themselves cannot get through to him that I am not his property to do with as he wants.”

She gave another snort but let me get out the rest of what I was clearly carrying.

“But I haven’t seen you in centuries and—”

“Not by my choice,” she said so quietly that I barely heard her.

I opened my mouth to press what that meant or demand answers, but I realized she wasn’t in good shape. Her aura was flashing signs of pain from nutrition deficiencies.

It almost made me feel bad for what I was about to do.

Almost.

I thanked the manager who came in with the cart, giving her a nod it really was okay. “Well, as I said, I wasn’t ready for your visit, especially you showing up to camp out at my condo building. The hospital orders catering from this restaurant all the time and they were able to swing this for me before they open for lunch. I promise it’s all delicious.”

She nodded and smiled at the manager. “It all looks lovely. I appreciate you taking such good care of my daugh—” She swallowed loudly when I cleared my throat. “Stepdaughter. Thank you.”

“Enjoy,” the manager muttered... And got the hell out of there.

I didn’t blame her and wanted to do the same. Really, I did.

As much as I wanted to jump to the questions I wanted answered and could maybe get the answers to finally since she clearly needed help, I didn’t think I could focus until I understood the current situation. “Why are you so hungry and thirsty? Down on blood? What did you mean that you wanted to see me but couldn’t?”

She finished delicately hurrying to eat the quarter sandwich she’d taken before having a sip of the iced tea. Her eyes flashed shock. “That’s lovely. Blackberry? So refreshing.” She remembered herself and met my gaze, her eyes full of sadness. “Would you believe a word I told you?”

I snorted. At least she was that honest with herself as opposed to before.

Aurora let out a slow breath. “I won’t ever ask for your forgiveness, Ellie. I don’t deserve it.” She nodded when my eyes went wide. “Please, understand now that it’s centuries later—I was a child. I’m fifteen years older than you. I was thirteen when I was shipped off to be Kenneth’s bride. I menstruated and that was it. Shipped off.”

I held up my hand to her. “You’re right that we do need to have this conversation, and I’m not sure I ever knew you were that young. I don’t know that I can forgive you, but... I do want the details and to understand.” I gave her a minute with that. “But I cannot right now. I have too much on my plate and your pain is distracting. So let’s handle that.”

She sighed. “It’s sort of all tied in, but fine, the raw facts are when you fled I used the last of my squirreled away money to send Theresa away as well. I knew what I was doing and he spent—he took all his anger out on me. I accepted that as the distraction to get you both out of range of his insanity.” She snickered and wiped her eyes. “Inbreeding. Monster.”

I couldn’t have agreed more.

“I sent a messenger to my family, a witness that he had wanted to inbreed and I’d had to send you away for your safety. They did nothing.” She snickered again. “Nothing until he lost the coven and that was enough embarrassment. They sent guards and reclaimed me saying he broke the mating contracts.

“That their daughter was to be the mate of a coven leader, not just any pauper. They took what they could...” She let out a slow breath and quickly wiped under her eyes. “I’ve been there ever since. Kenneth wouldn’t sign the papers to dissolve the marriage. I couldn’t be resold. My parents wanted to use me as bait for Theresa so they could have her in their portfolio.

“They knew they had no claim on you, but my mother still wanted me to make contact and—I wanted to contact you, Ellie. If you believe nothing else, please believe that I desperately wanted to check in on you and make sure you were okay. I had no idea how. I couldn’t risk being the reason people found you or you were scooped up.”

I did actually believe that. Mostly because of her aura. Aurora Reed was an accomplished actress, but the defeat and wear on her... I didn't think she had it in her at the moment.

“What happened now that you're here?”

She blinked back tears as she met my gaze. “I'm no longer sellable or have any value. The sins I committed that they always knew about were outed and it was deemed that I'm an asset not worth saving. They tossed me out with the kindness of letting me portal to anywhere and one bag of possessions the butler inspected.”

“After keeping you captive for hundreds of years until they could resell you and get their claws into Theresa?” I checked, disgusted when she nodded. “So you came to me for help to get them arrested?” I frowned when shock lit up her face. “You don't want to go after them?”

“It never crossed my mind. I'm theirs—I've always been theirs to do with—”

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“You’re not, Aurora,” I hissed. “You’re not property. They’ve been breaking the law for over fifty years. You’ve had a choice in everything for fifty fucking years now.”

Tears overflowed her eyes in a way I’d never seen. “The only choices I’ve ever made were so wrong and cursed that I don’t deserve to make anymore. And yet I still don’t regret them because you were born. I know I’ll end up in hell for my sins, but you were worth it, and this world needs you, Ellie.”

Well, shit. What did someone say to that?

I wasn’t sure, but I still didn’t understand what was going on, my mind spinning. “Why are you here then, Aurora? Why did you take your one portal to come see me? Why are you so down on nutrients?”

She waved off the last question. “I’ve been this way for hundreds of years. Ever since I tried to escape to find you and Theresa to make sure you were safe. I didn’t bring anything into the family to deserve real meals or blood. Besides, I’d already been married, and that was a huge strike against me, so I needed to keep my beauty and figure to be resold.”

Jesus Fucking Christ. How had I never—the mind really forgot things. Or maybe it was because so many women talked like this hundreds of years ago that I didn’t notice.

But to hear her speak of herself like this now killed me.

It really did.

“Why me and not Theresa?” I pushed.

“Because you got your wish and she hates me for ruining her life,” she said but then frowned, seeming confused. “That’s true but not why you first. I don’t know where she is and I do you.”

“And you need my help whereas—”

“I didn’t come for help,” she corrected. She nodded when I studied her but then sighed. “Ellie, you’re too kind for your own good. You’re going to offer it. We both know that. I didn’t come here for your help. I came to... You were right. I was selfish and horrible. I...” She frowned again and was quiet as she seemed to collect her thoughts. “I thought it wasn’t so bad.”

“Now?”

“Now I know I’m a monster, but I’m conflicted because the world needs you,” she whispered. She shook her head when I argued that was an excuse. “You cured cancer in vampire children. You did that. You—how many children have been saved from that death sentence? It was an automatic death sentence! You did that.”

I swallowed loudly, knowing the signs of trauma well. “You knew someone.”

Aurora let out a slow breath. “My younger sister. She was five. I was eleven. It wasn’t called cancer back then but the childhood blood sickness. People thought it might be contagious.” She wiped her eyes. “They locked her in a tower to die. Months later, servants carried out her rotten corpse and she didn’t even get a real burial. Why bother for a girl who caused problems?”

“Most do not know I was the one who did it—made that advancement in medicine,” I muttered. “I would appreciate you not boasting about it now that you’re free.”

Because most knew it was the founder of ASH who had developed the treatment for curing childhood vampiric leukemia.

“Of course.” She studied me several moments. “I shouldn’t have done what I did. I understand it was wrong on many levels now instead of being so young and misguided thinking protecting a maid was better than the horrors that happened to them at my family’s castle. That should never have happened. That was the real answer. None of it should ever have happened.”

“But if you say you regret it, you say you regret me being born,” I surmised, comprehending the speedbump we were going to keep hitting.

“Yes, and I won’t ever do that. I do and have always loved you too much for that,” she whispered. “I know I failed you in so many ways and you are valid to doubt everything, but I love you like my own, Ellie. I always have.”

Part of me believed that and I hated myself for it, deciding to get my other answers.

“Is my mother alive?”

“I have no idea. I doubt it,” she said too fast, looking horrified.

“What was she? What am I?” I pushed.

“She said her mother was one of the last—” Aurora slapped her hand over her mouth... And slowly looked at the iced tea. She covered her face and cried when she fully understood what I’d done.

And I felt like the monster. I swallowed loudly and felt horrible.

“I will tell you,” she choked out. “I just wanted to tell you better than blurting it. Please, please don’t take my choices from me when I’ve never had any free will.”

Shit. Now I really was a rat bastard.

I waited until she calmed down, studying my own untouched drink. “You wouldn’t ever tell me, and I couldn’t trust that you didn’t have an agenda. Showing up here right after Kenneth and now he’s in prison for so long...”

“Don’t you ever apologize to me for anything,” she whispered when I opened my mouth again. “I don’t deserve it. I just can’t—I’m also confused because I thought you would have found out the first time he found you. I know you couldn’t use the aura gift when you lived with us, but you had to have figured that out.”

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I winced. “It’s not like how witches and warlocks have it. I can’t see anything from those related to me by blood. It’s like a built-in privacy shield. I’ve also never had any real training. For all I know, I’m assigning all the wrong colors to emotions or—I couldn’t ever tell people to get help.”

She let out a long, shaky breath. “I believe your birth mother is dead. I don’t know. I didn’t do it, and I never saw her body.” She gave me a moment with that. “After Kenneth admitted to us he knew, I received word that she took off. I didn’t believe it, but one of the maids said it was like she packed a bag and took off in the night.

“Maybe she did. Maybe he threatened her or told her that he would bring her to the castle to take care of you. I tried to press him, and he told me over and over again that he had no idea and that was what I got for trusting a stupid maid.” She swallowed loudly and wiped her eyes again. “But I never believed him. She loved you and Theresa so much.

“Nothing could have made her leave you both and never come back—never contact either of you. It’s been centuries and she never found you? It’s not possible. It’s just not. If you need confirmation, I would suggest having him forced to confess now that he’s in custody, but that could bring up what you are.”

“Does he know?” I asked, wincing when she had to answer.

“No. He knows you’re special, but I never told,” she said too fast. “I think he killed her. After you ran and there was no trace of you, I found him drunk and he was complaining that if he was destined to have a bastard as his heir, he shouldn’t have taken out the chance to have another extraordinary one.”

I swallowed loudly and took a moment with that before being honest. “I was too afraid to ask because I was scared you killed her.”

“I never could have. Never. She was a darling woman.” She sighed when I snorted. “Yes, I committed enough other sins against her. I understand that now. I... I have no excuse or justification. I am a monster for what I did. I didn’t see that then. I always knew murder was wrong. That is the point I’m trying to make.”

Fair enough.

She waited until I seemed to accept that. “Your mother was noble born.” She nodded when I simply blinked at her with wide eyes. “Her father was to inherit their coven even. She never told me which one, but I had guesses from the way she talked. Her mother was said to be the last sprite. From her own accounts, her father truly loved her.

“But her mother died during early childbirth, the body of a fae not built to give birth to a vampire. She did not get your grandmother’s golden eyes or any of her abilities. That is why she was expelled from her family’s house. Her father said she killed someone extraordinary, the last sprite and the woman he loved, and she was completely ordinary.”

“Poor woman,” I whispered, shaking my head. “I still want to hate her for raising Theresa and just accepting all of this like it was the best thing for me to be—”

“I’m sorry that’s the perception I ever gave you, but your mother hated me,” Aurora rasped. “She was not complicit in any of this. She—she was simply a good woman who would not take my sins out on Theresa. She never treated Theresa like her daughter or that we just switched. Your mother cried for you every night.

“She did not accept any of what was done. I could have accepted if she ran to get you,

but that was the only way, Ellie. She would never have left you. She stayed because it was the only way she received word about you. If she did as she should, I gave her updates three times a week and snuck her in to see you when you were younger.

“I let her see you from afar when you were older. I let her work parties as a maid then. If she was good.” She quickly wiped her eyes again. “Your mother did all of it to stay in your orbit, not because—she was never as brainwashed or twisted up as I was. She was the righteous one I thought myself to be. She should never be the villain of your story. I am.”

And my mother was always the victim.

I bobbed my head. “I will call in a favor to get the answer then and—” I gasped as the door burst open and was on my feet in a flash... Jumping in front of Aurora.

Oh, that was something to discuss with my friend Renee who was helping me out as my therapist later. Most definitely.

Ha-joon was standing there looking scared and a bit wild. His gaze locked on me and instantly I was away from Aurora and behind him.

“What do you people want from Ellie now?” he snarled, his power pulsing the room.

“Tone it back,” I told him. I smacked his arm when he didn’t listen. “Ha-joon, I’m going to get pissed.”

Instantly, he reeled it back in and stepped aside so he could see us both, looking like a pup who had just been spanked.

“She needs help,” I muttered while Aurora got herself under control.

He gave me the look I probably deserved. “Yeah?So?”

I sighed. That was... Fair.

Really fair actually.

2

Ha-joon

I was on cloud 9 after Ellie let me kiss her in the lobby and everyone knew we were together. I didn't care if it was her jealousy or wanting to mark her territory that made her want to do it. Hell, I appreciated marking territory as a damn wolf.

I just didn't want her to regret it or change her mind.

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She didn't seem to, but was clearly embarrassed by all of the whispers and attention. So, I did the right thing as her lover and got her out of there. She gave me a kiss in thanks and mumbled about hoping the flies around me got better so she didn't get arrested for mauling one of them.

No, but I wanted to thank the annoying twats that they were useful in getting Ellie to open up to me. I was pleased with myself for being patient with them and not snapping at them to get fucking lives now that it all turned out well.

Or so I thought.

I decided to swing by Ellie's office to see if she wanted to go out to lunch now that we could since I hadn't heard from her all morning. I frowned when I was informed she was out and it might be for the rest of the day.

What now?

A million things rushed through my mind. Had she changed her mind? Had the whispers and drama gotten to her? Had people harassed her?

Instead, I asked the obvious question. "Is she okay?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," her head admin muttered as she wrote something down. "I was simply informed that Mrs. Reed was at your condo building and refused to leave until she had a meeting with Ms. Reed. She asked me to set something up away from all of the gossip." She slid the paper across the desk to me. "Please make sure I don't get fired."

“You won’t,” I told her, hoping I wasn’t lying.

She nodded and took her hand off the paper and lowered her voice. “Ellie’s amazing. I’d never gossip, but I can see in your aura how much you truly care for her. I’m worried. I don’t know if she can take one more hit right now.” She swallowed loudly. “I don’t know how she’s handling it all.”

I didn’t either. I took the paper with a thank-you and was gone. I raced out of there and was glad that the place was close.

I acted like a git barging into the private dining room after seeing the sign pointing where it was and not even asking the staff. There could have been a few of them or—I was just worried.

Luckily, it was the right place, but Ellie wasn’t happy that I was trying to protect her. Even worse?

She was going to help the monster who had fucked Ellie and her actual mother over. I couldn’t even hide how fucked in the head that sounded, but I truly did my best never to judge and be neutral.

“I know, I know,” Ellie sighed. “It’s beyond complicated and—”

“I’m not asking for help, Ellie,” the woman whispered. “I may ask you move the very intimidating Alpha further from me since I have no experience being around shifters and his power is terrifying. He listened to you fast and—I would never doubt you but—”

“I would never hurt her,” I snapped but still took several steps away from the woman. If she wasn’t used to shifters, what I unleashed on her would have fucked with her system even from what I’d heard vampires say.

Ellie moved her hand to my arm but kept the woman's gaze. "I was in an emotionally abusive relationship when I met Ha-joon. He was the one who helped me see that and I deserved better. Yes, he's big and powerful and scary but never with me. Never like Kenneth." She snorted. "He's a pup with me."

"I'm not a kid with you," I grumbled. "I think I prefer the golden retriever thing more than feeling like a kid when I like you naked in my bed."

"Fair. Very fair," Ellie quickly agreed. "I just tease you that you're a pup." She moved her hand down my arm to take my hand. She took in a slow breath and then let it out. "I won't get pissed at whoever snuck you the information where I was so you could storm in here instead of just calling, and you'll chill out and let me explain tonight, okay?"

I leaned in and kissed her hair. "I will always back you and hear you out. You don't need to make deals with me on that, my sweet kimchi. I just—you took—last week was..."

"Yeah," she agreed before looking up at me. "She's here now because her family finally released her. They've kept her captive in the hopes of reselling her after Kenneth lost the coven."

I cursed in several combinations. Mostly because that was illegal for a list of reasons, and—Ellie could never ignore any of that.

I kissed her hair again and moved behind her, supporting her to do her thing. She squeezed my hand, and I took it in thanks that I was being a good partner. Maybe that she saw me as one?

Hell, I'd take a gold star I was so into Ellie.

“I won’t force you to do anything, and I’m sorry for slipping truth potion into your drink,” Ellie said to her stepmother. She nodded when I went tense. “I shouldn’t have done that and—”

“Stop apologizing to me,” the woman said as she slowly stood, shooting me a quick glance before focusing back on Ellie. “I will do whatever you want. I didn’t come here for help but as I said, I knew you’d offer it. More than that, you clearly want something from me. More answers and yes, we need to talk more. Tell me what you want.”

Ellie was quiet, and I realized her mind wasn’t keeping up with all of this as fast as I’d thought or she had acted.

I kissed her hair. “How about the guest room at my condo? I stay with you mostly anyways and that way we know she’s safe in the building.”

“Do you mind?” Ellie asked softly. “I wanted to be—”

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Stronger. That was what she was about to say, but I turned her and hugged her to me, kissing her hair yet again and then her cheek. “You’ve got enough people to save and fires to put out, Superwoman. Mum set up my guestroom, so it’s great. I’ll handle it and get back to work. Are you okay to drive back to the hospital?”

“Yes, of course.” She gave me a soft kiss. “Thank you, Ha-joon.” She stepped away and opened her mouth but then closed it, seeming at a loss again.

I went over to the woman and extended my hand. “I’m Dr. Ha-joon Clark, youngest son of Alpha Clark of the London wolves, one of ASH’s Shifter Health and Wellness attendings.”

She studied me a moment. “And my stepdaughter’s lover. Long-time?”

“That’s for her to answer however she wants or if she wants to at all when you’ve been estranged,” I said after a few moments, giving Ellie time to answer first.

“As you wish, Dr. Clark.” She extended her hand to me. “Aurora Reed, formerly Aurora Graves, though it was made abundantly clear to me that I’m not allowed to take that name again even if I’m able to detangle myself from Kenneth. I’m sorry for putting you out, and I thank you for making this easier on Ellie if she’s going to insist on helping me.”

I was honestly impressed that the woman was clearly terrified of me but was going with the flow to not upset Ellie.

What the fuck had really happened and was going on?

Seriously? This wasn't the evil stepmother I'd built in my head.

I made sure Ellie settled everything with the restaurant, was stable in her SUV, and on her way before getting Aurora situated. I glanced at her when she let out a chuckle.

“Sorry.”

“I just didn't understand what's amusing,” I muttered, focusing back on the road.

“I've just barely been anywhere in my hundreds of years. Either my family's castle or my mate's. The trip between them was the longest time I spent in the world and it was with armed guards and no freedom. In carriages on weeks-long journeys. Now I've been tossed out and on a separate continent and it's funny that I started at her condo—”

“And you're going right back,” I muttered. “I get it.”

“My mind is a terrifying place, and I'm in as much of reeling shock at Kenneth's arrest and someone finally holding him accountable as Ellie must be.” She snorted. “Maybe more so.” She studied me. “Would Ellie be happy if I helped the investigations? I don't know of how much help I could be, and most is probably not current, but I do know how my husband thinks.”

“You'll have to ask her,” I said firmly, not about to stick my nose in such matters.

“Yes, of course. I was asking for your opinion, Dr. Clark, not your permission for Ellie,” she whispered and looked back out the window. “I was asking if you thought it would hurt her to stir things up more than help her. I can leave it all be or try to—I didn't come here to hurt Ellie. There were things she needed to know. Truths she needed if she could ever leave the past...”

“Yeah, not sure it’s something she can ever fully leave behind her,” I said, trying my best to keep the sarcasm out of my tone but clearly some of it leaked in.

“Heal from it as best as possible then,” Aurora corrected. “Even if some of the answers won’t give her much help. At least they are answers instead of... I never thought it would be this long until I saw her again. I never—this wasn’t the plan. I thought I would get them free and follow after a decade.”

She sniffled and wiped under her eyes, mumbling that it was for the best given how Ellie had thrived... And that she deserved no less for her sins.

Yeah, okay, so definitely not the evil stepmom I’d been picturing.

She was like a curious kid as we went through the drive-thru but also overwhelmed at the idea of ordering for herself. I picked several things, a few that worked for now warm and other options she could have cold from the fridge later.

Aurora promised to stay in the condo and seemed amused when I checked she knew how to work the TV and whatnot. Yeah, okay, that might be overkill to have asked but... The drive-thru was normal too.

Not if you were locked up in a castle. Got it. Castle prisoners still got TVs.

How the fuck would I know that?

“Every time I blink things get weirder,” I grumbled as I got back in my vehicle and headed for the hospital.

Luckily, I arrived right before my next patient appointment and had managed to eat the burgers from the drive-thru. They weren’t really enough, so I inhaled at least a dozen dumplings later before reloading the steamer for my staff.

Gerald intercepted me on the way to Ellie's office after I was done with work. "Can you talk some sense into her that I need to speak with her stepmother? I wasn't asking for the code to your condo, just what unit number and—"

"Whoa, take it down to like a five," I said firmly, giving him a look that I wasn't kidding. I made the motion for deep breaths in and out as I took them.

He rolled his eyes but did it, nodding that he heard me. "I've got a lot on my plate, and people here aren't taking Ellie's new declarations and press presence well. Now it's out that you guys are a couple—I've got like forty balls in the air and she won't let me protect her."

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“It all just went down, Gerald. Give her a moment to breathe, mate,” I replied with a sigh. “And Aurora Reed is—she’s not used to shifters. Like at all from what I can tell. I terrify her.”

He sighed. Heavily. “And you’re not terrifying at all. I’m loud and overbearing. Okay, I get it.”

“I actually went in hot and with my power out to scare her and protect Ellie,” I confessed, nodding when Gerald seemed shocked. “I thought evil stepmother, and—this isn’t the time for Ellie to take another fucking hit. I was a git.” I gave him a moment with that. “But Aurora Reed is a victim of everything even if Ellie is her victim.”

“I got that much from Ellie and something has changed,” Gerald muttered. “She said her stepmother isn’t who she remembered.”

I scrubbed my hand over my head. “I get the feeling she was being abused in other ways for hundreds of years being locked up by her family. She’s malnourished big-time. Like not just down on the tank but damage done to her body. I smelled it better when we were in my vehicle alone. I was going to tell Ellie that I think she needs medical care.”

“Okay, well, Alexis is the better call then, but—Kenneth isn’t going to take it all lying down.” He growled when I tried to brush him off. “Listen to me. I’m good at my job, Clark. I did my fucking homework. That man is petty and vindictive. I don’t care what he signed, he will do everything he can to take Ellie down. I want ammo and information to shield her.”

“I agree,” I cut in when he seemed ready to ramp back up. “I just don’t know that there’s anything for him to use. He hasn’t even seen her in fifty years. It’s been centuries since she lived under his roof.”

“You’re not wrong,” he agreed, giving me an inch. “I might be complete overkill here.” He leaned in a bit. “But I might not be. So really, it’s a question of do we want to take that risk that he has some sort of ace in his pocket as her father that could destroy her? I don’t want to take that risk.”

“Nor do I,” I agreed. “Nor does Ellie. You’re just moving too fast. Normally, she does too, but whatever Aurora said when they met—Ellie was fine when I went in, but then it was like it sank in and she was shocky.”

“Yeah, okay.” He let out a slow breath. He did a double take at whatever was on my face. “I’m not trying to use this or get between you two.”

“You’re not? You’re pushing pretty hard,” I hedged, not sure what I was getting from him.

A small growl slipped out. “You are not the only youngest who is despised in their family for being strong. I’m considered the family fuckup and I’m a successful attorney. But I’ve never handled something as big as the whole legal situation of ASH, and they are getting into trouble left and right. The person who runs it—I don’t handle this type of law and I—”

“Fish out of water,” I offered for him.

“For lack of a better way to say it,” he drawled. “But I also wasn’t locked up in Ellie’s office with her to flirt no matter where your pup head went off. We were buried, Clark. Redoing all of those contracts and people pulling shit and getting the board detangled and, and, and. I’m exhausted. Like I went to shift last weekend and

my lion slept.”

“You need to talk to Dr. James and get a physical,” I said firmly, a thrill of fear racing through me.

“I’m fine and—”

“Hey, don’t be stupid when you’re here to shield people,” I snapped. “That’s a serious symptom of too much and could be something way more serious than exhaustion. Do it or I tell Ellie and worry her because I will not sit on that.”

Rage filled his eyes. “Great, I try to reassure you that I’m not after your lover and you’re using it against me.”

“I’m worried for you, git,” I growled and shoved at his chest. I frowned when he stumbled too easily and I hadn’t pushed hard. I didn’t hide my concern as I met his gaze. “Gerald, you need to get checked out. Now.”

He lost his anger and realized what I’d just done, glancing down as well. “Shit, I shouldn’t have been off-balance like that.”

“Come on. I’ll get you worked up in an exam room in the emergency department somewhere quiet,” I told him, already texting Ellie that I could meet her in the parking garage in a bit or at home. “I’ll give the list of tests, and—I’ll handle it with the staff so we can rule out the big stuff. That makes treatment easier to start this weekend, but you need a real physical.”

“I’ve never had one before you ask and then yell at me,” he grumbled as he followed.

Well, at least he followed.

I met up with the on shift attending and told him what I knew and wanted to start. I opened my mouth to apologize for overstepping, but the guy gave me a tight smile and a whole lot of hostility.

“Didn’t take you long to get too comfortable being Ms. Reed’s lover and using her authority, huh, Clark?” he asked with a sneer.

“Shifter health is my specialty, and Dr. James will need the additional tests to rule out several things specific to lions or powerful shifters,” I answered evenly. “I am sorry for overstepping, but Gerald is involved with several pressing matters Ms. Reed needs him for that I do know about. That’s why I dragged him down here immediately.”

“He’s saying she’s going to hear that I’m here because she knows all and he wants to make sure to be able to give her good answers before she can worry when too stressed,” Gerald surmised, nodding when I did but then frowning. “Can you not do any of what you just did normally? I thought any attending could bring down someone to the emergency—”

“It’s not directly to the attending on a Friday night, and it’s clear I’m walking out the door instead of staying,” I cut in, not wanting Gerald to get in trouble for trying to defend me.

“I was still an ass,” the attending sighed. “Sorry. Rough day and—I let the rumors get to me. I apologize, Clark. You did a lot for us and trauma during the disasters. I shouldn’t have listened to the bullshit. I know better than to do that, and you didn’t get your job here by sleeping with Ms. Reed.”

I blinked at him for a full minute before bursting out laughing. “She was completely against hiring me originally. The board pulled a fast one on her—do people have such short memories? It wasn’t years ago but months ago.”

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The attending looked properly chastised. “I honestly never heard what happened. I didn’t really care. It’s been a fucked day.” He handed over a clipboard to me. “Give me your cell and I’ll text you updates and results. I’ll give him the full workup plus what you wanted. Let me know if you think of anything else and we can loop in Dr. James.”

“I appreciate it, mate. Really. This isn’t being—”

“Lions are one of the shifter species that can damage their bond and they lose their ability to shift,” Gerald spelled out. “Their animal falling asleep after changing forms is one of the first signs. Clark is being careful. I’ve done it before because of exhaustion, but he’s right and I shouldn’t be flippant.”

“Okay, good to know the most concerning possible issue,” the attending said as he took the clipboard back from me and jotted a few things down. “All over it. You go help Ms. Reed with what she needs.” He rolled his eyes when Gerald snorted. “Not what I meant.”

“He wasn’t being dirty either,” I admitted. “I think he meant more it’s hard to know what she needs right now.”

“Yeah, that,” Gerald confirmed. “I’m more professional than cracking locker room jokes with someone I’ve never spoken with before.”

“Glad to hear it,” the attending muttered, still writing more. “We’ve got things here. I’ll update you.”

I took the nudge and left, checking my phone to find that Ellie replied saying she'd meet me at my vehicle. She felt too shaky to drive home at the moment and I was proud of her to admit that.

"I think I need to do something about Gerald," she muttered when I reached her. "He was so—"

"I just forced Gerald to the emergency department for tests," I interjected, nodding when she did a double take. "I'm not defending him, but we talk—let me fill you in on the way home. What do you want to eat for dinner?"

"Sushi," she sighed, thanking me when I opened the door for her. She sighed again as we drove off and I filled her in. "Okay, that explains a lot, but—he wasn't hearing me to back off and let me breathe. It was very disconcerting and..."

"I know." I reached over and took her hand, my heart hurting when she sniffled. I wanted to gut the lion for upsetting her. "We'll kick his ass and ground him after he's better, okay? Full over my knee spanking."

She snickered, which had been the goal, so I was glad it worked. Then she chuckled and it built into a laugh. "You are such a shit. Seriously. Sometimes—I can't get over you." Ellie let out a long, exasperated sigh with absolutely no malice in it as she gave me a loving look. "I really do need you in my life, my sweet kimchi. It's so much better with you in it."

I blinked at the road and almost missed the light change, braking harder than I should have given the time I'd had. I muttered an apology before turning and kissing her deeply. "Yeah, you do need me just like I need you. Don't ever forget this moment. Don't let me go, Ellie. I wouldn't survive losing you."

I cupped her face and didn't hide that I was worried.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she promised, knowing this wasn’t normal relationship fears and that I saw she was drowning.

Good thing I was an excellent swimmer then.

3

Ellie

As much as I wanted to take a few days and do nothing but lie in bed with Ha-joon and let him comfort me, I had a big interview with the most popular Saturday morning show to announce another change at ASH. I was rolling out the idea that Ha-joon and I both came up with—the one I’d fought the board on several times—about having scheduled portals opened in certain areas.

It wasn’t all finalized, but over June we were doing locations in conjunction with hospitals that I’d spoken with that were overloaded or had patients they couldn’t handle. Ones they wanted to refer to ASH, but they couldn’t afford the travel or manage how to get there. The only flaw I’d missed in the plan was translators.

And it was something in Ha-joon’s presentation... Which really was a glaring sign once again that we were better together. We always seemed to make the other better from work to life—all of it.

There was one thing I needed to attend to first.

“Where are you going?” he asked as I got out of bed. “Your interview isn’t for a few hours.”

“There’s something important to handle first,” I said firmly.

Then something hit me. I actually changed the plan and went down to his condo to wake Aurora. I brought clothes for her to change into even if our sizes were different. She could make the dress work with a belt—it wouldn't be too bad.

“I'm going to help you learn the world safely, but you also need to do some penance for your sins,” I told her. “I want you to see the power of women who fight together for each other instead of against each other like you did. I want you to see the reality versus what you attempted.”

“As you wish,” she accepted, swallowing loudly.

We were ready thirty minutes later, Ha-joon driving us since my vehicle was at the hospital. He promised he'd take Aurora back home. I asked if he could take her shopping for basics and gave him my black card.

“I must really care about you deeply if I'm willing to brave the mall in Atlanta on a Saturday morning and I don't even get to see you in lingerie,” he grumbled as he took it.

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“I must really care about you deeply that I find what you said so amusing and immediately want to do some lingerie shopping with you,” I threw right back.

“My day is looking up,” he chuckled but then winced, glancing in the rearview mirror. “I have no idea what you went through, Aurora, but do you—I’m clueless about clothes and fashion. My mum sorts me out.”

“Okay, you’re too old for that,” I drawled. “I adore your mum, but it might be time to cut that off a bit.”

“It’s not the toxic kind of attachment,” he said gently. “It’s the guilt-filled kind.”

Right, that was fair.

“Besides, most of my life is in scrubs,” he added. “She sees things while she’s out and adds to my closet. It’s not—it’s really not toxic. Mum was raised as an oppressed Korean and has problems showing affection. Then decades with my British family who look at you funny if you want to hug sometimes when shifters are touchy and it didn’t get better.”

I sighed. “You and your family are so much work.”

I deserved the look he gave me like I was one to talk before he glanced behind us.

“I do know about fashion and how to dress appropriately so I do not embarrass Ellie,” Aurora cut in. “Though I would like to branch out.”

“Aurora, get what you want,” I said gently. “You’re not going to go crazy and switch to halter tops and booty shorts to wear to my job.”

The look of horror she gave me when I glanced over my shoulder was exactly my point. She’d be fine. I pushed a bit and told her to try jeans and even shorts. I didn’t think a woman raised as a noble had probably ever worn yoga pants and some comfy fucking shorts.

“A bit. Maybe one pair,” she accepted.

That was a start. Ha-joon gave me a wink that he had things in hand.

We arrived at the hospital and parked, Aurora taking it all in. I led them to where we were supposed to go, asking Ha-joon to hang back when we got there.

Then I turned to Aurora. “Do you know what Amanda’s Hope is?” I was glad when she nodded. “I’m the head of it—”

“I know what you’ve built, Ellie. All of it,” she told me quietly.

Oh boy. That was interesting when she’d been locked up. I had a lot of questions wondering how that was truly possible, but that was a conversation for another time.

I gestured to all the female vampires around us. “This is part of the hope.” I told her about the woman who had been abused by her mother-in-law, perpetuating the cycle of abuse for female vampires. How the brave woman had broken it for her and her daughter and asked for help—been brave enough to accept the help.

“I read online that the head of the family tried to hurt you and force you to turn her over and drop the charges,” Aurora muttered as she glanced around.

So she was clearly caught up on technology and more. Good, that would be helpful getting her acclimated.

“Yes, and he’s taken a plea agreement. So has the son and mother-in-law,” I told her. “The divorce and custody battles are still ongoing, but they’re safe to leave the hospital now with the protective orders in place. They’re healed enough and arrangements were made.”

Aurora did a double take before blinking back tears. “This is why the world needs you, Ellie Reed. This is why you are such a miracle.”

“I didn’t do this,” I argued, gesturing to all the women gathered. “They all have.”

“But you gave them all the path,” she countered. “You started all of this.”

“No, Amanda did,” I said firmly. “She started all of this. I simply continued her work and on a larger scale after she died saving me. I made her sacrifice worth it.” I might have said more, but people started getting into place. I moved Aurora to stand next to me as we lined up.

Who was “we?”

All of the female vampires who worked for the hospital that supported Amanda’s Hope and were available to be there.

Every female supe in the community who helped the program or was party to rescuing females from bad spots. The whole network of sisters saving each other and giving each other better lives.

I knew some of the female witches and shifters mocked it, but it was the one thing that even the most petty femalevampires would shut down. We’d all known someone

who had been abused by a husband or partner. Someone who had been treated as disposable or not worth what they truly were.

And it was beyond time to stand up and say we wouldn't stand for it anymore—stand together and stop allowing people to say it was an overreaction or “woke” anything.

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More like it was time people woke up to the truth and women were still mistreated all over the world.

The woman stepped off the elevator with her daughter and the nurse who was in charge of discharging her. She did a double take at everyone gathered and understanding slowly filled her eyes.

The female doctor nearest her extended her hand. “Good luck. Know we’re with you, hon.”

The abused vampire who had escaped blinked back tears as she accepted the encouragement. She moved on to the next person in the receiving line, taking in the advice, accepting hugs or handshakes—all of it. The daughter as well, some giving her stuffed animals or cute clothes for her new life.

It took a while because that many people were gathered, but no one seemed bored or annoyed at the time. This was the best part of the program. We’d saved one. Now we got to witness her fly from her cage into where she would be safe.

I could watch that all day, every fucking day.

Aurora shocked me by joining in, patting the woman’s shoulder and glancing at her daughter. “You will be stronger than you ever thought possible to give your daughter the future she deserves. The gods will bless your path and appreciate your gratitude.”

“Yes, I will always be grateful,” she agreed, her voice full of tears. “Thank you.”

I wished her luck and asked her again to always stay true to the program so she and her daughter kept safe. We'd never lost anyone who kept to the rules and worked with the plan. If there was a problem with the people hosting her, she could contact Alexis and she would handle it.

"Thank you, Ms. Reed, but my host already visited me and we will be fast friends," the woman assured me, hugging her daughter to her. "I don't judge the ones who waver because they once loved their husbands, but that was not my case. I look forward to my life being free and the day I can be a host to save someone else. Truly."

"It will be here sooner than you think just as your host will tell you," I promised. I smiled down at the little girl. "And you will thrive in your new settings and school. Study hard and appreciate that your mom risked everything to give you a better life, yeah?"

She nodded. "I'm going to be an attorney like Alexis and make bad people pay for hurting others. She's a rockstar."

I smiled when Alexis chuckled from a few feet away where she was talking with a woman that I assumed was the one hosting these two. I wished them luck and let them head off to their new home.

"So it's like a fostering system but not just for a child or children," Aurora surmised when I turned to her. She was staring at Alexis, the two women, and child who were talking. "The host has been through the program herself and understands the risks, knows who to contact—it's not just a place to stay."

"No, it's not, and most of the hosts have had some sort of training," I told her. "Several are former military or current police. We have dozens all over the country that host someone when they're on leave from the military, and those are normally

the trickier situations where we have to hide someone. They understand the risks and it's more protective custody than couch crashing."

"Because women's shelters aren't always safe and can be held against a woman when it comes time for court battles and such," she muttered, bobbing her head. She very apparently wouldn't look at me. "I'd love to be a part of something this wonderful, but I have absolutely nothing useful to contribute, Ellie. I would only hamper a flawless system like this."

That was so far from the truth that it hurt my heart.

"That's your abuse talking, Aurora," I said gently, studying her carefully. "Would you be open to speaking to someone?"

Her mouth parted slightly before she corrected herself from showing emotion. "A professional? Therapy?"

"I'm speaking to someone," I told her as I nodded.

She was quiet for several moments, once again showing the glaring differences from the Aurora Reed I used to know. The Aurora I knew was confident and her mind was set. Her goals laid out and ready for any change in her plans or retort someone might throw at her.

This was... A beaten down and broken version that made it hard for me to be angry with her when I was valid in hating her. It was very confusing and kept throwing me in ways that made me feel like I wasn't just on uneven ground but trying to walk on water.

So move in impossible ways.

Awesome. Exactly what I needed at the moment.

Ha-joon moved behind me and I felt steady. Just that and I felt my footing become more secure.

“Just think about it,” he suggested gently. “Ellie’s not saying you have to.”

Aurora seemed relieved even as she was leery of him. She met my eyes. “I would like to but not yet. I would like to adjust to my new reality. I wasn’t given warning and had no idea what was even going on with Kenneth before being informed of everything and then given hours to pack a bag and tossed out.”

Wow, that was... Heartless didn’t fully cover it.

At. All.

“You’re going to go after them, right?” I hedged.

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“I feel like I would disappoint you if I don’t,” she whispered and looked away from me.

The Aurora I’d known never did that except to appease Kenneth. What had my asshole father and her monstrous family done in the hundreds of years since I’d last seen her?

“If you need to let it go so you can move on, that’s your choice,” I said quietly, trying to accept that for her. “But at least make them pay, Aurora. They sold you. Fine, it was done back then, but they held you captive long after it was made illegal. Don’t let them think you accept that as acceptable. There’s a precedence for damages.”

She slowly nodded. “I would like to learn more about that then. That is where I would like to start. Please. I would like—two days ago I was just living as I have for centuries in limbo of being locked away and watching the world pass by. Too much has changed too fast. I would like to not commit to anything at this time.”

“Okay, that’s a valid answer,” I accepted. Yeah, more than fair and smart even. I told her that much. I glanced at my watch and realized I had to get moving.

I asked Ha-joon to speak with Alexis to get Aurora that information before taking Aurora shopping. I gave him a kiss in thanks and promised I’d be heading home after the interview.

Which actually went better than I’d expected.

The interviewer was treating it more as a fluff piece, but the station’s staff and prep

people had done their due diligence and the questions were pretty good. It allowed me to get out good information and act as if it was more natural instead of wanting me happy since ASH bought airtime for commercials.

And they probably wanted to hit me up for more.

The guy then went off script, frowning at his index cards. “Aren’t people just going to use this as a chance to have access to a free portal to Atlanta and North America for whatever they want? There’s no way to control that.”

Wow. What a fucking moron.

I chuckled dryly, trying to hide that I wanted to call him several names. “There is, actually, just like any other time a portal is opened from one continent to another. Especially since the witches and warlocks in ASH’s employment will be facilitating things. It’s all being done legally and through the proper channels.

“Our government has been informed, and one of the law enforcement agents who is at ASH’s airport will be assigned to the portal. People can only come through with proof of appointments or are sent right back. They will be given wristbands—everything like normal. We have ample security and cameras. We do this all of the time and we’re simply expanding.”

“Of course, of course,” he agreed awkwardly. “I was playing devil’s advocate so your answer was on the record for anyone thinking to cause trouble.”

Sure it was. Yeah, nice try, buddy.

Still, I played along and thanked him for being diligent and giving me the opportunity to prove we were ready.

I made it through the rest and thanked him when we were done. He was polite but didn't even shake my hand, mumbling and immediately pulling out his phone.

One of the assistants apologized and said he was like that with pretty much everyone he interviewed, so it wasn't a reflection of me. There was more the guy clearly wanted to say, but it would be professional suicide given where we were and all the ears around us.

However, I appreciated him making it clear it wasn't me and he was being honest. I still put in a call to the executives who hired such a dipshit interviewer on the way back to the portal. I'd traveled all the way to New York, having had one of the hospital's witches open a portal for this interview at our expense when others wanted to get this exclusive.

And they'd treated it like a fluff piece with some idiot who didn't understand the severity of the information? How this could realistically help their viewers?

I was glad when my concerns were received, and after a bit of back and forth, we decided to have another segment featuring ASH but their weekly medical one. It was late notice for that week, but they were going to juggle some things and get us in next week. I asked the executive email me what they were looking for and I'd get one of my department heads.

One who would be dynamic on camera.

Done and done.

She was chomping at the bit for it to be a reoccurring thing and I was open to it with different attendings even... The ones who played nicely and I would want to speak for ASH. Ha-joon immediately came to mind even. But a lot depended on how well we were treated on this second chance.

I thanked the witch when I came back through the portal and checked she was okay and nothing else popped into her day. She was fine and gave me a look not to doubt her. She was vastly powerful and this was child's play for her.

Actually, it was because of her child that she took the job. We had great benefits and didn't treat our witches and warlocks like doormen. She could be doing a lot more, but... Some people just wanted calm lives and regular nine-to-fives. Her especially after her rough divorce. So she normally picked up an extra shift when her ex-husband had her child.

Good for her.

I handled a few other things at the office and headed home, texting Ha-joon asking how things went and if he was hungry. His response made me frown because he said he'd eaten with Aurora but asked me not to be angry.

But to hurry.

Ummm, okay then.

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I understood better when I arrived to find Mrs. Clark at his condo looking like she was about to beat Aurora.

“It’s more complicated than you know and it’s not for me to tell you,” I said, not hiding how exhausted I was.

“Are you okay?” Aurora worried, no longer in passive mode blending in with the wall. “I thought your interview was supposed to be easy?”

“It’s not my normal and I had to handle more after,” I told her. “But it went better than I’d hoped. There’s just been too much and I’m pushing for a lot of change. I’m also hungry.”

“Oh, then of course you need to eat,” she said as she started to fret over me... At the same time Mrs. Clark went to.

Oh boy.

Which explained why Ha-joon had sent the message he had. I ended up having her white kimchi with radish with my burger and fries to appease her. Not a combination I would have sought out, but it didn’t work. Aurora seemed to be amused, so she understood Mrs. Clark was being a bit childish and left it alone.

“The Alpha of Atlanta sent a formal apology to our family for jumping the gun and announcing there was an actual match and engagement instead of a suggested idea,” Mrs. Clark informed us. “That’s why I came besides with more food. Your father was worried you wouldn’t be open to hearing that from him after his transgressions.”

“And he’s still angry at me for what I did and challenging him,” Ha-joon muttered, reaching for soy eggs.

She opened her mouth but then closed it. “I don’t know that’s true. I don’t know what is going on with your father or our family right now. We’re a mess. Someone is always fighting and—” She cleared her throat and stole a few of my fries.

She was hiding here. That was what she didn’t want to say. She needed a bit of peace from the problems going on at home.

“Stop feeding the gits if they’re going to be babies,” I suggested. “It’s not difficult to not fight in the house. They don’t even all live there. Right now, it’s a damn neutral zone for your sanity and everything else is outside. That’s more than valid to declare at least for the time being.”

“Agreed, Mum,” Ha-joon said after a moment. “They run to you for every little damn thing. They always have and then yelled at me for taking up too much of your and Da’s time. It’s—we all need a reset and reminder we’re adults.”

She snorted, probably because Ha-joon was the only one who acted like a damn adult. No, his eldest sister did too.

“You make valid points and I will listen,” Mrs. Clark accepted after a moment and stealing a few more fries. “Thank you. I needed to take a step back.” She glanced at Aurora. “If you need any help so you do not upset your stepdaughter, I can give you my number to—”

“I don’t have a cell phone, but your son has been helping me,” she told her.

“My son is too busy to—”

“Mum, it’s fine,” Ha-joon said quietly, seeming uncomfortable.

Shit, I hadn’t meant to put him in the middle of this.

Why was life always so fucking complicated?

4

Ha-joon

Shopping with Ellie’s stepmother had been easier than I’d thought. She wasn’t picky and just wanted basics to get through the week. She clearly also didn’t want to cost Ellie money. She realized it was awkward and was overwhelmed by the mall.

Of course. Right, no chance she’d been to somewhere like that after all she’d been through.

It was really, really hard to hate someone who had suffered so much. I should. I knew I still should, but when she almost had a panic attack from a pushy salesclerk smelling a fat commission, I had to jump in and rescue her.

So yeah, I now understood why Ellie was helping her, but also didn’t want the woman staying in her condo.

But we managed. It got way more complicated when Mum was waiting at my condo, and when I told her who Aurora was... Yeahhhhhh. Rage filled my nose and Mum’s eyes shifted she was so ready to gut the woman.

And Aurora just stood there ready to take it. She had absolutely no instincts to protect herself or like run and hide. That was what gave my mum pause more than my jumping in.

What a fucking fucked clusterfuck.

I was never so glad on timing and Ellie being done. She arrived shortly after, and it was better when Mum saw how Ellie was handling things. But Mum was also overloaded, and even with everything Ellie had going on, she flawlessly handled Mum to help me.

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“This is who Ellie always was,” Aurora said quietly when Ellie brought us up to her condo to get Mum’s opinion on the master bathroom renovations she was planning. “It was why...”

“What?” I asked just as quietly, pulling her off to the side.

She let out a slow breath. “I know now what I did was horrible. I do.” She gestured towards the other room. “But she was born to be a leader. I always saw that as confirmation I’d made the right call and fate smiled on my choices. Yes, I was young and misguided. I see that, but—she would never have been a docile coven leader’s wife. She would have been the leader they needed.”

“I hear you, but it also sounds like you justifying what you did,” I muttered, not trying to be harsh but unable to let her think I agreed with her. “There’s also the argument that your daughter could have been the same if given the same chance.”

She shook her head. “I’m sure Theresa has thrived in a different way, but... A leader can be allowed to bloom with the right support but cannot be forced. Something is born in a person to be a leader. I believe that after having seen good and bad leaders of so many different covens. It’s like introverts and extroverts. Intelligence versus book smarts.”

“Fair enough.”

“I tend to agree with you,” Mum said as walked into the hallway, letting us know they’d heard us. “And I even understand how growing up in such a repressive and abusive family can twist so much in your mind.” She gave me a look. “Which is why

I want you to know that you accused Ha-yun of something that was unfair. I was the problem.”

I swallowed loudly. “I’ll apologize. I pushed on that harder than needed when I felt her guilt and shame, taking it as...

“So did I,” Ellie muttered, figuring out what Mum meant since we’d already discussed this. “All I got from her was shame and regret like she never tried. If she did then she still feels it for not doing better or whatever is in her head on the topic.”

Mum nodded but then decided to be fair and explain. “My mate named our firstborn. My father named our second born, our first daughter. Ha-joon saw how sexist it was that I carried both children and never got to name them. I even understood to name the future Alpha as the Alpha and my British mate gave him a Korean name to honor me.”

“But you never questioned your father naming your child instead of you,” Aurora said sadly. “I never blinked at being collected back from my mate when he lost the coven. I was sold for a deal that fell through and was property to be taken back. Still now, I’m in shock that—I’ve never been my own. Hundreds of years alive and I’m to just now be my own?”

Her confusion and fear were heartbreaking.

Mum nodded. “My eldest daughter wanted to change her name when she came of age, decades and decades ago. She asked me what name I would have wanted to name her. Asked me to rename her something that wasn’t a slight.”

Ellie frowned then and I decided not to make Mum explain. “One of the meanings of Ha-yun is ‘great grace.’ It was Grandfather’s way of reminding her to always step aside for her brother. She was to be graceful and remember her damn place. Mum too

probably.”

Mum looked away from everyone and cleared her throat. “He said she would learn the meaning of her name, but for me it was a reminder that females were always to be beautiful like summer, so to raise her beautiful so she never shamed my mate or family and would bring a good alliance when the time was right.”

“Disgusting,” Ellie hissed. “I’m glad you told that bastard off.”

“Me too,” I bit out, adjusting my neck. “I really am going to have trouble not challenging him. Da was proud of me last time, but I haven’t been invited back to anything on that side of the family because of the ‘fit’ I threw last time.”

“Assholes don’t like to be called on their shit. It’s how tyrants stay in power,” Ellie said with a sigh. She reached over and rubbed Mum’s shoulder. “You told Ha-yun not to embarrass you by changing her name?”

“I regret it now, but it seemed my shame that...” She shook her head.

“Change starts with you, Soo-ah,” Ellie muttered. “At least tell Ha-yun that you regret it. She deserves that no matter your pride.”

“My pride never means more than my children.” She patted Ellie’s hand. “I will. Thank you.” She cleared her throat and pulled away before looking at Aurora. “When you do get a phone, it would be nice to have someone to talk with about moving on from old ways that should never have been. Maybe you can tell me what they’re so scared to and embarrasses you.”

“Mum,” I groaned.

Aurora took it in stride. “I’m fine with whatever they tell you, and I certainly didn’t

mean for your son to be in the middle of anything. My family kept me captive on the idea of reselling me after they forced Kenneth to dissolve our marriage. They wanted my birth daughter, Theresa, to sell too.”

Mum studied Aurora. “And that took hundreds of years to not make happen?”

“Oh, it was also to punish me for embarrassing them,” Aurora chuckled darkly. “You know evil minds. I wasn’t fed or given blood as I should be. I was trapped in my room without much. I shamed my family and should live like I was dead for centuries in regret and pray to the gods and such. I doubt they ever planned to resell me. That was simply the lie to save face.”

“Wow, that was ‘saving face’ and horrible,” I whispered, shaking my head. “The world truly is horrible.”

We left Aurora to get settled... After helping her with setting her up on how to wash her new clothes and whatnot. I let her onto my computer in my office against Ellie’s objections. That was mostly personal stuff and I still had anything important password protected.

All my patient files and ASH everything was in my laptop.

“If you betray him when he’s helping me cope, I will never forgive you and will prosecute you as I did Kenneth,” Ellie threatened before storming out of my condo.

“She’s scared,” I muttered and simply suggested she look on YouTube for what to do next. She could call up to Ellie’s condo from the intercom system... Aurora was smart enough not to do that.

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“Sorry,” Ellie whispered when I joined her upstairs. “I just had a flash of her stabbing you in the back like she has so many others.” She let out a long breath and rubbed her face. “I want to believe she finally realizes what she did was wrong and she’s really this person, but she’s so different than what I remember. Then I just keep thinking it’s been—”

“Centuries and how much was your own abuse and being a child versus what was real?” I muttered, hugging her to me.

“Yeah, that,” she whispered before punching in the code and letting us in. “Okay, well, she can figure out laundry and get settled. I can’t believe I’m really seeing her, much less she’s just in your guest room and I’ve dumped this all on you.”

I was still hugging her as we went inside, both of us kind of waddling to make it happen. I chuckled as the door closed behind us, kissing her cheek and trying to lighten the mood. She sighed and leaned against me. “I didn’t get to see your interview. I bet you were sexy and put someone in their place, right? Would I have been turned on?”

“I can’t say that, but the duffer went off script and yeah, I had to set him straight.”

“Always so sexy,” I growled and picked her up. I brought her into the kitchen and made her tell me about it, smiling when she added the deal she got from the network. Of course she turned it around to benefit ASH.

Aurora was right that Ellie was a natural leader.

“I hate that she did what she did to your mum and let you be so abused, but I’m glad you were born too, my sweet kimchi,” I whispered when she finished. “I can’t regret her evil ploy either when it led me to finding you, and I feel gutted that your mum was abused, but the world does need you.”

She sighed. “It’s such a double-edged sword. It would kill me if she said she regretted it because I did love her so much once. I think…” I let out a slow breath. “Have you ever read the theory that helping someone is the best therapy?” She waited until I nodded. “Something is telling me that getting her on the path for her new life is like what I need to move past my past.”

“Unconventional, but so are we.” I gave a half shrug. Not to shrug her off or her plan but more saying I didn’t have the answers for her.

Because I didn’t.

So I said what I was feeling instead. “I support you and I’ll help however I can, but I hope you’ll listen to me if I see it hurting you instead of helping, okay?”

“Deal,” she agreed, rubbing her face against my hand. “Yeah, that’s—thanks, Ha-joon. I think that’s exactly what I needed. A chance to do this but a fallback—no, a warning system or someone to pull the emergency brake.”

“Yeah, exactly that.” I swallowed loudly when sadness filled my nose instead of relief or comfort. It was like she was down on herself that she was planning for her idea to fail.

That was the last thing I wanted. It was simply smart to plan for difficult outcomes when things were crazy.

“So not to be a cad, but can we talk about that promise you made?” I hedged as I

leaned in and ran my nose against her cheek.

“What promise?” she asked, snapping out of her thoughts as she moved her hand to my chest.

“That one involving lingerie shopping. How about we get your laptop out and start looking?”

“We could do that,” she chuckled.

“I would have to size you first, right?” I asked as I slid my hand under her pretty, professional sweater. “Really get a feel for how everything should fit and feel against you.”

“Are you trying to seduce me, Dr. Clark?” she teased.

“I’m not doing it right if you have to ask,” I grumbled and pulled off her sweater before she realized what was going on. She had a sleeveless shell on underneath that was see-through. I licked my lips and met her gaze. “I definitely need to see more than that. Probably everything.”

“Since you asked so nicely,” she agreed, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. She slid off the counter, forcing me to move back and give her room.

I went rock hard as she stripped for me right there in her kitchen and then took the clip out of her hair so it gorgeously fell all around her. “Shit, Ellie, you’re just winding me up.”

“I love when you’re wound up and dying to pounce on me, my Alpha.”

And she wanted to think about anything other than what was bothering her. It was all

over her face and my wolf could sense it.

“I’m hungry for my lover’s cunt,” I growled. “Get on the counter and beg me to eat you.”

She moaned and did as I wanted. I feasted on her again and again until she begged me to fuck her already.

“How do you want it?” I asked her, unsure how to behave. Maybe she wanted sweet after being so upset or she wanted to be completely enthralled with lust and... Hell if I knew the mind of a woman even if I loved her.

She pushed up on her elbows and swallowed loudly. “However you think is best. I mean, now that we’re official and done with the contract, right?”

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“Really?” I whispered, thrilled beyond words. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure that you mean a lot more to me than I would have thought possible and everything is better with you around,” she said quietly. “There’s still more you don’t know and it’s complicated but...”

“But?”

She stared at my chest. “This isn’t casual or just fun anymore, and we’re kidding ourselves if we say it is or just some contract. We both know it’s more.”

“It’s more,” I agreed. I pulled her to sit up and kissed her deeply. “My answer is whatever you want, my partner. What do you need tonight, Ellie? Let me give you what you need just like you’ll give me as a partner should.”

She kissed my neck. “I don’t know what I need and I’m not playing games. I just want you—to get lost in you and feel—to feel.”

Because all of the crazy and pain was making her feel numb.

She flinched and leaned away, searching my eyes. “This is real for you too, right? You’re not just saying that because you’re worried about me or I’m upset?”

I burst out laughing, keeping her where she was when she moved like she was going to pull away. I growled and leaned over her, holding her where I wanted by fisting her hair and kissing her. Then I stared into her gorgeous golden eyes. “I laughed because I would scare you if I told you my true feelings, Ellie. Yeah, this is serious

for me.”

Shock rocked me when she looked around me like witches did when they checked auras. What—could she see them? I’d never seen her look like that before.

She seemed small and scared when she met my eyes again. “I don’t—please don’t say that just because I’m—”

“I told my parents that I plan to mate you,” I confessed bluntly. “That my wolf wants to mate you and I want you to be ours.”

Her mouth fell open and she was so shocked I wondered for a moment if she was breathing. “Oh.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, so—I would never placate you on something this important.” I was trying not to sound angry, but it was hard when she was accusing me of something that harsh.

Ellie flinched and looked properly chastised. “Sorry.” She cupped my face. “I’m really sorry. Yeah, that was horrible. I just—I’m all over and then I feel okay and like I’ve got it handled and then it just hits me hard like she’s here or he’s locked up and I spin out. And then I—did you really tell them that?”

“Yes.” I let out a slow breath when she just blinked at me. “You’re not ready, but when you are there are words I want to say to you. I’m that serious.”

“Yeah, I didn’t expect that either,” she whispered. “I was just hoping that yeah, this was definitely more than sex and not like—yeah, of course you wouldn’t out us at work if it was just sex. I think I’m feeling the same for you which I can’t believe after Tommy and never feeling that, but then it’s all confusing—please shut me up.”

It took me a moment to catch up with all of that, but then I kissed her.

“Do with me what you want,” she begged when we came up for air. “I want you desperate and crazy for me. That’s what I want.”

“Then get on your knees and feed from me while you suck me off,” I growled against her lips. “You know that drives me fucking wild.”

She nodded furiously and did as I asked the moment I set her on her feet. I lost my fucking mind and played with her hair as she rocked my world with her mouth. Then she fed from me, and it was like being on another plane more than just amazing.

When she giggled from the high my blood gave her, I carried her to her bed and didn’t hold back. I mounted her and fucked her with all I had.

I tangled my fingers in her gorgeous light brown hair and pulled her up to her knees at one point, pressing my lips to her ear and saying what I’d been dying to. “You will be my mate one day, Ellie. I will claim you as mine and I will be yours. One day as far in the future as you want, but one day.”

She came. I didn’t think it was her being excited at hearing it and wanting the same but more I was so wound up and even my power dripping all over her.

But she did beg for more, so clearly she wanted me that out of control. I gave it to her. I gave her everything I had to give and then some. I completely wore myself out sating her every need and both of our desires.

She was completely done when I finished the last time, unable to keep her eyes open then. She mumbled something about there being worse fates than being my mate before she passed out. I took it as a win and snuggled up to her so my heart could chill out a bit before cleaning us both up.

Then I remembered what Mum had said and sent Ha-yun a message to apologize. I was surprised at the immediate reply forgiving me and saying she wished she'd pushed harder later when she was older so Mum understood better instead of carrying the hurt she did from being a kid. I was shocked she opened up to me.

I took it as a sign and said I felt the same sometimes, that I wanted to stop carrying that hurt and just move forward. But also sometimes it felt like if I didn't handle things how I should then I would never actually move forward and simply repeat the same mistakes.

She agreed and said she felt like she was trapped in the same cycle and didn't know how to break out of it.

“What's got you so confused and with smoke coming out of your ears?” Ellie quietly asked.

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I jumped, almost dropping my phone. I chuckled when she narrowed her eyes at me like I was acting guilty. “You were seriously out, and I didn’t hear you stir.”

“You were laser-focused on whatever conversation you’re having,” she commented, her voice neutral, but my nose was picking up anything but neutral.

I turned it around and showed her. “I apologized to Ha-yun like I told Mum and she’s replying, being open with me. Part of me wants to like pinch myself or check that her phone wasn’t stolen. I don’t know she ever responds to my texts besides with basic information and certainly not like this.”

She glanced at it quickly and nodded. “And part of you wants to help because she’s your sister, but also you’re not there with her yet.”

“Yes, but also I’m not sure I ever want to be there,” I admitted, clicking my phone and setting it on the nightstand. I moved over to her and snuggled under the covers. “We can do business and I prefer us all be civil, but I don’t know I can ever be like real siblings with them. Even if she never came at me or wasn’t as bad as the others, she was...”

“That doesn’t make you a bad person,” she promised, moving a bit so I was snuggling up to her breast. I wasn’t sure why she did that until she started playing with my hair.

Comforting me. I was such a selfish git. She was going through several layers of hell and I was whining about my shit to the point where she wanted to comfort me.

But still, I wanted the comfort and reassurance that I wasn't being a git. It was hard to know what was the right thing to do when it came to family.

To life even.

A few minutes of her playing with my hair and I realized something. "I've never understood how I always read or saw that women loved this or even women I've been with. It seemed silly and no one ever played with mine or like this."

"Really? Your hair is so nice it makes me itch to play with it," she murmured, sounding sleepy again.

"It feels so good that I would tell you anything," I confessed. "Seriously, keep doing that and I'll tell you all my secrets. My bank passwords. My email login. Whatever you want."

She chuckled and then buried her face against my hair, hugging my head but also smothering her tits against me. "You go from wild animal fuck machine to docile pup wanting to be pet within such a short span that I honestly just can't—oh shit, life is so much better with you in it. I can't even joke anymore that it's the food your mom gives me."

"Glad it's more than sex," I said when she kept laughing.

"Yeah, more than sex though I've never, not ever had better than sex with you in my many, many years," she admitted as she settled down. "Honestly, if I had known sex with an Alpha shifter was this amazing and wild, I would—"

I flipped us so she was pinned under me. "And that's about the time you learn tact and shut it, yeah?" I raised an eyebrow when she frowned. "You want me to ramble on that I should have gotten blow jobs from vamps sooner so I knew feeding there

was—”

“Point made,” she agreed, nodding that she got it. “Sorry. I profusely apologize and you’re not being a brat. You’re right and that was tactless in afterglow time. I’m still a bit all over and not thinking.”

I gave her a smacking kiss. “Apology accepted. Are we snuggling, being productive, or another round—”

“I’m spent for the day. You wore me out.”

“I was going to say food,” I chuckled, wiggling my eyebrows at her that she admitted I’d sated her. Yeah, I was a git for enjoying that.

But I was a git who was in a real relationship with the woman he loved and I hadn’t seen that coming. I was fucking over the moon about it, and she could beat me later if she wanted.

All the time even as long as she stayed with me.

5

Ellie

I started my Monday with meetings off campus with a few vendors. They were a bit tedious, but I was glad we managed to work it out so there was more of what people were asking for in the menus and we didn’t screw over the people relying on us to buy from them. There would be more seasonal fun—it was good.

And we were going to have a makeshift farmers market. Twice a month on Saturday mornings people could pick up fish orders directly from the vendor for their personal

use at just a bit of a higher rate than we paid.

It was fair given they were setting up a cooled shop for a few hours just for our people. It would be a bit of a hassle for my staff, but one person would handle it. We'd get the numbers the week before of what was available and email it out. First come, first serve, and if there was extra we could open it to family or whatever.

We'd figure it out.

Hell, I was fine with expanding it. The company was family-owned, and I knew firsthand they were good to their fishers and people. I'd known the owner for over a hundred years, and he'd beat anyone who wasn't honorable and tried to fuck with his livelihood.

More should follow his business practices.

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The meat vendor he was connecting us with so we could get more at better rates was interested in doing the same. Way too interested, so I didn't know if he'd hit hard times or was just greedy, but I told him we needed a foundation before taking that step.

He accepted that and told me to please always think of him. I was relieved when I saw only worry in his aura instead of greed. Okay, so he'd had hard times.

Yeah, I could figure out a way to help with that. For now, what we were ordering should take some worries off of him. We were ordering a lot of fucking meat to change up our menus after all. And since we were going to increase the number of employees and patients—hopefully—I planned on ordering more.

But everything was positive, and I was happy from the major win and putting together difficult puzzle pieces.

So what I walked into was an extra slap in the face. I'd spent hours and hours making the work life of my employees better... Only to learn they'd been sharpening knives to stab me in the back at the same time.

I stared around at the chaos that several department heads, HR, and the legal department were trying to manage and snapped. "Enough!"

"Ellie, we can handle this bullshit," Alan said as he spun around.

I snorted. "You mean the children throwing a fit and trying to call it a mutiny?" I met the gaze of the attending I suspected at the head of all of this. "The sad, sad attempt to

try and keep me from kicking out dead weight and making doctors actually do their jobs instead of getting paid more than they're worth and reaping the benefits—”

He snapped as well, unable to take the jabs so publicly. “You run this hospital and I never disrespected that as others did. But you do not pay my salary, and I want to hear that these changes are approved by the owner as is my right. Legally, according to the federal government of North America.”

“Unfortunately, he's correct,” Gerald warned, looking severely beat up.

Alan's face turned red so fast that I thought it was going to explode. He turned on the lion and clearly they had already been battling. “Not when the owner has signed everything to—”

“Alan, leave it,” I begged. I sighed when he looked at me. “Please, this isn't Gerald's fault and he was in the ED Friday because we're breaking him.” I ignored everything else and focused on Gerald. “Are you even okay to be back at work?”

He sighed, scrubbing his hand over his hair. “Dr. James is going to show up and yell at me, but he ruled out everything scary. It's exhaustion. Clark is going to check me as well just to be safe. I'll be good with the knockout potions and IVs. I promise. It's just—I got word of...” He gestured around.

I let out a slow breath and took it all in. There were at least a hundred doctors, nurses, and hospital staff there throwing down. It was clear they were trying to out me by demanding a meeting with the founder and owner to hear these were approved changes directly from the source.

Not just the “mouthpiece” which was me.

I walked right up to the attending and studied him, unnerving him by acting so calm.

“You’re correct that it is your right under federal law, but the provision in all of your contracts stipulating you waive that right to always handle matters with the owner’s designated representative negates that.”

“It’s been approved by the federal government, held up at the North American Supreme Court,” Alan snapped when people wanted to argue.

“I didn’t know that,” Gerald sighed, waving off Alan. “I’m not on their fucking side. I’m trying to protect you, idiot. You were about to take a swing at him! I’m—”

“Get him in a hospital bed,” I ordered one of the security standing off to the side. “Seriously, he’s about to drop.”

“I’m sorry, Ellie,” Gerald mumbled as he ended up leaning on Alan.

“No, I am. I let my anger and upset make me stupid,” Alan mumbled as he helped the lion.

At least no one was so feral for my head that they didn’t take a time-out to let us help Gerald. Once he was wheeled off though... Game back on.

Luckily, more people from my team showed up.

I felt worlds better when the attending’s department head looked out for blood when he realized one of his was in charge of this fucking coup. All of my department heads were beyond pissed. We were busting our asses to make ASH into what it should be and people were blocking us at every turn.

“This will not be forgotten or that you did it when the interviews are starting today,” I said bluntly before looking at Beth, the head of HR. “What can I say legally? What won’t get me in hot water?”

She seemed to swallow a tired sigh before looking at me. “I would have to reread the section of the contract again. I got a call of protests in the lobby and raced here. If it’s against their contract and they’re breaching it by demanding this, you can absolutely fire them.”

There was an edge to her tone and I knew why. Yes, I could do it, but the optics of firing over a hundred employees for challenging my policy changes after I’d gone on TV and welcomed the challenge would be more than ASH could recover from for a long time.

Fuck. Me. Hard.

“Maybe it’s time,” Alan said quietly. “Maybe it’s just really fucking time already.”

“I don’t know how else we handle this without risking the progress we’ve made,” Carla agreed from behind me, a few other department heads echoing her. “And I’m just fucking tired of the drama and these stupid blowups. This makes us look like clowns when we’ve got interviews coming in.”

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Someone mumbled under their breath that media would be coming soon if we didn't shut this down and that was probably the goal.

I understood all of that. I just needed one thing answered and their auras could tell me. "Do you really think you can convince the owner to change course?"

The attending met my gaze. "I don't know, but I want to hear it from his lips why he thinks this is actually the best path for ASH and screwing over those of us who have been loyal to his hospital for decades deserves this treatment. He's only heard your side. I deserve for my side to be heard."

A bitter chuckle slipped out at this asshole forcing my hand. "Because you're one of the first on the chopping block." I smirked at him, getting my answer. "You don't really think this is best for ASH, but you. Selfish and egotistical as always."

"How dismissive as always," he threw right back.

Yeah, not really since I'd known him for over fifty years, but he'd shown his hand by saying the owner was a man. He said it with such confidence that it was disgusting.

"Fine, every employee is allowed to attend the meeting with the owner tomorrow, early before normal hours," I decided. "However, there are valid threats against the owner of ASH, you selfish fools. They don't stay hidden—selfish. Everyone will sign a magically binding agreement to lock who the founder is in their mind."

The objections started right away. They wanted to kick the owner and hospital on their way out if they were going to be fired.

“This is not a negotiation!” Alan roared. “We can sense the petty and revenge on many of you. You want to destroy ASH as you’re replaced because you are toxic, don’t do your jobs, or—take the deal or we will accept this as your resignation. You want to protest? Fine, we met your terms with something reasonable. Quit in protest if you don’t like it!”

“That you can do,” Beth confirmed. “They made demands against their contract and you allowed it with conditions. If they don’t accept, they either withdraw the demands or they’re breaking their contract to quit. Yes, that’s legal given the Supreme Court ruling you were referring to.”

I wasn’t sure if that was exactly how it really worked or if she was bluffing a bit, but it succeeded, and people backed down. They wouldn’t get any sort of severance or unemployment if they quit.

They still wouldn’t for getting fired for bad performance but... Fools.

“So, sign it or hand in your notice,” I announced to everyone.

“Wait, she said we could withdraw our demands,” someone from the back challenged.

“Except I’m within my rights to fire you for this stunt, so I’m taking that option off the table.” I shrugged when people seemed shocked I would do that, even on my side. I snorted and focused back on the ringleaders. “You’re coming for me and trying to get me tossed out.

“Did you really think I would just nod along and not fight back?” I snorted again when it was clear they had. “Yeah, you’re lazy and haven’t been paying attention at all. I don’t start it, but I run this place because I get things done and I will finish it.”

I moved closer and got in the attending's face, glancing at those who backed him up until they all squirmed.

“Sign it or get the fuck out of my hospital. You made your pathetic little move. Enjoy what it gets you, because I won't be the one out tomorrow. I guess all that time in the sun playing golf instead of sharpening your skills and paying attention to your workplace got to you.”

“We'll see,” he said, grinding his jaw. “I think the owner will listen to us when he sees how many of us with flawless records are stepping up and all of the discourse that's been going on at his hospital.” He leaned in and smirked. “It's all our word against yours after all, and we both know this is a world of guilty until proven innocent.”

It was hard not to laugh, but I let him see in my eyes that I was laughing at him. “Remember this confidence tomorrow. Really, remember it so you choke on it.” I turned and looked at Beth. “Call in whatever magics we need to get it done. People are curious, even the good ones. We'll probably break fire code with everyone who will show up.”

She opened her mouth but then closed. “Yeah, I'm dying to know, and I'm completely on your side that all of the changes are what's best for ASH. I'll get it done. I'm going to need some extra overtime approved.”

“Done.” I smirked at her. “It will come out of the bonuses of the doctors here. Make sure security gets everyone here on the list. I'm not kidding that they sign first or resign.” I nodded to the security guards there, knowing the guys in charge were probably already listing everyone from the security room and monitors.

I left them to handle it because there was a conversation I needed to have before I blew up my life tomorrow. I swallowed loudly when I saw Ha-joon standing towards

the back. I gestured with my head for him to follow me and led him down to the mechanical area where I knew there was a blind spot from cameras and audio.

“I have to tell you something,” I whispered, shaking inside. This was too hard to tell him when things were going well.

“I already know,” he said gently, cupping my face. He nodded when I frowned. “I know.”

“No, you—no, this—it’s—you can’t—”

He gave me a soft kiss. “Da told me he thought it was a Dr. Miller who had founded ASH. That was what he’d heard.” He continued when I froze. “That Dr. Miller had saved a human protégé from the mayor trying to take advantage of humans finding out about supes. The story you told me without the ending. Also, that the founder didn’t want the world to be separated.”

“I didn’t,” I breathed, shocked on so many levels that my hands and feet felt numb. My nose too. Maybe my face? Spots formed and then I was in his arms.

“Ellie, I’m not mad,” he whispered as he lowered me to the ground. “No, I don’t hate you. I love you. I’m in love with you. Please, I understand why you kept this secret. Please, don’t worry about me when you’re under so much pressure, my sweet kimchi.”

I realized I’d started to faint and must have said something, blinking at him. “What did you say?” He started to repeat some of it, but I moved my fingers over his lips. “You’re in love with me?”

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His eyes flashed shock, but then he cursed. “I didn’t realize I’d said that. You just like dropped and I got scared. But yes, I am. This wasn’t the way to say it.

“How do you not hate me for keeping this from you?” I breathed. “I’d hate me. I’m still keeping more from you. I’m terrified to tell you when I haven’t known you very long.”

“That’s why I’m not mad.” He kissed my forehead. “If you knew me a year and we lived together and you kept it from me, that would be so different. That would be totally different. We just became a couple, Ellie. You hide you’re the founder for valid reasons. Even I’ve heard that people want the founder of ASH for a list of reasons.

“The main one because you are the only person who knows the formula of the additive put in the blood that’s so amazing. No one can replicate it, and—I know the threats and talk on black markets to abduct the owner and get that formula. You have dozens of patents and basically own Atlanta. Of course it’s terrifying.”

“Alan knows too. He’s the only one who knows the formula,” I muttered, sort of lying but not really. He knew what it was, but... It wasn’t so much a formula.

It was complicated.

Everything always was.

He gave me a soft kiss, so soft it was like a whisper of his feelings when I needed them most. “I’m in love with you, Ellie Reed-Miller. Not the founder. Not the boss of

ASH. Not the daughter of Kenneth. Not the doctor who did great things. You. This person in front of me. That's who I love."

"Okay," I whispered, trying to process it all.

"So don't worry about me and go be the kickass baddie who founded this place and put those fucking gits in their place. Do it before my wolf shreds them for coming after the woman we love and our future because I'm barely holding it together. Seriously. I want his fucking head."

Wow, so... Okay then.

And I wasn't in trouble?

"I think I might love you too," I heard myself confess. I cleared my throat and tried to push to stand, thanking him when he helped me. "Okay, you want a badass. I'll give you a badass. No holding back."

"No holding back. Time to finish this bullshit with coups and mutinies and take back what you built," he said firmly. "Turn me on before the first of that lingerie order arrives and I get to see you in it before taking it all off and having you."

Well, my Tuesday was definitely looking up.

I spent the rest of the day making calls and cashing in some favors to make my plan work. It was go big or go home time... And I wasn't fucking going anywhere.

This was my mother fucking hospital, and I was done with people challenging me. It was time to get the shits in line or kick them the fuck out like we had the board.

It was a lot of juggling and coordinating. Some of my admins had helped HR to make

sure everyone signed the magically binding agreement ahead of time. Some tried to slip through, but security wasn't playing. I heard over the radios that someone called in for the police but then canceled it. It was clear they were over the shit.

Seriously, a lot of us were over it.

I greeted our guests and received them well given it was early and last-minute. I'd had to sweeten the deal for a few of them with a luncheon and going over some of the plans on our expansion. That had annoyed me since they weren't in power anymore but simply added validation to what was going on.

They were just being nosy and wanted to act like they were still looped in on things. Whatever, it was an acceptable level of petty for dropping everything to make this work.

The President of North America showed up about five minutes before the meeting was supposed to start. We'd made it clear to employees that they were there early or they were locked out.

And anyone who was part of the mutiny and not there no longer worked for ASH and had quit. That was them quitting.

I would be curious later if any didn't show, but right then I had to remind myself not to vomit about a dozen times. I'd been keeping a lid on this secret for over a hundred years and was about to share it with all the employees of ASH, most of whom I didn't trust.

Someone thought they'd be smarter than the agreement, and what did it matter once they leaked the information? Yeah, we would still nail their ass.

Most just didn't have the faith in magic they should. The information wouldn't just

be locked in their minds. They wouldn't be able to write it or—even if they tried to think a name, their mind would go blank. We were going to jam electronics—the whole jumping through hoops.

Still, it would probably get out. Nothing was perfect.

Which meant it was time to change my security and up things. I felt bad for those who valued me who would be hurt I'd hidden this from them.

I simply hoped they were smart to understand why.

“You ready for this?” the president asked me.

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“Nope, but it won’t get any easier so might as well just get it done,” I grumbled. I smiled when people politely chuckled and we headed out.

I walked into the massive lecture hall first, flanked by a posse of leaders from the hospital and around the world. People couldn’t hide their shock at who was with me and blinked like they thought they were seeing things or needed more coffee.

I should have been surprised when the president went off script and headed right for the podium... But I honestly wasn’t. He was all passion and theatrics. Alan snorted from behind me, and we decided just to take our seats on the stage.

“I was severely disappointed at the pettiness and selfishness a hundred and forty-two citizens of North America displayed yesterday,” the president started. “All to save your own skin as a last-ditch effort instead of doing better and being the future of ASH. Instead, you are pushing to drag it down and kick the owner on your way out.

“And I cannot just be quiet on that. Not when the owner of ASH saved my life.” He stared out at the large room. “I’ve said it many times, praising ASH and how far our medicine has truly come. I’ve always been an advocate for doing better and saving lives, not just ignoring health care because we are supes. Health care isn’t just for humans who die too young.

“It’s for all of us. It’s a miracle we need to respect and always value. The hundred and forty-two of you failed in that yesterday, and as the first child the founder of ASH saved from childhood vampiric leukemia, I demanded to be the one to introduce the owner if this was happening. I also wanted to look into the eyes of such selfish people who would risk such a good person.

“The founder of ASH has performed medical miracles. Not just saving children but changing how vampires consume blood by discovering the additives ASH puts into their blood. The threats against the owner because of that gold mine are endless, and all of you risked that person because you are selfish.

“Nothing Ellie Reed has proposed is horrible. Do your jobs like professionals with grace and dignity while acting like adults instead of petty teenagers. And for that, so many fight against her tooth and nail. First, the stupid board who brought nothing to ASH and now you childish fools. You blind fools because the answer was always right in front of your faces.”

He gave them a moment with that, staring around the room and shaking his head.

“How many of you know who the owner or founder is? Everyone on this stage does. How about the rest of you?”

I was shocked how many hands went up. I shouldn't have been maybe, the handful of attendings had been there for over fifty years. Or Dr. Joyce Tai was my best friend and smart. She... Yeah, it made sense she knew. A few department heads that we hadn't told pieced it together.

Some others in security. Okay, paying attention was their job.

But it was definitely more than I'd thought.

He nodded, glancing around. “Well, I thank all of you for being the best of us and protecting the person who founded ASH, this mecca of medicine, and my savior—the savior of many of us.” He turned and smiled at me. “It's my greatest honor to present the founder of ASH, Dr. Ellie Reed-Miller.”

I stood and met the gaze of the attending who started the coup. “Surprise.” Just to be

an extra shit, I added jazz hands.

Nope, I didn't regret that. It felt fucking delicious.

6

Ha-joon

She fucking did jazz hands.

She. Did. Jazz. Hands.

And I fell a bit more in love with her. I wasn't the only one who burst out laughing. I saw Joyce and several who loved Ellie were enjoying it just as much as I did.

I was a lucky bastard that she could love a git like me. That was for damn sure.

"You never change," the president said as he walked over and kissed her cheek.

People went quiet and slowly turned to look at me, making me realize I was growling. Rather loudly.

"Oh, so that's the lover I heard about, huh? I get to meet him after you spank the kiddies?" the president teased. "I hear he's some hotshot that's impressed all the department heads and more."

Ellie snorted. "He impresses me all the damn time. Mostly by putting up with my crazy, but that's up to him and his schedule." She waved him off when he went to say more. "I'm a bit busy. Behave for once, yeah?"

I swallowed a groan. Only Ellie would tell the President of North America to fucking

behave.

And he did with a chuckle, several of the previous presidents who had joined her softly, half chuckling as well.

She took the podium and extended her arm like she was going to click for a slide but then stopped. “I have all the proof. All the documentation that shows I own the land and the hospital’s trust is in my name. All the steps and legalities but...”

She set down what was in her hand and moved from behind the podium, shaking her head. Instead, she stared out at us, meeting my gaze after a moment.

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I winked at her, my heart full of love and encouragement at what she was doing.

“My petty reveal aside, let’s do this right and like adults,” she said after a deep breath, gesturing to who was with her. “Every president of North America is told who owns ASH in case there’s a catastrophe or something happens to me. It could devastate the continent—several given we’re the largest trauma center in the world.

“You know the people up here with me and they’re not going to lie to you any more than I would. I’m the founder. I’m the one who started this whole crazy idea.” She chuckled and rubbed her hands over her face. “So let’s start with some of the questions I hear—the rumors about the founder that I catch the most.”

“I can tell the story if you want,” Alan offered when Ellie glanced at him.

“No, I’m fine. I just—it always feels wrong to take the credit as the founder when you’ve done as much as I have.”

He snorted. “No one in the world has done as much for anything in the history of anything than you have for ASH, Ellie. I’ll take the award of wingman or sidekick, but it’s always been you.”

She smiled when several people nodded and looked out at us. “ASH was founded on an idea that everyone deserved the chance to be saved. And yes, it was originally All Souls Hospital, and I did disagree with humans being shipped off to their own continent. It broke my heart to segregate the people of this planet in that way as the answer to the war.

“It always will because I knew some truly amazing humans. It was a human who died protecting me after I ran from my family. A vampire recognized me and wanted the prize of reclaiming my father’s property and bringing me back home. That human died fighting to keep me safe. I—I have countless examples of the goodness of humans.

“And now they only know us as monsters who took their world. Some understood back then because evil exploited what happened. But a hundred years later and none of those humans are still alive. It’s humans who only know the restrictions and limitations we’ve imposed on them. I said it back then and I still say it now that someday that bill will come due.”

It was going to be a bill that cost more than we were going to be willing to pay. What she meant was clear and I didn’t disagree, but it was also all I knew.

She told the story she’d told me about her protégé and what had happened to her, but then she went on. There was more to the story that I didn’t know which shocked me.

“That girl, that child by today’s standards only ever wanted to make people’s lives better,” Ellie said, tears in her voice. “That is the reason ASH was built here in Atlanta. This is where it all happened. Dr. Carpenter was one of the people I went to for help. He and several vampires who helped us get ASH off the ground were the ones who came.

“Where I am standing is where the ringleader of it all—his house was here. And the garden atrium? That is where my protégé and her family are buried. Deep below it so they are never disturbed. They believed in helping people—the goodness of people and they are at peace where goodness and help are received every day.

“I fully believe that.” She let out a slow breath. “I met Alan by chance. It was a miracle I could find him again with how things used to be. It was luck he found the others to help. And then after it was over, we tripped over Carla.” She smiled when

Carla snorted. “It was all a sign that it had to be here. Atlanta might have been a racist horrid place, but it became more.

“It still has more potential, and I will be damned if I let the selfishness and childish, unprofessional antics of some ruin what—” She chuckled and I followed her gaze, my eyes going wide. “Say the words. Don’t just storm out like a child. Say the damn words because you showed your hand the moment you declared the owner was a man.”

“Now, at least she doesn’t have to explain why she hid partly due to sexism,” Carla drawled, most women in the audience making some noise of agreement or amusement.

The attending who had started it all spun around and threw up his hands. “You win. I quit. Clearly, I’m not going to convince the owner after your deception and bullshit. So fine, you win and are better than me to—”

“This isn’t about you,” Ellie drawled. “It’s about ASH. It’s always been about what’s best for ASH. You threw down this fight for your selfishness—the selfishness of your group, so don’t go rewriting history. I wanted to stay hidden because what’s important is ASH, not singing from the rooftops that I founded it.”

“Wow, yeah, you deserve to be an attending,” the president drawled when the doctor flipped Ellie off and walked out. “So he was all up the board’s butt, right?”

Ellie sighed. “He’s the nephew of a former board member who passed down his seat to his son even though it’s in the bylaws that couldn’t happen. So yeah, his cousin was on the board, but it was his uncle who got him the job. Then he’s been here so long without ‘issue’ besides normal doctor antics of golfing too much and wanting work-life balance.”

“Except he barely worked,” Alan drawled. “Ten-to-three four days a week is part-time for the love of the gods. He has a bunch of residents that do everything, and he gets paid the bonuses. All under the guise of being an amazing teacher. But he never showed his stripes outrightly until this—even after the board was tossed.”

I chuckled when I heard people whispering they hadn’t known that... And several had joined him in his mutiny. I saw a group of three women hiss about that before getting up and storming out as well. I would guess they were his staff and he’d persuaded them to join him, but they didn’t have the backing he did.

Well, it was their fault for throwing their careers away. They could have gone along with it to his face but talked to Ellie on the side. She was blindsided, so obviously no one had warned her.

So yeah, I didn’t feel bad. They’d made their beds, and they could suffocate under the weight of their shitty decisions.

Ellie let out another slow breath and looked around. “ASH is not about me, but maybe it’s beyond time people understand that the founder isn’t some amazing man that people put up on a pedestal. I am a bastard born of rape to a sociopath, gambling addict, and habitual liar. I was raised on lies and people trying to use me at every turn.

“Even after I found out I was a maid’s daughter, I played along with what was expected of me. But I broke free and ran, risking everything to save myself and people died to protect me. That was why I became a healer. That human didn’t have to die to protect me. I was trained with a sword, but he did what he thought was right.

“And he died because of it. However, if I’d had the training I do now, I could have saved him. That stayed with me. That moment was how I found my purpose, and I learned everything I could to heal and help others.” She turned and looked at the

president with love. “A bastard daughter, a useless woman according to too many vampires, saved a bratty kid.

“Never in my wildest dreams did I think that kid would grow up to become the president. All my attempts to save you and my stubborn desperation and your snarky sexism your stupid father taught you ended up being what unlocked the cure for maybe the deadliest supe disease children faced.”

“I’m lucky you didn’t turn me over your knee and toss me off a roof for the way I treated you,” the president said with emotion. “You were so damn set on proving me and my father wrong that—”

“It was never about proving either of you wrong,” she told him firmly, shaking his head when he frowned. “It was the trust your mother put in me. The way she begged me to save her sweet boy who snuck her flowers when his father wasn’t looking. The boy who thanked the cooks and she knew would grow up to be a great man.

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“She prayed to the gods every night that they give me the answer to save you and stop punishing vampire children needlessly. She told me every time she saw me that she knew I had the answers inside of me and I wouldn’t regret saving you when I figured it out. She was so sure I could do it that I could not fail that woman and be the reason she lost you.”

“You never told me that,” he rasped, wiping under his eyes.

“You lost her not long after you recovered and...” She trailed off and gave a half shrug. “Now you know my own mother issues. I’m not perfect.” She snorted. “We’ll talk. You were young and deserve the stories.”

“Yeah, in our spare time, Ellie.”

I doubted I was the only one who snorted then. Right, the owner of ASH and the president had tons of downtime.

Sure they did.

“ASH isn’t about me, but maybe you all understand now that you are the writer of your own story. I’ve written several stories that I’m proud of. I’m the founder of Amanda’s Hope. Amanda Hope saved my life. She saved a lot of female vampires, and I carried on her work. With the help of Alexis Gomez and others, we have saved countless females.

“I have medical patents and discoveries that have changed this world. And yes, I discovered the additive we put in the blood we sell to fund ASH. But no, I’m not

sitting on piles of money from that as too many assume. Many assumed the owner was just living on a yacht somewhere burning his piles of money.

“I’ve reinvested just about every dollar ASH has made besides a sizeable emergency fund. Enough to cover your salaries and rebuilding ASH should something happen.” She smiled when several of the department heads chuckled. “Would an asteroid or satellite crashing into ASH be the weirdest thing we’ve seen?”

“If you had asked me when I was young if humans would ever find out about us, I would have answered a firm no. A confident no and without wavering.” Murmurs in the crowd agreed. “So that is the only riches I have from ASH. Many of you know I have other companies and some of you own condos in my buildings.

“Yes, I’m rich.” She shrugged. “But all of the department heads know the budget and see the financials.” She frowned and looked over at the presidents. “I’m sure you all have seen them and the accounts. I mean, you’re in charge of taxes and all of that.” She nodded when a few did. “Plus, I think one of you had to sign off on some sort of insurance whatever.”

“Yes, because it was a policy to basically cover rebuilding Atlanta,” one of them drawled.

“That was a headache and a half, and the amount we pay in insurance...” Ellie shivered. “We’re so far off point.” She looked out at us again. “I’m sorry I had to lock this to your minds. Over a hundred of you are out of jobs for the shit you pulled. You don’t deserve the knowledge. The rest of you—some of you don’t like me.

“That’s fine. We don’t have to like each other. I hope you care enough about ASH to realize I keep this quiet because being the founder of ASH is dangerous. The world is still sexist. Hell, humans have been trying to find out who I am since the start of it because taking me out would cripple supe health care. It would end the advanced

blood we sell.”

“Why will you not share it?” someone called out, a female doctor I sort of recognized. She stood and raised her hand so Ellie could spot her. “I ask without malice but—it’s the one thing that always irked me. I understand it funds ASH, but we can’t produce enough, and there are vampires who are hurt by that. And now it dies with you? I’m sorry but...” She shook her head.

“You’re taking it personally,” Ellie said gently. “You’ve worked with me for years. You’ve known me six or seven years. You know the answer. You do.”

“It’s something that can be used against vampires if not done right,” I called out, already having put that together. “If not in the right amount, it can hurt them. Or it comes from a particular source you’re protecting. It’s limited somehow or—I have other theories, but you are keeping it secret to protect your kind.”

She met my gaze and couldn’t hide she was impressed. “Yes, one of the ingredients is finite. And very, very complicated. Beyond words complicated and I am protecting—yes. It’s not a medication we can synthesize limitlessly or put on a production line. It’s why no one has ever been able to replicate it, and people have sunk billions into trying.”

“I think I just needed to hear you say,” the woman admitted. “I wanted to believe that of you, but... Sometimes you just need to hear it.”

“Fair enough,” Ellie accepted.

There wasn’t much left to say after that. She addressed some of the other rumors and weird things people said about the founder, but that was it. People were shocked at the reveal but also how she left it.

What had they really expected?

She chuckled and reminded them that there was work to do, lives to save, and people to help. This didn't change anything. Now they just knew the changes that were being made around ASH came from the founder, not the "paper-pushing middleman" some still accused her of being.

Even after learning she was a multi-board-certified doctor.

She asked those who had thrown the mutiny and hadn't stormed out like petulant children to stay after. And to not be petty and try to deny they had been a part of it. Security had the list and she'd be annoyed if she had to chase them down among everything else.

Ellie raised an eyebrow when I stayed. "You? Really?"

"I want to see the full show so I can congratulate you," I said with a grin. "Also, apparently, the president wants to grill me before my office hours start."

"Excellent," the president joked.

"I will beat you," she warned, rolling her eyes when his security went on edge.

I think I was more surprised to find she was on such good terms with the damn President of North America than I had been she was the founder.

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Ellie was gracious with those who stayed and handled themselves better than they had. She didn't tell them to get out right away. She said she'd take two weeks or a month's notice, but she expected their best their last days. It was all she would give them so their next employer didn't find out they were part of the mutiny.

Like everyone would know about the others who stormed out. That threat was clear, and Ellie would make it happen for sure.

Also, that she expected no issues with people training their replacements or they would be fired on the spot and she would make their lives hell. This wasn't even personal and she wasn't settling a score. People didn't seem to believe that, but she reminded them that this was a hospital that saved lives and a chunk of the staff threw a mutiny.

Yeah, this needed to be handled well and handed over better than things had been. They did that well and she'd be gracious too.

That seemed to cut through their stupid and wrapped things up.

Awesome. Seriously, she was so fucking awesome.

Now I just had to meet the current—and several former—presidents.

Good times.

Actually, it was. Ellie didn't brush off our relationship or try to dodge it. She warned them it was new so not to scare me off or she'd be pissed. It was pretty damn perfect,

but now that it was beyond ASH, I quickly texted my parents that we were official and out.

I didn't want them blindsided even if I couldn't tell them she was the founder of ASH. It shouldn't matter and they didn't need to know.

I wanted Ellie to be my family one day and that meant protecting her as well. Some of my "family" would try and use that information to their benefit.

It was fairly amazing to see how respected Ellie was by presidents when so many in the hospital treated her like crap. I was pretty sure that was why Dr. Carpenter allowed most of the attendings to join the brunch. He wanted them to witness that and maybe it would trickle down to their staff.

Maybe—just maybe—this bullshit of how people treated her could seriously end. Nothing would ever be perfect, but the animosity and blatantbullshitneeded to stop. Even if she was only the position she said, that wasn't a paper-pushing admin like she was fucking entry-level.

No shade on people who were in that position, but she wasn't. She ran ASH and... It was all jealousy and pettiness, other idiots who didn't understand that was where it stemmed from.

Now maybe others would see the truth. Sheshinedand was in her element cracking jokes and deflecting questions with presidents.

"So how does a pup wolf land maybe one of the most impressive women our world has ever seen?" one of the former presidents asked when there was a lull in the conversation.

I snorted, not bothered by the jab. People didn't hide their shock that I reacted that

way, dismissively even. “I’m the youngest and strongest child of one of the most powerful packs. There’s nothing you can throw at me to set me off, sir.” I gestured around the room. “I grew up in this setting. It’s not my favorite, but I swim just fine in these waters.”

“And he’s very impressive in many ways,” Ellie added, rolling her eyes when several people chuckled or choked on their drinks. “Oh, you’re all dirty.”

But she’d said the innuendo intentionally to completely shift the conversation and turn it back on them. I knew that much about her.

“I meant hismind,” she drawled. “We had many presentations of ideas and how to develop ASH. He was the only one who had four and they were all great. All the department heads agreed. Hell, one was an idea I was pushing for with the board for years. He made my version better.”

“Yours was better than mine too,” I praised. “You’re way more read in on the state of things and where to start. I didn’t have the time to do more research, and I felt bad when I realized it was so incomplete.”

She snorted. “You weren’t making a final pitch. You’re—you are too damn perfect. Every single proposal you made was more fleshed out and researched better than almost anyone’s. You were a rockstar, not lacking in any way.” She smiled up at me. “I’m so glad I was wrong about you and the board forced me to hire you. It’s the only good thing they ever did.”

And I no longer felt guilty for using their greed and how they went behind her back to get me in. Her saying that was what I needed to finally forgive myself for being underhanded to get into ASH.

I was also relieved she felt I’d been worth it and it wouldn’t hang over our

relationship.

7

Ellie

I was stunned beyond belief at how well revealing I was the founder had gone. The negative attitude too many had towards me at ASH did a complete one-eighty, several apologizing to my face even. I had meetings with HR that employees had set up to get things on the record and clear the air.

Mostly women.

And it was genuine.

A dozen female doctors admitted they had listened to bullshit that I was sleeping with the founder and his plaything which was why I had the power I did. They thought I made female professionals look bad and were resentful of me especially when I preached to everyone else to be better.

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They now realized they were the fools who fell into sexist traps listening to the bullshit of others and being too harsh on a woman instead of using their heads. They wanted the write-up in their files and an action plan on how to do better going forward because they wanted to be part of the future I saw for ASH.

Yeah, I hadn't seen that coming either.

And apparently, it was spreading. Beth told me there were another two dozen nurses, practitioners, and physician's assistants who wanted to schedule the same.

I really should have done this all years ago. Seriously.

Probably not. It was the series of dominoes that fell that made everything play out the way it did. I understood that and accepted it, but the wear and tear on me mentally, physically, and emotionally was beyond calculation.

Or reason.

Still, with things going so much better already and over a hundred and twenty of the people who had been a part of the last mutiny working hard to leave gracefully, life was better. Mywork-lifebalance was better. I was leaving work at six-thirty again. Something normal to have dinner at a reasonable time instead of at my desk and simply collapsing into bed.

And there would be a sexy man there.

My life really is so much better than last year.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I'd been distracted and stupid. I knew better than to ever fully drop my guard, especially in the parking garage where there were so many blind spots from the cameras. We had a lot, but we couldn't cover everywhere and not have a million people to watch all of the monitors.

It just wasn't realistic.

The gun cocking snapped me out of my happy thoughts and made me realize I was completely vulnerable and had no clue where the threat even was. I threw up a shield on instinct and made it just in time as the gun fired.

I knew without even checking that I was fine, but nothing was in front of me. Spinning around, I used my magic to freeze anyone around me.

My eyes went wide at who I found, but then I sneered as my fangs came out. "I'm only shocked you'd actually get your hands dirty, not that you'd shoot someone in the back, you pathetic piece of shit."

Joel Warren, the former head of the board, stood there frozen with a gun pointed at me. His eyes were too wide and full of fear and hate. "What are you? How are you doing this?"

He mumbled it because of my magic, but he was able to speak. The magic wasn't perfect and he couldn't move much. Twitching basically, but it was focused mostly on his limbs.

And I wasn't very good since I couldn't practice much and hadn't even known what I was... Which was why I snagged the gun from him.

Then I decked him with all I had just because he deserved it, but it took my magic off of him since I needed to focus to hold it. Whoops.

I smirked down at him. “What are you talking about? Vampires can’t do magic.” I chuckled as I squatted down by him. “I saw you in the reflection and dodged, turning around and disarming you, Joel. You picked this blind spot from the cameras to kill me after all.”

“Not kill you,” he hissed, but froze when I pointed the gun at him. “I want the formula for the additive. I deserve it after all—”

“You deserve it?” I mocked. “You? The moron who didn’t figure out what was right in front of him all this time? How...” I swallowed loudly when I realized we weren’t alone. I was in seriously deep shit and I didn’t care about the threat from Joel. “I can explain.”

“I’m going to love hearing it,” Ha-joon muttered, blinking between us. “I didn’t think you could shock me any more, Ellie, but I just saw something not possible.”

“Yeah, it’s complicated,” I sighed, focused on him and hoping this didn’t ruin what we had.

And that was the moment Joel decided to attack. When I was distracted like an idiot.

He lunged for the gun, knocking me to the ground. I kept possession of it and got a good elbow to his face before he was ripped away from me by a very, very pissed-off Alpha wolf.

“You dare to touch my fucking mate?” Ha-joon roared in his face, looking more animal than man he was so wild.

“Mate?” Joel gasped. “I heard you were only fucking. We brought you in, you ungrateful fleabag, and you forget that and who you should answer to for some—” He groaned when Ha-joon slammed his head into a concrete pillar.

“I bet that felt good,” I chuckled darkly.

“You have no idea and how difficult it was to hold back,” Ha-joon muttered. “I want to know how he knows you have the blood additive formula. He knows about Tuesday. How?”

I hadn't put that together yet.

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“Fuck you, dog,” Joel snarled.

“Wrong answer,” Ha-joon chuckled darkly, shifting his hand into a claw and digging it into Joel’s side. He smiled when the vampire wailed in pain. “You are mistaken if you think I won’t get my hands dirty or will be nice because I’m young or a doctor. You are a threat to my mate and it’s taking all I have not to kill you. So talk.”

“I can make him,” I blurted. “Not long. Hold him still.” I waited until he nodded and forced Joel to be still. I grabbed the man’s head and made him look at me, catching his gaze and using my magic. “How did you know?”

“Bribed a warlock,” he slurred. “A few of us did when we learned what was happening. We wanted access to the owner after what you did. He faked the magic on five of the contracts.”

“Who?” I demanded, cursing when he told me.

“He’s gone,” Joel chuckled. “You’ll never find him. You’ll never put a lid back on this. Good. Fuck you, bitch. Now we know the truth and will ruin you. It’s what you deserve.”

I snorted. “You know nothing, maggot. Who did you tell?”

He fought me but eventually admitted he hadn’t told anyone yet. I got the names of the others who worked with the warlock and how it all went down.

I smiled at him. “This is going to hurt.” Then I seared the information from his brain,

enjoying when he screamed in pain.

“He won’t remember?” Ha-joon checked when I was done.

“Yeah, and more than that.” I shrugged when he seemed surprised. “It’s not like I’ve had training.”

“Good. Glad it hurt.” He dropped Joel like a sack of shit, kicking the sobbing vampire. “What now?”

“Now I go handle the rest,” I told him.

“Not alone,” he declared. “Let me help.”

I was going to argue but honestly, I could use the muscle. “I’ll explain later.”

He sighed. “I knew but I didn’t. I mean, I knew—yeah, we’ll talk. We need to hurry before it spreads.”

Agreed.

I called Alan, Carla, and a few of the most powerful witches on ASH’s payroll that I’d known the longest. They met me faster than was reasonable, obviously understanding the urgency and ready to jump in.

“Thank you,” I whispered, touched they dropped everything for me, the witches even opening portals to me. Alan and Carla had been at the hospital working on something, so that was easier.

“What are you, Ellie?” one of the witches asked.

I sighed, knowing that it was probably fair to answer. “I don’t know. I only know what my stepmother just told me. Apparently, my grandmother was some type of fae?” I shrugged.

“Their power wasn’t supposed to cross species, but there are legends about it,” she muttered, studying me. “It skips generations if it does. I have some—I remember where I read some things about it. It was in a family journal. I think it was the grandson of a shifter and goblin. I’d have to check, but all the fae are long dead.”

“Or returned to their world,” the other witch muttered. “No one really knows. The last known recorded was five hundred years ago.”

“I really don’t know,” I sighed.

“But information would be helpful because she does have gifts and no one to help her,” Alan worried. “It’s caused issues.”

“Not for decades,” I drawled.

“Because you’re always exhausted, too stressed, and not taking care of yourself. That needs to change,” he snapped.

“Now she’ll have help,” the first witch promised. “We will help her. Quietly. And we will handle the bastard who betrayed our kind with false magic. I’m his elder and it falls to me. You handle the board. We’ll get you the information and plug the leak from him. Also, anything else you need.”

“Thank you. Really.” I was shocked when they each hugged me.

“You’ve created a miracle here, Ellie,” the second said. “This is a mecca and not just of medicine. It’s the one place we’re all just people, not witches to be ignored or

magical humans to perform tricks. I wish the whole world was so integrated and accepting as ASH. This is a future I will fight for and support.”

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“And you saved both of us from shitty circumstances and protected us,” the first added. “We remember our friends.”

“Amen, girl,” Carla chuckled. “Now let’s go kick some ass because I want blood.” She smirked at Ha-joon. “And to see you in action. I know what you did to Joel. Those are deep claw marks going for a kidney.”

“He tried to shoot Ellie in the back so he could get the formula for the blood additive.”

I froze when the witches shared a look, but they didn’t say anything, wishing us luck and opening a portal.

“Can you do that?” Carla asked. She sighed when I snorted. “Damn, that would have been nice. Okay, let’s do this the old-fashioned way and drive.”

“I wouldn’t rely on me much but in emergencies,” I warned her, pointing to Joel. “That is supposed to be unnoticeable from what I know. He lost a chunk of his brain and memories. I have no fucking clue what I’m doing and it’s always just survival.”

“We all do the best we can, pup,” she comforted.

“Well, I feel better about her calling me pup if she does it to you too,” Ha-joon drawled. “Who’s driving?”

I wasn’t the only one who chuckled.

We enlisted a bit more help, so a few other department heads caught the other former board members. It turned out that of the five bogus agreements, only four were used. The other one chickened out at the last minute. I wanted to know how they used them, but it turned out the deal included being glamoured to be at the meeting.

So we had four employees to fire? They let someone else go in their place? How did that all work out?

More fun to uncover later.

Luckily, two others didn't tell anyone like Joel, too paranoid that even their own spouse or family would blab and people would trace it back to them. They hadn't made a move yet because they were deciding what to do. Both were furious that Joel was such a hothead and made such a rash move in anger that got them all caught.

I honestly didn't blame them. I doubted snakes and assholes picked the best people to be their mates. They were untrustworthy money-grubbing fuckers, so... Who would mate them besides other untrustworthy money-grubbing fuckers?

Shocking, right?

“Well, he was a moron to start, so at least the world isn't losing a genius or anyone useful,” Dr. Sean James chuckled as he dropped the man like disgusting garbage, wiping his hands on his pants even.

“Oh please, he's the harshest of us most days,” Carla drawled when I gave Sean a look like I'd never seen him before. “He was always voting for most of the board to have accidents and that would be how the board fell apart without you having to be stressed. People would think it was cursed and we'd only get pushovers or no one to join.”

“Glad you like me now after I know you weren’t kidding with your threats,” Ha-joon muttered, scrolling through the guy’s phone to make sure we weren’t missing something.

“You threatened him?” I hissed at Sean.

He simply snorted. “I’m pretty sure we all did, Ellie. We let things go with Fitz because it seemed what you wanted. None of us knew he was abusing you on top of being a cad. I regret not being a better uncle and stepping in, and I wasn’t going to let it happen again.”

“Oh geez, you’re all...” I sighed. Heavily. I looked at Ha-joon who simply shrugged but then studied Sean.

“He’s not shocked at what you could do. At all.”

Yeah, that was a good point, and I was glad he was there to back me up and catch things when I was missing too much.

Sean didn’t make me ask. “I knew you were different, Ellie. When—you didn’t have the control you do now. When this all started, you used to look around me all of the time like magics do. You were checking my aura. Vampires can’t do that.” He shrugged as if that said it all.

So he’d known for over a hundred years and never said anything to make me feel uncomfortable or be nosy.

“Thanks, Sean.”

He simply leaned in and kissed my cheek.

“Got the answer,” Ha-joon interrupted. “The warlock had the list of employees from HR. They found five people who couldn’t come to the early meeting or were off that day and didn’t care. I’m looking over the solid reasons employees weren’t there. Resident doctor on vacation. Nurse who volunteered to chaperone a field trip.”

“So it included a glamour as employees, forge their names, and no one was wiser,” I surmised, sighing when he nodded. “Okay, so we need to check every employee who attended was really the one who attended.”

“Or former employee now that some left,” Carla grumbled. “Fucking snakes.”

Amen to that.

Nothing could be easy, but it wasn't remotely as bad as it could have been. Only one of the four told someone and his son wasn't on board with his dad's evil. He hadn't told anyone else and understood why we showed up. Luckily for him, we believed him and had one of the witches helping us gently take the information.

I also confessed to the president what had happened and we'd made a mess. He cleaned it up with the federal police, and a story was released that some of the former board had stolen proprietary information from ASH that included an early version of our blood additives. They tried to recreate it and basically made themselves brain-dead.

Wow, that was one way to scare people into not trying to do what we did. That was insanely helpful because someone was always promising they had the formula or had the same blood on the black market.

"It's you, isn't it?" Ha-joon asked me quietly later when the report came out on the news. "You're the additive. Your blood is."

I blinked at the TV before slowly looking at him. "Your intelligence is so fucking sexy that I cannot put it into words."

"The clues were all there," he sighed. "You need more blood than a normal vampire and you take from me more than a normal vampire your age. You guys normally need less after two hundred. You need more. Fine, you can do magic too but... If you have fae blood in you—it just fits."

“Yes, it’s my blood diluted in a huge batch of donated blood. It’s some sort of reaction—it has to be a mix. It can’t just be added to vamp, shifter, or magic blood solo. It has to be all three.”

“I didn’t see that coming,” he muttered.

I nodded and swallowed loudly. “I think that was what fae did—brought everyone together as best as they could. When they failed at that, they left, or maybe the ones here just died out because we’re all monsters—no matter the species. But if vamps drink directly from me, they go insane. Absolutely fucking feral.”

“But you survived,” he hedged, really asking the question of how I survived and we both knew it.

“Amanda Hope saved my life,” I rasped, focusing back on the TV. “She—someone...” I took in a shaky breath, always having a hard time talking about that night no matter how many years—centuries had passed. “A group of male vampires found me alone and thought I was easy prey. I’ve had advanced fight training, so I wasn’t.

“They wanted—I couldn’t hide that I was from a wealthy family. They wanted to rape a noble, not really knowing anything about me. It’s how I carried myself. Back then it screamed—I fought back. I killed two, and when I disarmed a third, he defaulted to survival instincts and his fangs came out. He bit me and tried to drain me.”

“And went nuts.”

“And went nuts,” I rasped. “Amanda had helped me a few times and kept several of us safe. When she received word there was a problem at the hostel a few of us rented rooms from, she ran right over. She arrived to find him trying to drain me, others

cheering to rape me now. She didn't hesitate. She stabbed the one on me and..."

"She was no match."

"She was no match," I sobbed, flashes of that night hitting me harder than normal because of everything else that had happened. I cried as Ha-joon pulled me onto his lap and hugged me tightly. "I survived because they got distracted with her and others came to help because she was involved. She was a great woman who helped me, and she died for me."

"She died because she cared and helping you was the right thing to do," he whispered. "She died because she was a good person and she was right to save you, Ellie. Look at how many you have saved. Look at all you have done in her name and to honor her."

"It's not enough. It will never be enough," I mumbled once I was done crying. "She deserved so much better."

"So did you, Ellie. So did you," he whispered as he held me tightly and kissed my hair. "It's not your fault. Even if you knew what you were and your blood did that to—none of it was your fault. You didn't kill her. Those horrible men did. You didn't do it."

I think maybe I finally started to hear someone and believe that as Ha-joon whispered it over and over again. Hundreds of years and I still acted as if I'd killed Amanda myself.

The guilt as if I'd done it ate me.

Funny how logic didn't work much when pain and emotions distorted our perception of things?

But that night, Ha-joon was my logic and the key to helping me process my pain, even rework my emotions maybe. He gave me a priceless gift that I wouldn't ever forget.

Ever.

8

Ha-joon

Saturday morning there was a planning meeting for the first outreach date set in a few weeks. We were doing it in London where we would have the support we needed from my family. They were doing press conferences and more saying that the blood drive they'd done to help in an emergency wasn't enough for what our vampire brothers and sisters deserved.

It was a good PR campaign for not just my family or London, but shifters. And it was needed.

It was a few of the shifter department heads that were running it along with five of us who were shifter attendings. We would need more to add to the program, but it was a good start. We had nurses and staff signing up to help, understanding there was more going on than they had realized.

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Also on the London side. The hospitals there didn't want to be left behind after some poking from Dr. James and an American hospital coming to do something good in their backyard could make them look bad. Especially with the time difference.

It worked like a charm and we were going to have a lot of support staff taking blood and more. Fabulous.

I was supposed to have a meeting with Ellie and Alan about the blood, something she was a bit squirrely about, so I was confused but ready for whatever she needed. I pulled out my phone to ask what they wanted for lunch, but it silently rang in my hand.

"This is Dr. Clark," I answered the local number I recognized but couldn't place. I was annoyed with myself for not saving it so I didn't have to guess.

"Dr. Clark, this is the front desk at your condo," a man said, sounding distracted. "There is a guest waiting here for you."

"I'm not expecting..." I frowned when I realized the call was over, glancing at my phone. That was it? He just said that and hung up?

Something was off with that and it made my wolf on edge. I texted Ellie and Alan that I had to check on something at home. I had thirty minutes until we were supposed to have the meeting and it wasn't a formal one on Saturday after all.

But I was definitely going to talk to the front desk about just calling like that and hanging up. It was really unprofessional and... Maybe there was a reason? They

seemed to have their shit together better than that. The call could have dropped or a hundred other reasons.

Right?

Nothing surprised me more than walking into the lobby to find a woman who looked like Aurora's twin standing there but way more put together.

Theresa. This is Ellie's half-sister.

Immediately, I texted Ellie what was going on. Just a quick one saying her sister was at our condo to see me.

There was no way I was going to keep this a secret from her. None.

"I can't think of anything we have to say to each other, but if you want to speak with your mother—" I started to say, but her snort cut me off.

"I haven't seen that woman in hundreds of years and I have no desire to," she said, anger in her eyes like she thought I was being cruel. "Clearly, you're not very read in on our lives or past, Dr. Clark." She continued on like she didn't see me open my mouth to respond, probably counting that as a dig for her win. "I'm here to see you."

"Then I stand by what I said," I told her firmly.

"Well, then you're short-sighted," she sighed. "I can only imagine the villain Ellie has made me out to be, and in some ways she's not wrong. But I am not her enemy. More than that, I went through a lot of trouble to see you." Her gaze was hard. "Since I came from London where I'm currently living."

The hair on the back of my neck stood up and my wolf's fur even if he wasn't in

charge right then. “Is that so?”

“Yes, it is. I believe you can give me five minutes, yes?” She glanced at the front desk who was too interested in our interaction.

They should have been because of security reasons but now they cared? And they didn't seem too busy. I started to bring up the call and how I wasn't happy about how it had played out... But that had been Theresa. She'd reached over and ended the call, not wanting me to snitch to Ellie before she'd had a few minutes to talk to me.

Smart. Really smart, but probably still not how the front desk should have handled it. That was aggressive, and they just let me walk into a situation like this blind?

Theresa sighed, probably knowing I was valid and handed me a business card. “I assured them that I'm not here to do you harm, Dr. Clark, and I'm not. I'm here to talk about something sensitive and private. The security here were astute enough to sense the truth and left it. Now, I am busy and don't want too many knowing I'm here.”

Oh, this should be good then. She wasn't here to try and steal me away from Ellie or anything trivial like that if she was rushing this along.

I led her to one of the private lounges residents could use. She thanked me when I opened the door for her and offered to get her something to drink. She said she was fine, but the hesitation and caution coming from her were very telling.

“Look, I'm not here to try to change your mind on me or argue with whatever Ellie has told you,” she said once we were seated. “I will say there are always two sides to any story and—”

“There isn't another side to trying to kill her,” I bit out.

She blinked at me for a full minute before snorting and not in an amused way. “Is that truly what she is still telling people after all of these years? Well, good to know the perfect daughter can be perfectly foolish.” She held up a hand to me when I opened my mouth. “You’re an Alpha wolf, yes? Super strong one and that’s the problem in your family?”

I simply raised an eyebrow, not taking the bait.

She sighed. “Fair, I would have thought that suspicious as well. I’m asking because you can sense when people lie.” She waited until I gave a slight nod. “I don’t resent Ellie.”

Oh, the fuck she didn’t. Everything in me screamed it was a lie. Her heart, her scent—lie, lie,lie.

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She gave me a moment, probably thinking my senses needed to reset after a lie. “I did not go to kill her that night.” She nodded when I couldn’t hide my shock. “I was sent that night to kill her. There is a difference. Yes, I absolutely probably botched explaining it as a child, a terrified child given a fucking dagger to go—I botched it.

“She...” Theresa let out a shaky breath and turned away, wiping under her eyes. “That night ruined my life and any chance I had at a relationship with my own mother. She only believed her precious Ellie, her beloved, perfect girl and...” She sniffed quietly and then met my gaze, her eyes hard. “Your brother sought me out.

“He wants me to be his so we can have some petty, old-world family drama of which Clark has the better Reed girl and all of the bullshit I would never, not ever want. Ever. I have not stepped into Ellie’s world, and I doubt she cares enough about me to worry about stepping into mine, but if she found it, I doubt she would linger.”

I figured that was fairly accurate and gave a slight nod. “Myung?”

“Yes, and he was rather aggressive about it, like I was blessed he would consider me and expected me to be obedient while trying to destroy Ellie. So the fool barked up the wrong fucking tree with me because I will never be subservient to a man, especially one so much stupider than me.”

I snorted, glad to hear it and not just because of what that meant for Ellie and me.

“If it was simple, I would have blown it off and sent word through... I’m not sure what party would have been trusted,” she admitted with a sigh. “Or maybe I would

have just asked you catch me when you were in London. I'm here dropping everything my first chance to sneak away because he started to throw a fit when I didn't jump at the chance."

"And you want to save my family embarrassment," I surmised.

"I have clients who are in your pack—my firm does. I don't know that we care that much, but I like my reputation, Dr. Clark," she said firmly. "I don't want any liaisons with power struggles and petty bull like..." She trailed off when she clearly sensed Ellie.

My lover burst through the door seconds later, clearly having dropped everything to come and raced from the parking garage. Her fangs came out when she saw Theresa. "If you dare to try and hurt him, there—"

"Stop," I interjected, saying it firmly. I stood when she did, but the hurt look she gave me cut through my heart. "Ellie, she—please, hear her out and I think you—"

"Don't defend her to me," she bit out, stepping away from me, actually recoiling as if I'd taken a swing at her.

It didn't help when Theresa snorted.

I shot her an unamused look, but she sighed and stood as well. She opened her mouth but then closed it before gesturing towards Ellie. "This was what I wanted to avoid. I did what I should and warned you. You have my card if you have questions, but I ask you not make a mess of my life."

"Wait, please, you were telling the truth and Ellie needs to know," I argued, moving to block her from the door... Something neither of them liked.

Theresa licked her teeth and shot Ellie a furious look before meeting my gaze. “I’m sorry, but I’m having a hard time controlling myself and as I said, I like my reputation.”

“Because I busted in here worried for him?” Ellie asked, clearly judging her.

Theresa turned her gaze on Ellie, full of hate. “No, learning that you’re the head of Amanda’s Hope and that’s why my employment there was blocked again and again. All I’ve ever wanted was to be part of that cause and do what no one would do foreitherof our mothers. And you’re so petty to—”

“Wait, she iswaytoo confused to know what you’re talking about,” I told Theresa as I pointed at Ellie. “It’s pouring off of her.”

“He’s right,” Ellie sighed. “I don’t handle the hiring and—I had no idea you applied. Why would I block you from volunteering or—”

“I’m an attorney,” Theresa informed her. “I’m one of the most sought-after attorneys in Europe. I’m a senior partner at a global firm based out of London, and on the side I take vampire cases to help women pro bono.” She narrowed her eyes at Ellie. “Because Amanda’s Hope kept blacklisting me from their program or any other I could help.”

Ellie opened her mouth but then closed it, cussing under her breath. “I didn’t know. I didn’t do it.”

I sighed, figuring it out. “Alexis. She would do background checks and probably all the red flags went up when she filed a resume. She’s smart enough to do her homework.”

“Yes, and I’m absolutely sure at some point she asked me if I had siblings and I

probably answered without thinking of why she might ask,” Ellie said before letting out a huge sigh. Then she studied Theresa. “I will speak with her and take off the block—whatever she’s done. I’m not involved in the day-to-day—the legal side.”

“Ellie handles the hospital side,” I told her. “Facilitating the care and even getting patients out of other hospitals to ASH. Working with insurances even if under their husband’s everything.”

“Fine, thank you for explaining,” Theresa accepted after a few moments. Then she focused on Ellie. “Hear me on this because your Alpha wolf confirmed it’s true.” She waited until Ellie nodded. “I did not go there that night to kill you. I was sent there to kill you. There is a difference, and I have no idea what story you were told, but it’s wrong.”

Ellie opened her mouth but then slowly closed it, sighing loudly.

Right, she said her magic or reading auras didn’t work on family members.

“She’s not lying, and I checked that her lies would register with me. She offered.” I held up my hands in surrender when she shot me a shit look. “Ellie, you needed to know this. Especially with everything that’s happened—what she just told me now.”

“Maybe,” Ellie sighed, scrubbing her hand over her neck. “But why bring this all up now? To see Aurora?”

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Theresa scrunched up her face. “I have no desire to see that woman ever again. Her lack of decency is—she acts like she saved me from a fate worse than death, but she has no idea what I went through, especially after she sent me away when you ran. She never cared to ask when I suffered or find me after Father lost the coven and she just walked out with what she could.”

“You have gotten the wrong story on that,” I whispered, my eyes going wide. “She wasn’t given a choice or—” I frowned when my phone rang even if I had it on silent. It was some kind of software ASH had to override our phones if there was a big deal going on.

Apparently, Ellie got it too because she already had her phone in her hand.

“Please hold while you are connected to the President of North America,” the man on the other end of her call said, Theresa and I staring at her in shock.

But Ellie just acted like it was a Saturday like any other.

“What can I do for you, Mr. President?” Ellie asked when he came on the line.

“I need you to call in everyone you can,” he told her. “It’s bad this time and there’s no help around them. A sinkhole opened up—”

I was listening even as I checked my phone for the alert. “Holy fucking shite. A warlock opened a portal and brought a whole fucking busto ASH. We have to go. They need everyone emergency and—Ellie, head to my car. I’ll drive.”

Ellie handed me her keys. “Drive mine. I’m authorized for emergency lights.” She looked at Theresa. “Aurora is here, and you have everything wrong about what happened. I understand—we have to go.”

“I’ll come with,” she offered. “I have medic training.”

Ellie didn’t have time to debate. “Sir, we’ll do whatever we can. You heard what Dr. Clark said?”

“Yes, and I doubt that’s the last that will break protocols. Give me permission to overstep into ASH’s safety and security. I want to dispatch everyone I can. Help for you, and then we can open portals and get them—I’m getting reports the sinkhole is in a major metropolitan but nothing like Atlanta.”

That was about the nicest way to say poor backcountry with an overflowing town and no real help.

We were already hurrying along and Ellie gave permission before adding Alan to the call. He knew nothing except about the bus part and couldn’t get the emergency department attending on duty or anything. He had a feeling things were that chaotic already.

“Call in everyone,” Ellie ordered. “Mr. President, I would ask for any EMTs and first responders you can spare to help at ASH. New York, Chicago—where did this happen?”

“South America,” someone in the background said. “The President of South America is on the line and asking for immediate aid. They have reports that the sinkhole is an eighth of a mile on the east side of town. They think there used to be a mine there and people didn’t—no one cared as they built new homes for poor people.”

And new homes meant new shops, schools—all of it. Fuck.

“We’ll do the best we can, sir. Whoever you can spare that will take my orders so we’re not dealing with pissing matches,” she told him before glancing at her phone. “I’m getting a call from the ED department. I’ll update you.”

“We’ll hold,” the president said. “We’re putting you on hold as well.”

She nodded but then switched. “How is the warlock? Did he really bring a bus?”

“Yes,” a man sighed. “I doubt he’ll make it. He used too much magic too fast. He—it was a school field trip. He was one of the parent chaperones and did it to save his kid on the bus. Right before it would have dropped into the sinkhole and they would all have been toast from what the kids are saying. They were right at the center of where the ground opened up.”

“Okay, see if our magics can help the poor man. I’m on with the president and they’re sending everyone.”

We were at her SUV by then and she showed me the emergency lights. We didn’t even need them, two police cruisers waiting for us out front. I flagged them, and once they saw her in the passenger’s seat, we got an escort to ASH moving faster than I would ever have thought through traffic.

So clearly, this wasn’t the first time Ellie had needed to be escorted in like this. Wow.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing when we pulled into ASH. I headed right for the emergency department to get Ellie there faster and... My brain couldn’t make sense of it at first.

Yes, there was a bus, but the front foot of it was cut off like the warlock opened the

portal while it was falling. And it had fallen through and onto its side. It was—the pretty fountain out front of the main entrance was toast. That was for sure.

And clearly, others had opened portals as well. I wasn't sure if from their side or ours, but there was just chaos all over.

Security recognized Ellie's vehicle and one of them jogged over. "I can park her vehicle and get her the keys, Dr. Clark."

"Yeah, thanks, mate," I accepted when Ellie nodded. I rushed over to where I saw Alan. I remembered Theresa at the last second and gestured to her. "This is Theresa Reed, she has medic training and wanted to help."

Theresa elaborated and mentioned the specific certification and credentials she had. Alan was impressed, and I was pretty sure it was the European equivalent of volunteer EMT status for catastrophes. Alan called over the right person to get Theresa temp credentials and to be shown where she could lock up her stuff and change.

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Yeah, that was definitely smart given she was in a professional suit and everything. I had to change as well and didn't hesitate, racing to the trauma department's locker room where I now had a designated locker.

Right as the National Guard showed up, all hell broke loose with more portals opening. Apparently, magics from all over South America had gathered at the site and were breaking international law to get as many people out of the area as they could.

"The ground is still unstable, and people assume the sinkhole will grow in size," someone from ASH announced loudly, clearly understanding... Portuguese? I was fairly sure it was Portuguese.

I pulled out my phone and called Da. "You've heard of the sinkhole?"

"I just caught part of it now," he muttered, sounding like he had a million other things going on.

"Magics helping from all around South America are bringing people here—injured and uninjured to get them out of range to somewhere safe." I nodded when Da swore under his breath. "Yeah, you see the problem with that."

"The traumatized uninjured who are worried about their family are going to get in your way and that could cost lives," he said, cursing again.

"Yes, and while understandable, we're—a warlock opened a portal to a falling bus full of kids to save a field trip. Guy probably won't make it. That's the chaos here."

“Okay, we hear you, Hugo. We’ll enact our phone chains and get help there to manage the uninjured.”

“Thanks, Da,” I said, sighing in relief.

“Your heart is always in the right place and that should be supported.” He hung up before he said more, probably having lots to say about the execution of my plans or intentions.

Which really wasn’t unfair given what he thought I was up to with announcing I would eventually take over the pack. I should probably be disappointed he hadn’t figured out my true intentions, but... No one was perfect.

And it was better for my own sanity to not delve deeper into too much. At least when I could let it go.

The disaster in front of me was one of the many things that kept me busy and distracted. There was never a shortage of people to help or work to do at a hospital after all.

9

Ellie

I was beyond furious that the magics helping in South America made the call all on their own to bring the uninjured to ASH. And then they had the balls to demand we feed and take care of them. We were a hospital, not a fucking motel.

And who the fuck were they to tell us what to do about shit? We didn’t answer to them. We were a separate fucking country—continent even if they broke up into countries. Most still referred to the United States as the United States even if we were

technically the country of North America.

Old habits died hard. And that was the country when supes took over. Nothing was ever simple.

But this was citizens of another country, breaking international law without any kind of permission and facing huge problems later just ordering us around. A few smirked at me like they dared me to argue when they brought children through.

“So they want medical personnel from another country that they don’t know to drop everything and take care of scared children without their parents?” I asked the translator. “That’s their plan? Who will help the injured arriving who have permission to come to this hospital to get care? When those people die—probably some parents of these children, they’ll handle it?”

The translator looked less than thrilled to have to say it all for me, but what did he want me to do? I couldn’t accept this situation. He sighed and looked at me after they spoke. “They ask if you preferred they left the children in a dangerous situation, and would you have taken responsibility later if they died?”

I lost patience and fisted the shirt of the warlock in the front of the group. “We are not responsible for your fucking country’s lack of emergency planning, asshole. You’re saying there wasn’t anywhere else in all of South America to take them? Take them to your president! Take the uninjured to your own damn hospitals to get checked out and help.

“We’re trying to help save the dozens who have already arrived and you’re taking us away from doing that!” I gestured to the new group who arrived, our soldiers acting as medics and helping several heroically. “Medical personnel is needed to save them. Not babysit people and kids. Take them to a fucking daycare!”

The warlock got pissed that I was challenging him even if he didn't know exactly what I was saying. He went to use magic against me so I let go since he couldn't overpower me... But nothing happened. My magic automatically blocked it which was why I normally avoided powerful magics.

I simply smirked and let him go, nodding for the translator to do his thing. He didn't even get the chance to, two aides of our president's who I recognized arriving. I filled them in and was glad when they were furious and promised to handle it, update the president—everything.

Ha-joon came jogging over. "Sorry to interrupt, but my family's pack activated the phone chain to get bodies here to handle the uninjured. They can get names and—Da takes emergency training and management seriously. I should have gotten permission first."

"See, this is a plan that doesn't involve keeping fucking doctors from treating patients," I said to the warlock, annoyed when I saw he fully understood me. Asshole. He was wasting time using the translator for... Asshole.

I thanked them both and headed to handle what was next.

Which was too much. I was beyond relieved when it was the same military contacts who had helped us as the last catastrophe. They had been fantastic and didn't fuck around.

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“The word we’re getting from boots on the ground is this is four or five times worse than the earthquake,” one told me. “And they don’t have any sort of response close to what Asia did. South America is so busy trying to downplay it like they didn’t let something so stupid like this happen over an old mine—”

“They’re not being of much use, and their own people are playing games under the guise of helping,” I muttered, gesturing to the magics who were hanging out like they wanted trophies for what they did.

Yeah, they deserved them... But not from us. Their government should give them. I was disgusted how they were behaving and—all of it.

“What do you need differently than last time?” I asked him.

He seemed to hesitate but then sighed. “More of our soldiers are going into danger. We’ll need blood. The president might not ask for it, but—you know how rough things get for us in a crisis. Is there any chance you can spare extra of the good stuff?”

I did some quick calculations and a flash of the last reports I had. “For sure I can get you at least three hundred pints of blood with additives. Beyond that, it might be only regular blood. I’d have to check.”

“Okay, then additives for only our people who get injured. I would suggest getting something set up because it won’t take long before some will need to refuel.” He sighed when I frowned. “Getting into the sinkhole to retrieve people is bad. It’s deep. This was—idiots. Serious idiots to have built over that mine.”

Fair enough. I made it happen, having a few of my admins work with his soldiers who were in charge of managing it all so someone didn't slip into the chaos and walk off with free blood.

Then I was actually needed to jump in as a doctor because so many were coming in faster than our off duty people could get here on a Saturday. Or extra help to us.

I was relieved when about a dozen emergency and trauma doctors from New York arrived. A few were attendings—even better—but would be lost at ASH. I had them help the military and set up in extra medical tents outside to triage as best as they could.

Then another group of seven showed up from LA. Five from Chicago with the promise more were coming. Ten from Dallas.

Fabulous. Fucking fantastic.

But it was also summer in Atlanta and that was part of my yelling at the warlock. It was too hot already.

Relief filled me when I saw some of Ha-joon's family working with others to set up tents and shelter from the sun on the grassy area along the parking lot. I talked to one of the president's aides and he promised me water and more was already on their way. Clothes for kids and people to change into and—everything.

Amazing. And ASH didn't have to pay for it all.

It sounded selfish or cheap, but we were giving enough already. It wasn't like we were going to be collecting from another country's insurance for all of the medical fees.

Apparently, one of the more sexist aides to the South American President was tired of being told no or I wouldn't just do whatever they wanted... So, he came for the source. I sensed the pissed-off vampire before he reached me. I gave him a bored look as he stormed down on me which only incited him even more.

Fuck. Him.

He extended his arm like he was going to grab me and pull me to the conversation he'd been having.

But I wasn't having any of that.

I used the clipboard I had been reviewing to smack his hand away and then slammed it into his throat. "Maybe that will make you swallow down whatever bile was about to come out of your mouth now, you ungrateful piece of shit. We don't owe you anything, and we're not a United Nations funded hospital no matter what your president tries to pretend."

Just to be a bitch, I tapped his head a few times with the clipboard while he was healing from the shot to his throat.

"Did that clear things up or do I need to smack more sense into you? Because I'm more than willing to."

"You will be arrested for this," he coughed.

I snorted, smirking when rage filled his eyes. "Everyone here saw you get physical first. Just because I'm better than you and was ready for it doesn't change that. How about I have you arrested for assaulting a citizen here when you're a guest?" I glanced past him. "Who am I talking to with a brain besides this one?"

Some idiots just never learned because he reached for me again. I let him touch my shoulder this time so there was no mistaking it or anything he could spin later.

I moved my fist under his arm and punched up into his elbow joint, instantly dislocating it before doing the same to his wrist and shoulder. “See, that was what I was stopping by slapping your hand away last time, but apparently you really wanted to see the consequences of your actions. Fine by me.”

Alan came racing over and glanced between us. “I warned you fools not to poke the bear when we’re in the middle of a calamity.”

A deep British voice spoke from my left. “I was unaware you had such a temper.”

I turned my head and met Alpha Clark’s gaze, swallowing down some of what I might have said because he was Ha-joon’s father and I was pretty sure I was in love with my Alpha wolf. “You should be grateful you didn’t get even worse and I was in such bad shape when you met me. I was too down on blood and recovering from injuries painfully because of that.”

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He glanced from the man on the ground wailing in pain back to me. “I believe that. Clearly, you were well trained.”

I nodded. “And you always found me in public. Human women weren’t trained like that back then. You had all of the advantages then.”

“Yes, and I will keep apologizing for how I acted. It was unforgivable.” His lips twitched. “But I hear your message loud and clear, Dr. Reed. Things have changed.”

“Yes, the biggest one being that we both care for your son, so we should never be on opposite sides of anything,” I reminded him before heading to speak with my president’s aides.

We had enough help from other hospitals that I didn’t have to jump in again as a doctor, but honestly saving the lives of the victims would have been less stressful than coordinating it all. Especially with too much pushback and not enough help.

And I’d thought no one could be worse than the head of that hospital in Asia that we’d dealt with.

No, I knew the truth and there was always someone worse.

I was beyond floored when the South American government doubled down on what that asshole aide had tried to pull. One of their most popular senators showed up in his place... Apparently, to try and put me in mine.

He never touched me, but he had several choice things to say about me including that

it was disgusting I ran a UN hospital when my father was a gambling addict and criminal who stole money from the coven he ran. I let him go on and on and on, even letting the media that was there get soundbites that he was thrilled about.

Then it was my turn.

I asked for two doctors to join me and gave them a list of tests I wanted run on the senator. Focusing mostly on head injuries.

“Are you mad?” the senator bellowed after his shock kept his ranting mouth quiet for a few moments.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “I apologize for not having someone see to you sooner, but I didn’t realize you were involved in the catastrophe. You’re suffering from a head injury, right? You hit your head on the way out or—”

“I was nowhere near the sinkhole,” he snapped. “I live hundreds and hundreds of miles away.

“Oh, I assumed you got hurt when you went there to help and do something useful instead of harassing the person authorizing all of this to help the citizens of South America,” I replied sweetly, knowing the press was getting a good view of this. “It’s the only thing that made sense given how much you were mixed up in what you said.

“And you were confused where you were at and apparently what year it was to think any woman would be obedient. That you had any right to ream her for thinking and not listening to her better—none of which I see here.” I gestured behind me when he opened his mouth to blast me. “I understand the situation is a lot, but you’re confused, Senator.

“This is All Supes Hospital, a privately-owned hospital, not a UN funded medical facility. I understand that we both agree that’s where the victims should have been taken first, certainly the uninjured, but they weren’t and we’re still kindly helping them. Now, if you would be so kind as to shut the hell up of your idiocy and leave if you’re not going to help.”

He sputtered for a good full minute, my amusement growing as he couldn’t recover fast enough. “I am a senator. You have no right to—”

“She has every right,” one of our military officers said as he stormed over. “And since you apparently can’t do anything besides distract the woman in charge of all of this, unable to handle dealing with a beautiful woman like the rest of us, I asked to be authorized to send you back. Our president approved it along with anyone else getting in the way of the help here.”

No one was surprised when he listened to the man with a penis instead of me with my boobs.

Dickhead.

But I did thank the officer later. I had way too much going on and piles more to handle.

He cleared his throat and was suddenly focused out at the chaos. “I apologize for being unprofessional. As sad as this all is, I was happy to have a chance to work with you again. Less happy now that I’ve heard you have a lover.”

I slowly blinked up at the ridiculously handsome man in uniform and felt my face flush so hot I was very sure my ears were also red.

“Oh boy, grab popcorn because when the jealous Alpha wolf hears about this, we’re

going to get a good show,” one of the residents joked as she raced to help more people coming through the portal.

She wasn't wrong.

I thanked the officer for his... I wasn't sure, but I said it was flattering. However, I was very happy in my committed relationship.

But I wasn't dead, and that man was fine and wore a military uniform better than most. Like, for real it was made for him. Top one percent of best military booties for sure.

Damn.

Carla found me later and warned me that it was all over the hospital that a colonel was my knight in shining armor and asked me out. I didn't even bother to tell her that wasn't exactly what happened, simply pointing him out when she demanded to know who it had been.

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“Shit, that man is so fine I want to take several bites... Or let him take them from me. I love feeding hot vamps while naked. Always naked. Excuse me.”

“Happy hunting,” I chuckled under my breath. I could never be that confident and behave that way.

But I also never judged women who did. Good for her. As long as she backed off when someone wasn't interested just like we expected men to do, there was nothing wrong with being the one to start the fun.

Nothing. At. All.

I thought the resident might be right when a pissed-off Alpha wolf known as Ha-joon came storming towards me an hour or so later. “It's fine. He was polite and accepted we're a real thing.”

He frowned, looking adorably confused before rolling his eyes. “I don't care that someone flirted with you. I trust you.” He snorted. “You're gorgeous, love, and people say it all the time behind your back and shit to your face. Good on him for having the balls to actually say something to you.”

“Then I'm confused,” I admitted.

That made him pout. “You thought I was going to be some jealous dick?”

“No, not—maybe?” I gestured to him and then where he'd come from as if saying he had stormed out and that made me wonder.

“I want the asshole who put his hands on you,” he growled. “I’m in surgery and I hear some git—multiplegits are ordering you around liketheirlittle woman and to be obedient and—where are they?”

“She beat one of them up, broke his arm in several places before he was kicked back, and the other one was kicked back as well,” one of the EMTs from New York said as she shot me an impressed look. “Must be nice to have the kind of power that you won’t get in trouble for that later. I would use and abuse that with the crap we have to take.”

I reached over and patted her shoulder. “If someone ever gets grabby with you, just get them here and I’ll gladly break them.”

“I normallyaccidentallyget the gurney stuck so they get jostled around and their injuries hurt more after someone grabs her,” the man next to her said under his breath. “Something like that. Oops, I dropped something heavy on them too. I’m a klutz like that.”

“Yeah, but your file now says that from all the complaints,” she muttered, looking worried.

The guy was not. The glance he gave her clearly said he gave zero fucks.

Okay, they were pretty adorable, and I shouldn’t use this crisis to poach... But I was probably going to try and poach them for the hospital.

“I’m fine,” I assured Ha-joon, getting us back to the beginning. “How was surgery?”

“Good. Faster than expected and we saved the mom and baby.” He wasn’t happy though and he sighed when I waved him on. “The warlock who brought the bus through the portal to saveall those kids and everyone died. His body just couldn’t

recover from using all that magic like that so fast.”

“Fuck,” I cursed under my breath, and I wasn’t the only one around us. “The kid?”

“Inconsolable and asking if the gods will take him instead of his dad,” Ha-joon rasped. “Apparently, all he had was his dad. Someone overheard him blabbing that his grandparents disowned them because his dad wouldn’t force his mom to marry and she ran off. He has no one.”

“Let’s make sure people like them or someone else doesn’t just scoop up that kid,” I said to one of my admins since several of them were being runners for me. “Talk to Jackie Dillon and see if she can get a background on the kid and find the mom. Maybe she’s willing to be a mom now and start over in Atlanta instead of...” I shrugged.

“Seriously, you’re too kind for this world,” my admin said with a sigh. “I’ll handle it so you can focus on saving everyone else that isn’t your responsibility to save either.”

I felt kind of good about myself when she put it like that. I’d been getting torn into and demanded more of left and right.

It was really, really nice that someone saw what was really going on and took the time to praise me.

After a quick kiss, Ha-joon jumped on the next case that came in and helped out all over. The town that had been affected was mostly magics. Like ninety percent or more, so he wasn’t needed to check shifters and help there because we’d only had a few come through.

And most were kids or uninjured people to get them out of the danger zone.

We worked tirelessly for hours and hours. Finally, after about ten hours, South America stopped being assholes and started giving real help after the backlash they received. I didn't know all of the details, but their citizens were protesting all over South America to overthrow the government if they didn't help in a crisis but dumped it off on someone else.

That was a good start. Definitely a turning point for the least developed and poorest of the super continents. I was glad to see people were willing to fight for better lives instead of with each other over petty shit.

At least for today.

Marlon

We mobilized the pack to help out because we could and were blessed while others were suffering and losing loved ones. That was the only reason. It was what we could do, and as people who had received help—had more than others—we should. I didn't force anyone as the Alpha of London and my people knew that.

There were just a lot of genuinely good people in our pack which was why I was always proud of them.

Except my eldest who was supposed to take over was whining about having to give up his weekend for people he didn't know. I couldn't hide my disgust which finally got through to him. I also noticed he didn't thank the warlock we now employed who handled the portal for us.

Where did I go so wrong with Myung? Why did it take me so long to notice who he really was?

I made sure to check in with the military and show the emergency passes we had to visit, everything cleared. We got them faster than others because of Ha-joon and he must have let others know. Our showing up and the prospect of more help let us know how bad things were getting fast.

“Alpha, thank you for coming,” a man who jogged over in casual clothes said. “Dr. Clark told us he reached out and what you would be best to handle. He's in surgery and will find you later.” He waited until I nodded. “We have too many uninjured—”

“Ha-joon told us,” I interrupted. “We’re providing safe comfort for the uninjured to come to terms with what happened and wait for word on their families if they were directly involved.”

“Yes, exactly,” he agreed, relief in his eyes that he wouldn’t have to spell it out for me. “We’re clearing out the parking lot, but that will take time because it’s—it will take time. For now, if you can set up the start on the grassy areas along the patient parking over there, that would be great. You have to be careful of anthills.”

I blinked at the man like he’d grown another head. He quickly explained how the Southern states like Georgia had fire ants that weren’t like ants we were used to. They bit and those bites burned, even supes. Some had severe reactions and to take it seriously.

So basically, we needed to start by searching the area for these ant hills and getting rid of them.

“I’ve got it,” a soldier told the man when he got flustered and clearly had more to do. “I’m from around here originally.” The soldier nodded and took over, leading the way. “The fire ants are no joke, but I wouldn’t want to worry about them if I’ve never seen them.”

“I would think an anthill is an anthill and would be hard to find in the grass.”

“Yeah, you won’t miss them once you see the fire ant ones,” he drawled.

I couldn’t hide my shock when I saw the massive anthill. I was actually a bit disgusted that it was allowed to get that big and their landscapers or maintenance didn’t notice? When they were dangerous?

The soldier seemed to understand where my head was. “They said the grass was

mowed last week. That's a week's hill. I've seen them three times as big." He nodded and then waved me back before stomping on the hill and jumping back.

My eyes went wide as large, red ants came pouring out of the mound in a way that I'd never seen before. "I feel like I'm in a Discovery Channel wildlife in the jungle special, lad."

"Yeah, they're bad. So are the black widow spiders," he drawled. "I'll get a few guys who are used to this and we'll rope the areas off. It takes a while for the poison they use to kill the little fuckers. But we'll get you spots that are safe."

I thanked him and then made sure everyone in the pack saw what I had, most having the same reaction I did.

"Ha-joon had to move to some weird area with biting bugs and now we have to visit," Myung grumbled.

I gave him a look to shut it. We weren't there for Ha-joon but to help.

We worked for hours, and luckily their military and someone from the hospital were managing our help because I was mostly distracted with Myung. Normally, my focus was solely being Alpha and handling too much. This was a rare time I could observe him while just doing what I was told.

And I didn't like what I was seeing... Or hearing. Not at all.

To make my day more trying, the Paris pack had done the same as we had to help. That was great given the amount of people and chaos, but their Alpha was a pretentious git who boasted about being the wealthiest and best pack in the world.

According to who? I could declare whatever I wanted as well. That didn't make it true.

Yes, of course they were towards the top, I would never debate that. Our pack was as well, but I never, not ever said we were the top. There was no actual ranking or scale. We could figure out which pack had the most income like cities did but... Why?

Who the fuck cared? Spend that time doing better by your pack and the world.

“Good to see you here,” I greeted, nodding my head to his mate to be polite. “They’re well organized and our contacts have been appreciative. Hopefully, more will join in aiding with both of our packs here.” I turned to get back to what I was doing, thinking I’d handled that well and there wasn’t much else to say given what was going on and what was happening.

“I hear your youngest said he’s going to take over, which is funny because your eldest is boasting that London will become the top when he takes over,” the Alpha said loudly.

I told my wolf to settle and chuckled tiredly. “Nothing is decided, and if Myung was being childish to care about who is top dog when that never really matters in life to anyone paying attention, it just proves none of my children are ready to take over. Which is fine given I’m in my prime and they’re still young. But today is about helping people.”

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He didn't let it go though, hearing the dig that I thought he was an idiot for saying the same or even caring. I let him boast they'd brought more than us and were willing to do more because they were better. I bobbed my head as he ran his mouth, looking a fool in front of so many who weren't in either of our packs.

But it was upsetting my wolf. He wasn't passive and this git was insulting our family and pack. He should pay for that.

With blood.

Ellie Reed seemed to appear out of nowhere and moved in a way that put distance between the two of us. She gave a hostile smile as she glanced between us but then focused on the Alpha of Paris. "Comparing dick sizes during a calamity is about as uncouth as you get. I'm sure you're both the prettiest and bestest there is, but people are dying.

"Right this second, people are coming through another portal who won't make it. Their loved ones and others getting out of range in our way of helping those people. I think any adult with a functioning brain understands that to be more important than whatever old rivalry you both have. Glad to hear it."

I swallowed a snort. She was fierce and reminded me of my mate how she didn't even give us time to respond.

She waved someone over and assigned them to help the Alpha of Paris, muttering that it was best to separate the children before problems started.

Needless to say, the Alpha was less than thrilled, steam about coming out of his ears. He opened his mouth to blast her, probably throw in her face that they were there to help.

“Try it,” she chuckled darkly, mocking in her eyes. “I’ll be in front of the ample media here before you can blink saying you withdrew your help because you wouldn’t get preferential treatment and enough ass-kissing. Or would you prefer I told them that I had to toss your pack out of here because you are unable to handle a crisis? Which would play better?”

I heard a few people behind me from my pack snicker, but I was too stunned to be amused. She threw down faster than I would have thought, almost to the point of being reckless.

“Glad we can be adults about this,” she purred when the Alpha didn’t reply, too shocked as well. She leaned in and lowered her voice so only we could hear her. “And just so we’re clear, their son is my lover and one of my doctors. So do not fuck with his family again because I am a petty, vindictive woman who would cut your pack off from my hospital.”

And then she walked off as fast as she had shown up.

“I think it best you and your pack follow me, Alpha,” the man from the hospital said to the other wolf. “Ms. Reed doesn’t make empty threats, and given what else she’s dealing with today, I would advise not testing her. Certainly not when several of your pack have medical conditions that require treatment at ASH.”

I swallowed a flinch knowing the wolf was just as petty and vindictive... And had a long memory of slights. Ellie Reed had just made an enemy today that was dangerous.

“Thank you so much,” his mate cut in with a bright smile, her accent thick. “Please forgive the anxious attitude. The situation is tense, and everyone is too stressed over something that should never have happened. Please, show us to where we can help.”

The Alpha gave a sharp nod and followed after his mate, not giving me another look.

Well, that was one issue handled for the moment. The other made me want to shift and tear into my eldest.

I was terrified he was going to be a disaster and immediately lose the pack if he took over, and he was so deluded that he thought the pack would become number one with him as Alpha? That was ridiculous no matter who took over. A young Alpha taking over always made the pack’s standing in the world fall.

It wasn’t even a slight on the new Alpha. It was just how life and the world worked. He wasn’t a known. He was wet behind the ears and wouldn’t have the reach and connections his predecessor had. I’d gone through the same growing pains.

Basically, the wolf Alpha of Paris was right to mock Myung and we both knew it. Still, doing it so publicly and during this type of situation was over the line.

But I needed to have a real talk with my eldest and claws would probably be involved.

I made it clear that he was in serious shit and we were talking later so not to step a toe out of line and get his ass to work instead of only working his mouth. He seemed to realize he’d really stepped in it because he was actually being diligent every time I looked over at him the next several hours.

Most of the pack was ready to take off by then, willing to leave the tents and everything we’d bought to get back later. The shifters of South America were finally

being allowed to help, but also ones from a different time zone were ready to take over. We were five hours ahead, and it was time for those with children to get them to bed and more.

I made the announcement to start wrapping up so the warlock could get some of them home, but to make sure I had an inventory of what they'd brought so we could leave it with the hospital. I was going to say more, but I heard something break and turned to see a folding chair was in pieces.

And Myung was holding it.

Shit.

I followed his gaze and frowned when he was watching a woman with rage. She stopped to talk to Ellie Reed but then hurried off. Myung's gaze didn't follow along with Ellie but the other woman.

What was going on now?

He took a step towards the woman with so much anger that her death was in his eyes. Who was that woman and what had she done to him? I glanced back to the woman and caught Ha-joon watching the situation as well, his jaw grinding as he seemed ready to pound Myung into the ground.

I told one of my Betas to keep working on everything to get people home and grabbed Myung before he could make a move. He barely registered me at first he was so in his head, but then he tried to yank his arm away from me.

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That was never happening, and I was shocked he even thought to challenge me.

Who was that woman?

I dragged him off to the side, glad when my mate, Soo-ah, joined us. I was just about to ask what was going on now when Ha-joon was there picking up his brother by the front of his clothes like he weighed nothing.

“If you even think about touching Theresa Reed, I will end you, Myung. Look into my eyes and see the truth.”

“Unhand me, you mongrel,” Myung snarled.

I wanted to roll my eyes. His attitude towards Ha-joon like he was a bastard wasn't just stupid, it was insulting. He'd been there when his brother had been born. He knew he was his mother's son.

So his pride of not being the best shit all over mine.

I backhanded Myung even with Ha-joon holding him, shocking all of our family since the others had followed us to where we were hidden. “My mate has never and would never cheat on me. You're a shite son to not see how your mum flinches every time you try to tear down Ha-joon that way. You imply she was unfaithful and your mum doesn't deserve that!”

Myung lost some of his anger and swallowed loudly, but then tried to break Ha-joon's hold on him... And couldn't which set him off all over again.

But something major was going on and I wasn't mad anymore but fearful for my son.

My son, Myung.

Ha-joon was out for blood, and from what I was getting from him, validly.

“Hugo, whatever has happened, I promise that I will back you, but please release your brother before—” I started to say.

“Before he has to face consequences ever?” Ha-joon bit out.

“No, before you do something you cannot take back, Brother,” Seo-yun of all people whispered. “You are—please, check with your wolf. I know you are stressed and pushed too far today. I have never felt you this out of control.”

That seemed to get through to him and he shoved Myung away, smirking when my eldest son collapsed to the ground. Then he seemed to have trouble controlling his wolf. “You're right because I'm afraid of what bile will come out of his mouth after I tell and this has caused a rift between me and my future mate and that was his goal.”

“Ellie is a forgiving woman—a good woman and I'm sure she will listen to reason,” Soo-ah comforted. “What did Myung do now, my youngest?”

His mum's genuine concern broke through his rage and he focused on her. “The git learns what family Ellie comes from and we're together and he just can't leave it alone and let me be happy. No, he investigated her and found out about her half sister, Theresa.”

“The woman he was staring daggers at,” I surmised, glancing between my sons in confusion.

“Yes, because he realized she was here because she came to tell us what he did, his offer,” Ha-joon sneered, snarling when Myung opened his mouth. “I will end you. My wolf is itching to take out the threat to my mate. Do. Not. Push. Me.”

I was glad when Byeol and my other son moved to block Ha-joon’s view of Myung. Not to side with Myung but so we didn’t lose a member of the family today.

Ha-joon understood, but his wolf wouldn’t see it that way. He adjusted his neck and focused on me, knowing I would have to handle whatever. “Theresa Reed told me the truth when she said he showed up at her work and basically ordered her to be with him. That she obviously would have an axe to grind with Ellie and now he would have the better Reed at his side.

“He was aggressive, demeaning, and threatening when she didn’t drop to her knees sobbing in gratitude at his shit demands. She’s one of the top attorneys in Europe and he ordered her to come to his side like a damn dog, giving her a list of his expectations, including destroying Ellie.”

“Which obviously she has no desire to do no matter the rift between them,” Ha-yun muttered. “And she came to you to warn you and ask you talk to Da so this didn’t blow up worse. But now you’ve sided with the sister over your lover?”

Ha-joon sighed. Heavily. “I didn’t side with her, but she needed to know more—it’s complicated. We didn’t get to finish because we were called in on this. It’s a mess between them and Myung was going to use that to hurt Ellie and, in turn, me.”

“You have no proof of that and it’s—” Myung started to say, and I had to block Ha-joon so he didn’t go for his brother.

I kept my hands up in surrender and met his gaze. “I can’t stay still and let one of my children kill the other.”

Tears that cut my heart to shreds filled Ha-joon's eyes. "Keep telling yourself that, Da. He deserves sense beat into him, but you still love and support him after you caught him trying to kill me as a toddler." He angled his head and studied me. "Or do you wish he succeeded so the problem of this family would be gone?"

I recoiled as if he'd struck me, his belief that I might want that breaking something inside of me. "Never. Never, Son."

"I wish I believed you, Da," he rasped, quickly wiping his eyes before shoving me aside. He didn't move forward towards Myung, so I left it alone. "There is something broken inside of you, not me, Myung. I would bet money that you'd fail a sociopath test."

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“Okay, doctor,” Myung mocked as he stood and pushed his siblings aside.

“You haveno regret!” Ha-joon roared. “You tried to kill your toddler sibling and have no regret about it. You’re annoyed we’re talking about it and disappointed that you failed. Not because I’ve ever wronged you or—”

“Of course you did!” Myung blasted. “You challenged me from birth. You challenged my position and—”

“Do you hear yourself?” Ha-joon whispered. “You are a fucking sociopath, Myung. You are unhinged and erratic without thinking your stupid plans through. You lie like the rest of us drink water and are without remorse, regret, or the normal feelings one should have. And I’m done pretending I don’t notice. Not when you came for Ellie and now her sister.”

“Did you really just order some woman to be yours like she was property?” Byeol demanded, looking disgusted. Truly disgusted.

Myung threw her a bored glance. “She’s a bloodsucker who should be useful—”

Ha-joon moved faster than any of us and then Myung was about twenty feet away bleeding and unconscious. He turned away and threw back his head before howling. His eyes were his wolves when he met my gaze. “I will kill him if he tries to hurt Ellie again. You preach and preach about the importance of family. Act on it for once or lose your son.”

“Both of you because you’d be dead if you went for Myung,” my second eldest son

grumbled.

Ha-joon just snorted. “I could kill any of you in a million ways that would never be proven. Have some self-preservation to realize how much knowledge I have as a doctor even if you’re too stupid to see that I’m not as dumb as you.”

I grabbed his arm before he stormed off. “Did you mean what you said?”

“Ya, Da, all of it,” he snapped and yanked away from me.

“No, I meant that you think Myung is clinically a sociopath or something,” I clarified.

He lost some of his anger and sighed. “Most of the warning signs taught are to recognize problems in children. Abusing animals—which is confusing since we’re part animal. However, he checks several boxes, yeah.” He started ticking off fingers. “Chronically lying and thinking you’re better than everyone else can be just a spoiled git.

“Except he shows no remorse. The rest of us look like we’ve been kicked in the teeth when Mum is upset or hurt, but not Myung. He reacts late like he doesn’t feel it but picks up on the social cue and mimics it. He gets his jollies manipulating people. He’s aggressive for reasons he shouldn’t be. Theresa not jumping at his plan and praising him that it was amazing?

“Yeah, huge flag. She’s a pawn on a chessboard to him, and that’s a serious lack of empathy or caring what this could do to her life. He would never have a ‘bloodsucker’ as his mate. So he was just going to use her and wanted her to thank him for that. But I can get him tested for Antisocial Personality Disorder. Quietly.”

“We would just have to be honest for once and that comes with risks,” Ha-yun muttered.

“You’ve thought the same, not just he’s an entitled git?” I checked.

“Yes,” she admitted quietly. “I didn’t know the label or which, but he scared me as children. He only acted remorseful about trying to kill Ha-joon when you were both around.”

“That was my drunken joke that too bad he didn’t go through with it,” Byeol admitted, sighing when Ha-joon reacted like she’d smacked him. “Because it would have outed all of this and not just been a knot in my stomach. It was in bad taste, and I am sorry. I’ve been a right bitch to you, and you’re a little shit more than you ever say, but I never, not ever wanted you dead.”

Ha-joon gave a quick nod to accept that before meeting my gaze. “If it were me, I would lock him up. He’s not going to react well to this, and he needs to see that you’ve hit your limit. Throw him in the old cells under the mansion you still use sometimes for bad shifts. I can talk to Dr. Renee Bass. She’s the head of Psychiatry and Mental Wellness.”

“She’s lovely,” Soo-ah muttered. “She would do something quietly to help us. She’s very close with Ellie and was supportive of her being with Ha-joon after her abusive relationship.”

Ha-joon shot his mum an unfriendly look for oversharing, but she didn’t even notice she was so focused on the problem.

“I will take your advice, thank you,” I accepted.

“I have to get back,” Ha-joon mumbled, shooting me a look like he doubted I would really do anything.

And I couldn’t even blame him for that. I fully deserved it. I did as he suggested

though and had my sons help me sneak Myung through a separate portal. I didn't think many saw us, and if they did, most were too busy with everything else.

"You're still not forgiven until you handle your jealousy towards your own son," Soo-ah said quietly after she heard what I'd said to Myung when he woke up.

"I love you, my mate," I whispered. "I'm doing my best."

She was quiet a moment. "I believe that, and I should have done better too. You can return to our bed, but all is not forgiven."

No, it certainly was not. I saw that and accepted it.

But I was probably still a git because I went back to Myung and gave him another earful. It was all I could do in that moment.

11

Ha-joon

The line of patients to help felt never-ending even with all the extra doctors and staff we had aiding us. I barely closed my eyes the first twenty-four hours, but then I had to crash for a bit. I wasn't the only one and it was hard to find an empty bed.

And my bitterness at the South American government grew. They weren't doing enough when this happened in their area to their people.

But there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it, so I let exhaustion take me. It was for only a couple of hours because they needed more hands. I took a quick shower to help wake up and then wondered if I was dreaming when I found Da there with our chefs.

He looked relieved to see me. "Everyone keeps focusing on the people injured or in range of the danger. Your mum is worried about you and your colleagues. The staff is making extra quick-to-eat food."

"Thanks, Da," I said, accepting a breakfast sandwich. I wasn't even sure... No, it was lunch? Almost dinner?

Whatever. It was fucking grand and exactly what my body needed. Well, maybe a dozen more, but it was a start.

"Can we talk while you eat?" Da asked hesitantly.

“We need you in ten for another surgery,” the ED attending said as he snagged his own sandwich. “And some shifters were injured in the rescue op. They’re coming in, so if you can check they’re stable, that would be a big help.”

“On it,” I accepted, waving Da to come with as I grabbed a few more sandwiches. “Everyone okay?”

“No, and we shouldn’t be,” Da said quietly. “I was blind to too much, but I finally made it clear I had no intention of Myung taking over. I’d had my doubts for a while, and it was most of my stress.” He was silent as we got on the elevator with others but spoke once they were gone. “You have no intention of taking over the pack, do you?”

“Glad you finally figured it out,” I drawled. “It was to get him to pull his head out of his arse but now...” There was no nice way to say I didn’t think there was any hope for my brother. “I hope you do the right thing and see you have an amazing option right in front of you.”

“There’s never been a female Alpha of a pack as large as London,” he worried, not playing games or denying it.

“And isn’t that fucking pathetic in this day and age?”

“I agree, Ha-joon, but she will be the target of everyone going first. It’s not sexism that stops every Alpha, everyfather. If I make that decision and it gets her killed...”

He would never recover.

“Da, it’s her choice and you need to respect that. It also won’t happen tomorrow. You could have twenty years to get the world ready for it. More. If you focus on your health better, and you could if Myung wasn’t such a worry for you.”

He snorted. “You’ll all still always be my biggest worry because I love you so much. And it would be new worries for your sister.”

“True, but... I see it being much better. She’s smart. She could run that pack better than you do maybe. Her only ‘flaw’ is her damn sex. Fight for her and let others fight. I would. Others in the pack would just for the statement of having the first female Alpha. I see it going better than you could hope.”

He nodded. “Myung spiraled after what you said. He was telling people it wasn’t true and I promised him that it was a done deal. He was flat-out lying and signing checks for me that now we’ll take a hit not cashing.”

“Change the reason. Get him tested, and while people don’t need to know the official diagnosis, make it clear it’s a medical reason. That it’s to protect the pack and to keep everyone safe that you would make such a horrible call,” I told him in between stuffing another breakfast sandwich into my mouth.

“That could undermine your sister if she does take over.”

That was a good point, but I reminded him nothing was perfect. Also, to talk to Ha-yun given it could hurt her in the long run. Don’t sign checks for her either.

That seemed to really help and he gave me a grateful look.

He grabbed my arm. “I did as I promised. I really did, Ha-joon. I will get him tested, and—he wasn’t lying when he told me that he knew he couldn’t go through with killing you. I swear to you that I always believed that.”

I let out a slow breath. “It might be harder to read him if he really has the condition. It might be because of the crazy that day and your own wolf being conflicted. There could be many reasons.” He waited until I nodded. “But there was no guilt from him

when I found out. He was annoyed, Da. Like someone pointing out a failure, not his shame.”

“I know,” he rasped. “I sensed it that time too. I also heard he was telling people that you and Ha-yun were throwing childish fits for attention and it was all horseshit. Not only does that undermine me as the Alpha and our laws about becoming Alpha, but...”
Da shook his head.

Yeah, there wasn't much else to say.

“Glad you called him on it,” I muttered, not sure what else I could add.

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“He’s taken off the mask fully like what he said about Ellie’s sister,” Da whispered, his voice sounding hollow. “The things your brother said in response... I think you’re right and something is truly broken in him.”

“It’s not your fault, Da,” I said gently, shaking my head when he chuckled darkly. “Please, just hear me on this.” I waited until he nodded. “It’s an underdeveloped brain, basically. That part of him didn’t grow right. It’s not your fault. It’s not Mum’s fault. It just happens. Just like I got your eyes instead of hers or Ha-yun is so much taller than our sisters.”

“I will try to hear you, but I still deserve your hate when I didn’t handle this sooner.”

Yes, he did, which was why I didn’t disagree or let him off the hook. Something he noticed.

“But you’re wrong about why I’m jealous of you, Hugo,” he said quietly, shyly almost, which I’d never seen from my da before. He sighed when I simply stared at him. “Yes, you’re different because you’re two wolves. You’re more powerful—so what?” He nodded when I raised an eyebrow and kept eating. “I’m more powerful as Alpha too.

“I’ve been labeled as different for treating your mother as my partner, not just a pretty trophy like how most Asian Alpha Mates are. Or mating with a different type of wolf—one from Asia no less.” He let out a huff and put his hands on his hips. “Now I just sound like I’m bragging that I’m not a git.”

I snorted. He really kind of did, but I understood what he meant.

“It’s how you popped out that always made me jealous, my boy,” he said gently. “You’ve always known who you are. You—no matter what people said about your shift, it never bothered you. You knew it meant you were powerful and you just had to get on the same page as your wolf. You knew you’d be here one day changing the world.

“It’s your confidence that I was—am jealous of. I doubt myself and who I am so often that maybe I need my head shrunk.” He snorted. “Definitely do. But you popped out knowing you are Ha-joon Fucking Clark and your approval was the only one you ever needed. You knew you were special and better than so many.”

I almost didn’t say anything and simply accepted the praise... But it wasn’t that simple. “That’s not what was really happening, Da.” I stared at my food and blinked back tears. “I had to. I had to look to myself because I wasn’t supported. My siblings sneered at me or ignored me. You and Mum were always focused on so much else.”

“Yes, and we have failed you but—”

“It wasn’t confidence, Da. It was armor to not get hurt anymore,” I said as I gathered my wrappers. “It was how I survived to get out of that house and have my own life instead of staying the hated youngest—the black sheep no one cared about. So I’m sorry I made you feel inferior or jealous, but I’ve seen the way your siblings support and love you. I would have given anything for that.”

I had to walk away. We probably needed to talk more, but I was needed for work, and that was more important than old issues that wouldn’t ever be solved.

And I really didn’t have the energy to rip bandages off old wounds.

It took another two days of almost constantly working to handle the disaster. The last numbers I heard were over a hundred died and they expected more. People were

rioting that the government wasn't taking it more seriously, but honestly I barely heard any of it. All I cared about was getting home and really crashing.

Especially since I'd be working Saturdays for the next few weeks to make up for all the appointments I'd had to reschedule. It was ridiculous that ASH handled everything for a disaster on another continent and it was just expected of us.

Expected of Ellie.

I'd showered before we headed home, not even driving ourselves because neither of us felt safe behind the wheel. I thanked the officer who gave us a ride and got the shower ready for her while she ordered us food.

It was honestly comforting and nice to work together when something horrible like this happened. We were both wrecked but on the same page, so it didn't feel so overwhelming.

Or so I thought.

She wouldn't get into bed when it was time, both of us clean and fed. She looked anywhere but at me. "I'm going to sleep on the couch."

"Why the bloody fuck are you sleeping on the couch in your own condo?" I demanded more harshly than I should have. I sat up and let out a growl, noting her shock. "Sorry. I'm wrecked but was just thinking how nice this is and we're in sync..." I swallowed another growl when she flinched. "Ellie, talk to me. What is going on?"

"I just need some space," she whispered, looking ready to collapse.

"Fine, then I'll sleep on the blasted couch if you won't even care enough to tell me

why,” I snapped when I realized that was really all she was going to say. I grabbed the pillow and went to leave since there was an extra blanket in the living room.

“Did you forget what we were doing when we got the call three days ago?” she asked, her voice tight but so weak.

I let out a slow breath, facing the door so I wasn’t looking at her and it was easier to keep myself in check. “No, and we still have to speak with Theresa more. But I thought it was on pause and you trusted me enough to know I’m always on your damn side.”

“I did—we did pause, but it came back to me in the shower,” she whispered, sounding lost. “I don’t like how it played out. I think I’m valid, but I didn’t want to blow it up when we’re both beyond exhausted. Saying I needed a breath seemed...”

“You’re not wrong,” I accepted after a moment. “But we’re in a cycle of pushing each other away when anything happens. We said we were done with that. Sleeping on the couch is—it’s too much for this, Ellie. Especially when I felt closer to you coming home after something so horrible. We lost so many, but we did our best, and I got to come home and hold you.”

“I wanted that too, but I feel...”

I turned and hurt when I saw tears running down her cheeks. She was in such worse shape than I was because she was always all over the hospital and handling too much. Three days of surgeries and helping patients without enough sleep was rough and horrible, but Ellie went through way more.

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I went over to her, tossing the pillow back on the bed before wiping her tears. “Tell me what you’re feeling and then we pause until after sleep. I hold you and we handle this together. Always together now.” I pushed when she hesitated. “You know I’m not on her side or—Ellie, you know I’m on your side.”

She let out a slow breath and nodded. “I don’t like how that played out. If it was Myung who came for me, I wouldn’t have met him without you. There’s contention and issues and it’s not for me to meet with him alone.”

“Fair, but I didn’t know it was her until I was standing in front of her.” I told her what happened with the front desk and then even how she’d hung up the phone for them. “And I made it clear that I wasn’t speaking with her until she brought up an issue in London and made it clear it was my family.”

She bobbed her head as I spoke. “I don’t ever want to feel like I’m an outsider coming into something like that again. We’re supposed to be the team. I might not have been in any real relationships, but I know that. I felt like the intruder and annoyance from you getting what you wanted from the meeting.”

“No, I texted you knowing you would come,” I told her. “I was in shock. What she told me shocked me on several levels and I’m scared about the threat against you.” I sighed when she frowned. “Someone sent her to kill you, Ellie.”

She blinked at me a moment and then stood on her toes to kiss my nose. “Hundreds of years ago, Ha-joon. You act like she was sent here now because someone wanted to kill me.”

I opened my mouth but then closed it. “Okay, yeah, that’s fair and I’m showing I’m a pup probably, but that doesn’t mean the threat is gone. You should know the information. Not forgive her because you said she came for you another time and was a cunt, but... Clearly, more is going on. She didn’t know about Aurora or—”

“You’re right, but that wasn’t something for you to decide right there and try to force. She and I could have settled it later after you and I talked.”

“Fair,” I accepted. “I just heard the threat against you. But yeah, fair.” I sighed. “If I’m in the same situation again, even though you don’t have any other siblings, how do you want me to handle it?”

“Wait for me. Or call me while I’m on my way,” she answered immediately. “I should never feel like we’re not the team, and maybe that’s not fair with what really happened, but that’s how I felt. We become official and my sister shows up and you’re saying I have to talk to her and hear her side. That’s what happened.”

Shit, she was so right.

I wasn’t wrong for what I did... But she was right.

“Okay, yeah, that’s more than fair to say,” I told her, kissing her forehead. “I just need you to say that I didn’t do anything wrong.” I stepped away after several awkward moments of her not saying anything. I frowned at what was on her face. “I didn’t do anything wrong or to betray you, Ellie.”

She turned away. “This was why I said I just wanted to breathe. I can’t...”

She was too tired. She was all beaten up and I had to be understanding.

“Okay,” I accepted, telling my wolf to stuff it. She’d done a lot to push past what she

was comfortable with to make me feel more secure and we were solid.

Time to do the same for her.

“What does okay mean?” she asked, sounding like she was about to break down crying, her exhaustion hitting me hard.

“Okay, you need more time to say it after you’re rested. Okay, you know where I’m at on this and let’s hit pause and get some sleep.”

She still didn’t look at me. “Just like that?”

I swallowed loudly. “Yeah, just like that, my sweet kimchi.”

“Okay.” She was on autopilot as she got into bed. She was so down on the tank that I was surprised she made it to pull the covers over her.

I realized what else I could do and got into bed with her before moving my wrist to her face. “Drink, Ellie. Did you get the blood you needed?”

“No, we needed like everything for our guests,” she mumbled. “How a hospital was housing uninjured like that—there were over a thousand who didn’t even have family at the hospital. Our tents outside were just nicer than the chaos. Great, but we’re a hospital, not a damn hotel. I hate everything and how horrible people can be in a crisis.”

Yeah, she needed rest and blood—everything. It took a bit of coaxing, but she drank and was out before she even healed my bite. I wasn’t mad. I knew it wasn’t intentional or even a slight.

She was just that exhausted.

I hugged her to me and the bite healed on its own by the time we were settled. I was out seconds later.

But woke to more issues or... I wasn't really sure, but Ellie was clearly agitated.

“No, Alan, I'm not asking that,” she hissed. “He has his own shit and life going on! He's not my fucking food.” She was quiet a moment but then sighed. “Look, I hear you, but—there has—”

She was quiet again but then chuckled darkly, sounding almost ready to cry in frustration.

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“Oh yeah, that will go over well with my jealous lover when there’s too much going on. Yeah, he’ll love the idea of me feeding from other Alpha shifters. Are you having a laugh? Soft in the head? I don’t—”

I was up and out of the bedroom in a flash, startling Ellie into dropping the phone when I was suddenly standing in front of her.

“Fuck, you scared me,” she hissed as I caught her phone before it hit the ground. “I’m not awake enough for any of this.”

“Well, it can’t wait because South America isn’t doing enough,” Alan said from the phone.

“Put it on speaker,” she said, giving me a guilty look. “It involves you after all. And I don’t care—South America can suck it.”

“The whole continent or like some part of it in particular?” I asked as I put the call on speaker.

“Not in the mood even if you’re sexy and mostly naked,” she drawled.

Fair enough.

I thought my sarcasm was pretty well deserved.

Ellie

“I’m making coffee,” I grumbled when Ha-joon simply shrugged. I was a complete mess. This crisis was so much worse than any we’d helped with in years and years, and the fact the South American government acted like it was all owed to them was really pissing me off.

And people would want me to just accept it to not start trouble. I’d already told the president I wouldn’t this time because they were pushing harder and harder that we were a UN hospital. That was dangerous and he wasn’t hearing me on that.

“Why are you trying to have Ellie drain me?” Ha-joon asked Alan, sounding as exhausted as I felt.

I snorted. He deserved his sarcasm, but it would irk Alan who was just as wrecked as we were.

“Not drain you, dipshit,” Alan drawled. “Ellie, does he know—”

“Yes, he figured it out,” I said over my shoulder. “And hurry this up because the president is going to be calling one or both of us soon. You know he will. He doesn’t want to fight on this.”

“I love and hate that man,” Alan grumbled. “Fine, Ellie’s blood is four times more potent for how we use it. The blood is—we’re going to have to redistribute it and dilute it. The only thing that’s changed?”

“Feeding from me,” Ha-joon instantly surmised. “Okay, great. So what’s the problem? You get four times as much to help the regular blood.”

I winced, knowing things weren’t that simple.

“Yes, but we don’t know how and when it works because it’s all hidden,” Alan answered, his tone tired. “It’s not like we have a team on this, Ha-joon. It’s a hidden secret that we’ve kept quiet for this long. Now there’s suddenly a change that quality control noticed? And how do we figure this out? Only take blood from her the day after she feeds from you?”

“That would make things less fun,” Ha-joon sighed as he sat at the counter while I made coffee. “Okay, I get it. So you’re saying she’s still drinking normal blood since I can’t give her everything she needs and that could make some of the batches not hit the new higher standards?”

“Yes, in theory. Also, it could throw red flags like something became unstable. If even a whisper of that happens—the only way people have accepted this is because it’s always,alwaysbeen stable since we’ve started.”

“And I’ve threatened to shut it all down if they pull tricks. But that’s my biggest fear with the South American government repeatedly trying to label us a UN hospital. What is in the bylaws of being a UN hospital?”

“Any government in the UN can inspect the hospital and do a full audit at any time,” Alan answered for Ha-joon.

I nodded when Ha-joon’s face went pale. “Okay, so one problem at a time. I’ll just have to stop drinking from Ha-joon.”

“Fuck. No,” Ha-joon growled, his eyes flashing his wolf and making it clear that wasn’t happening. “My wolf would go damn near feral if we were providing something necessary for our mate and then had to stop. Plus...”

I nodded. Yeah, it kicked up our sex to a whole other level.

One neither of us wanted to lose.

“Ignoring you just called her your mate,” Alan drawled.

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“She’s our future mate to my wolf,” Ha-joon muttered. “We’ve already discussed this. Leave it be. You can’t bring logic or like relationship timelines to our animal sides.”

Alan was quiet a moment. “I’ve heard Sean and others say the same. Glad you can keep it under wraps. Okay, on the blood, we’ve needed more, Ellie. It’s not about the money or what it could do for ASH. You know that.”

“I know that,” I agreed, knowing the numbers better than he did. There were just too many vampires in the world, and they needed better, stronger blood. “But your answer just—even if it was reality, how would we suddenly explain being able to produce so much more blood?”

Alan snorted. “I doubt most will care as long as there’s more on the market, Ellie.”

“So your answer is for her to... What? Have a list of Alphas she can just bite and that won’t be suspicious or lead to misunderstandings?” Ha-joon demanded, his tone tight.

“Do you want to be a jealous child and throw a fit or be of use because right now we have a problem and you just shit on both options,” Alan snapped.

“And that wasn’t his real suggestion,” I cut in. “So let’s all breathe and remember we just went through three days of hell.”

“It wasn’t even about being jealous but getting her caught as different,” Ha-joon grumbled. He stood suddenly and slapped his hands on the counter. “Some will want

her dead if they find out she's the reason vamps can get better blood. Others will take her and—you know this!"

"We do," Alan said gently, understanding he'd misread Ha-joon's upset.

So had I.

"We could make something sound legitimate," I sighed. "When these blood drives are happening, we—"

"Pay an Alpha for their blood and say it's needed to have on hand in case an Alpha is injured or needs surgery," Ha-joon interrupted as he went to the fridge to get everything we needed for coffee. "You'll make more money being able to sell way more blood—four times as much, right? You'd get Alphas who regularly donate because some packs can always use money."

"But are Alphas of smaller areas or packs that need money always real Alpha shifters?" Alan muttered. "Look, I didn't say we needed the answer today. I wasn't even being a shit before when you laid into me, Ellie. I didn't say bite Sean or Gerald. They'd give blood to..."

"Gerald is a problem when he's shown interest and he doesn't let things go," I interjected when Ha-joon started growling, explaining the issue. "It's also—yeah, okay, we'll discuss it and get back to you. I hear you. Let's get through this crisis first." I thanked him and hung up.

"It's because I'm different, right? That's what you didn't want to point out to him?" Ha-joon asked quietly, his voice distant. It was such a wound for him, especially everything going on with his family.

"I don't know." I shrugged when he shot me a look that he wasn't buying that. "We

fell into all of this, Ha-joon. I have no fucking clue what blood to drink to make mine more powerful. Or powerful in this way. Yes, your blood is powerful and I love it. It gives me a bit of a high if I'm down on the tank and makes me..." I cleared my throat.

"Horny for me?" he asked hopefully. "Tell me it at least makes you extra horny for me and help me feel better."

I chuckled. If he could try and make this conversation easier, I could too. "Yes. Very." I decided to address what happened last night before we had to head to work too soon. I moved closer and cupped his face when he focused on me. "And you didn't do anything wrong with Theresa. I'm not mad at how you handled it."

He studied my eyes for a moment. "You're not."

"No, I'm not given the situation and what you told me. You weren't poking for information when I wasn't there. You weren't sticking your nose in it or trying to play mediator. I'm sorry I couldn't say it last night, but I just—I couldn't use my brain I was so tired."

"I know." He turned and kissed my hand. "Thank you. I'm glad we talked it out. I'm glad you stayed and we could be good enough for each other to pause on something like that. I got snitty because I was exhausted too, but—I hate the space. Time-out on a fight or conversation but don't run from me."

"Deal." I nodded when he met my gaze. "Now that I saw the healthy way to handle this and asking for a pause was reasonable when we shouldn't talk about serious, I would rather us handle it that way instead of sleeping on the couch. Thank you for showing me how to be healthy—valuing me so we could be healthy."

"Me too," he said, leaning in and kissing my cheek. "It was really nice to talk things

out and have it settled this way. I hate—everything was always a blowup in my family or other relationships. Yes, we care enough about this relationship to fight, but not everything has to be a fight.”

I couldn't have agreed more and did.

I told him my idea about separating the blood of Alphas at the drive and making it clear that it was for shifters. Sort of like he said, but right now we gave the same mix for surgeries by blood time. Supe blood was supe blood in a way unless special conditions or reasons, and then we normally had blood separate for that.

But even if we said we were doing a research study on more powerful shifter blood for... Whatever. A list of things butto push how it could help hospitals. Maybe even do it for real without letting people know that I was drinking some of it.

“Yeah, that's smart too,” Ha-joon accepted. He gave me a hug and pulled me onto his lap. “I want you to have the best. I do. It's just hard. I hate that I don't give you all of what you need.”

“It's because I give so much blood to make better blood for my people,” I promised him.

He blinked at me for several awkward moments. “Yeah, but if it's four times as powerful—do you need to give as much that often? Even if you gave half as much as you do now, that would be twice as much blood additive as you have now?”

“We're too sleep-deprived that we didn't see that,” I mumbled. “You might have to change a bit of your diet and whatnot to more iron-rich—we should loop in Sean. There's got to be a way to do this quietly.”

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“I’ll do whatever I can and not just because the sex is so amazing between us when you feed. I know getting better blood to vampires is a priority for you.”

“You’re going to make me fall in love with you,” I warned.

“I hope so,” he chuckled, giving me another kiss.

We headed into work and everyone was just dead from the past several days. We weren’t getting in any more victims, and most would be presumed dead by now, so it was mostly recovery operations from what I knew.

But somehow we still had “guests” all over the lawns of my fucking hospital. Guests who were asking when food was coming again and if they could get showers—basic everything.

I was beyond furious. Not at them. This wasn’t their fault, and they hadn’t asked to be brought to ASH, simply someplace safe.

And probably not forever.

I called the president and wasn’t happy with the answers I received. I made it clear that he handle this fast and without asking me to grab my ankles for these assholes or he wouldnotlike how I handled it.

Unfortunately, I was pretty sure he was going to call my bluff.

“I don’t bluff, you fool,” I grumbled after the call was over.

I had a meeting with several of my top admins and told them where we needed to start. First, it was going to be hellish, but I needed the bill for everything we'd provided. Everything. People needed to see exactly how much the South American government was trying to push off onto a private hospital when it was their responsibility.

I also had our media people start taking footage of the crazy we had and even security footage of the portals being opened to dump uninjured people on us. We hadn't released that for privacy reasons, and it had been a crisis, but now... No.

Again, we weren't a fucking hotel or resort for people. We weren't a UN hospital for them to abuse like this.

Which was why there weren't many UN hospitals.

At. All.

There was a whole list, but it was clear that I was preparing for war. I knew they were nervous, and it was against what the president wanted... But we didn't answer to the South American government, and I wasn't going to risk that the people advising the president were pushing him the wrong way on this.

It would benefit the North American government if we were labeled a UN hospital as well. All of the governments would love that—had been trying to make that work for decades.

No matter that it would fuck me and ASH over. It would be the political win of the century.

Which was why I was never, not ever going to let that happen. ASH wasn't about politics or even one government. It was bigger than that.

That was how we were able to help as we did.

I made some calls and recorded them so I had the threats and dismissive attitudes along with what I already had. Basically, my arsenal was well-stocked.

I gave the president one more chance, but by four in the afternoon, I was getting the brush-off, not even talking to him directly. Big mistake. That was too big of a mistake on something this important.

So I contacted the news station with the biggest nightly news show and told them I was willing to give an exclusive interview that they would want. Including a whole lot of information that would make their views explode.

Needless to say, when that sort of statement came from me, they believed it... And asked how long until I could be at their studio.

“Good luck,” Ha-joon muttered as he met me by the portal to take me to New York. He gave me a quick kiss and couldn’t hide the worry in his eyes.

“I’ve done much crazier things than calling a world leader on his shit,” I assured him. “Get some rest. I’ll see you at home.”

“I have a meeting with Alan and Sean about what we talked about.” He cupped my face when I flinched. “I’m trying to take something off your plate. You trust us. It’s just hard for you to be party to it when...”

When it was about my blood and talking about me like an asset that more could be gotten from. That was fair, and I was pretty sure he had noted the way it had triggered me about my past. Especially since my father had popped out his head.

And I still needed to have a difficult conversation with my father.

The anchor of the show was hesitant and clearly didn't think an interview during his prime-time show was a good idea. He changed his mind quickly when I went over some of what I was going to show everyone. It was against their protocols that they didn't see and verify all the information first.

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How could they? We were the ones who it came from.

But also, they didn't relinquish control of their screens and equipment. They gave it over for the data when I handed over the footage from our security and more. They could quickly flip through that while things got set up and decide what they wanted to play.

I also promised to give them full access to the "guests" to interview as they pleased so they heard it from their mouths. I thought that was more than fair.

The president must have gotten word of what was going on because he tried calling me from his personal line. When I didn't answer, he texted asking me not to do what I was and to talk.

I simply responded that he'd had his chance and I would do whatever I had to so my hospital and people were protected. Always.

The interview started from the beginning. I was honest that my president asked us to aid South America because we were the best trauma center in the world—or one of the top. I could be modest sometimes.

But that things had quickly spiraled out of control, and magics opened portals to ASH without authorization, mocking us as they did.

"Forgive me for saying this, but you sound like you might have some animosity towards magics," he worried.

“My best friend is a witch,” I snickered. “I previously had a long-term lover who is a warlock. No, I have nothing against any supe species. What I have a problem with is egotistical, entitled jackasses who try to use a crisis to settle scores or... Whatever this was. Your station has the security footage with audio.

“You have the proof this wasn’t about helping people but trying to stick it to a North American private hospital. I don’t know why. Jealousy? They know their president hates me because I won’t allow ASH to be named a UN hospital? I can’t tell you for sure, but they used the suffering and deaths of many to try and make this worse for everyone.”

“We’ve been reporting on the excessive push to shout everywhere that ASH is a UN hospital,” he accepted. “There have been slips here and there, but now it’s been—it’s been incessant.”

“Because they want access to our research, including how we formulate the blood additive. I’ve been threatened so many times over the years to hand it over to the South American government—this president in particular—it’s ridiculous.

“They want it to make money. Not to help their citizens, but with a private company. I believe there are many, many laws about presidents not making money off their time in office, yes? It’s a level of corruption any sane person agrees is over the line. It’s a conflict and they weren’t elected to office to make themselves richer. They were elected to make our lives better.”

“I agree, but there are many who are saying this is all a ploy to skip out on the bill which is the agreement in place between the governments when aid is given, yes?”

“There is,” I answered, glad he was on the ball. “But ASH isn’t money-hungry like some accuse us.” I brought up the slide that was relevant. “This was the total of everything we spent and services when the earthquake hit Asia and we jumped in.”

He whistled. “That—no one knows it cost that much. It’s an exorbitant amount.”

“Saving lives isn’t cheap,” I chuckled darkly. “Take into account all of the overtime—double timesince most of the staff didn’t leave the hospital for days. We had extra people come in. Not to mention all our families volunteering and bringing in supplies, food—there’s no way we got all of those costs.”

“Plus the cost of our military involvement,” he added. “We heard you gave free extra blood to our military and first responders.”

“We did. Food was always available to them and more.” I waited until he nodded. “However, most of our doctors are salaried, so they didn’t demand the overtime or double time they could have in such a crisis. Other medical staff who came to help didn’t request payment for services. A lot of people donated their time.

“But that doesn’t mean the value of their work isn’t there. We had to reschedule four days of appointments because of this crisis. I have doctors and practices that will be working weekends for months to get their schedules back in order when we’re trying to provide health care to more. There are also costs we can’t forgive because we’re billed for them.”

“Laundry services—”

“ASH has its own in-house laundry but yes, you’re on the right track. Our water and added energy consumption doesn’t get waived. Medical waste costs are a lot to handle. We had to put in a rush order for more surgical equipment because of this last crisis. That bill will make me cry and cost about the same as hiring a new nurse for a year.”

I went over all the numbers, saying what we didn’t charge for and the discounts we gave to Asia because of the promises to help us restock our blood supply. Which they

did and even offered some of their personnel to cover for ours while they recovered. I basically pumped up Asia on how they handled the situation even if it hadn't been smooth at the time.

It was still a whole lot better than what was going on now.

“I had no idea ASH ate so much of the cost,” he muttered. “That’s not what was reported at all.”

“Shocking that certain governments in particular were pushing that narrative while referring to us as a UN hospital,” I drawled. “We’re not, and the department heads are so upset how everything happened, the way their staff was treated, and what’s being reported now, that we’re discussing magically locking ASH from portals.”

The horror on his face and those of others in the studio at the threat would have been amusing if the situation wasn't so serious.

But it was.

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Ellie

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Next, I went over the list of reasons other governments wanted ASH to become a UN hospital. All to benefit their pockets since all of the money we made would be reverted to them. Our government made a lot of money off of us in taxes and the others wanted that money. UN hospitals were basically neutral zones or embassies.

And they wanted what was most of Atlanta to become that? Just because they said so?

No, over my dead body, and even then it wouldn't happen because the founder had it in several clauses and charters. If the move was ever truly tried, ASH would be no more. Governments were not to control medicine like that or there was no point in keeping the doors open.

Again, the anchor and people in the studio were horrified, but I thought it was best to lay it all out.

While they were still in shock, I brought up the next file that showed our costs for the sinkhole crisis. There was also a list of departments that hadn't gotten updated numbers or we ran out of time to get all the invoices that vendors would bill us for the extras later.

“That is the cost of the South American government's neglect to allow a town to be built where it was. For not having their own trauma center able to help. First responders not ready to give aid or a cohesive plan like our FEMA. And their administration has the audacity to try and force a UN hospital label on a private hospital in another country?”

“That’s their answer? They want to distract attention and try and get the win that they have full access to ASH instead of fixing their problems? Or apologizing for this huge misstep the government made? It’s ludicrous.” I snorted. “I have people warning me to tread carefully or let some of this go. That I have no leverage or way to fight a government.

“That’s ridiculous. There is always a way—starting with canceling all hospital services and appointments with citizens of their country. Also, cutting off the blood supply. No longer selling it to them. Those of us at the top of ASH have been killing ourselves to increase the blood supply we sell.

“Mostly so we can give discounts to our military, law enforcement, and first responders. We could easily if we cut off South America.” I shrugged when the anchor dropped his pen. “ASH is not government-run. We are for profit. We pay an exorbitant amount of taxes. I am not allowing crazy from their politics to try and take over my hospital.”

“Yes, but—” he tried to interject.

I looked at the producer. “Roll the footage I gave you. Show how we’re flooded with uninjured South American citizens and their government isn’t doing anything. They said we agreed to help so handle it. How? ASH isn’t a resort. We’re a massive hospital and these people aren’t injured. I’ve been told it’s my duty to handle this.

“Unless the gods come here and tell me that themselves, no one else gets to tell me and my people what our duty is. We made an oath of do no harm. That is a medical oath while taking care of a patient, not a promise in blood to give everything of mine to others.” I saw the video was playing and gestured to the screen. “They need showers.

“Beds we don’t have. Basic necessities. It’s been days and they have no idea about

their homes. The few people from the South American government have only shown up to yell at me that we're a UN hospital like that senator who physically assaulted me. Others yelling that we're not doing enough." I snorted again. "Enough? No, we've had enough of this situation."

"What about all of these people?" the anchor whispered as he watched the footage.

I shrugged. "They're getting upset. Validly, but we didn't do this. This is not the fault of my people and it will become a mob fast. I wonder if that's not what their government wants. They promised there would be 'punishments' for me if I didn't agree to what they want. Are they inciting these poor people to become a mob? In another country?"

There was so much more to unravel and I had no problem doing it. Showing the numbers and listing the doctors and more who came from all over our country to help and yet not one offer from those in South America. It was beyond ridiculous.

We had help from Asia and Europe but not from the country of the crisis.

Enough was enough and I said as much.

They thanked me when it was all over, switching to a different segment. Someone had just come to take my mic off when my phone rang... From a South American number.

I waved for the producer and her assistants to follow me and moved into the hallway. Then I answered the call on speaker and let them hear the disgusting onslaught of insults and threats I received from someone in the South American's cabinet. I recorded it and let them get it all out, not saying anything which they eventually noticed and demanded I answer for myself.

So I did. I hung up.

“You’re welcome,” I chuckled when the producer realized what I’d been up to. “Go ahead and report it. I’m done. The fact they just called a powerful citizen of another country like that...” I shook my head. Disgusting.

Which was why I also sent it to Alan and the president. They needed to be read in, and my president needed to handle it whether he wanted the drama or not.

I hadn’t been the one to start it. I was only protecting myself and my people.

“Fuck today,” I grumbled after coming through the portal. The last thing I wanted to do was drive home and then I frowned, not even sure whose vehicle was at ASH. Mine? No, I rode with Ha-joon that morning.

But I thought he drove my SUV?

“I need a fucking vacation,” I sighed, rubbing my eyes and trying to remember this morning.

“You do, but I can’t give you that right now, so tell me how to help,” a deep voice said with a sexy accent.

I glanced over my shoulder and smiled at Ha-joon. “You drove my SUV today? I can’t even remember and was trying to think about getting home.”

“Yes, and I promised to wait for you,” he reminded me, giving me a worried look.

“We need more rest.”

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I snorted. That was the truth. “And less stress.” I nodded when he sighed. Yeah, I didn’t think that was going to be happening anytime soon.

But something to ease my stress would help and that was a text from the president apologizing. He had no idea things were remotely that bad with thousands of uninjured using ASH like a damn camping park. He said he’d given the order to our military to start getting those people through a portal to our embassy in South America.

And they would reenter their country from there. No more playing. No more bullshit or trying to get them to the border or whatever games their government would try next. He didn’t know what the goal of the South American President really was with this, but he was done playing.

Especially because the President of South America was a warlock and we now knew a lot of the witches and warlocks who helped that day to bring everyone here were of his family. Not the good ones, the local ones who truly saved people.

Some dying because of it. No, the smirking assholes who just kept bringing more and more uninjured people like we were a resort for them to find peace at after their crisis.

I told Ha-joon while he drove and he nodded as his grip on the steering wheel tightened. It was so bad I was worried about my damn SUV his knuckles were so white.

“What am I missing?” I worried.

“I’m just upset that I can’t bash that fucker’s face in,” he mumbled. “All of their faces in. Hearing what they’ve been saying to you now that I’m not in surgery saving their citizens—getting caught up has been hard. I can’t imagine how you’ve been shouldering it all and always. You’re really amazing, Ellie.”

Oh wow, I hadn’t seen that coming from him. I liked it, but... I hadn’t seen that coming.

“Wanna see how amazing I am on my knees while we shower?” I asked, trying to keep my tone as innocent as possible.

He looked at me so fast that I heard his neck pop.

“Traffic!” I yelled when we came up on brake lights.

“Shit, sorry,” he growled as he slammed on the brakes and paid attention, his arm shooting out protectively.

“So you almost rear-end someone in my SUV and you cop a feel as your reward?” I drawled, looking down at his arm over my breasts.

“Ellie, that wasn’t—I can’t even get mad. My brain melted and now I just want what you—how much longer until your condo?” The ramble he said that all in and so fast was fucking adorable.

How was a huge, sexy Alpha werewolf also so damn adorable?

Yeah, I was in trouble... And naked the second we were in my condo.

“Don’t even joke about being subtle when you asked what you did,” he said with a growl when I opened my mouth.

Fair enough.

The shower wasn't fully warmed up when he pushed me inside, the smirk on his lips letting me know that it was intentional.

Fine, I closed the door in his face.

He laughed. He burst out laughing and just opened it back up. He moved me against the tiles and blocked the water until it finished warming up and then made sure every inch of me was soaked.

Yeah, that wasn't difficult, but it took a bit for my hair given there was so much.

He placed soft kisses all over my body, the touches driving me mad and we both knew that was intentional.

"I was already horny when I offered," I chuckled. "You don't have to wind me up."

"I like when you get out of your head for me, Ellie." He pushed his wet hair back out of his face, absolutely showing off his muscular arm and toned body.

And that his dick was standing proud and ready for my attention.

Yes. Please.

I dropped to my knees and took him in my mouth. He stretched my lips wide like always and my nostrils flared as I smelled the power in his blood right there under his skin for me. I wanted that as much as I wanted him to fuck me.

But I wanted it because it was his blood, not just powerful blood. It had always been about Ha-joon and what we shared, not just some ride on his blood.

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The fact it got him going so much when I drank from him was the fun.

“I feel like I should be useful and wash your hair while you do that,” he muttered, sounding a bit confused.

I pulled off with a slurp and shrugged. “Sounds kinky. It’s multitasking at its kinkiest?”

He laughed again... But did it. Goof.

Sexy goof with a very,verytasty cock.

“Don’t drink,” he told me, nodding when I glanced up at him in shock. “Just us.”

Okay, if that was what he wanted. Maybe all the talk about his blood and feeding had... yeah, that could be a turn off or something to worry about.

But I didn’t want him to ever worry about that. So I sucked on him harder, practically choking myself to take him deeper. He loved it from the noises he was making. Completely loved it.

I swallowed down what he gave me, gasping for air when it was over.

Then I was standing with my chest pressed against the wall.

“My lover should never be so neglected that she’s horny,” he murmured in my ear as his fingers plunged into my pussy. “I didn’t bring it up before, but I heard you were

checking out that officer who said he liked you.”

I knew that jealousy was going to come up. “I’m in a relationship, not dead, but I told him I was happily in a relationship. I said it for anyone to hear.”

He nipped at my ear as his fingers did everything to me that I wanted. “That’s why I’m going to fuck your perfect body until you’re sated, not spank you and walk out, my sweet kimchi. But you also need to tell me what I want to hear.”

“I want you to fuck me,” I whimpered as he teased my clit.

Ha-joon chuckled. “Not what I meant.”

It wasn’t? I sighed. “It’s hard to think.”

“You’re smart.”

“I would never cheat on you.”

“I know that without needing you to say it,” he promised. “You don’t have it in you to cheat.”

I was glad to know he felt that about me. “I want only you.”

“Closer.”

And so was I. My body was right there and I begged him to let me finish, done with the games.

He gave me what I needed but then spun me around and slowly washed my body while staring at me, waiting for the answer.

Then the jerk washed himself with a smirk knowing I was dying for more. So was he from his leaking dick, but the game was fun for him.

I was just getting frustrated.

“I don’t want anyone else,” I tried when he rinsed off, moving closer so I did as well but also reaching for him.

“Better,” he whispered and gave me a soft kiss.

That was the clue. “I’m all yours. Only yours, Ha-joon.”

“You sure?” he pushed, a mischievous look in his eyes.

Definitely the right answer. “You should show me.” It came out more like a question, but... I absolutely wanted whatever was swirling inside of him.

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“Gladly,” he snarled.

I blinked and we were out of the shower, water off, and I was sitting on the counter with him between my legs. Gasping as he thrust inside of me, I held on for the ride.

And what a fucking ride it was. He was completely wound up and I was pretty sure it wasn't just the days without sex. We'd both been dealing with so much crazy that it wasn't either of our fault.

Was this really about one hot guy saying he was interested?

Could I find more to do that and Ha-joon to hear about it?

Did it make me a bad person that I immediately wondered that as he fucked my brains out exactly how I needed?

Probably.

Did I care right then?

Nope. Not even a little bit.

I finished hard, but I had to admit I was too tired for the counter. I barely said my ass hurt and he lifted me off of it and we were on my bed.

Where he plowed me some more. He pinned my arms over my head and fucked me. I loved it, but I had questions racing through my head.

Well, when I had enough brain cells to think anything.

“Say it,” he growled after bringing me to climax a few more times.

“Yours,” I moaned, gasping for air. “I’m only yours.”

He snarled and shook his head, his wolf clearly riding him before he leaned down so we were nose to nose. “And you accept that we’re going to get jealous and aggressive at the attention you get especially when you look at them?”

“Yes, absolutely, yes, you should make it clear to me,” I panted, trying to say what he wanted to hear, not even sure that made sense. My head was in happy, world being rocked land.

“Say it!”

“I accept,” I cried out as he made me orgasm again. This man was a fucking machine, and I was all for it.

Well, as long as it was healthy jealousy like this that was done privately and more about him having a wolf that didn’t understand how people had to live. It made sense to me.

No red flags jealousy.

He brought me one more time and finished as well, promising more “punishment,” but I passed out, my body just too down on the tank.

I woke with him demanding I feed from him and ride him and give him what he needed like I should. I wasn’t fully rested, but I’d gotten some sleep for sure. He’d cleaned me up and my hair felt tended to instead of a rat’s nest.

And what he wanted sounded amazing so... Yeah, I was in.

I rode him the best that I could when so tired, noticing that he was helping more than with my balance. I fed from him and moaned at how good he tasted, even more than normal. It had to be how zapped I was but fuck, everything felt great. He did. His body. His blood.

Everything.

But then I crashed again when we were done... Only to be woken up later to him demanding more sex.

And again.

And one last time before our alarms should have gone off. I didn't even get dinner.

So I wasn't surprised at the guilt all over him when I woke for real to start my day. It was in his eyes, all over his face—his aura completely full of it.

“Was that really about one good-looking military officer commenting that he was disappointed to hear I was in a relationship because he'd been happy for the excuse to see me again?” I asked him. “Tell me that wasn't your response to something so mild even if I completely enjoyed it.”

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He huffed as he sat up, sounding a bit petulant. “No.”

That was it though. I sighed and rolled out of bed and used the washroom before following after him to the kitchen where he was fixing us coffee. “Ha-joon, I’m too tired to piece this together. Please be kind and just spell it out to me.”

His response was pulling something up on his laptop and flipping it around so I could watch... And it wasn’t good. The South American government was less than thrilled about what I’d done, and a few cabinet members had publicly stated they wanted me arrested for trying to overthrow their government.

Right, that was what I had tried to do, not simply protect myself and my hospital. Idiots.

But it was clear that threats against me truly upset my lover. He was pouting as he slid my drink over to me fixed my favorite way.

“I saw that in between our rounds when I was anxious and couldn’t sleep. I knew your interview would be—you were so amazing and sexy—”

“But you were scared about the fallout.” I nodded when he did. “I’ve handled worse. I promise.”

“I believe you, but this is terrifying as someone with strong feelings for you.”

It actually hurt that he didn’t say he loved me. I knew he was trying to spare my feelings so I didn’t feel pressured to say it back or that it was too soon, but he’d

already said it, so it was almost like taking it back. Who didn't like to hear they were loved?

I pushed that aside and accepted what he was saying. "What else?"

"Your popularity has gone through the roof now that most of the hospital has learned who you really are," he grumbled, sounding a bit petulant. He probably thought I should have figured this part out or was already read in.

Maybe I should have been, but it was all stupid to me.

But I still reached deep for patience because I knew it couldn't be easy on Ha-joon... People wouldn't make it easy on him given he was a newer addition to ASH and young in our world.

"Yes, people attracted to money and power would absolutely tempt me. That sounds like something that would interest me," I said dryly.

Okay, fine, I didn't reach for much patience when I was this tired. I needed to work on that for sure.

The soft growl he let out made that clear. Whoops!

"They're not assholes, Ellie. They're people who realize they've been too harsh on you or got swept up in smear campaigns against you. They're people who have always admired the founder and your innovations. I've heard several say it was always amazing how hard of a worker and diligent you were, but to know you were always the one behind the curtain is astounding."

I let out a slow breath and met his gaze. "That has to be hard for you to deal with as my lover. I understand that." I held up my finger to hold him off when he opened his

mouth. “I hope you’re also happy for me that people are finally pulling their heads out of their asses. I went through too much, Ha-joon. I deserve people to recognize me.”

“I do. I absolutely do, and it took the duffers long enough to see what was right in front of their damn faces. I’ve said that. Repeatedly.”

I was glad and thought that was the end of it.

“But they need to stop saying that plowing the founder is now on their bucket list,” he snarled.

Or apparently not. Okay, men were just... Men.

I had no cure or way to fix that. May the gods help me.

14

Ha-joon

Ellie overthrew a government.

She could say it wasn’t her all she wanted, but she damn well pushed over the first domino, and anyone with a damn brain knew that. Did she do it to overthrow a government?

No, not in the slightest... But that was where the chips landed when everything settled.

My partner had that kind of fucking power and it was beyond astounding. I was also really, really grateful she was on the side of good.

Reallyfucking grateful.

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After her bombshell interview, she was hassled left and right for more comments and information. News media was all over ASH to get footage of the North American military escorting uninjured South American citizens through a portal. It wasn't being brushed off anymore or left to handle later.

Our government finally acted—was pushed to act by Ellie.

They should have on their own. The South American government was challenging ours. It wasn't just an oversight or prank. They were... Politics sucked.

But Ellie had a response for all of it. She was so poised and ready for all of the attacks, insults, and assertions that it was amazing. I could never be as smooth as her if I lived to be a thousand.

“The person who says it cannot be done should not interrupt nor judge the person busy doing it,” she told the media several times. “The President of South America was very vocal that ASH could never become what it has and that this was all North American greed and a failed attempt to show our superiority.

“Once it was achieved, he changed his tune and spent years and years trying to slap it with a UN hospital label as if he'd had a hand in it. That no one would notice or remember all his previous very loud comments. Yes, many of us remember and were always going to stand in the way of his idiotic plan.

“The fact he did it during a horrific crisis affecting his citizens—one that killed over a hundred and was the failing of his government disgusts many of us. It should disgust the citizens of South America. They were suffering and he had his family help make a

play on a private hospital in another country for money. Money he wanted for himself. Beyond disgusting.”

She had bigger balls than I did. Everyone said it again and again and was beyond impressed with her.

Funny how when they thought she was just the mouthpiece of the founder they tore her down as a loudmouth paper-pushing admin, but now that they knew she was the founder, they were behind her. It probably wasn't that simple, but to some... It was.

Some people were that simple. It was fair to call a spade a spade.

But about a week after her interview, it came to a head, and in a desperate attempt to stop the dominoes falling, the President of South America came for who he saw as the head of the movement.

Ellie.

He wasn't wrong, but it had gone way beyond her now, and rightfully so. It was now like trying to throw a wine cork into a tornado. He had protests all over his continent and... There was no getting out of this. One exposé after another uncovering how other corruption and misdeeds were going to take him down.

But he came for Ellie.

Or the South American military did.

Yeah, it got that crazy.

I was outside with the running club wrapping up when a massive portal opened and soldiers started pouring out. I didn't hesitate, grateful that one of the North American

President's aides slipped me their number in case of emergencies.

This was a fucking emergency.

I sent them a message with pictures of what was going on and then hit record, trying to call them on video.

Ellie was fearless, coming right out and making me want to run off with her and spank her for a week. Maybe more.

She really knew how to push the limits of how far someone could trust their partner. Truly push them.

But she was breathtaking and... There weren't words for how cool my lover was.

She smirked at the general who demanded she surrender herself and ASH to them, publicly state it was a UN hospital. She stood there fucking smirking as he ranted.

"You done?" she chuckled darkly when he paused, seeming to understand he wasn't going to get the reaction he expected. She ignored the steam coming out of his ears and looked past him. "This is not a UN hospital. This is a private hospital on sovereign land of North America, and you just invaded without reason.

"It can and will be considered a declaration of war and you will be party to that. Of a hospital." She met the general's eyes. "You should have just gone for kindergartens and put the final nail in the coffin of your jobs. Seriously. This is so desperate and foolish that—aren't you embarrassed to be party to this? To end your career this way?"

She knew how to piss people off and push every button to get a reaction as fast as possible. That was her greatest gift it seemed.

And it worked. The general snapped and made the mistake of putting his hands on her.

In front of cameras. Media that was there doing follow-up stories and trying to get whatever they could. Well, now they were getting footage that would go down in history.

Also, that no one would ever forget because Ellie folded that general up like a pretzel faster than most could even react to the change of things getting physical. He was unconscious and broken at her feet, people staring at her like they'd never seen her before.

And she simply chuckled, staring at the next in command. "It's public knowledge now who I am. I was born of a noble family, the only acknowledged heir of a coven leader hundreds of years ago. Yes, he might be a criminal and a gambling addict—a rat bastard to everyone he meets—but it means I was trained." She snorted. "You should see me with a sword."

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Two more went for her and she handled them just as fast.

But the next one pulled a gun and put it to her forehead. “Enough.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” she purred, still fucking smirking. “He won’t back you on this, fool. There’s media here filming live. You think he’s going to say this was all him?” She snorted when he frowned. “Oh, you’re the patsy here, darling. You kill me and he gets his revenge, but you’re all traitors to supes because you came for a hospital.

“You cannot be this stupid and not see how he doesn’t keep his promises. You will be rogue. You will be the problem or have gone over the top to try for this all yourselves.” She looked past him. “Don’t be stupid! This won’t change what’s happening.” She focused on the guy holding a gun on her. “But if I die, you’re next. Are you really ready to die over this?”

“I’m the one holding the gun,” he hissed at her. “And you’re—”

“But you’re not the only one holding a gun,” she purred... As dozens of lights appeared on his chest. “Our security is top-notch. You even so much as twitch, you’re dead before you can pull the trigger. They’re just letting everyone see that you pulled a gun on an unarmed hospital administrator. One who protected herself. You pulled a gun on the head of ASH.Live.”

I fell to my knees when the guy held up his hand in surrender and let himself be disarmed by someone from the hospital’s security who appeared out of nowhere.

“You’re okay,” Sean whispered as he moved next to me, rubbing my shoulder.

“I’m really not,” I mumbled, seconds from a panic attack.

“Yeah, neither am I,” he admitted, his love for Ellie clear.

But Ellie was. She was completely fine, smiling evilly when portals started opening and North American military started pouring out to take invading troops into custody. It was beyond crazy and the ploy of a desperate man to hold onto power that should never have been his.

Yeah, great, it involved the woman I was in love with.

She cooed all over me when I was taken to the ED at her insistence. I thought that overkill, but when I saw where my blood pressure and vitals were... Yeah, I’d been about to pass out.

Awesome. And it would take a bit for my blood pressure to come back down no matter how great it normally was.

“No getting invaded right after your distance run, huh?” Ellie teased, immediately apologizing when she saw whatever was on my face or in my aura. She promised me it was never going to get ugly, Alan even jumping in and joking about way worse situations they’d been in.

That wasn’t helping. Hearing how many times she’d come close to dying protecting ASH did not fucking help. I finally grabbed her arm and made it clear that I wasn’t messing around. “There was a gun pointed at your head and he was ready to shoot. I had to watch that. Enough.”

“Sorry,” she whispered, moving onto the cot next to me. “Sorry, my Alpha. Yeah,

this was scary when—it was scary.”

The joking didn't help, but when she told me later that she saw in the guy's aura that he wasn't going to pull the trigger—yeah, that fucking helped. A lot. I lost my anger at her joking and... Everyone dealt with stress differently. I understood that. I really did.

But for fuck's sake. Seriously.

She called it though. The South American President tried to deny everything. The bullshit that came out of his mouth was ridiculous, especially when someone in his cabinet had recorded the meeting where he ordered it. It was what the guy played to justify taking over the government.

But then someone took him over. It was a mess.

It was a mess that Ellie didn't have to clean up, so she didn't care much. She promised the other countries would put pressure on whoever won to have a real election in sixty days and would make sure it was a clean one just as they had before, Asia being the most recent example fifteen years ago.

She was right and I had been an adult for that. My mum's family had said that while they hated outsiders sticking their noses in too much, that was the one time it was excused. When it kept peace, which was the whole point of sending the humans to Africa and streamlining supe governments. We needed peace and for things to be fair.

It always affected more than our own country.

That was maybe the only thing I could remember agreeing with Mum's family about. I wouldn't expect anything else anytime soon.

But miracles could happen.

Again, Ellie was right and things got better after that. A month after the crisis and things at ASH weren't just back to normal but better. Plans were underway to build an extension onto ASH with my idea. It was so far beyond my original idea that it was amazing. There would be whole new types of specialties and doctors.

It was going to be a breakthrough in medicine. I was glad to have been a part of that.

My practice had expanded. One of the attendings in my department was part of the last coup that tried to get Ellie out. She talked to all of us and I was the one who could absorb that attending's practice. I had the most experience with a larger practice and it made sense location-wise since it was next door to mine.

Plus, I had the resume to teach and take more residents under my wing. Renovations to make it work were underway and my contract was renegotiated with my mate's help. I didn't care about, nor want the bonus structure. I didn't ever want patient care to become oil changes in a bad way where I made more money and looked at them that way.

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The efficiency and expediency were good, but... People were people and needed a different touch than cars. Duh.

But that was why I had five new residents and ten new nurses. I'd gotten the bad apple out from my practice and five were out from the other doctor's staff. There were maybe a few PAs I wanted gone, but... They had a chance to redeem themselves and I wanted to give them that.

I just made it clear that they were on warning. I could give people the path to do better, but I'd already made the mistake of letting people treat me like a doormat at ASH.

It wasn't a mistake I was going to repeat.

Others were talking about the efficiency and even how we could start earlier with all the extra doctors. I had more than one attending from other departments ask if they could come shadow and see how it all ran. I told them that it was fine but asked they wait until I shifted the schedule because... I was shifting the schedule.

I didn't want to work Saturdays, but Ellie normally did already. Now I would have Mondays off to do adulting that I needed to and maybe I could talk her into going in afternoons only.

Maybe.

But that helped as well. People needed Saturdays for quick appointments. And other doctors weren't assholes about it because I wasn't stealing their bonuses for myself.

Sure, they weren't getting it, but no one was.

I wasn't sure how that really worked out in their heads, but it was less stress and petty for me, so I simply took the win and didn't complain. It was nice when people weren't bitchy with me after all.

Sean—Dr. James—was thrilled. Two months after the crisis and it was clear that my changes made my practice thrive and he wanted to make it the new standard. Not just for Shifter Health and Wellness, but the whole hospital. Carla had her attendings who had merged practices shadow me and they said they'd learned a lot from it.

Mostly that they definitely needed to shift hours as well. No matter how important dermatology truly was, it would always be seen as extra, cosmetic even.

And people didn't have time to take off work for cosmetic when work paid the bills. But it was more important than ever to change that mindset and attitude with the addition and more coming.

Overall though, two months after the crisis and my life was aces. Things with my family had taken a turn and that situation was on a better path. Same with Ellie's family—though neither of our family dramas were settled. It wouldn't ever truly be. That wasn't how families worked even if they were cut off.

The company I'd formed with my mates to invest in Ha-yun and then the deal with Ellie were doing better than projected. Ha-yun and my mates were really all over it. I'd done more to help the marketing, even being the face of the new buildings going up. Saying they were partially owned by a doctor to help medical personnel and first responders with housing was a hit.

Of course, Ellie was a marketing genius as well.

So really, that left her blood situation and that was the meeting we were currently in. She'd looped in Carla who had a lot of lab work experience, Sean since he was an Alpha shifter as well, and Dr. Joyce Tai... Because she'd already figured it all out and demanded to be allowed to help.

Of course she had. That woman might come off as adorably clueless, but she wasn't. She was sharp. She tuned out a lot more than I could, and honestly I was a bit jealous about that and wished I could learn how to do that more.

"So that's it? Three pints from me a week and you're getting the results to double the production?" Sean asked, his tone incredulous.

"If she's regularly feeding from Clark," Alan reiterated. "It's all contingent on him." He glanced at Joyce. "And yes, again, we've tried to use the blood with her additive on her. We've done that."

"It made me ridiculously sick after a few weeks and we didn't know why," Ellie grumbled, rubbing her stomach as if the memory made it sour even after all these years. "It's not worth the risk."

"No, you just have to keep me," I chuckled, sitting up a bit straighter and not hiding my amusement.

"Like you wouldn't donate to keep..." Carla started to say but then clucked her tongue. "Oh, pup, I'm disappointed."

"Only I get to call him that, thank you," Ellie muttered. "And he's not food. If something happened and we don't work out—why should he have to? It would be hard on his wolf to give an ex-lover—could he even if he found his mate?"

"No, but let's not talk about this because it would agitate my wolf now." I met her

confused gaze. “He’s met his mate. We’re fine and sure of our relationship no matter how slow you need it.”

She was the one still hesitating. That was what I was trying to say nicely and without poking her.

She gave a swift nod and glanced at the numbers. “Sean, I think we take five pints a week from you just to be safe and have extra. That’s better than stuffing Ha-joon with so much extra iron—how horrible has that been?”

I shrugged. “Other than the blood burps you have to suffer with as well, it’s fine.”

“Iron supplement burps,” she chuckled. She was always amused when I referred to them as blood burps when it wasn’t like I tasted blood in my mouth. It was just burps from the iron supplements.

They were pretty gross though. I would do way more for Ellie, but... Ick.

“And you’ll never have a shifter complain about more meat and fish,” Carla muttered. “I’d like to make the changes to my own diet with the supplements and try again.” She held up her hand to us. “It’s not about pride. Sean is older and more Alpha. Fine. Who cares?”

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“I was going to suggest the same thing for the science,” Joyce muttered. “I think Dr. James should do the same. It can’t hurt besides possible burps. It might be a good idea to have the data to even push it with shifters the week or two before their blood drives. Get more bang for their buck when some of this is a PR campaign for them.”

Sad but true. Many were doing it just to appease vampires when they were reminded the vampires were everyone’s military. Seeing how quickly South America was overthrown by pissed-off vampires whose warlock president had risked the lives of their fellow soldiers for a cash grab to get ASH and control of the best blood... Yeah, people were behaving better.

As. They. Should.

The meeting was another way things were going well. Ellie wasn’t being pushed so hard, more blood was being made to sell—all positive all around. Would there need to be more in the future and other plans?

Yes, absolutely.

But it was handled for today and the near future.

Total win.

Which was why she seemed a bit confused when I followed her to her office and locked the door behind us.

“Are you feisty after we were talking about you biting me, Ha-joon?” she surmised.

“I’m always feisty around you,” I drawled, but then snorted. Yeah, that was completely accurate. “But no.” I pulled out a gift bag that I’d been hiding behind my back and set it on her desk. “For you.”

She set down what was in her hands and went over to the bag, frowning as she looked inside, which confused me. Nothing should make her frown in my mind. She pulled out the stockings and garters, something coming off of her that I couldn’t put a name to. She cleared her throat and set them back in the bag.

“No, sorry, but no.”

Well, I hadn’t seen that one coming.

15

Ellie

Things were going so well between us, and as much as I hated to throw a wrench in that, I couldn’t just go along with what he wanted this time. My head had still been in the meeting we’d just had and trying to crunch numbers and the figures of what blood was coming in—too much.

Always too much even if good news.

Then it was something fun and a present that I hadn’t seen except I felt like I was standing in the past. Over ten years ago even and hearing that I really should know better and wear lingerie for my lover.

Staring into the bag and seeing the stockings and garters was like a slap to the face. Taking them out and seeing them up close made them real and not just a flash or my mind making me—this wasn’t me projecting. I stuffed them back in the bag and

tossed it to the edge of my desk.

“No, sorry, but no.”

“What?” he asked. “Wait—what? Why not?”

I let out a slow breath and kept focused on my desk. “I’m not wearing lingerie for a man ever again.”

He was quiet for several tense moments. “So this is about Tommy, not us.”

I ran my tongue over my teeth and decided to be as shitty. I raised my head and was glad he flinched at whatever was on my face. “No, it’s about not repeating past mistakes and learning to not be stupid.”

Anger filled his eyes. “How is my gift—”

“This is the first gift you’ve given me and it’s stockings?” I drawled. “A garter. Yeah, I’m fucking touched.”

“No, not the first,” he argued.

“We buy each other food,” I pushed. “Yes, you’ve gotten me flowers. We did spa stuff. The funny brownies. All gifts. I accept that.” I gave him a moment with that. “I gave you drawers and closet space. You told me you love me and then stopped saying it. Then you give me stockings and a garter. Not a sweater that matches my eyes or would complement my hair.”

“Wait, okay, so clearly—”

“Not earrings after I lost one of mine at your place—not that I’m hinting, but that

would be something sweet for a partner to do,” I told him. “Or I was thinking of getting you a new band for your Apple Watch because you said yours was getting loose, but you like the silicone ones and those are like ten bucks.”

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“That’s actually really sweet and I would have liked it,” he admitted.

“Glad you think so,” I said, reaching over and tapping the bag. “This is sex.”

“No, no, Ellie. It’s meant to be fun for us.”

“Well, I don’t wear stockings and garters, so it seems like changing me for you,” I snapped.

He opened his mouth but then closed it. Ha-joon tried again and then let a slow breath out before seeming to mentally say “fuck it.” He grabbed the bag and shoved it in my garbage. “I obviously missed the mark of what should have been next for gifts between us, but I don’t think that was a fair shot at all. I’ve accepted secrets and more—accepted you.”

He seemed at a loss and just left.

“Damnit,” I sighed when he was gone. He wasn’t wrong.

I just didn’t think I was either. How I handled it probably, but... Fuck.

And I didn’t know how to fix what I’d done, how to process what I was feeling, or even where to start. Then I realized I hadn’t had a good talk with Renee in a while. I knew her kids were still at her parents’ for the summer because they lived by the ocean and the kids loved it. She went out there on weekends and for a few weeks.

But she would be home now. I picked up the good Chinese she liked and a couple

bottles of wine, figuring that was the price of dropping by for help... And walked into chaos.

“Renee?” I whispered when I found her sitting in the middle of her living room that looked like it had been ransacked. “Renee, did you call the police? Are they still here?”

She frowned and glanced up at me for a full moment and then burst out laughing. “Oh, I bet that—no, there wasn’t a burglary. Gods, I’m mortified you’re seeing this. I want to scream you’re seeing this and came over, but I was the one who lectured you so much about letting people in and not to ever be embarrassed between friends. Great, I’m a hypocrite also.”

I was so confused, but at least she hadn’t been robbed. “I got your favorite and some wine.”

She stared at her hands for a full minute before she let out a shaky breath. “I know you’re here for help, but I’m glad you’re here because I need help. I really need help, Ellie. I came home and realized I didn’t want to...”

Keep living. It was in her aura. “Renee, what happened?”

“My mate’s been having an affair,” she choked out.

“That bastard,” I hissed as I sat next to her and hugged her.

“I ignored all of the signs. I was so—it was so blatant. He wanted to get caught. He said as much. He said the fact it took me so long proved this was all my fault and how I neglected him—our mating. All I cared about was my job, ASH, and our kids.”

“Bullshit,” I hissed, shaking her when she just covered her face. “Bullshit, Renee.

Even I remember that he was the one who wanted to stay home full time when you guys decided to have kids. He wanted that. He was the one who pushed for kids. Yes, you wanted them, and you love them to bits, but he was the one who outlined the plan.

“He doesn’t get to play the victim—it’s bullshit. If he was unhappy then you talk. Things can be changed and something else—I know how much you make. I was the one who gave you the raise when we just renegotiated your contract. You could hire a nanny or three if he was unhappy. If he had told you, you would have suggested that in a heartbeat.”

“I would have,” she choked out. “You brought wine? I drank everything here in between tearing apart my house the past few weeks once the shock was over.”

“Where has he been?” I worried.

“I tossed him out to be with his slut while I figured out what comes next,” she mumbled. “He tried to drain our accounts so I didn’t screw him.”

“More like hide what he can since you found out before he was ready,” I grumbled as I moved her to the kitchen with the food and wine. The dining room was just as trashed as the living room, so that wasn’t an option.

She snorted. “He laughed when I asked how much he’s spent on her or demanded to know if he’s stolen from me. He said I financially abuse him and he’ll get a ton in alimony since he’ll get the kids. He’s going to take my kids, Ellie.”

“We won’t let that happen. We won’t let him use them,” I promised, kissing her hair as I put food in front of her. I went for a wine opener and found what we could use for glasses. “But you need help, Renee. If you’ve known for a bit, it’s beyond time to act.”

“I know. I know that but...” She quietly cried before taking a huge gulp of the wine I poured her.

“Let me get Carla here,” I begged. “She’ll know what to do.” More like she was much better at handling situations like this than I was. I wasn’t the best with the personal aspect.

“I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable,” Renee whispered.

“Hey, you didn’t.” I tapped the table until she looked at me. “You. Didn’t.” I stared her down until she nodded. “I just don’t want to make it worse, Renee. I jump into what’s next and everyone isn’t ready for that. I move into battle and fixing what I can. It’s—it’s the only way I know to be.”

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“It’s not a bad way to be at all except you never deal with the shit you push to the side,” she muttered. “But you’re starting to. Be proud of that. Be proud of coming here for help for whatever happened. That’s a big step for you. Truly.” She poured herself more wine and nodded. “Call help. Please. Yes, but with more wine. Are there egg rolls?”

“Of course and all of your favorites.”

“I knew you really did love me,” she muttered and started digging through the bags I’d brought.

I texted Carla, Alexis, and, after a moment, Jackie Dillon who was the personal assistant for the department heads and me but also used to work as a private investigator. We would obviously need someone well-versed in that.

For her mate to be throwing it all back in her face and trying to beat Renee down, he didn’t expect her to fight.

Which meant we needed to get a lot of the ammunition.

Then I decided to text Ha-joon and be honest.

Me: You weren’t wrong with what you said earlier. I just don’t think I was either, but I mishandled it. I came to ask Renee for help and how to articulate where I am better, but found her in bad shape from something personal. I’m not avoiding you but handling that.

Ha-joon: Thank you for making it clear to me. What can I do to help? Is she okay?

Me: No, her mate is cheating—it's bad. He's emotionally abusing her and going to take the kids, planning to control her that way. I called in help and—I've known her a long time and never seen her so broken.

“Tell Ha-joon I say hi,” Renee whispered. “I want to tell you to run because mating is bullshit, but he seems like a good one.” She snorted and I glanced over to see she was drinking directly out of the second bottle. “I thought my mate was too. I never thought—that geek I met decades ago who could barely talk to a woman would never have cheated.”

Oh boy. This was really going to be bad.

“He asked what you needed,” I told her. “If there was anything he could do. I didn't tell him much but basically that I wasn't avoiding him.”

“Tell me what happened before I get shit-faced and help arrives,” she said, pushing when I tried to deflect.

She nodded along as I told her and kept putting more food in her. Now that I was really paying attention and not just quickly seeing her in passing at work, I noticed the state she was in... And it wasn't good.

Renee had lost at least ten pounds and was down on the tank in every way possible. I was concerned as a doctor, and while wine was the last thing she should be having, if it got her to eat as well—so be it. Now we knew and could take better care of her, get her the help she needed.

“Neither of you is wrong as you recognized,” she said once she seemed done eating, mostly just picking while finishing that second bottle of wine. “You were a bit harsh

and maybe didn't handle it the best, but neither did he."

"He didn't?" I checked.

"No, he needs to stop acting like your past with Tommy is ruining your relationship. It's not, and he was the one who pushed for everything when you admitted you weren't sure you were ready. Instead of his 'So this is about Tommy,' the correct and healthy way for him to respond is 'What happened that is making you have such a knee-jerk reaction?'"

"You're hundreds of years old. You haven't only been with Tommy, and I'm very sure you've had strong feelings for other men. You've lived more, and that comes with more baggage and pain. The pup needs to handle that better because you don't pick on his shit. And he's got a lot of shit for one so young. But he wasn't wrong or bad, he just needs to be better too."

"Okay, yeah, that makes perfect sense," I accepted.

"What happened that made you have such a knee-jerk reaction, Ellie?" she asked gently after a few quiet minutes while I finished my plate.

I sighed and told her, glad when she gave me a pitying look. Not because I liked being pitied, but... It made me feel valid. Like what I'd gone through in that same office even was a real wound.

She promised I was doing much better than I thought, especially with all the chaos and ass-kicking I'd been doing. She snorted as she finished the bottle. "I had something as basic as a cheating mate and tore up my whole house because it felt like a lie now and I'm the head of mental health."

Renee definitely wasn't okay.

I was thrilled when the calvary arrived, Carla bringing more wine and mochi donuts because everything was better with donuts according to her. She wasn't wrong.

And they were damn good donuts.

Jackie asked for access to everything—home security cameras, her phone with the evidence of his cheating... Because the idiot was stupid enough to taunt her over text and voice messages.

Wow, he really thought Renee didn't have it in her to fight.

Maybe that was true, but she had us, and while I might not be the best at mental and emotional health, I was a warrior.

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I'd always had to be to survive my life, and I was glad my life had been rough, so I had the battle armor ready for times like this.

Alexis was always ready for battle too and she even came prepared, announcing she had a tail put on Renee's husband. She handed that all off to Jackie who didn't do fieldwork anymore because of her own messy divorce and custody hearings. That had all been settled, but her ex-husband was always hovering watching for one little slip-up after he'd been embarrassed.

And we'd gotten a sexist, asshole judge in serious trouble.

With all of the help and needing to answer questions, Renee stopped drinking and realized this was what needed to happen to protect their kids. She was still wounded... Until Jackie found a smoking gun for that "perfect father" image Renee's mate said would make things difficult for her.

Namely that he'd been taking their kids to daycare three times a week and Renee hadn't known. She'd heard them talk about playtime and this person or that, but her husband had said it was a playgroup or a class he was there for with the children.

He wasn't. It was a full and licensed daycare that required physicals and medical appointments to be admitted. Her children had gone to see other doctors and she hadn't fucking known.

Gone was the wounded woman who was betrayed, and instead the momma bear emerged ready to bring down the hammer. I watched her completely change, pulling out her phone and letting out a slow breath.

“Hey Dad, it’s Renee,” she said quietly. “I need a favor and for you to document everything without asking me too many questions. I’m still in shock, but I have help now, and—we have to protect the kids.”

“Anything, girlie boo,” the man on the other line said instantly. “You just tell us who hurt you and we’ll handle him.”

Renee looked around at us. “You don’t need to get your hands dirty, Dad. We’re going to do it legally so it sticks.” She let out another slow breath. “My mate has been cheating on me and is threatening to take the kids—never let me see them if I divorce him. I was considering letting him win because I can’t lose them and it was killing me, but now I know he’s not the dad he’s said.”

The man snorted. “I could have told you that, Renee. Bastard hasn’t called here oncesince they came to stay. Your mom’s called him a few times with the kids on the line and he’s rushed them off. They keep asking what they’ve done that he’s mad and doesn’t want to spend time with them. I think there’s something more going on. I was going to call but then South America.”

That was a while ago now. I could hear the regret in his voice. He was a good dad who hadn’t wanted to be the one to hurt his daughter.

What would it be like to have a dad like that?I shook myself out of my thoughts, focused on the now.

“Let me talk to him,” Jackie said. “There is a way to document everything—the courts look for certain things. I have experience beyond my own divorce.”

Renee nodded and introduced her before handing the phone over. I was shocked at what she asked for and thought phone records might be over the top... But it would show their father hadn’t called Renee’s parents the whole time they were staying

there.

And it had been months now. Wow.

Okay, this was really a battle now.

Much better than Renee having to stay with a horrible man like that for her kids.

16

Ha-joon

Ellie came back pretty late from Renee's and looked older somehow. Not physically, but... I knew what I meant.

"How bad?" I asked, knowing we could put our issue on pause for a moment.

"Bad," she rasped, wiping under her eyes. Knowing Ellie, she stayed strong in front of her friend but broke down once she was alone. "He was taking the kids to day care behind her back so he could be with his side chick. Renee is livid. Didn't get to meet the teachers and staff before—they've been going for months."

"And she missed it," I sighed.

"And she missed it. She would be the first to tell a patient they can't see everything or it wasn't their fault, but—I've never seen her so—she destroyed rooms of her house."

"Like tossed it around or destroyed it?" I hedged.

"Both." Ellie snorted as she rubbed her hands over her face. "There is no putting that dining room set back together. Magic can only do so much." She gave me a tortured

look. “It was the wedding present he bought her after they got the house and the first place they had sex when they moved in.”

I winced. Ouch. Yeah...Ouch. “It’s not her fault. Cheating is about the other person’s issues. Always.”

She studied me a moment, clearly understanding that was something I’d had to come to terms with. She nodded and gave me a kiss on the cheek as she set down the rest of her stuff.

“I’m sorry I let myself in but—”

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“You texted asking if we could still have a quick chat and I said it was fine,” she forgave. “I realized something else on the way home that I want to address before I get into what Renee said. Basically, she said neither of us was wrong, but we both could have handled it better.”

“Okay,” I accepted, already having a feeling I was going to get called on that. I knew I sort of lashed out since my feelings had been hurt.

Plus, we could always, always do better. I would never be so full of myself to argue that assessment.

“It’s that you got me stockings and garters, which I don’t wear, don’t like, and—if you had gotten me lingerie like I wear, I wouldn’t have gotten so upset. A replacement to that nightgown you tore—even if not the same kind. Same with that lingerie set you ripped off of me.”

“More than one,” I mumbled, knowing I owed her some replacements for sure. “Makes sense. What did Renee say?” I nodded as she told me, mentally wincing when she got to the part of what I’d done wrong. “That’s fair. Yeah, I get sensitive to it, jealous.” I moved my hand to her arm. “The shot about saying I love—no one wants to keep saying it and not hear it back.”

She blinked at me like she was disappointed. “I thought you stopped so I didn’t feel pressure to say it. No, your pride at now hearing it back was more important?”

I opened my mouth but then closed it. “Not pride.” I sighed and moved away, scrubbing my hands over my head. “Pain, Ellie. I grew up giving love to my siblings

and not one has ever said it back. Yes, not the same but—does that matter? Does pain have distinctions for this stuff? No, I wanted you to understand you were loved and...”

“You don’t think you said it at the right time?” she offered, nodding when I did. “I understand that. It was just—it was like holding your hand out to me for a stronger step, and when I didn’t immediately respond the same with all I was going through... You took your hand back and let me trip along. That’s what it felt like.”

“I didn’t mean it like that at all. Part of it was so I didn’t put pressure on you when you were doing things that showed progress and I was valued.” I realized I maybe talked myself in a circle and sighed.

“I know, it’s not easy,” she accepted. “I’m sorry you tried to do something nice and it didn’t pan out.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t more considerate.” I cleared my throat. “Could I try again?” I clarified when she seemed hesitant. “I would like to replace the nightgown. It’s a reminder on my phone. I liked the idea of you getting me an Apple Watch strap. Let’s just do something nice for each other. That’s what I want.”

“Okay.” She cleared her throat and went for the fridge. “Just send me the one you’re thinking of before you order. If you got me the wrong size it might...”

Be another issue when we weren’t on the best footing instead of helping. I nodded, feeling a bit like I’d been kicked when I really just wanted to do something fun for us. But she was right. I’d never gotten her real clothes or anything—I showed her in other ways that she wasn’t just sex to me, but this was a misstep when we both had baggage.

“Can you tell me what happened to make you react like that?” I asked a bit later when

we were sitting down to our new nighttime snack. It was something Ellie loved and I'd kicked up a notch. It was semi-thawed frozen fruit mixed with yogurt and a squirt of flavored whipped cream on top.

Something about the consistency or match just made it feel like eating higher-calorie frozen yogurt. I wasn't sure how... But it did.

The variety in America was amazing. I'd found the marshmallow whipped cream and we both agreed it was perfect. Unless we were having blueberries and then we had the blueberry-flavored whipped cream. I wanted to have a whole shelf in the door of my fridge just for flavored whipped cream just so we could have fun.

I listened to her explain about why the gift threw her into the past—made her think of past mistakes and gave her such a strong reaction. I didn't focus on being jealous because it involved Tommy and heard her that it was because it was a situation that made her feel unseen and small.

I could accept that and did. I tried to even if I felt like I'd been spanked for trying to be nice.

"I'm going to be helping Renee after work," she told me when we wrapped up and got ready for bed. "Not to avoid you."

"Thanks for clarifying." I leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Let me know if I can help. I have poker Friday night—but otherwise."

"I'm sure she'll appreciate the support but probably will be anti-men for a while."

Fair enough.

I blinked and it was Friday. The first poker night had gone really well. Five police

officers like the friend I'd made and six of us attendings from the hospital... Plus, Alan who'd invited himself after hearing what was going on.

He brought good food at least.

I didn't want to do it too much, and once a month seemed like a good amount. And if I reserved the party room more than that, I had to start paying to use it. I was too cheap to do that.

"You're lucky I adore you, Nephew, because we're too old to stay up this late," my uncle said after he came out of the portal with Da and one of my cousins.

"Imagine how I feel when you tossers keep trying to get me to run Saturday mornings with you," I grumbled. "It's like two in the morning my time. Even my wolf wants to sleep."

"Aye, we'll adjust better," Da said as he slapped me on the back. "We brought a bunch of food. Your mum was on point with this so we both could have a bit of fun."

And things were still tense between us. Better but... Tense.

"She doesn't seem the fancy tea sandwiches type, but I bet she made some to make us feel posh," Alan said as he greeted my dad and introduced himself to the others. "I'm not the only crasher this time. I said it was a blast and not the normal ass-kissing we get outside of work."

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I snorted when I glanced over his shoulder and saw four other department heads... Including mine. “We just have to keep it under fifty, yeah? I’m not getting in trouble when my lover owns the damn building.”

“I have a unit here as well,” Dr. James—Sean reminded me.

Right, right.

He had already met Da, but introductions were still made with my uncle and cousin—plus the other department heads.

The police officer who I’d started this all with—a lieutenant—walked in with the others... And gave me a look not to be mad.

“More crashers?” I chuckled.

“It got around and a few captains asked for the address and time,” he mumbled. “Including mine.”

I pointed to Sean. “My department head crashed as well.”

“I’m a rude ass who needed a night off, but I’m a rude ass who brought pulled pork that I made myself,” he told me. “Smoked two butts overnight and it’s my mate’s barbeque sauce. Totally worth me crashing, I promise.”

“I love American barbeque,” Da said and clapped his hands together. “Alright, let’s meet the rest and get food set up so we can play. We snuck in some...” He swallowed

down what he was going to say and gave me a worried glance.

The officer who must have been the highest ranking chuckled. “We’re off the clock as long as it’s nothing bad.”

“Just a couple bottles of good scotch and a box of cigars we didn’t claim through customs,” my uncle confessed. “And it’s not even about the damn tax. Last time I claimed anything like that, it was ‘lost’ and I got pennies on the dollar for the value. Such a con.”

“Yes, not everyone is noble,” the officer accepted.

“We’re sure it happens on our end too,” Da said firmly, making it clear that it wasn’t to pick on North America but corruption and hand greasing everywhere.

That eased the tension, and people were thrilled with the spread. A few of the guys from last time hadn’t brought anywhere near as much as the crashers but promised to help clean up after. It wasn’t a big deal, and captains made more than lieutenants and sergeants.

The doctors that had come definitely did. So yeah, all was fair.

Or within reason because of good intentions. One of the cops who didn’t bring much joked about fixing parking tickets or letting someone speed. He seemed to remember he was the lowest on the hierarchy there and looked nervous.

I hurried to jump in before things took a turn since I was the host. I laughed and clapped him on the back. “I cannot imagine what you lads get asked to handle or stupid favors from people you barely know. We get it all of the time.”

Alan took the cue and snorted. “I went for takeout from that place you recommended.

The Middle Eastern place?”

“That was so—it’s legit,” I groaned. “We have good Middle Eastern food in London and I was happy to find it here.”

“It’s new and getting mixed reviews because people aren’t used to that type of cuisine,” he said with a sigh but then waved off the thought. “But I was in scrubs because it was after—whatever. I hadn’t changed and was exhausted. Just wanted good food. Had a witch stop me and ask to help her son with his magic.”

“‘You’re a doctor, aren’t you?’” Sean mocked. “Yeah, we get it all of the time and I’m not even picking on magics. I have all species ask me—my brother-in-law is the worst. He’s always calling me to diagnose people over the phone or sending me pictures of moles. Even if I was a dermatologist—which I’m not—I’m not giving a diagnosis like that!”

“That’s asking for a lawsuit,” I drawled. “Yeah, try being the youngest child of the Alpha and the one the pack likes to bully the most. They’d have these bullshit medical ‘concerns’ that I knew they were making up and bring them up to me at pack gatherings. I’d tell them I wasn’t that type of doctor or they had to come in for a full workup but—”

“Is that why I kept hearing you were a shite doctor and now acting like some big shot elitist?” my cousin asked, frowning. “They were trying to have you diagnose them on runs?”

I nodded, not realizing it had reached his ears. “Oh yeah, and most of it was just hassling me. ‘My stomach hurts after I eat something. What do I do?’ Not eat that wasn’t a good enough answer. It wasn’t like they were eating a burger and got sick. They were saying they ate mushrooms in the woods in wolf form. Except they were lying and knew I wouldn’t call them on it.”

I swallowed what else I might have said when Da looked at me like he'd never seen me before.

"I'm sorry you were treated that way, Hugo," he said quietly. "I had no idea. I knew too many ran to you with every littlething, but—you've even said it that sometimes knowing when it's serious enough to get checked out is what people struggle with."

I blinked at him for several moments. "You thought it was only that sort of thing."

"I did. I'm sorry."

That healed something inside of me. "I tried to bring it to you once."

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“I’m listening now, Son. Next wanker that tries that shite, bring them to me and let me witness the diagnosis. I’d heard you were acting high and mighty but—you would never. I knew it was idle gossip, but I didn’t know they were stacking the deck against you.”

“Well, now you both know the truth,” my uncle said and clapped my da on the shoulder. “Speaking of decks, I’m ready to win some money off you Yanks. Fifty buy-in? We brought dollars so we didn’t have to convert from Euros.”

I nodded and was glad when Alan said he’d handle all of that as long as someone made him a large plate of the chicken wings he was smelling.

I realized I had more to say, but not everyone needed to hear it, so I went up to my da, holding up a hand to him when he opened his mouth. “You’re dealing with a lot still, so I just want to clear the air on this.” I waited until he nodded. “I’ve gone with members of the pack to doctor appointments when I couldn’t help them and they were nervous to see someone unknown, Da.”

He reached over and squeezed my shoulder. “Of all my kids, I never worry about you being egotistical, Hugo. Never. I’ve seen how you help the smallest nipper and always keep respect for the elders of the pack. It was always the gossips and—I ignored it because I knew it wasn’t true. I never, not once doubted you on that.”

That sounded like trying to open a can of worms on what he had doubted me on, but I understood what he was saying. No one was perfect and we all listened at times.

He just didn’t on that.

I was glad and thanked him for making sure things got better for me because I didn't always want to spend full or new moons with the Atlanta pack after what happened. It had gotten better after Ellie and I had gone public, but some of the pack gave me nasty looks and made comments that I preferred a bloodsucker over a quality wolf.

I hadn't dumped the Alpha's daughter for Ellie. I'd been with Ellie when the man had tried to force me into a mating.

I was the victim and so was his daughter. The last thing anyone should do was shit on Ellie about it all. But there were always jerks in any group that had to ruin things.

For the first thirty-minute card session, I actually sat at a table with my da, uncle, and cousin since they came. Sean joined us and it was nice that he genuinely liked my da and uncle, them liking Sean as well. My cousin and I kept sharing looks like we were watching old guys make friends, but honestly it was cute.

And the food was fucking fantastic. We had such an array that my wolf and I were very happy.

We got to talking about the heat and I couldn't hold back how much I hated Southern weather after a few drinks.

"Yeah, there are many times I wish that ASH was built almost anywhere else," Sean grumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. "But my animal loves the heat, and my mate and damn kids are all—their natural animals originate from Africa. There's no such thing as too much sun to them."

I hadn't known he wasn't the same shifter type as his mate or children. That had to be frustrating as a parent since he couldn't always help them with the issues that would come up for them.

“Fair, but it’s gonna be grand when you don’t have snow or our never-ending winter rains,” my cousin chipped in. “We’ll be freezing our fannies off and my wolf won’t even fucking run outside like that sometimes and you’ll be walking around in t-shirt and shorts.”

“Your wolf is a bit too prissy sometimes,” my uncle drawled. He cleared his throat when my cousin and I both looked at him like he needed a smack. “Right, sorry, forgot about when you were a kid.”

I hurried to change the topic but gave Sean a look that I’d fill him in later. It wasn’t that juicy of gossip. My uncle hadn’t been as attentive as he should have been when my cousin was a pup and my cousin had gotten lost deep into the pack’s lands... And almost froze to death.

So yeah, I was sure he and his wolf had a ridiculous aversion to freezing weather even if it was decades later.

“Anytime you want to get away from the cold, come visit,” I told him. “You work remote. No reason you can’t work remotely for a week from my guest room.

“I’ll take you up on that,” he accepted with a smile. “Last year about did me in, so it would be nice to take breaks.”

We took a break and then shuffled up the tables so it wasn’t all cliques and possible drama. The point was to make friends too and keep things easy. The next session, I was with a couple of cops and two attendings that I didn’t know well but was glad I’d invited. They weren’t drama and mostly wanted to talk shop with the changes my practice had made.

“Sorry, sorry,” one chuckled when he realized he’d monopolized the conversation. “It’s just difficult to picture what they want and that it’s for the best intentions. I

don't doubt Ms. Reed but..." He shook his head.

I gave a half shrug. "Change is difficult, and I'm sure there will be growing pains or speed bumps. I think it's smart to get more information. This was more how my previous hospitals worked, so it's not that shocking to me. At least this part."

I offered for him to talk to my staff—especially my office manager—and to come see it for himself on Saturday. He graciously accepted that and we got back to playing. He didn't see the type to overstep or harass my staff like a few others did. I thought it was the right step for him and would help.

Hopefully. I'd gotten annoyed having to smack a few attendings who had overstepped or demanded more answers than they should have. A few had wanted to flex seniority or their age on me, but all I did was let my wolf show off and they backed down.

One practically ran with his tail between his legs because I was so much more powerful of a shifter than he was.

My staff was probably still laughing at what had happened and would for years.

Overall it was fun, even with the crashers. A few asked if we could do it every other week, but I explained I had to pay then... Any polite answer that I didn't want to do this too often. I finally settled on saying maybe more in the winter when it wasn't nice out.

Yeah, right. In Georgia?

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From what I'd heard, the winter nights then were like most spring nights in other areas. Ellie said she didn't ever have to turn her heat on, especially when she was the top floor and so many were below her.

Made sense.

She came in towards the end and couldn't hide her surprise, which I was feeling too at seeing her. She was going to help Renee and I hadn't expected her to drop by.

Ellie found Alan at a table and burst out laughing. "How many extra crashers did you have?"

"A fair few," I answered honestly but shrugged.

She lifted a large pink box she was holding. "Well, we went for cream puffs at this new place and I got extra for your poker since all of your teeth are sweet."

"Well done, Ellie," Alan said as he stood.

"No crashers," she quipped. "I only got enough for how many I knew were invited. Be a proper gentleman and RSVP next time for engagements you were invited to."

"Oh, he's pushing me to have it two times a month," I drawled.

Ellie gave Alan a look that would scare most sane men. "This is why you weren't offered a unit in the building when I did Sean. You're too much trouble. Twice a month? Come up with something else you host and make your own damn friends."

Everyone was quiet for several beats and then I burst out laughing. Of course she said that.

Of course she did.

Damn, I was so in love with this woman.

17

Ellie

“You’ve spoken with Alexis and believe what she’s said?” I checked with Theresa, glad we were finally having this sit-down... Even if I’d been the one delaying it.

“Yes, she didn’t blacklist me but simply denied my resume. She was being honest that she didn’t remember mentioning my name to anyone or giving a reason, simply deleting it. However, she acknowledged that could have raised red flags and people talk. I’ve accepted her apology and I look forward to working with her.”

Theresa wasn’t hired at Amanda’s Hope, but Alexis admitted that she needed more attorney allies in Europe to help out with certain situations. After looking into Theresa instead of just writing her off as my half-sister, she said Theresa was beyond impressive. She truly was one of the most sought-after attorneys in all of Europe.

“She also promised that I could have a position when helping on certain cases blows up my current position.” She sighed when I raised an eyebrow at that. “You make deals with devils to achieve your goals. My understanding was you did the same with your board of directors to get your hospital traction when you started it.”

“You know then,” I stated, my question of how she found out implied.

She nodded and was kind enough to not make me ask. “I’ve been working in law as long as you have as a healer before a doctor. Our options were limited as women. Hearing of a woman who saved people and defended female vampires with golden eyes only some could see wasn’t a jump.”

Theresa picked a non-existent piece of lint off her skirt when I didn’t say anything.

“I tell you this not to brag or for thanks, but to clear the air a bit.” She waited until I nodded. “You originally had some pushback on getting the land while the war was really going on. It was smart to secure it before the supe governments were formed. Very smart.”

“That wasn’t my goal actually since I objected to kicking all humans out,” I said with a sigh.

She seemed to consider that. “I don’t know what the right answer was. I don’t think there was one, and while I agree that bill will come due—as I’ve heard you say—I think what we would have paid to keep them among us would have been higher.”

I accepted that. “I don’t disagree, and I do agree that either answer probably was wrong in many ways.”

“Luckily for us, they’re always fighting among themselves, so they are never organized enough to come for us. Especially with the restrictions and oversight.”

“I don’t know much about that part,” I confessed.

She gave an elegant snort. “Yes, you’re fairly busy with what’s already on your plate.” She met my gaze. “There was suddenly no resistance and you came into a sizable amount of money. Gems and jewels that pirates acquired—”

“I was never stupid enough to believe the pirates story,” I drawled.

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She chuckled darkly. “You should have. That part was completely true.” She nodded when I couldn’t hide my disbelief. “You saved the captain as a child. I knew him from some legal trouble, and when he was about to get caught with some cargo that would cost him his head, I told him what you were doing here.”

“You’ve lived quite the life,” I muttered, shocked that the spoiled brat I’d heard of over and over again had actually helped me.

“It’s best you erase what you think you know of me and start fresh,” she said firmly.

“Except I experienced what I experienced,” I told her. “I believe in what Ha-joon sensed and there is more to the story than I know, but... Even if you didn’t come to kill me that night, you did come to see me later.”

“I put the blame on the wrong person. I know that,” she accepted. “I was exhausted and almost broken from the harshness of this world. I had just been repeatedly raped—”

“What?” I gasped, mentally cursing that I couldn’t see her aura since we were related.

She intentionally wouldn’t meet my gaze, focused on the curtains. “The world is perilous for a woman without protection—even more so back then. I proved that I had a mind for the law and sought a clerk position. The humans I went to thinking they would be safer tricked me. Who would think the best-known firm in Paris for fighting for people was filled with monsters?”

“I’m so sorry, Theresa.”

She gave a sharp nod. “I couldn’t find it in myself to—in my mind, if I had been raised like you and knew how to fight, it wouldn’t have happened. I could have gotten free that night. I was too terrified to be outed as a vampire and found by either family looking for me that I let myself get chained up. They used me as a clerk and free whore.”

“Until you didn’t get blood for too long,” I surmised.

“I became the monster, and it was blind luck he had the keys on him or I would have been stuck down there forever in that damn place,” she whispered. “I didn’t know what to do and I basically tripped over you. And you were thriving. You were part of a group of healers, supported and thriving.”

Theresa took in a long breath and met my gaze which impressed me.

“I’m sorry. You deserved none of what I said that night.” She seemed to think better of it. “Actually, maybe a little because you telling everyone I’d tried to kill you did set my escape on a bad path. The servant Aurora had sent with me ditched me after getting me out of the country, saying he didn’t trust I wouldn’t kill him if I wanted to my own sister.”

It was my turn to take in a long breath and let it out. “So what did happen that night? What was all the...” I shrugged. Mess? Disaster?

Cliché?

“It was all a setup,” she said bluntly. “From the broken wheel and needing help to—I believe I was Anna from Frozen basically and he was... I forget the bad guy’s name. It was all bullshit.” She gave a sad snort. “He thought I was a bastard and living hidden as Kenneth’s shame.” She gave me a hard look. “I told no one about you—about our relation.

“Neither did your mother. They knew. Even after going to the castle to meet you, he kept sneaking back to see me.” She rubbed her neck. “The things we believe when we’re young, stupid, and desperate to be loved.” Theresa let out a slow and pained breath. “He came to me that night and said we were out of time and I had to prove my love for him so I could take over.”

“I cannot even tell you what he fully said or knew. It was such a switch from the way he’d been and—I thought he truly had loved me, but it was all about control. I snuck in and killed you and he had that secret over my head forever. A puppet forever or maybe outing it once we were mated and he controlled the coven.”

“Ha-joon said you were telling the truth and it’s hundreds of years later. I cannot think of a single reason you would lie besides being a psychopath.” I was shocked when something filled her eyes when she’d been cold and distant, but it was gone as fast as it had appeared.

“I’m not a psychopath. I’ve been tested.” She chuckled darkly. “I was worried about that too.” She cleared her throat and fidgeted with her skirt. “I hope you don’t repeat that, not even to your partner.”

“He’s not nosy like that and it has no bearing on this,” I comforted. “Why were you tested?”

She gave me a hard look but then swallowed it down. “I wasn’t loved like you were, Ellie. Even if her plan was psychotic, Aurora truly loved—loves you like her own. Your mother didn’t feel the same with me. Looking at me hurt her because I wasn’t you and you were being kept from her. She didn’t blame me, but it wasn’t an emotionally healthy way to grow up.”

“She abused you?”

“No, that implies intent,” she said quietly. “She did her best. Looking back, I don’t blame her. She was broken from her family and then what ours did. I’m sure I didn’t help and was a brat, but—I had nothing. I grew up in the most fucked up circumstances and—yes, I was jealous of you. Even if what you had was messed up, it was less messed up than what I had. Trust me.”

Again, I had no reason not to. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. Of course it wasn’t your fault either, and I’m sure I was a mess when I tried to tell you what was going on. I still can’t picture that night clearly. All I remembered was panic.”

“What did you think was—what was the goal?” I hedged when she seemed lost in the past.

She sighed and rubbed her neck again. “I was trying to show you that it was his dagger. He gave me a dagger with my initials on it just so I could kill you.” She nodded when I snorted. “Yes, a sexist male who thinks we’re all complete morons. Of course. But I wanted to get to you and tell you what happened so you were safe and you could help me.

“I had no idea what to do. Your mother never abused me and was kind, but if she thought for a second that I might ever hurt you, she would have stabbed me a million times without remorse.” She met my shocked gaze. “Never doubt that. Your mother was constantly plotting ways to get you out and run that she didn’t think I knew about.

“I used to help her and give her information thinking—I didn’t care about being the coven leader’s daughter. I wanted my mother. I thought she would love me like yours and then—the servants didn’t care like Aurora thought. They would mock me as if I was a bastard. The hidden secret they were annoyed to take care of. You have no

idea...”

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“I’m sorry,” I whispered when she sniffled. “That wasn’t the picture Aurora ever painted for me.”

She gave me a dry glance. “Yes, because she’s fucking sane to trust on anything. Ever.”

Funny she felt that way and was so vocal because she was still helping Aurora get her pound of flesh for what had been done to her. I’d heard from Alexis several times that Theresa was vicious in a way she wasn’t and giddy at going after her mother’s family.

I would have felt the same if there was any Reed family worth going after.

I swallowed loudly and met her gaze. “You startled me into waking up, and now hundreds of years later, I can see that nightmore clearly with the information you’ve given me.” I waited until she nodded. “You were muttering that you had to kill me so he’d love you.”

She sighed. “I remember feeling like I was breathing through fire. Things were blurry and it was a miracle I’d even snuck in to find you. I figured out later that people were paid off, but luckily Aurora was smart enough to fill those holes. I don’t blame you for that night. I blame both of you for after when no one would even hear me out.”

“Yes, I would be upset too if Aurora wouldn’t even hear you out. I never said anything either way—”

“You wouldn’t even see me so I could explain,” Theresa snapped. “I was trying to

warn you that you were in danger still, not finish the fucking job!”

I blinked at her for a full minute and she slowly lost her anger. “I’m confused.”

She snorted. “No, apparently, I’m still the fool.” She let out an upset chuckle and quickly wiped under her eyes. “You were never given my letters. Aurora lied. You didn’t refuse to read them or see me. She blocked—fucking liar. Gods, why can’t I have at least one decent parent? You did even if you never knew her.”

Which led me to ask the question I needed answered and part of why I had finally agreed to this meeting. “Do you think she’s alive?”

“No, I’m sorry, but I’m very sure Kenneth killed her,” she said gently, pain in her eyes as she met my gaze. “I looked for her. I desperately looked for her after my escort ditched me. I knew she would help me even if she could never love me. She was kind and decent like that. Truly, she was.” She shook her head. “Nothing. I searched...”

“What?” I pushed after a few tense moments.

“One of her plans was to go back to her family coven where her father or brother was now in charge,” Theresa told me. “She said it wasn’t worth the gamble until you were ever abused because they might be just as bad if they knew you were special. I thought that was what she did when she ‘ran.’ I truly did.”

“She wasn’t there?” I checked, understanding she’d gone to my maternal family’s coven.

“No, and I didn’t just—I worked there for months as a maid to get real information. She was erased from the family’s history basically. Your grandfather remarried and acted like his first wife never happened. And the woman he married was a good

woman. If she—she wouldn't have killed your mother if she'd shown up. She was too kind. Abused and kind.”

I nodded, hearing her loud and clear. “I have finally received permission to privately ask Kenneth questions under potion. I have an hour next week. If you would like to join me and ask what you need to, I'm fine with it.”

“I would. I need... I need closure on him. There have been some updates and how many years he will spend in prison and where. He was convicted again and the total is up to sixty years,” she told me before pulling out her phone.

It was maybe fate that she had a packed calendar with trials but one had been delayed at the exact time I was to meet with Kenneth.

Theresa seemed to hit her limit after that and stood, clearing her throat as she gathered her things. “I prefer people be clear in their intentions so please don't take this negatively. It's my respect for all you've done that makes me be blunt.”

I snorted and apologized when she twitched like her temper was ramping up. “I say the same all of the time. I respect people's time and just say what needs to be said. That doesn't mean it has to be harsh or crass. Just enough with the bullshit when the world is full of it.”

“Agreed.” She let out a slow breath. “I have no desire for some sisterly bond or trying to have a family relationship after hundreds of years and what we've both been through. However, we are sisters and the world is harsh. I would like to have you as an ally and vice versa. If nothing else, I think we are each other's key to healing from the past.”

I let out the slow breath this time and considered what she said. Yes, she had a lot of information about my mother and such. I did for her. “I'd like that.”

“Good.” She reached for the glass she’d brought with her and snorted when she looked at me. “We bring our own drinks to a coffee shop.” She looked at me. “Do you have an aversion to this place?”

“Not at all, but I prefer my own concoctions and favorites. This place—I ordered treats for my staff. Their bakery is delicious.”

She glanced towards the counter and nodded. “Then I’ll give it a go before the portal opens to bring me back. Any recommendations?”

“Several,” I told her and we went up to the counter. I opened my mouth to say I had an order to pick up but was interrupted by the woman at the counter.

“Oh, finally ordering something instead of bringing outside drinks in?” she mocked.

“There’s nothing posted saying outside drinks are unwelcome and you don’t offer what I drink,” Theresa said easily. “But nice of you to get that in before we order.” She dismissed the woman, focused on me. “She doesn’t make the baked goods, does she? I would worry they were oversalted if she did.”

Yeahhhhhh, we were related.

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“They have a whole bakery in the back,” I assured her before turning to the woman. “I have a large order picked up that I spoke with the owner about. It’s under Reed.”

The woman flinched at hearing that and mumbled she’d go get it.

“Charming,” Theresa drawled when the woman scurried off. “What drink did you make?” She seemed to ask more because we were waiting now and—I didn’t think she was one who liked silence.

Or maybe it was just awkward silence to me.

I snickered. “It’s like an apple pie latte actually.” I nodded when she glanced at me like she didn’t know how that worked. “Starbucks came out with a brown sugar cinnamon concentrate. I picked up some real fruit apple syrup and a bit of caramel creamer on top of the milk. It’s delicious. Ha-joon kept saying he was going to bounce around on the sugar.”

She snorted. “It’s half the fun of making your own coffee. That sounds delicious. I’ll have to check and see if we have that in the UK or have it picked up for me.” She held up her almost-finished drink. “I basically make their cherry chai latte with shots of espresso. They don’t have the milk I like in my lattes since I can’t have dairy.”

“You can’t?” I asked, frowning. “That’s very rare for vampires.”

Her lips twitched. “Yes, it is, Doctor. It’s genetic for us, not an allergy like humans. Aurora can’t have it either. At least we don’t have it bad. I would become a murderous wench if someone took cheese away from me.”

“I feel the same,” I teased, glad when she seemed lighter.

Someone else came out to help her and I pointed out what I liked best from the display cases. She asked about a few things I hadn’t, checking I didn’t think they were bad. One I hadn’t tried and the other two were fine but not to my taste.

She nodded and thanked me, giving me a nervous glance. “I’m not picking them because they weren’t your recommendations. Two of my interns are chocolate addicts. One I mentored through law school and—she’s had a rough go.”

“I’m not offended in the slightest, and we’re too old to be that petty,” I said easily.

She snorted. “I’m never too old to be petty, Ellie. There’s no such thing.” She gestured to the display case. “I could just never be so bored I’d be petty with this.”

Fair enough. She had a very valid point and I chuckled.

In another life, I could actually see us being best friends or at least tight.

I ended up adding a few things onto my order to try their seasonal options and Ha-joon loved everything matcha, so that would make him happy.

“I’m glad he’s good to you,” she said when we were done. “Truly. And I’m glad things are better for him with his family. I’m grateful he didn’t make a mess for me.”

“He was beyond furious anyone in his family intimidated you.”

She gave me a dry look. “You haven’t met Myung Clark, have you?” She chuckled when I shook my head. “We could chew him up and spit him out with our pinkies. He’s beyond weak—sheltered and entitled. I wasn’t intimidated. I didn’t want to have to explain why I broke the Alpha’s eldest son.”

I believed it. Studying her and feeling her absolute confidence... I believed it.
“Where did you train?”

Surprise flashed in her eyes. “Several places. I learn from my mistakes.” She seemed to think about that a moment and gave a half shrug. “Also, the mistakes others make that affect me.”

Namely that Aurora didn't have her trained to protect herself in such a harsh world. She'd made sure I had been and pushed with Kenneth to have me safe... But she'd left her own daughter as chum in the water.

“How did it go?” Carla asked me when I walked into the hospital. It was by chance that we crossed paths, but I saw the genuine concern in her eyes.

“The good news is my half-sister isn't a nutfuck like I thought.”

“The bad news?” she hedged.

I sighed and balanced the bakery boxes I was carrying as I faced her. “That I didn't know the truth hundreds of years ago and we both went through unimaginable hell because of it. We could have run together or—I wouldn't have turned her away back then. So much could be different.”

She gave me a sad smile and tucked my hair behind my ear. “I understand your hurt, but things work out for a reason, pup. You would never be standing where you are if the past was different and this is the place the world needs you to be standing in.” She shook her head when I argued. “You could have been easier to find if you were traveling together.

“Aurora's family might have made a monstrous move if they thought they could get both of you. Kenneth could have gotten more backing if it was two daughters to sell

instead of one.” She reached out and booped my nose. “I’ve looked into your sister and Theresa Reed is fierce. Beyond fierce, and that’s because of the journey she’s taken.”

“You don’t know the horrors she went through,” I rasped, heartbroken for what Theresa had told me.

“That’s for her to square up with the gods about when her time comes, not for you to carry, pup. Take your moment to grieve and process, but know that I thank the gods that the Ellie Reed before me is the one we got. She would have been different if her past had been.”

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I stared after Carla and thought about what she said. Seriously, I wanted to be that cool when I was older.

Or ever.

18

Ha-joon

My day was looking up when Ellie dropped off a bunch of matcha baked goods after her coffee with her half sister. She seemed down but also lighter, like she'd heard something difficult but knew she'd made the right decision to go.

“I think you're amazing, and seeing you accept the past to move forward gives me a strength I never knew possible, my sweet kimchi,” I whispered. I hadn't wanted to let her go yet but we both had work. Still, I'd chased after her to say one last thing and give her a kiss that I hoped conveyed my support.

“I should be furious with you that you just did that in your waiting room, but it's too sweet,” she grumbled and smacked my chest. “You're too old to be this blind.”

I winced and glanced around my completely full waiting area... All of whom were watching us like we were the best daytime drama they were catching. I flushed lava hot and covered my face. “I'm sorry. Shit, you get to leave and I have to see them all in an exam room.”

All of them erupted laughing and even Ellie chuckled. “That's your punishment for

making a spectacle.”

“And for being sweet?” I asked, hoping I wasn’t in trouble.

She kissed my cheek and left.

That meant I wasn’t in trouble, right?

The waiting area died again when I asked my office manager that.

“Doc, I think you’re going to get all the fun tonight,” one of my male patients drawled. “That woman had hearts dancing all around her after she’d been sad. Bring home flowers and you’re set.”

“How do you give such good advice and have never been romantic like that with your own mate?” the woman next to him demanded.

Oh well... I got the hell out of there. I mumbled a thank-you and focused back on work.

But I did listen to the man’s advice and brought home a large bouquet to Ellie. She simply chuckled and told me that I wasn’t in trouble. That the flowers were exactly what she needed to brighten her day too.

So double win?

She’d brought home groceries which was odd for her. She normally had them delivered Sunday after she relaxed Saturday night and made the list. Yes, we saw each other on Saturdays, and besides the occasional schedule hiccup, Ellie kept her spa Saturdays.

I was simply included now too. We still normally had sex, but it was softer—making love and no marathons.

Besides the occasional horny times.

And I didn't just mean mine. My woman was right there with me most of the time which was honestly impressive for a vampire.

Or maybe not? What did I really know most days... Especially about women.

Something was up with the groceries though. I didn't push or ask what was going on, simply offered my skills. I wasn't a great cook, but I was a damn good sous chef. Ellie had complimented my prep and knife skills many times. I told her that I'd always liked the kitchen in my house because my siblings didn't normally go in there.

And our chefs were nice people. I'd learned a lot, but I wasn't the type to push people aside or push my family to try my cooking. I'd been too busy always trying to blend and stay out of more trouble.

Well... Until recently when they'd pushed me too far.

When she was done, we sat down and she told me what the different dishes were, clearing her throat as she moved her napkin to her lap. "After I ran, I found a family—farmers who let me stay with them for help. The grandmother taught me how to make these, and her family couldn't tell when they were from her or me because I'd help when her arthritis flared up."

"It all smells delicious," I praised, my stomach having growled several times while she'd been cooking. "Armenian?"

"Yes."

I took a bite and moaned, gesturing with my fork. “This is fucking fantastic, Ellie. Shit, I’m going to beg you to cook for me instead of us always picking up food.”

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She was pleased at the praise and gave a slight shrug. “You made it much nicer with your help. As long as you help with the dishes or—”

I snorted, already having taken a bite of another dish. “I’ll fucking do the shopping and all of the dishes, not just help. This is ridiculous.” I pulled out my phone to take pictures because I wanted my mum to see. She was adventurous with food and I knew she was still struggling. “Can we sneak some of this to Mum?”

She gave me a wary look before sighing. “You make—you seem like a mama’s boy I need to be worried about sometimes, but I know she’s—your dad is still on the couch, right?”

I sighed and set down my phone. “I think he was off the couch but got back there. He’s struggling too, and finding out Myung truly is a sociopath sent them both over the edge.” I took another couple of bites before I figured out what I wanted to say. “I don’t know how to help Da, and I don’t think I can because of his own issues.”

“But you can help your mom.”

I gave a half shrug. “I don’t know anything can really help them right now. Byeol blasted me over text saying it was all my fault the family was falling apart and they’re all a mess.”

Ellie paused in her next bite. “You know it’s not your fault and she’s a fucking cunt, right?”

“I know,” I sighed. “I know that.”

“But?” she pushed.

“But I pushed over the domino, and she said Mum and Da were arguing about whose side of the family gave Myung the sociopath gene.”

She sighed. “I’ll talk to your mom. Yes, there’s a genetic component, but it’s way more complicated than that. It’s not a done deal of getting it or not, and there are people who are sociopaths and psychopaths who have no history of mental illness at all in their families. Sometimes assholes and monsters are just born.”

“I know,” I promised. “It’s just... I never realized—I’ve always been a sympathetic doctor, especially with those who have suffered the same as I have. I just haven’t seen this side before and worry I didn’t handle it right.”

“Have you had many you’ve come across?”

I let out a slow breath. “One really, and I’ve always wished that I pushed harder for them to get tested. The parents were in denial and I was harsh.”

“That’s a doctor’s job and to hold them together when the results come through—get them answers then. People who hide their heads in the sand are doing damage, and those parents didn’t help their child that day. I feel bad for the kid.”

I blinked at my food and then slowly looked up at her. “Have you come across any?”

“Several,” she admitted, nodding firmly. “I’m older and traveled all over. I was a doctor to humans for over a hundred years, and their bodies don’t heal the way we do. It’s a ten percent chance in humans to have some tendencies at least. That’s a lot more than people realize. Whatever magic makes us more than human—we rarely underdevelop unless abused.”

I nodded, thinking that was fair and feeling comforted that she had more experience on the topic as well. “Thanks for talking to Mum. Ha-yun is down on herself too that she didn’t push harder. My brothers are in denial and think it’s all ‘psychobabble bullshit.’”

“Well, they’re dumbasses and we’ve known that,” she drawled before clearing her throat. “This probably isn’t the right time, but last time when I didn’t tell you what I knew it blew up in our faces.” She waited until I met her gaze, chuckling nervously. “Speaking of cunts...”

Mandy. Something had happened with Mandy’s case. Worry and nerves were pouring off of her to even bring up the topic, which meant it was definitely about Dr. Mandy Tate, my first love.

But not a doctor anymore probably.

“Might as well tell me since we’re already talking serious,” I grumbled. “I’m sorry. I wanted to be here for you after meeting with your sister.”

“Carla straightened me out,” she promised, telling me what the wolf had told her.

“She’s right. I couldn’t switch gears that fast and accept it, but she’s right.”

“She is,” Ellie agreed and cleared her throat again. “Mandy took a deal. She lost her license to practice medicine and can’t ever again. On any continent. She’s blacklisted from all the approval boards.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Good, but she got more than that, right?”

She snorted and listed off all that she knew explaining she got the heads-up since ASH had handed Mandy over and the news would break in the morning. It would be

big, and there would be some who tried to use it to smear ASH that she was interviewing or whatever bullshit that would help sell papers or get clicks.

I set down my fork and sat back in my chair. “Part of me is freaking out that she got a hundred and forty years for a mistake, but it wasn’t a mistake. There was more to it, right?”

“She wasn’t sorry,” Ellie answered bluntly. “She was annoyed. She tried to play up—they used potions. They knew she was full of shit, and then she went off on some tirade that it was the fault of everyone at the hospital that made her so desperate to be accepted. The prosecution was given all her employment records—it’s bad.”

“I heard she had a malpractice lawsuit,” I muttered.

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“Several over such a short career is a joke,” Ellie muttered. “Major fuckups, not people just looking for money. All settled quietly, but her insurance premium would have been a huge red flag and knocked her out of ASH. I don’t even know how she afforded it.”

“Her family has money. Her brother spoiled her—fucking git used to treat me like trash because his princess sister was too good for me.”

She blinked at me for several moments before throwing her head back and laughing. “So the whole family is delusional. That’s awesome.” She shook her head and focused back on her food. “Fucking people. Seriously just makes me want to stop trying.”

I couldn’t agree more. It was honestly hard to keep going sometimes with all the bullshit and... People sucked.

“Well, we’re just full of sunshine and glitter,” I joked after a few minutes of quiet eating where we both wallowed in darkness. I might have said more, but my phone rang from a number I didn’t know.

One from England.

“This is Ha-joon Clark,” I answered, worried who would have called me at this time. Was something wrong with my family? Were they giving me a heads-up someone was going to try and attack them?

No.

Not even close.

It was Mandy's older brother calling from a different number than he used to have and that one I'd long since blocked.

After a couple of minutes, Ellie lost patience and grabbed the phone away from me. "Listen here, you sorry sack of shit, your nutfuck sister killed two people because she was a shit doctor, and instead of admitting that and switching fields, she was selfish. She's an entitled princess who has never faced consequences for her actions and I see you're part of the problem."

"Who is this? Do you know who I am?" he demanded.

"You're the murderer's brother," Ellie chuckled darkly. "I'm the woman who set the trap for your criminal sister after she tried to get me tossed out when she couldn't force me to give her a position. If you call my lover again to harass him instead of accepting reality, I will come for you next."

I watched as she hung up the call and blocked him before tossing my phone onto the table. "Feel better?"

"Yes, but I sort of want to smack you for not doing the same," she grumbled.

"I was shocked. Some of what he said..."

"Yes, Mandy was clearly lying to her family that you were back together or whatever. Seriously, your parents need to give them a swift kick in the ass." She had her phone in her hand before I could stop her.

Not that I would ever be stupid enough to stop her. She was on a mission.

“It could be cathartic,” she defended after sending whatever message she did that I was sure went to my mum. “Someone they can take their anger and frustration out on and do their job of protecting you for once.”

I stared at her for a full minute, shocked but not surprised that she did that—all of it. Shielded me like no one ever had. Any other relationship I’d ever had—I was the shield. I was the one who did things like she’d just done.

It was never even or a team like this.

“I love you, Ellie Reed,” I stated firmly, my heart full of everything good for her and seeing my future in front of me.

She flinched like she wasn’t ready for me to speak in the silence... Or maybe she’d been bracing to get yelled at. Either way, she blinked at her plate and glanced up at me with wide eyes.

But something beyond magical happened. Ellie Reed gave me that soft smile I’d only ever seen her give me and kids. “Me too. You.”

My breath caught in my chest. It wasn’t saying it back, but really it was. It was what she was capable of right then, and while I shouldn’t have pushed her when she cleared her throat and focused back on her food... I had to. “Yeah?”

“Have I ever lied to you?” she asked and cleared her throat yet again. Then she snorted. “It would be more amazing if I didn’t and could hold out against your charm. You’re like the gold standard of partners. You make Prince Charming look like adamn slouch.” She cleared her throat yet again and then winked at me. “I have good taste. I’m not an idiot.”

“No,” I chuckled. “No one could accuse you of that without any real brain.” I threw

back my head and laughed before I was around the table and picking her up.

“Way to keep your cool, goof,” she mumbled even as she hugged me back. “You’re not mad?”

“I’m thrilled, my sweet kimchi,” I assured her quietly, running my nose along her cheek. “You say it however you’re comfortable. I feel it.” I gave her a smacking kiss before setting her back on her chair. “Does this mean I get to tattoo that you’re mine on your lush arse?”

She blinked at me for several beats. “You are so much fucking work. Really, you are.”

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I just laughed and got her a new fork when I saw she'd dropped hers. I knelt next to her and held it out like it was something way more important than a fork.

"Thank you, kind sir," she sighed as she took it. Then she gave me a quick kiss before mumbling not to let the food go cold when she'd worked so hard to make it for us.

I did as she asked and happily gobbled up everything she'd made like a complete glutton.

"You're coming with me to the gala for Amanda's Hope, right?" she checked, looking relieved when I nodded. "Good. I'm giving a speech now that it's out that I'm the head of the nonprofit. I'm thinking of telling the story of Amanda—making it public."

I froze in my next bite. "Obviously not the blood part?"

"No, not that part," she confirmed. "I was also thinking of inviting your mom and sister. They could use a bit of good energy and the events for that charity are empowering."

I nodded in agreement but then froze again. "Am I going to be one of the only men there?"

"No, but we can invite your whole family if you want to increase the testosterone," she teased. "It will be mainly women, but—there are a lot of men who support what we do. Men who got out their sisters or helped their mothers when older."

“I’ll invite my family if they can promise to behave.” I snorted. “They do well in public. We fake it well in the Clark family.”

“You aren’t the only ones who do that,” she comforted. “Whatever you feel is best. I know it’s last minute.” She let out a slow breath. “Theresa’s coming, and Aurora is basically running the show so...”

“You’re glad she’s jumping in and using what she knows to help others, but it’s still a lot of mental load for you,” I surmised.

“Yes. Yes, that’s what I’m feeling.” She reached for her wine. “Plus, everything with Renee—gods, what a mess. It—I’ve seen so much darkness that the idea of mating terrifies me. I don’t know if that will ever change.”

I swallowed loudly, hearing what she was trying to tell me. “I would never push you, but I do want that one day. You know that. I want pups too.”

“Soon?” she worried.

“No. I want to be at least double my age—having pups before people stop calling you pup can be dangerous for someone as powerful as I am. So far distant future.”

“But not mating will be difficult for your wolf,” she said, giving me a look not to deny it.

“He’s pretty chill compared to most Alpha’s. Yes, he would mate you tomorrow and be done, but he cannot see you upset. That would upset you. He understands that. It’s more of balancing to make sure he knows we’re the only man—wolf in your life. You should probably spoil him more. You’ve only met him once really and you were annoyed that he saved you.”

She frowned. “We’ve long since dealt with—”

“We have,” I corrected, gesturing between the two of us. “Have you said anything to my wolf?” I nodded when she frowned. “Shifters aren’t being dramatic when we say it’s like having another person in here, Ellie.”

She nodded. “Okay, then I’ve got some reading to do. I’ve mostly only been with warlocks, humans—”

“You’ve been with humans?” I asked, thinking most never went there before they were all shipped off.

She seemed shocked by my confusion. “That’s how most vampires got blood before we had modern abilities to bag it, Ha-joon. I don’t know a single vampire my age that hasn’t had a list of human lovers. I know we as a species try to glorify how we killed monsters for the better of society, but that’s not the only way we feed. There wouldn’t be any assholes left if we did.”

Yeah, that was more than fair.

My wolf lurched inside of me and I cleared my throat. “You did nothing wrong but—”

“Don’t bring up my past love life and be careful what we discuss while your wolf is unmated,” she surmised. “Did he hear me accept your love and respond? Can’t he sit with that for a while?”

“Does that work normally with animals even if he’s smarter than a natural one?” I countered, nodding when she sighed. “I know, I know, I’m so much damn work.”

“You are.”

“Yeah, and you’re easy,” I threw right back.

“Do you want me to be easy for you tonight?” she asked with a sexy smirk.

Yes. Yes, I did.

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And she was. We had romantic naked time... After I cleaned up dinner and did the dishes.

The next morning, I set the present I'd gotten her on the table, hoping it went much better this time.

She saw it and was hesitant since I hadn't sent her anything to approve.

"I can sneak into your closet just fine, Ellie," I said quietly, deciding to give her a pass on this one.

"Right, of course. How silly of me," she chuckled. She looked into the bag and did a double take. "How did you know?"

"Joyce," I answered, deciding to be honest. I smiled as she took out the book that I'd gotten her from an author she liked. There was also a pretty pastel long wrap sweater in the style that she liked to wear at home when the weather was rainy... And whatever cold the South ever got.

She immediately tried it on and told me she loved it before giving me a kiss. Then she went over to the kitchen drawer and pulled out a small box that she handed me.

I smiled when I opened it and found it wasn't just the Apple Watch band, but one for my bicep or ankle depending on what I was doing. There were also some protective covers and a bicep holder for my phone if my shorts didn't have pockets. "This is perfect. I love it."

“Good, good, if not, you can exchange it for whatever you want on Amazon,” she offered, smiling when I gave her another kiss.

Ellie really was always right. This was so much better than stockings and garters. This was calm and loving.

Though I did really want to see her in stockings and garters one day.

So sue me.

19

Ellie

“Don’t be difficult,” I said into the microphone as I stared out at the audience. “How many of us heard that from our parents growing up?” I nodded when dozens of others did. “Don’t embarrass us or the family. Don’t be a baby. Don’t make a big deal out of nothing.” People were still nodding. “These are the phrases we need to stop telling our daughters.”

I gave people a moment with that.

“If we are to push further to combat the cycle of violence and abuse women suffer, we must do better by the next generation,” I told them firmly. “I know it feels like we’re standing on solid ground with all the progress we’ve made—and we have come far. But I promise it’s quicksand we’re slowly sinking into if we don’t take the next necessary steps.

“People all over are becoming complacent as if the job has been done. I saw a commentary show talking about how it’s not the 1950s and women have so many options. That if they don’t leave and immediately report it, they are the problem.” I

snorted. “How easy for someone who’s never been in an abusive relationship to say.

“Hell, for a man to say about a culture and life he knows nothing about. I would never say being a man is easy or just give flippant advice. Do I think more women need to be strong and leave? Yes. Do I think more need to report crimes for change? Yes. Yes, of course I do, but shaming them does nothing. Blaming them makes things worse.

“Those women would if they felt safe and had support. He was specifically referencing the court case all over where the rapper has a list of crimes. Instead of support, everywhere I look they’re criticizing her that she could have left. How easy for others to say. Yes, she could have left, but what came next?

“What came now that she spoke out? People criticizing her that she gave consent. Yes, but then she revoked it. Consent is needed each time, not just blanket at the start. And her career is destroyed. His fans are harassing her, blaming her for his fall. It’s still our fault, unlike other crimes. So we are not on solid ground, not even close.”

I took in a slow breath and let it out before meeting Aurora’s gaze of all people.

“I grew up in a different time and most now know my story. I receive flak for not being a mother and speaking on raising our daughters better. It’s not that simple, and you’re raising future members of the society we all are a part of.” I gestured out to the crowd. “Something we all take seriously and should help those who need it.

“Yes, we get a vote. We need to speak about it more and have a consensus on these topics. It’s not picking on and judging parents. Parents are not perfect. That shouldn’t be a debate. No one is perfect and we all need help. I need it. I have dozens of staff help me. Why can’t mothers accept the same? Pride? Shame that they couldn’t do it on their own?

“Who taught them that?” I nodded when I saw what I was saying was being received well. “Our parents. I have so many colleagues who constantly talk about their ‘mom guilt.’ Funny because I’ve never heard of a ‘dad guilt.’ I’ve only heard that more are pushing for dads to stop acting like they’re babysitting their kids and need to parent like the mothers.

“Yes, we can change some of this now, but if we don’t change the way we raise our daughters, the same pitfalls and problems will continue. They will become women who are ripe to be abused. I say that as someone who was in a long-term emotionally and mentally abusive relationship and I didn’t even realize it. I thought it was fine because we weren’t committed.

“But he tore me down at every turn. He thought he was lying to me about his escapades and all of it affected my life. I was so far from the woman I was before meeting him that I was crushed. All the work I’ve done to help others and I let myself stay in an abusive relationship, completely blind to it. It’s been hard to come to terms with that—get back on track.

“I had people in my corner and willing to say I deserved better.” I found Ha-joon in the crowd and smiled. “And I found so much better than I thought possible.” I chuckled when he winked at me and focused back on the people there. “The right man won’t save you and our lives can be complete without a partner. I fully believe that.

“I would never push others into relationships or act like finding the right partner solves everything. No, that’s fairy tales. Some people thrive better on their own. That’s fine. We need to accept that as a way of life and not be so damn judgmental. For me, my partner is the one who helped me see what I was surviving when I’d been so turned around to think I was thriving.

“Saying all of this is important, and hearing you aren’t the only one and many of us

have been in the same spot validates us. But it doesn't give you the tools of what comes next and how to do better." I glanced around and let out a slow breath. "You are responsible for how people treat you and we have to teach our daughters that.

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“I’m not victim-blaming. I’m not judging anyone’s past. I’m saying going forward, we all need to accept that we put up with too much. Boundaries are not a bad word and we need to have better boundaries for ourselves or we cannot teach them to our children. Learning to say I’ve had enough, need a break, or I cannot handle something in the moment is hard.

“But it’s freeing. I feel so much better having been able to say that for myself. We’re all on the airplane and it hits turbulence at times. We need to listen to the rules of the airplane for our lives and make sure we are wearing the oxygen masks before we try to help others. A well-rested, taken care of, and mentally well mom teaches that to their children.

“I’m not saying to raise brats. No, and more than that, we need to stop calling our daughters princesses or treating them like that. Life is not a fairy tale. Prince Charming is normally a crock of shit and many of us have experienced that. So enough. And that means listening to their boundaries as well.

“Not when they say they won’t eat their vegetables and only have fast food. That’s a brat.” I smiled when people chuckled. “But when your child says they don’t want to hug someone, that is their answer. If you ignore that answer and tell them it’s fine, don’t make a scene, or they’re family, you just taught your child that what they want doesn’t matter.

“You taught them to be quiet and swallow their needs down—not to listen to their instincts. You taught them that their voice doesn’t matter and no isn’t actually no. That stays with them. I hear it now in my head all of the time. We cannot fully break those chains we grew up with, but we can make damn sure our daughters are raised

better and without them.

“And it still happens. I saw it the other day at the hospital. A nurse went to hug the children after their visit. She didn’t push it but simply offered comfort after the visit was rough. The boy ran off and the mom excused it as ‘boys will be boys’ but then yelled at the girl when she said no. That is what needs to stop.

“All that does is teach that girl that boys can do what they want and it’s fine and she cannot trust her mother to protect her. The nurse did nothing wrong and immediately backed off when the girl was uncomfortable, but the mom tried to force it. The nurse was the one who said she was uncomfortable hugging a child who didn’t want to.

“The mother then got snippy and told the nurse not to tell her how to parent her child.” I gave everyone a moment with that. “So her pride on whether she was a good mother or not was more important than the comfort of her daughter. Yeah, that’s not a good mother. That’s a selfish mother worried more about how people view her than her children.”

I flipped the page of my speech and recentered myself.

“It takes a village to raise a child. Yes, we should always be diligent in protecting them and not just take random advice. But we all need help and it’s time we accept that. We’re not superheroes, and asking us to be because we’re women while also expecting us to accept unacceptable behavior is too much.

“If I could wave a magic wand, I would ask all mothers to look inside of their hearts and admit what we all know. We are not perfect. We cannot shoulder everything alone and it’s time we stop acting like that’s the standard. To do that, we need to stop fighting each other. Boys learn team sports and how to play well with others.

“Girls learn to compete. Beauty pageants. Sports that are focused on being the best

like ballet or dance. Competitions that make other girls and women our enemies. Don't you think that was intentional?" I snorted when people frowned. "I do. I grew up being told that I could only get the best man if I was the best woman.

"I had to do better than other women and they were competition. You know what competition is? Never an ally. It's meant to isolate us so we're without resources or help. It makes us constantly strive for perfect even when the deck is stacked against us. It's meant for us to tear each other down and chip away at our self-worth so men don't have to as often.

"And our ancestors fell for it. They taught it to their daughters, and it's a horrible tradition that has been passed down. We're not jealous like men and strive to do better—are motivated to do more. No, we gossip and tear each other down. I constantly hear that I must be the plaything of the founder of ASH to have the position I do.

"Other women are the worst saying it as I pass them but never to my face like adults. They push that rumor for the sexist men who started it and don't even understand that those same men laugh at them as well. Why not? They just did their dirty work because we're raised to be petty."

I stared out at the people there and stood proudly.

"I run ASH because I am the most qualified. I am not in a sexual relationship with the founder and never have been. I have been a healer for hundreds of years—long before women were even allowed or to have the title of doctor. I am board-certified in eight fields and could be in more, but honestly keeping up the accreditation while running ASH is exhausting.

"I ran from my home as a teenager with what would be about ten thousand dollars today and no knowledge of the outside world. Yes, I was a vampire, but there were

more supes than humans ever thought. I was trained to fight and educated better than others my age—men or women. I'm not taking away from what I had.

“But I cannot hide what I was lacking for my own ego. I needed saving a few times.” I let out a slow breath. “And one of the people who saved me was Amanda Hope. Yes, she was a real woman. A—” My voice cracked and I quickly wiped my eyes. “She was a vampire who knew the world was horrible for not just women, but female vampires in a way—she would be so sad.”

I chuckled darkly and wiped my eyes again.

“She had such hope hundreds of years ago that we would be so much further along,” I confessed. “She used to say ‘Enlightenment for our kind is just around the corner, but until then, we will be the hope our sisters need.’” I let out a slow breath. “She saved me once when I was out of money and almost fell into a trap.

“She saved me again—gave her life protecting me when a group of feral male vampires found me and wanted to rape a woman from a noble family—drink from her because they were so thirsty. I fought. I screamed and killed—she came in like the angel she was, and even knowing she was no match, protected me while I was bleeding out.

“And died to save one of her little lambs.” I hurried to wipe the tears that fell and sniffled. “I'm a poor substitute for Amanda, and I pray the gods forgive me for being the reason she's gone when the world needed her. I never had the faith she did in our people or the world getting better, but I always fought for it. I started Amanda's Hope because it was the least I should do in her honor.”

I was shocked when people started clapping, flinching when the applause got louder. I wiped my eyes and gave a sad smile when I saw Ha-joon was standing and clapping the loudest.

Damn, I really did love that man.

How could I not?

I thanked everyone and let out a slow breath as the applause died down. “The guilt of not telling the truth about Amanda has always eaten at me, but to explain who she was risked people finding out who I am. And until recently, there was still always a looming threat over my head from my birth father and family.

“Mostly because I handled it like a scared girl too often instead of the woman who has saved hundreds.” I gave people a moment with that. “So no, we never victim-blame. We understand that life is hard and complicated and terrifying for us. But we do better. We get help and promise to do better by our daughters.

“We fight and save others. That’s what we do because we can. And now you know that it all stemmed from one woman who truly did change the world. I have no idea how many Amanda Hope saved, but I knew a dozen she was helping at the same time as me. She was never idle and—I can never replace her, but I hope she smiles by the gods at her legacy. Thank you.”

The applause were thunderous as I quickly grabbed my notes and headed for the stairs. I did a double take when I saw someone waiting to escort me.

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Ha-joon. He was standing there smiling proudly and clapping until I was close enough and then he offered me his hand.

Which of course I accepted.

“I rambled,” I mumbled as we headed to our table.

“No, you didn’t.”

“I was preachy.”

“People need that,” he countered. “It was inspiring.”

“It was—”

He turned me and gave me a soft kiss. “Ellie, shut up and take the win. You were magnificent.”

Okay then.

He booped my nose when I couldn’t hide my surprise he’d just done that in front of everyone. “And stop picking on the woman I love or I’m going to spank you when we get home.”

I smacked his chest with my free hand. “You say that when we’re headed to the table with your family? Are you having a laugh?” I felt better when he winced at least.

“You were lovely,” his mother, Soo-ah, praised as the applause died and we sat down. “And what you have built is amazing. All of it.”

“Thank you, and thank you for joining us tonight,” I replied, meeting his father’s gaze. “It sends an important message that you did.”

He dipped his head to me. “It’s one that’s long overdue, but knowing the right cause or foundation to support can be tricky. You know this yourself.”

I accepted that. I’d been a part of a few corrupt nonprofits, and even if you were completely blind to what was going on, the stink followed you for a long time. It made people hesitant to join anything.

Which was truly a shame because the world needed help and a lot of people wanted to help. We just didn’t want to constantly be criticized for trying to do something good.

Shocking.

Everyone was polite and well-behaved the first course while the first performer played. I saw a change in the aura of one of his sisters when people came and congratulated me during the break. Several were talking to Ha-joon and he was amazing handling it all.

And she was jealous. She was no one and did nothing with her own life and privilege like her other sisters.

I would have let it go if she’d kept quiet. I really would have, but when she opened her mouth with everything bad in her aura and gaze focused on Ha-joon... No.

“Byeol, I could end you before either of your parents have a chance of reacting, and if you ever mistreat Ha-joon in my presence, that will be the outcome,” I told her firmly,

letting her see her death in my eyes when her glance cut to me. “And I have blanket immunity in several countries given I run ASH, including yours. Do not test me. Ever.”

Her family was eerily quiet for several beats as they digested and processed what I’d said.

“Do you really?” one of Ha-joon’s brothers asked quietly.

Ha-joon snorted. “She has all of the presidents’ personal numbers, and their people know to immediately put her through. The President of North America would give her...” He shook his head. “Yes. Ellie doesn’t bluff.”

I kept Byeol’s gaze and smirked. “No, no, I do not.”

“You promised, Byeol,” Soo-ah bit out.

Byeol flinched and then cleared her throat. “Old habits die hard. I apologize.”

Oh, that was the wrong thing to say, and her mother quietly let her have it in Korean. Whatever was said seemed to touch and amuse Ha-joon. He winked at me so I knew we were being backed up, but hopefully he would fill me in later.

“This event is truly lovely,” Ha-yun praised once their mother was done chewing on Byeol. “Did I hear right and your stepmother had a hand in it?”

I saw the hesitation in her aura, understanding she wasn’t trying to be mean or step in anything. I nodded and thanked the server as the next course was handed out. “Yes, she was known for hosting some of the best parties—our coven was after she was forced to mate my birth father. She needed some help being updated, but—no one pays attention to detail like Aurora.”

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“Good on her for wanting to and using what she was taught to her advantage,” Ha-yun praised, waiting for me to look at her. “And good on you for allowing it. You’re a stronger woman than I am because I hurt for you. I’m sure Amanda Hope was an angel as you’ve said, but your grit inspires a lot of us, Dr. Reed. Never forget that.”

All of her family slowly looked at her like they’d never seen her before, and I felt bad when her aura started to squirm under the scrutiny.

“Thank you, truly,” I accepted, wanting to move things along for her. “I heard you’ve taken on your own challenge mentoring the daughter of Atlanta’s pack.”

She let out a huff. “Her father is truly...” She shook her head. “I thought I’d seen the worst level of sexism given how old our pack is and Mum’s in Korea. But his mindset is—I don’t think progress will ever be made until a female wolf truly puts him in his place and he sees it. I hate to stoop to making things physical—”

“But it is the way of wolves,” Seo-yeon sighed. “But we are more than our wolves. It’s complicated because yes, they’re half of us and we need certain allowances, weak people put the blame on their wolves for everything. It makes it difficult to ever really flush out the truth.”

“Or if it’s some combo of the truth and exaggeration for their purposes,” Ha-joon agreed.

“You mean there are difficult shifters? I’m shocked,” I teased. “Absolutely astounded. I would have been more surprised if you told me the sky was green.”

“Funny,” Ha-joon grumbled as his family politely chuckled. “Funny, funny woman.”

I might have said more back, but my phone chirped. It was on silent, so that only happened if the program for ASH overrode the phone’s settings. I apologized and quickly checked it, frowning at what I was reading.

“Is it a crisis?” Ha-joon asked, checking his phone. “I’m not getting anything—”

“No, the hospital is fine,” I promised.

“Then who is using the hospital system to contact you?” he asked, an edge to his tone.

“Gerald,” I answered but hurried on when I felt how pissed he got fast. “He needed to make sure I saw this and knew my phone would be turned off. It’s—” It was quicker to hand over my phone so he could read it even if it was private information.

“Shit,” he hissed when he did. “Are they having a fucking laugh? This—”

“Hugo,” his father cut in. “We’re at an event. Her event.”

“Right, sorry,” he accepted and handed my phone back, adjusting his neck. “I need a minute.” He threw down his napkin as he stood and quickly left the room.

I blinked at his empty chair and then after him. “You would think he got the bad news?” I glanced at his mother as if asking what I was missing.

Surprisingly, it was his father who explained. “He’s an Alpha wolf. It’s ingrained in us to fix problems and protect people, Ellie. If he can’t or something was taken out of his hands—it’s what we struggle with most. And as Ha-joon sees you as his future mate, if you’ve been wronged...”

“Are you okay?” Soo-ah worried.

I sighed, mentally promising myself to spank Ha-joon later for making the issue bigger so his family had to be told. “Kenneth Reed learned more about my financial situation than he should have been able to. It was clear he got the information unethically. The former head of the hospital’s legal department I fired and my financial advisor were the main suspects.”

“They found the answer?” Ha-yun surmised, nodding to my phone.

“Weeks ago while interrogating Kenneth,” I answered. “My financial advisor, and apparently he was stealing from me. I learned that weeks ago too. The hospital’s attorney did me a favor and worked with the forensic accountants to figure out from where and how much.” I sighed heavily. “They have the final number, but there’s a problem.”

“A dirty man has more dirt that he is involved in,” Soo-ah surmised.

I tapped my nose and pointed at her. “Apparently, he’s willing to make a deal and is insisting everything stolen is included in the deal, so it’s waiting for him after he’s released from prison. He’s never committed a capital crime, so there’s no chance for a death sentence.”

“So the government is asking you to just give up your money for their justice?” Ha-yun asked with wide eyes. “Well, how generous of them to consider screwing you over as the victim of his crimes.”

I snorted. She had no idea when I’d saved the damn president’s life as a child. I would never regret it when his mother was such a wonderful woman, but sometimes I wished I’d smacked him more when I’d had the chance. Seriously, he asked way too much of me at times.

Ha-joon

The moment I stepped outside I swore under my breath. I was such an ass. I had been focused on controlling my temper and not making a scene instead of the whole situation.

If I made it clear something big had happened that was upsetting and left Ellie in front of my family... They'd pester her with questions.

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And I just now left her alone to handle that.

Ass. Giant ass.

I spun on my heel and hurried back inside.

“It’s fine,” Ellie said, giving a wave as I reached the table. “I’m sure they’ll work out something so I don’t get—I don’t need the money.”

“Are you having a laugh?” I growled. “It’s not twenty dollars he took, Ellie. It’s twenty—”

“Are you just trying to rack up your sins?” she asked, her tone cold as she focused on her plate.

But I saw her hand shaking.

I let out a slow breath and knelt next to her, waiting until she at least cut me a glance. “I’m sorry, my sweet kimchi. I’m a giant, huge, unforgivable ass. I know. I just... It’s hard to see so many always taking advantage of you or asking too much. They always expect you to clean up their messes or just swallow things down. It’s infuriating as the man who loves you.”

Byeol snorted. “Guess she’s not that smart and fabulous if she’s stupid enough to let someone steal twenty thousand dollars from her.”

I went to blast her, but Ellie chuckled darkly.

“Million, actually, child,” Ellie purred. “And I run all of Atlanta basically, the lives of millions on my shoulders every day. Yes, I let my personal life fall to the side too often because I’m in charge of managing crises countries cannot handle on their own. What have you ever done that makes you think you are worthy to judge me?”

“Stop,” Da ordered Byeol, rage in his voice. “Your level of petty is beyond ridiculous, especially when she’s right and you’re a spoiled brat.”

I was glad when my siblings all looked at Byeol with disgust. They might still have issues with me and our family ready to explode most days, but Ellie was amazing. And the victim of a crime. A massive one.

And she was mocking her and victim-blaming? How horrible.

“Ha-joon’s mate is a master with portfolios,” Ha-yun told her. “I thought he was a clever pup, but—the man has a mind for numbers and the market that is beyond impressive. He should branch out into his own firm he’s that much of a savant.”

“He’s wanted to, but he’s not management material, and the idea of managing an office—he’d get screwed over,” I told her as I took my seat again. I kept my focus on Ellie. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even check if you were okay before I stormed out of here like a nipper throwing a fit.”

She lost her anger and chuckled. “I’m fine. It’s just money.” She chuckled again softly when I flinched. “Oh, you are too adorable sometimes. If you think this is the first time I’ve lost this kind of money—it’s not and it won’t be the last.”

I sighed as she booped my nose. “Ellie, be serious.”

Ellie gave me a sad smile. “The older you get, the more you expect to get screwed over, Ha-joon. It’s surprising every damn time but no longer shocking.”

“Amen to that,” Da drawled, Mum snorting as well.

“I get that, but it doesn’t always have to be you.”

“No, it would be better if there was more balance, but I can handle this type of being screwed and the president knows that.” She moved her fingers over my lips. “Do you think he only screwed over wealthy people? I’ve known that man for decades. He started in Atlanta. He started by managing the benefits of first responders. Would you rather them get screwed?”

“No,” I growled. “I only want the criminal screwed. That’s what’s fair.”

“Yes, but it’s not life. So I will let Gerald handle this and get us the best deal possible and not give the criminal the best deal either. Him riding off into the sunset with his full stolen booty is ridiculous. We have other ways to make people talk and I know many of his skeletons as well.”

“You are truly at the top of my list of people never to piss off, Dr. Reed,” Ha-yun said with a dark chuckle. “You do not pick the fight, but you will make sure to always,alwaysfinish it.”

Ellie glanced at her and winked. “I knew you were a smart one, love.” She gave me a kiss and pushed my legs so they went under the table and I faced properly instead of towards her.

She really was too much.

“Do you at least get to ride around in Air Force One if you keep doing the president so many damn favors?” I grumbled after a moment. My family laughed... But Ellie laughed harder. Likerollinglaughing which confused me.

“Even I get the joke, baby brother,” one of my brothers chuckled. “She has a plane that is much nicer than Air Force One. That’s why it’s funny that you want her to downgrade for a favor.”

Ellie was still laughing when she tapped her nose and pointed at my brother.

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Fine, I was a duffer but at least she was smiling and hopefully the awkwardness was over. If nothing else, the food was bloody fantastic, everyone saying so.

“The caterers are all companies or restaurants owned by women Amanda’s Hope has saved,” Ellie told us with a smile. “None of us had ever thought about that. Aurora did. She said it like it was a given to brag about how far women can come with the right help instead of being bought and sold like mares. She immediately saw the wasted potential of this party.”

“She’s making her own point now that she’s being supported,” Mum praised, sharing a look with Ellie that I didn’t understand. “Well done to her.”

“Yeah, I’m glad.” She let out a slow breath. “I don’t know if I can ever really and truly forgive her for what she did and be what we were before I found out... But hundreds of years suffering is a penance I’m not sure she deserved either.”

I reached over and squeezed her hand. There wasn’t much else I could do for her or help her with on the topic. I just had to be there for her.

Gladly.

The event wrapped up well. Ellie wasn’t involved enough to stay after and help clean up or with the closing up details, but she was shaking alotof hands now that everyone knew she was the founder.

Geez, if they knew she was the founder of ASH, our lives would forever be her shaking hands and kissing babies with meon her arm. I mentally shivered at the idea.

We weren't those types of people besides here and there.

No, Ellie and I were people who liked to jump in and get right at the problem. It was what we did best.

And support each other. I smiled at the thought as I escorted her outside to the valet station. I squeezed her hand and went to look at her over my shoulder.

I didn't get to though, her hand ripped away from me and I felt magic as I was shoved hard enough to throw me off balance. I faced forward as I fell so I could catch myself easily... And had a front seat for what I thought was my worst nightmare.

But that was before the gun went off.

She'd shoved me out of the way to deal with a man who'd pulled a gun. I saw her grab him as I was falling. I caught myself and went to push up to help her but froze at the gunshot, horror filling me as I truly processed what was going on.

I had a split second of relief when the man froze, but Ellie kept moving, snapping the man's neck while holding the gun.

Then she turned towards me and blood was flowing down her pretty dress.

"Ellie!" I roared as I found my feet and pushed others away.

"I'm fine, pup," she lied, her breath in a wheeze. "Protect your family. She had other family."

"Stop talking," I ordered as I lifted her up in my arms. "Da, we need a—"

"Ha-joon, here!" Ha-yun bellowed, waving her arms... Standing next to a few cops

waving us to hurry.

Perfect.

I glanced at the valet who I'd given my keys to and nodded to Da. "He's going to take my vehicle and follow us."

"Yes, good, right," Da agreed, getting everyone to hurry into my SUV. "Ha-yun, go with Ha-joon."

"Got it!" she called back.

"I'm fine," Ellie told me. "I've had—"

"If you tell me you've had much worse right now as you're bleeding from a gunshot, I will lose it and shift when I love you, you fool," I warned her as I got us in the back of the police SUV. "I might have amazing control, enough to pass being a doctor, but I am not without flaws."

"You are so handsome when you're in doctor mode," she muttered. "I'll tell you when it's bad. I promise. I'm just going to close my eyes and—"

"Don't you dare!" I growled, pressing a towel Ha-yun got from somewhere against Ellie's chest. "Don't you dare sleep, Ellie Reed. You know—"

"Not sleep," she interjected. "Being in the back while they drive crazy and the lights make me nauseous. Gonna close my eyes for that."

"We'll make it as best as we can, Ms. Reed," the officer driving promised as his partner called into dispatch with an update.

“Can you get information directly to ASH so they know what we’re coming in with?”
I asked, but then realized I was being dumb and could call directly. I handed my phone to Ha-yun after putting in the code. I told her who to call.

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“I didn’t even get to try,” she mumbled before swiping my phone. “Dr. Carpenter, this is Ha-yun, Ha-joon’s sister. We are en route with Ellie. One gunshot wound to her upper right chest.”

“Put me on speaker,” he told her.

She did and I told him specifically where the wound was and what else I was sensing.

“Alan, it’s fine,” Ellie promised. “The bullet is still inside and it hurts less than a sword.”

I wasn’t the only one who looked at her like she was nuts. It was then I realized what she was trying to do. “Stop trying to dig out your own fucking bullet!”

“Driving here,” the cop reminded me.

Right, yeah. Shit.

“It will hurt worse if it heals over,” Ellie argued as I held her wrists in one of mine and kept pressure on her wound.

I opened my mouth to tell her that there was no chance of the entry wound healing over in such a short amount of time, but she opened her eyes and gave me a look to listen to her. Fine, I wouldn’t beat her ass. “We’re almost there and Alan will have the good pain meds so just behave.”

“Yes, my Alpha,” she chuckled.

It felt like seconds and also forever until we reached the hospital. People were waiting when we arrived and helped get Ellie out of the vehicle and onto a gurney without jostling her too much.

“No, you’re not getting involved,” Alan said as he blocked me from following them.

“You’re just as much her family and shouldn’t—”

“I know that, but I can’t shift,” he muttered. “Besides, Ellie knows what she’s doing. It will take us just a bit and she’ll be in a room. I promise.”

“What does that even mean?” I snarled, but he was already hurrying off. “That doesn’t make any fucking sense!”

“It does if you’re old enough,” one of the officers who had helped with the convoy said, holding his hands up in surrender when I turned on him.

“He’s right,” Da said from my right, moving his hand to my shoulder. “I’ve seen vamps make that move a dozen times. It’s their training.”

I spun on him. “To get shot in the shoulder? Are you having a laugh?”

“No, she learned it with swords,” he sighed. “She’s been trained. They train to take the nonvital hit to disarm their opponent. If others could be injured—to save innocents, they take the hit—” He was struggling with how to explain it.

The officer moved Da aside and showed me he was holding his taser and it wasn’t ready to be used, but as an example. He waited until I nodded that I understood he was demonstrating. “If I fire and others are around, I could miss. If you move closer, the chances of me missing are less, right?”

“She shoved me out of the way,” I whispered, already knowing she’d done it to protect me. I caught on when he moved closer. “She rushed him or pulled him closer so the gun went off in her shoulder and there was less chance of the bullet going through to hit someone else. In his shock, she disarmed him and snapped his neck.”

“Yes, and she is well-trained to do that while injured,” the officer praised. “Shock gave her a few moments too, but—it’s a badass move that a lot of us over a century know. I did it once only because kids were around, but I startled the guy and he lost his hold on the gun. It happens with swords as well because—sometimes people are so used to sparring they’re not—”

“Their instinct is to pull back when they see something like a mistake in a fight,” I mumbled. I patted his shoulder. “Thanks, mate. I’m still going to encase her fine ass in bubble wrap, but I appreciate the explanation.”

One of the security offered to park my vehicle once Da gave him the keys and I thanked him. Ha-yun had only a bit of blood on her and waved off my offer for a change of clothes and just went to the bathroom. I grabbed what I had in my surgical locker and changed.

Alan was heading towards my family when I returned. “I told you it would be fast. She’s fine and doped up. Asking for you and if you’re going to dump her because you were yelling.”

The sigh I let out was probably heard around Atlanta. “Where is she?”

He told me the room number and said to bring my family with. I didn’t understand that, but he seemed worried as he hurried off.

“We were the target?” Da asked. “Or you? Our family?”

“I have no idea, Da,” I admitted as I quickened my pace to the room, my parents and siblings right in step with me.

“There’s my handsome Alpha,” Ellie greeted with a loopy smile. She was propped up on pillows and her right arm in a sling. “Good thing Sean is a good guy and let us take extra blood, huh?”

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“Do you need more?” I worried.

“Soon,” she mumbled, rubbing her face against my hand when I touched her. “Sorry, Ha-joon. I’m really sorry. I’ll take security from now on.”

“So you were the target? Dr. Carpenter was worried and said we should come with Ha-joon,” Mum asked, her tone confused and tired.

“I was the target,” Ellie confirmed. “He was a vampire—his family is loaded and connected. I personally rescued his wife about twenty years ago and he lost everything.”

Her throat sounded rough, and I was about to ask about getting something to drink when a nurse came in with options for her. I thanked her and fretted over Ellie which she ate up, asking that I shower the blood off of her once Alan stopped being mean.

“Whatever you want, Ellie,” I whispered.

“A burger. The biggest burger and burger friends and fries,” she said with a happy sigh. “I always want that after I’m hurt like this.” She seemed to see Mum and realize she and my family were there.

Oh yeah, she got the good potions and drugs.

“Right, yes, asshole lost everything because he not only beat and raped his wife in front of his friends for fun, but she is super smart and took his family company from failing to thriving.” She focused on Mum. “In London. You probably know—”

“I recognized him after you handled him,” she confirmed. “We’ll make it clear with his family—thank you for the warning.”

Ellie seemed relieved. “Good, good. I’m sorry. I should have thought ahead about that aspect of announcing I was the founder of Amanda’s Hope. Coming out as being with Ha-joon and having you attend—I didn’t think it through. There’s going to be miles-long lines of angry vamps and old money families who now have a target. Fuckers.”

“We’ll figure it out and—no more pushing me out of the way and handling it all on your own like that, Ellie,” I whispered, tears in my voice. “I’m more durable than you and—”

“You’re not, pup,” she sighed. “You’re not and I’m sorry that I can’t promise—it’s instinct. I’ve been in too many battles and fights. It’s just—when I saw the rage and death in his aura, I reacted that—”

I hadn’t realized what she’d been about to say at first and reacted too late. I dropped the drink in my hand and moved my hand over her mouth... But was too late.

My wolf instantly alerted me of a problem, and I turned to face my family.

“Oh wow, you might have another damn psychopath,” Ellie whispered. “Why is she so fucking jealous and giddy?”

Byeol. She was seeing something in Byeol’s aura. It was the bad my wolf instantly smelled and warned me of.

“I will kill you to protect my mate,” I warned, my tone cold and deadly. I nodded when she pressed her lips together. “In a heartbeat, Sister. I love her, and I don’t even remotely respect you or think you contribute anything to the world, our pack, or this

family.”

“You are such—” Byeol started to say.

“So set your phone on the bed before I stop holding back my wolf,” I instructed. I didn’t even cut a glance at my brothers when I felt their aggression go up. “Don’t. Don’t be stupid.”

“Everyone put your phones on the bed and start acting like family or leave our house, pack—all of it!” Mum yelled. She stared at each of my siblings in turn. “She immediately warned us of a possible—possible—threat because she is a good woman and you are giddy to have something against her? Who are you? You are no child of mine if that’s how you behave.”

The others immediately did it and Byeol finally did then with a huff. She shot me a disgusted look. “I wasn’t going to text a reporter or post it to social media from her damn hospital room. I just liked that perfect Ha-joon wouldn’t have Mum and Da adoring his mate now that they know—”

“We knew she was special,” Da cut in, nodding when Byeol couldn’t hide her shock. “I knew before any of you were ever born. I met Ellie before your mother when I was sent off by your grandda. I knew she was a vampire who could do magic and was a git who tried to force her back to the pack like that would be some prize to impress my da.

“It was a stupid, misguided, and horrible idea out of desperation and foolishness that I have regretted for hundreds of years. I scared her trying to tail her and figure out what she was—I knew.” He shot Ellie a look and then met my gaze. “I figured out a lot.”

Shit. He knew Ellie was the head of ASH. He put it together.

Okay, well, another problem for another day.

I pulled out my phone and called Alan. “Ellie made a slip in her current state. I need one of the witches you trust to lock something in my siblings’ minds for her safety.”

“Fuck all the fucking fucks today,” Alan snarled before disconnecting.

“Well, he’s having a good time,” Ellie drawled with a frown. “What did I let slip? I’m normally really good at that no matter what condition I’m in. I’m a vault.” She met my gaze and sighed. “It’s your fault. I get all gooey and let my guard down around you.”

“Aye, I’ll take the blame for it. It’s all my fault, so let me protect you.”

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“Fine, but this isn’t as much fun as brownie. I get sex then, not itchy icky and a stupid arm sling.”

Oh fuck, she was whiney and adorable.

I was cooing over her when I realized an argument was going on and focused on it.

“Look, I’ll give a blood oath or whatever else you want since apparently that’s required because he says so,” Byeol said with a dramatic and exasperated tone. “But I’m not letting some witch we don’t know do anything to my fucking brain. No, not even for you, Mum. That’s insane that you are even considering this!”

Ha-yun lost patience and grabbed her arm, spinning Byeol to face her. “The problem here is not one of us believes you would honor any agreement you would make. None of us trust you after what you did with the Alpha of Atlanta and that was about more than Ha-joon. That was a mess for our family and embarrassing.

“And even if not all of us get along with Ha-joon, we know we can trust him. He would not risk us to protect his mate. I would bet he not only knows the witches well, but has seen exactly what they will do, so it’s not a risk of it being the first time. He wouldn’t risk damage to us for this. You would, so the problem here is completely and totally you, Byeol.”

“I like you now that you’ve opened your eyes to who your brother is,” Ellie muttered. “Really, you’re an impressive woman, Ha-yun. It’s why I want to name you my successor to run ASH if I die. You would—”

This time I did move my hand over her mouth before she said more... But then I saw more than my father had figured it out. Mum and Ha-yun had.

Shit.

Luckily, Alan came in with one of the witches I remembered from the last disaster.

I nodded towards Byeol and my brothers. “They’re the main, bitter problems. Ellie let it slip she had magic.”

“And more,” Mum warned. “They could put the pieces together later.”

The witch dipped her head to Mum. “I’ll gently take the whole conversation in this room then. Your son can fill you in on the important details you needed later.”

“I think that best,” Da agreed, surprising me. He smiled when I did a double take. “I agree with what Ha-yun said, Son. You’ve worked with this witch and trust her.”

“I have and I do. I saw what she did,” I confirmed, glancing at Byeol. “You’ll have a headache, but you’ll be fine after we go eat. That’s it.”

“It hurts because they fought,” the witch clarified, but then snorted. “And they were monsters, so I didn’t give a shit if they hurt. I will be gentle with your family.”

“We should move in together,” Ellie said after the witch handled my brothers. She smiled as I slowly looked at her as if she’d grown another head. “In a few months if we’re still doing good. Yeah, we should—I don’t want to keep with the your condo or mine. Even if we’re a few floors apart. It’s silly. You always have to go back downstairs to grab stuff or—”

I kissed her. Gentle but full of love. “Yeah, that sounds perfect. Just remember you

said this and don't take it back because you're high."

"I won't, but I am in pain again," she said under her breath. "Alan forgot to set the IV faster for me."

"I'll handle it."

"You always do," she sighed happily.

And I always would as long as she let me.

21

Ellie

Eight Months Later

"Are you ready for this?" Theresa checked.

I sighed and gave her a look to show what I was really feeling instead of the mask I normally kept on. I was beyond ready. The fact our meeting with our father had been delayed this long was an annoyance that ground on me more than I liked to admit.

But the fucker just always had to be a fucker.

When he found out we were both coming to visit him, he assumed why and tried to kill himself. The asshole almost succeeded, but luckily a guard found him at the last second and he was revived.

Barely. They'd had to keep him in a coma for months while his body slowly healed. We were more than human but not unkillable or perfect. And blood loss to a vampire

did toxic levels of damage to our bodies fast. It was our Achilles heel in many ways which was why it was so effective for suicide or a quick murder.

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Granted our skin was tougher so it was harder to kill us like that, but blades still cut, and if done the right way... The result could easily be catastrophic.

And clearly, Kenneth was scared of what we would ask him. Using potions and magic for interrogations wasn't just a blanket pass for anything no matter what TV, movies, and books said. It wasn't until he learned that we were in contact with Aurora that he became unruly and tried to kill himself.

Now that he'd woken up, he was under suicide watch, so it was time to finally handle this and try and move forward.

Try. I wasn't so deluded to think I could just get the answer I'd long since wanted to know and not struggle with it.

He looked horrible when he was brought in. Rage filled his eyes when he saw us sitting together, but then he did a double take, realizing it wasn't Aurora but Theresa.

“So that ungrateful bitch isn't even going to come see me herself but just have her useless attorney harass me to sign the divorce papers?”

“You really do live up to your reputation,” Theresa chuckled darkly, waiting until he sat with a frown. “I'm that 'useless attorney,' Father.”

I snickered, unable to cover up my amusement. “The elders were fair when they tore him down about missing details and checking he could read or—”

“That's enough from you,” he snapped.

“Or what?” I drawled, gesturing around to where we were. “You always think your threats have some sort of bite, Kenneth. But they never did, and now they really are just pathetic.”

He sneered at us. “I have information you want.”

“Yes, and it must be good for you to be such a coward and try to kill yourself before admitting to it,” Theresa mocked. “But you’re so incompetent you couldn’t even do that right. Well, better for justice.” She nodded to the witch we’d brought with us.

“Drink it and don’t fight it or it will be painful and no one here will care about that,” the witch warned him before holding the potion up to his lips.

“And if you even twitch, you won’t like the punishments you receive,” the guard told him firmly.

Kenneth shot Theresa and me looks of hate before he did as he was told.

Oh no, my heart broke that the sexist, useless monster hated me.

Clearly, Theresa felt the same given she was checking her phone. She sighed and tucked it back away. “Did you get permission to record this? I might have to leave sooner than planned. Something blew up with a case and the person covering for me was pulled in.”

“I’ll ask the warden, but I’m sure it will be fine if not shown publicly,” the guard said. “I know they’re worried about the next level of investigations with what will be uncovered here.”

“Nothing can be used from this,” Kenneth snapped after he was done swallowing the potion... That seemed nasty?

I gave the witch a glance and she simply shrugged. Yeah, fine, no need to make it taste good for jerks.

“You know that’s not true or you wouldn’t have tried to kill yourself,” Theresa drawled as she opened her leather-bound notepad. “Instead of the police moving on credible information, Ellie asked for an exception to ask the question herself. She kindly included me so I could ask questions as well. From there, the investigations will be—”

“You are even more disappointing,” Kenneth cut in. “You are my actual heir, not this bastard fraud. This is the first time we’re meeting and you’re siding with—”

“I may not have lived with you, but I also did not live under a rock, Kenneth,” Theresa said firmly.

“Stop interrupting me!” he shouted.

“Sexist even hundreds of years later when others have evolved,” she drawled, her lips twitching when I snorted.

“Did you kill my birth mother?” I asked, ready to just get on with it.

He opened his mouth to give a dramatic “no” like a cartoon character. I could see it with the way his lips moved. But then the potion made him hiss out the one word I’d needed to hear for centuries.

“Yesssss.”

I bobbed my head, swallowing loudly. “Why? How?”

Something broke inside of him at being forced to answer and it was like I saw the

floodgates open. “Because I’m not as stupid as you all truly think me. I knew the truth about you long before you did and long before Aurora would have guessed. I knew much about the bride I’d bought, and I never remembered such a bizarre physical feature in her bloodline.”

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He'd checked on my golden eyes. I nodded that I heard him. "That doesn't answer how or why. Answer me."

He grimaced, the potion doing its job. "She was in communication with her birth family. She asked for help for years, sneaking word to them under Aurora's nose. It was all denied until her father remarried. The bitch didn't know he had a daughter and finally accepted correspondence."

That was the piece of the puzzle I'd needed. "She was going to get help to rescue both of us and promised I'd be treated better than my mother had been. That my mother wouldn't be mistreated by her father again."

"Yes," Kenneth chuckled darkly but then frowned, studying me. "You really think I'm just some psychopath who killed her without a viable reason or for spite?"

Theresa and I shared a look and burst out laughing... Something he did not like.

Fuck. Him.

I opened my mouth to explain that it wasn't a stretch given how he saw women and his mindset, but then I realized... Why? Why waste the time? He wasn't worth it.

"How did you kill her?" I asked.

"Quickly," he answered. "She was to meet with a direct representative of her family to confirm it wasn't a ploy or—I smashed her skull. She died almost instantly."

“But that wasn’t your original plan,” Theresa muttered, seeing something I didn’t.

“No, I meant to throw her in the dungeon and figure out the best plan since I was coming late into what was happening,” Kenneth muttered. “But I couldn’t overpower her the way I’d planned and I was out of time.”

I swallowed loudly. “Where is she?”

“I have no idea. The messenger arrived at the location and I was waiting with her. I let him take her back to be buried at her family estate if they wanted but made it clear that I was within my rights to kill a servant who betrayed me so not to be stupid and push the matter. He took her body and I never heard from them.”

I didn’t hide my hate for him as I met his gaze. “Have you killed others?”

“That has nothing to do with your mother and it was within—” He grunted as the potion hurt him. “Yes.”

“How many?” I pushed.

“Dozens,” he growled.

I looked at the guard. “Tell the police they’re welcome and to please keep me updated. I would also like to know the answer of where my birth mother is buried since I assume they’ll follow up on that.”

“I’ll check,” Theresa interjected. “You’re not staying?”

I let out a slow breath and met her gaze. “No, I want to move forward. I needed that answer and the why, but now I want to forget him and let him rot until he’s executed.”

“As you wish,” she accepted, looking a bit disappointed.

I couldn't explain it, but this wasn't about revenge or sticking it to him. I wanted to stop having nightmares over answers I didn't have. I wanted... Peace?

As much peace and happiness as I ever could.

“You don't get to just walk out of here, Ellie Reed,” Kenneth snarled when I stood. “I promised you that if you did this that I had information on you too.”

I smirked as I leaned over the table knowing a bad poker face better than most. “And that would be?” I chuckled when his eyes flashed shock. “Are you going to tell people I have angel blood again? How well did that go over before? Or what was the other one?”

“I heard you were part dragon,” Theresa purred, getting in on the ploy.

“Really? That would be cool,” I accepted. I glanced between her and Kenneth and shrugged. “The golden eyes thing is a fluke. Some of the best medical minds in the world have studied them and me.” I nodded when Kenneth frowned. “I wondered if there was some truth to your bullshit. There wasn't. I'm a vampire. So was my mother.”

“You were in talks with her birth coven after all,” Theresa mocked. “Or what else are you trying to say Ellie is?”

“I don't know,” Kenneth bit out. “I just know she's more than a vampire.”

“I am,” I confirmed and went for the door. I glanced at Kenneth knowing it would be the last time until his execution. “I'm a supe, Kenneth. You're the one who thinks only vampires matter. I value all supes equally.” I thanked Theresa and the guards

and left.

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I let out a few slow breaths when I stepped outside of the prison before I met up with the warlock who was going to portal me back to where I belonged. I needed a few more and then I felt like I could function again. I'd never held out hope or onto some fantasy that my mother was alive.

No, I'd seen too much darkness and knew most stories didn't actually have happy endings... Or at least in all areas of their lives.

That didn't even make a good story because it was so far from reality.

But hearing the truth and fitting the pieces in my mind was what I'd truly needed. One more breath and I pulled out my phone to turn it back on.

I smiled as messages from Ha-joon immediately started popping up on my lock screen. He was my happy ending. A life with him—a future better than anything I had ever pictured for myself.

That was the fairy tale I was living, and I was so fucking grateful for it that words would never do the emotions justice.

I saw the warlock approaching and headed towards him. "I'm sorry, but can we change the location? I don't want to go back to ASH but my new house with my future mate."

"Congratulations," he accepted before asking me the address and then pulling it up on a map so he could make it work. He did his thing and dipped his head to me. "Be well, Ms. Reed."

“You too. Thank you again.” I dipped my head to him before walking through the portal. I came out the other side and found a massive fucking wolf sniffing around the front yard.

I laughed so hard that I wasn’t sure if I’d ever laughed so hard before in my life. Ha-joon’s wolf shot me a guilty look, and somewhere in my mind I knew without a doubt he’d just peed on something to mark the property as his.

And I loved the damn wolf for it just like I loved his person.

I went over to him and scratched behind his ears in the way he adored but Ha-joon would never admit. “The title transferred to us faster than I would have thought. No other problems getting the keys or anything?” I smiled when he shook his head. “Anything your wolf doesn’t like?” Again, the wolf shook his head. “Perfect.”

I kept scratching his ears as we stared at our vacation house. It was way bigger than needed and luxurious to the max. I’d argued that we could let our friends and family use it when we weren’t and they wouldn’t ever have to touch the master suite.

Plus—and this was important—I was fucking rich.

Duh.

But when we’d talked about moving in and back and forth about who should move in with whom or Ha-joon had really wanted us to move forward and buy a place together... We’d struggled. I wasn’t ready to let go of my condo where I had so much history.

I also understood Ha-joon’s side that the history included other men and that bothered him for our future.

It was Joyce who got annoyed with me talking about it again and again and just

yelled at me that I was rich and to buy a separate place together. It had been the perfect solution and Ha-joon loved the idea, somewhere for us to just be us and not the hospital or Atlanta. We had access to witches and warlocks because of my position so... Why not?

But then it was the back and forth about how much he could afford versus what I could afford. When Alan reminded him how much money I was making off the blood because of his blood, Ha-joon relented.

And that was how we now owned a huge vacation mansion that was everything both of us could ever want for relaxing. Full indoor and outdoor pools. Private beach. Just... Everything.

“I love you, Ha-joon Clark,” I whispered as we kept staring at it. I wasn’t surprised when he changed back to a man and hugged me. “I told you getting a lot of land was smart. You’re naked on the front lawn. If we didn’t—”

“Ellie, shut up and let me kiss you after the first time you said the words to me,” he said with a growl.

I could suffer through that.

The kiss was so good I felt it down to my damn toes, but honestly it wasn’t enough. I blinked up at him when it was done and raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to do more than kiss me, right? I was thinking we were going to christen the whole place and—” I let out a yelp as he swung me up in his arms.

“You’ve had a rough day if you’re doubting me or acting like you’re so neglected that I would ever leave you wanting,” he grumbled as he carried me towards the front door. He sighed when we got there and nodded for me to help.

“Kiss, please,” I teased, pursing my lips.

“You’re too damn adorable to even pretend to be mad at.” He gave me a kiss and waited until I opened the door. “You okay? I wasn’t expecting you so soon.”

I nodded. “I got him to confirm the answer and that was all I needed.” I reached up and cupped his cheek. “Now I just want to move forward and be happy. Make me happy, Ha-joon.”

“Always, and not just with hot sex, my sweet kimchi.”

That I believed maybe more than anything I ever had before.

The End