



Embers in the Wind

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

Description: She can run, but there is no escaping the games that destiny plays.

Embry

A much needed escape leads me into the Mystic Forest, somewhere to hide from my sordid past.

The sacred woods have a way of whispering secrets though, passing them along to friends and foe.

I shouldn't be in the enemies' land, yet there must be a reason I was sent from the city into the cavern hidden deep in the woods. The sacred area that both the vampires and witches claim for their very own. They act like friends.

Yet, I'm told the witches are not to be trusted, but nor is the vampire lord sent to bring me home.

The arrogant and ruthless Lord Stephan Corvinus is known as one of the most powerful vampire leaders in the region. And I'm not going anywhere with the bloodthirsty beast.

No matter that with one dark and sultry look I'm putty in his sexy hands.

Trust does not come easy, yet if I'm going to uncover the truths of the past, I must depend on the very man who openly challenges me to a deal I should refuse.

But can't.

Lord Corvinus

Embry can run but she cannot hide. Sent by the vampire overmaster as a favor to his queen, finding and protecting Embry from the creatures of the dark is my job.

It should be an easy task...

But from the moment her scent invades my senses, nothing will ever be the same. It seems destiny has stepped into my life and wants to play a cruel little matchmaking game.

I scoff at the thought of fated mates, especially when the sharp-tongued female defies me at every turn, but there's something about Embry that calls to my dark-hearted soul.

She can resist, but I will protect her from the enemies in a nearby witch academy, and even from herself, but at a price.

She's mine for one year, that's the deal.

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Prologue

The cell in front of Overmaster Descallia rings. He scowls, turning it over to check the message, but then excuses himself for a minute to step outside. The masters' phones all begin to ring, vibrate, and buzz at the very same time, while I see I have a missed call from Taylen. I flip over to the missed voicemails and read the transcription of the message while the others call their mates.

Message: Just got word that Embry is missing. She left a note for Lucianna that said she needed time away from us, and this place. The ladies want to go after her, and there's a big debate. I'll help in whatever way you need.

Descallia walks back into the room and clears his throat. "Gentlemen, Embry has disappeared. She left Lucianna a note letting her know that she needed some time away, but the ladies aren't convinced that she should be on her own. I sent out a few feelers to Sheba and others. They'll help us locate her if she wanders into their areas, but we need someone skillful and who knows his way in and out of the vampire lairs, and quite frankly someone strong enough to deal with Embry. Lucianna has tried all the normal ways of communicating with her. She's gone dark. We believe she's alone but we need to find her."

My right-hand man will be furious, but if Taylen were missing, I'd want him leading the charge to find her. I clear my throat. "Stephan Corvinus. I'll get him up to speed and have him take point in finding her. There is no one better in a situation like this."

Every one of the masters nods their agreements and Descallia bangs the gavel with so much force the sound reverberates around the room. "Good. Have him find and

convince Embry to come home.”

“I’ll get right on it. No thoughts at all as to where she would be? Lucianna didn’t have any visions or thoughts?”

Descallia grimaces. “No, it’s like she’s turned everything off and completely vanished. Embry’s in the wind.”

Chapter 1

Corvinus

An impromptu visit from Overmaster Descallia is always a surprise, especially when he arrives in my estate without any warning at all, red-eyed and fangs descended. I stand from behind my desk, coming around to greet the man who only last night made his mate our queen at a ceremony that will be the talk of the vampire community for centuries.

He tugs on the end of his shirt sleeves, letting the crisp white show beneath his black suit. “Lucianna is worried sick about Embry. Even with her powers, she can’t get a sense of comfort with Embry gone. We need to deal with this once and for all, closure to the whole damn thing. I won’t have Lucianna upset like this during at a time when she should be the happiest.”

I gesture to the seat across from my desk and settle back in, unbuttoning my own jacket as one of my dearest friends and my boss for centuries folds his length into the chair. There must be far more to this assignment than what I learned last night, but I’ll let him tell me when he’s ready. “There are a few things I need to finish, but I planned to leave to find her at first dark.”

He inhales a deep breath, the red in his eyes diminishing, returning to the dark black

eyes that pierce me with their intensity. Something tells me I'm not going to like what he's about to say, any more than I liked getting the assignment last night after the ceremony.

Overmaster Descallia is not known for beating around the bush and he doesn't do it now. "Embry was spotted in the Mystic Forest. No one is sure where, but there are many who have spotted a young woman with a dark cape, purple hair and eyes traipsing through not only the tall oaks in and around Master Romano's territory but venturing into areas of the forest that are off limits to the vampires, at least according to the witches."

My jaw tightens with agitation. What should have been easy just got fucking hard. "She plans to hide in the very place she knows vampires are not wanted, in the land we've agreed not to battle with the witches over right now. We just got out of one war with the rogue vampires, and she wants to start another with the cackling biddies? She knows the contention around that land."

This woman, best friends with our new queen or not, has just inched herself up on the list of people I don't like, in addition to upping my annoyance level by many degrees.

Descallia's eyes tinge with redness around the periphery as he stewes over the same thing. He shifts in his seat. "Exactly. The same area where the witch caverns convene, right along the property adjacent to Romano's estate, and the Carpathian Mountains. So close to the very land we fight over with the witches, and she damn well knows it. Yet, she runs to the Romanian hills without a word of warning other than that fucking note."

I clear my throat. "Which told us nothing about where she was going, only that she was leaving."

His deep eyes meet mine. "You're not wrong. Embry has been truly committed to the

vampires, and a fearless warrior. But her relationship with Lucas has put doubt in everyone's minds about her trustworthiness."

That in itself should tell us to leave her be. Let Embry work whatever it is out by herself and for us to stay out of that land. She'll come back when she's ready. Let the witches deal with her but that's not likely the case, damn it all to hell.

Descallia wouldn't be here if that were the case. A quick phone call or text would have sufficed to let me know plans had changed. No, something is troubling our fearless leader, and I have no doubt I'm about to find out the real reason for his visit.

He waits as Bernard, my house manager for many centuries, walks in with a silver tray with two glasses of Descallia Red, a mixture of blood and wine made in the vineyards of Italy around one of Descallia's homes.

"Thank you, Bernard," I tell him as he leaves us to our business, closing the door behind him as he leaves. I hand a glass of the Red to Descallia and take one for myself, taking a sip and allowing the calming blood mixture to mingle in my veins. Fresh blood, a truly soothing balm for whatever ails you.

He takes a drink of his, almost draining his one long swallow. His fangs descend again, and his eyes begin to take on a red glow, his emotions generally well hidden from the public and prying eyes. "Devora and I have agreed to keep each other informed when traveling into the area of the Mystic Forest that both the vampires and witches stake claim on as our own. We need to find Embry and get her the fuck out of the Mystic Forest before she reaches the area that Devora claims as her own."

I glance at the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak open worked watch on my wrist, a million-dollar gift to myself. Perhaps extravagant, but also a sign that the vampires have arrived in the world of human billionaires who believed until not long ago that they were the only males on earth. "It will be dark soon now. I'll get things wrapped

up here and be on my way.”

He stands. “I’m counting on you to get in, find her, and bring her home fast. We’re in no position to go to war with the witches. And you never know with Embry what the hell she’ll do and what’s going to pop right out of her mouth at the most inopportune of times. I swear that woman has no filter, but Lucianna loves her like a sister. She is one of the best at wielding a blade, so we protect her at all costs.”

“You don’t think she’s already crossed the line, or wandered into the land?”

His dark eyes penetrate mine. “I’m counting on you to make sure she doesn’t and for you to keep the impetuous little vixen in line before she starts another war!”

My jaw tightens with pent up frustration. Fucking fantastic...

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Chapter 2

Embry

A crunching sound behind me causes my heart to hammer in my chest.

The forest animals scurry, rapidly jumping from tree to tree, racing along the forest floor causing the dried leaves to crunch at their feet. The oak trees stand tall and proud, their majestic trunk circumferences all centuries old, and just as wide as I slip in between the protection of their girth.

Waiting for danger to pass.

Cooler breezes blow lightly, swirling, moving the underbrush of the forest floor as I make my way to safety. It has to be close by. The journey has been farther and taken longer than it should. I can barely keep my eyes open as I look for signs of the much-remembered place.

Doubt swirls in my mind. Maybe I should go back.

Descriptions of the pathways may be years and years old, but still Gramma's directions remain vivid and clear as I walk the journey, that even years ago, Gramma must have known I would need to make today.

All the trees may be slowly baring, but winter has not yet come to call. The temp may be a little brisk, but at least we're still in the peak of fall. No matter that it's dark and the brilliant colors of nature cannot be seen, when the sun shines in the morning, the

magnificent plume will bring the entire forest to life, while hopefully I've found somewhere to rest out of the sun.

Planning to make the journey in one day or two was more than silly on my part. At least not knowing the forest floor as well as I should before venturing through the vastness of the land. The Mystic Forest outside of the Carpathian Mountains is known for its immensity. I should have remembered from so many others who have traveled it before.

I've heard the rumors, and knew the dangers, yet not even those could keep me away.

I have been fortunate along the way. Creatures of the land coming to my aid in many shapes and forms, providing guidance, if only with a gentle nod of a head to put me in the right direction when lost. But land in the Mystic Forest can provide an abundance of sustenance as long as you know where to look and friendly creatures to guide the way.

Gramma prepared me for this journey well with all the stories that she told, but still, a few of the tales are dim from age. But the generosity of those who live in the land seems to know no end, offering me sustenance and temporary shelter as I find my way deep into the forest, to a cavern that gramma used as a child and that she described so many years ago.

My cape pulled tightly around me, I step from the protection of the trees carefully, hoping danger has passed, trying to avoid disrupting the sleep of the animals and creatures again. The mean ones. The ones that will shred me to pieces without a bit of remorse.

I urge myself on, past my fears and the relentless fatigue after the previous day's journey in flight. They say we are the fortunate ones because vampires can transport where they want to go in a blink of an eye, but it's not so fast or without

lingering fatigue, especially when the journey is that far. Already my provisions, especially the fresh blood, are in short supply having used so much more to regain my strength than I planned.

The forest sounds quiet again, free once again of danger, at least for a short while. I've barely started moving again, when a branch cracks on the ground right in front of me.

Bright eyes shine through the night, almost causing me to transform and make for the treetops as fast as my bat wings can carry me, but the wolf is only watchful. Keeping his eyes peeled on me as I make my way onward, giving no signs of aggression, bedding down to watch me move from treetop to treetop until out of his sight.

My breathing slowly returns to normal as I transition back for at least the fiftieth time since starting out on this journey. I'll make it, because no one dares to cross the angry vampiress who is rumored to have more combat skills than most when it comes to the sword.

And once I do, I'll have peace, solitude, and serenity to get me through the day. Gone will be the ugly whispers of creatures who have no idea what it's like to be me.

The clearing ahead gives me cause for worry, leaves me out in the open and vulnerable, but on the other hand gives me hope. A landmark in Gramma's directions that tells me soon I'll see a winding river and follow its bend. If memory serves there will be an overgrown patch of ivy growing up the side of a hill, seemingly at home here in the foothills of the Carpathians, but with a door hidden behind its wall of green.

And when I walk through that ornate carved entrance, I'll be home. Away from all the gossip, the prying eyes, and busybodies who have nothing better to do than talk about my shame. And then I can rest, refresh and find myself again.

Fuck every one of those assholes that keep whispering my name. I don't need them and their world. They may have turned me, kept me safe on more than one occasion, but where were they when I needed them most? And where was the loyalty instead of thinking I'd strayed? All they cared about was catching the rogue vamp, and of course the infamous Lucas who I hope is laying in a pile of ashes in the bowels of hell.

After all that I've done, my grandmother has done for them? How could they have possibly thought I was a traitor? That I would allow anyone close enough to harm my friends, my family and my coven, at least knowingly. No matter that the enemy slept in my bed.

My breath catches momentarily pulled from my despair as I follow the beauty of the ice blue mountain water, bathed in the clearing's moonlight I was almost afraid to follow. The majestic stream, home and respite to so many creatures for survival and pleasure. Right now, it means I'm mere minutes from my new home.

Even with the moonlight the ivy on the hills is hard to discern from the underbrush and growth, but my keen night vision homes in on the pattern of the trailing vines, hanging from the hillside that will be my refuge, at least for a while.

Somehow the fact that gramma was here, and that her stories led me here sooth the ache inside that otherwise would still be filled with utter despair.

Crashing leaves and branches overhead cause me to tense, but instinct tells me there's no danger this time, it's just the scramble of birds getting tucked in for the night. I head into the lit clearance, hugging the hood of my black cape, keeping my body warmth from seeping into the crisp night air as I make my way to the secret door, looking this way and that to ensure I am not seen.

I slide my hand over the roughness of the old green door, feeling around underneath

the ivy until I find the doorknob. Gramma said the key to opening it is simply to open it. It will know intuitively that I have arrived and will welcome me no matter the state I'm in.

At least that's how the story went so many years ago...

I take a deep breath, hoping one last time that the childhood stories told to put me to sleep by an aging grandmother are true and will unfold as she described to me and that an angry owner will not tear me to pieces for disturbing its peace.

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My eyes trace up the hillside, taking it in. It's just like the witches' cavern that we uncovered with the vampire masters while searching for the rogues not so long ago. Yet grandma wasn't a witch but a psychic, at least that's what I've been told.

I turn the old knob, surprised, when with a gentle pull it begins to open, as though propelled on its own, with no force at all from my hand.

“Hello?”

Chapter 3

Corvinus

The forest floor is swarming with critters as I trudge through the underbelly of the fucking forest night after night, only time and time again to find I've just missed the elusive little vampiress who wants nothing but to be left alone.

And these damn creatures are little to no help at all. I swear if I see one more furtive glance between the other as they lie right to my face, I'll sear them all to hell with a blink of my eyes.

Why Overmaster Descallia and Lucianna, and her other friends, do not allow her time to grieve, is beyond my imagination. It's only been days since her mate Lucas was killed, sure, longer than that when she realized who and what he was according to the gossip amid foot, but still, his death had to have hurt, no matter the reason or her allegiance.

Why not just tell her not to tread on the land that the vampires and witches have battled over for centuries? Maybe it will be as easy as that when I find her. But something about the way Descallia handled the entire thing tells me that's not going to be the case and I'm going to have my hands full with this Embry if the rumors about that little mouth of hers are true.

If I had my way, we'd be done with this hunt. Cut our losses and let her go. Nothing good can come of bringing her back. Give her a warning to stay clear of the land and let the witches deal with her if she doesn't obey. There are too many who believe her to be the enemy, no matter that Lucianna still stands loyal to her friend.

It would sure as hell make my job easier.

But, as long as Lucianna is determined to find her friend and have her brought back into the Vampire Master's fold, I will be chasing the elusive vampiress who according to those along the way, have seen her fleetingly, watched her disappear into thin air, turn into a bat, and battle a demon with her bare hands and a sword, and come out winning, in only the last few days.

A female with extraordinary combat skills, said to have slayed some of our centuries-old enemies without an assist, but yet sleeps with our enemy for months and months with no clue of the traitor's intent?

No, this female is too smart, cunning and adept for that. Surely, she would see right through the guise of anyone wanting to use her to get close to the vampires at large. Besides, she came to our community through Lucas. He brought her into the fold, not the other way around. There would be no reason for him to bring her into our coven of vampires unless he wanted her help. The kind that only a woman like her was more than happy to give.

Befriending the females, infiltrating their friend group to get the inside track. Maybe

it was Lucianna who was duped, fooled by the cunning female who wanted to help her lover and long-time family friend take over as ruler of our kind.

She certainly hasn't shown any remorse in staying with him for so long, didn't apologize to the coven as a whole for not knowing the enemy we were searching for, the one who wanted nothing more than to send every single pureblooded vampire back to the dark ages, was sleeping in her bed.

They may feel pity for the young vampiress, but something tells me there is far more than what they are seeing, far more to Embry than meets the eye. She and Lucas were friends for years. Her grandmother fought by Lucas's side, and was rumored to be a psychic. How can people not see this female for what she really is? Maybe I'm not giving her the benefit of the doubt, which is her right.

Pain in the ass that she is...

Frustrating beyond belief. Trudging around in the forest, night after night, but at least now, I have closed the distance. Finally catching a break, inhaling the unique scent of the female from a sudden breeze, a wind that whipped up from nowhere and put me on her trail.

The minute her scent soaks into my nostrils, the runaway female is done. Known for my hunting skills, I will not be outsmarted. Never mind those I've encountered along the way weren't as forthcoming with the knowledge of her whereabouts as I thought they may be. Now that I've found her, she's not getting away.

The other creatures were no doubt manipulated by the female's charms, but she won't get that lucky with me. I've had enough of this dance, and in short order, she's going to heed my word and return to our land.

Lucianna can deal with her wayward friend. I'll have done my duty as asked by

Overmaster Descallia and begin the task of putting the warriors back together again. Now that is a task worthy of a lord, not mucking around on the forest floor chasing the skirts of a runaway girl.

The scent of her in the wind becomes strong, drawing me in, homing in on my little black-caped prey. She may have fooled others by hiding and keeping her fangs at bay like an innocent marm, but she won't fool me as easily at all.

She looks up, gazing at the moon with bright purple wonder. There is no hiding those unique orbs of hers, no matter if she's changed the color of her hair or has only hidden it tonight.

Embry's eyes shine under the light, confirming what I already know. I've found the little troublemaker. The one who's cost me countless nights of sleep, and a soft bed back home which I'd far rather be lying in than chasing after her in the night.

I hover forward, my cape cloaked around me as my keen eyes penetrate the trees, scanning the darkness, falling on eyes that peek out from beneath the brush, hissing a warning that makes even the smallest of creatures scramble for a safer place to be.

The large cat sniffs the air and decides he doesn't want to play.

The scared little creatures can run, and they will be safe, but there is no safe haven for the one with purple eyes who is suddenly alerted to my presence and streaks across the clearing, intent on getting to the other side.

I give chase, one minute on the ground and the next transporting through the air, intent on closing the gap, on one thing and one thing only, catching my prey.

Seconds count, and as soon as her hand touches that knob, I lunge. Some sixth sense tells me that as soon as she gets through that door, she will have reached the destiny

that will safeguard her, exactly what she's been looking for, because she's sure as hell not going to invite me in and this looks as close to a witch's hideout as I've ever come.

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My hand reaches out, ready to grab her from behind and subdue her with my strength. But the wily female must have keener ears than I, spinning at just the right time, and out of my grasp, allowing her the element of surprise.

She turns, and instead of drawing the sword, pushes her hood aside, those majestic eyes ablaze, exposing her beautiful cascading mane of purple hair. The same shade as those magnificent eyes that were entranced by the moon not so many moments ago.

But now they're turned on me, glaring with a vengeance that I've never seen. Not from someone as stunningly beautiful as the dark-haired vampiress. Embry may be gorgeous but is deadly to boot. I've heard all about her run-ins with our enemies, and the deaths they've suffered at the tip of her steel.

She draws a jewel-tipped sword and waves it menacingly, the kaleidoscope color taking on a bluish hue from the moon above. "Come closer and you'll seal your fate. I have nothing you want. No silver, no gold, and nothing to eat."

Embry appears strong and confident, yet I hear every beat of her heart, the heart gifted to life from a pureblood vampire, Descallia's right-hand man, until he turned traitor. "Overmaster Descallia and his queen sent me to bring you home."

The pulse at the base of her neck calms slightly, and she lowers her sword, yet she remains on guard, a combat skilled soldier through and through. "Why did they send you?"

My eyebrow arches. "They want to make sure you are safe, that you haven't taken ill, and Lucianna wants you by her side."

Her gaze shifts to the forest as a screech owl hoots in the distance. “I’m sorry you’ve traveled so far. I won’t be coming with you. I’ve left that world behind. Tell them you found me and that my mind is made up. The vampires no longer need to worry about me.”

I scoff. “The little vampire traitor thinks it’s easy to turn her back on the vampires after all that we have done for you? We do not allow our families to wander off without a clue as to their health. You should have known Lucianna would send someone to find you.”

She shrugs, but the emotion in her eyes belies her uncertainty.

“Clearly you do not know who I am, if you think I’ll just turn and go away. You are going to return with me, face up to what you’ve done, and accept whatever punishment is due. Understand?”

The purple-haired vampiress has the audacity to laugh at me. “Lord Stephan Corvinus, I know exactly who you are. You are the asshole who has been trailing me for the last few days.”

Didn’t see that one coming. “How did you know?”

She gestures to the trees above that shield the forest. “The creatures know far more than you think. The same asshole who I will run through with this sword if you don’t leave now and do as I say.”

The dark-haired beauty’s eyes flash. “Understand?”

“Oh, I understand you’re going to learn a few things in a minute.”

Chapter 4

Embry

The arrogant vampire lord looks down his royal nose at me as though he has much better things to do, and I'm almost positive that he does. But then he shouldn't have messed with me, at least not tonight. Does he think I haven't heard the heavy step of his foot on the forest floor, or the sound of his voice trying to pry information from friendlies along the way, or that they wouldn't let me know?

He has not been through the rigorous training that I have. Lord Corvinus may be Overmaster Descallia's right-hand lord, especially now that Lucas is no longer alive, but he has not been in bloodthirsty battles with the rogues who use every dirty trick in the book and force you to ensure your skill sets with the steel to stay alive.

The vampire lord looks down at me from his over six-foot muscular frame, but no matter the difference in height, I have speed and can disappear or take flight in a blink of an eye, disappearing again, which would cause him more wasted days. I can see the barely constrained frustration and tolerance in his eyes. He has one mission. Deliver me back unharmed, and then be on his way and he wants to get it done and over with as soon as he can.

His strong and masculine voice booms with his anger. "I understand that you're coming with me. I've been asked to bring you back, and that's exactly what I intend to do."

I've heard a rumor that he'll be in charge of the warriors. Everyone knows his skills with the sword, but just because he's got immaculate skills and is quick on the draw doesn't mean he should dismiss mine. "If you come any closer, this is going to turn from a very friendly chat to an all-out war. Turn around and go home. Tell my friends that I've made up my mind, and they should heed the note I sent. It's really all I have to say."

Those intent dark black eyes draw me my eyes upward, magnetizing me momentarily as though locking me in place. So handsome, yet deadly in his own right. Yet his voice softens as though changing tact. “I mean you no harm, but you’re making this difficult at best. Why not come back, tell them yourself that you are fine, convince them of that so Lucianna does not worry, and then you can return.”

I laugh scornfully. “You mean after the vultures and gossip mongers rip me to shred with their lies, or the other vampires and their mates condemn me to a burning fire for no reason at all? Which or all of that would you want to run back to, Lord Corvinus? Because I, sir, will have none of it at all. You will go back and tell them whatever you wish. Because I simply don’t give a fuck.”

His eyebrows arch in challenge, causing me to ready for battle, my fingers stroking the handle of my steel in the event that he pounces to take me by surprise.

Instead, the handsome vampire lord surprises me yet again. Speaking to rationale that I’ve gone over a million times in my own head.

Corvinus gestures with a nod toward the forest. “Funny, you don’t look like a quitter to me. Yet, you’d rather I tell them you ran away, that you aren’t willing to defend yourself, or to tell them the truth? All they know is what they’ve been told. That’s what they believe, Embry. Why not tell them your side of the story? Tell them your truth.”

It's not that I haven't told myself the same thing time and time again, but if they didn't listen to it when I pleaded with them to, when I could have been their biggest ally, then why the hell does he think they'll listen now?

My silence infuriates the beast. “Why are you so damn obstinate after I’ve come all this way? Do what I say, or I’ll take you home the hard way, in shackles and with a sore ass.”

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The fury of days and days builds to an almost overflowing cauldron of angst, bubbling inside while seething fire at his words. “Leave now before this becomes something it does not have to be. Make no mistake, I’ve said my piece and If I have to run you through?” I shrug. “Then it was meant to be, asshole. My blade has taken down tougher than you.”

His eyes flare red, bright flaming red, a warning that I’ve gotten on his last nerve. Well, newsflash, he was on mine a long time ago. The minute I caught sight of him tracking me through the forest floor. But this standoff is real, and my hand clenches the steel, knowing what an accomplished adversary he will be. Because I’ve heard rumors to, about just how arrogant and deadly he can be.

A loud screech pierces the forces, a blood-curdling scream that causes him to turn and gives me the very chance that I need to open that door and sink into the sanctity of my new home, hoping against hope that what grandma said was true.

No one, evildoers, and vampires alike, can penetrate their walls. Too filled with the sacred magic of those who built it centuries ago. An almost impenetrable fortress, a safe haven that will always be your home. Unless, of course, you invite them in.

And as I slide to the floor in exhaustion, I have to hold on to the hope that what she said is true, that I’ve not made the journey for nothing, only to be led back by the arrogant bastard on the other side of this door.

But yet his ferocious knock makes my heart race with fear. “Go away. Tell them I’m fine.”

The door shakes with his wrath, his strength pushing against the door, and my back as it moves with his rage, but yet, just as grandma warned it stays locked and keeps me safeguarded from his attack. “Go away.”

A heavy thud on the door is enough to sway it and me at the same time, but the door does not come from its hinges. The not too light footsteps fading away, and the scurrying of creatures scrambling through the night can be heard as the enemy retreats, hopefully to go back to Descallia and Lucianna and leave me alone.

But I’m not taking any chances. The lord is known for his arrogance and in his circle, coming back without accomplishing his mission will no doubt be seen as a blemish on his impeccable record. No, that asshole is coming back, and I’ll be more than ready to convince him to leave.

I stand, surprised at just how shaky my legs are now that I’ve had time to calm. The room is dark, but my keen eyes grow accustomed to the dark, taking in the small table and chairs, the hearth in the corner and the queen size bed that lays against the wall. I walk toward the lamp and strike a match, wondering if after so many years they will work, but the flame flares in only one stroke.

The lantern lets off a warm glow around the interior of the cavern carved into the hills of the Carpathian mountains, and gratefulness and memories of my grandma abound.

A light brushing sound against the floor causes me to turn. But only the rocking of a chair can be seen by the unlit hearth. “Welcome, child.”

Chapter 5

Corvinus

Once on the ground and close to Master Romano’s, I decide to see if cell service in

the area will connect us with a call, happy when he answers after only a ring. “This is Corvinus. I’ve found Embry. She’s in the Mystic Forest, not far from your estate, but she’s holed up in a cavern of sorts. I tried to send word via text message, but it didn’t go through.”

Master Romano laughs. “Alas, modern devices have no functionality in the Mystic Forest. It’s like the entire area is set in another time. A magnetic field that divides the mountain side between us and the witches. Raven and I have been expecting you, so feel free to come by. We can discuss the caverns she’s no doubt taken refuge in.”

My jaw locks tight. Yet another magical trick of the pesky witches, no doubt. Sealed off and unable to get to the woman with the shark’s tooth tongue. “No, I appreciate the offer, but time is of the essence. I need to get her well in hand and be back to my estate before first light.”

The vampire master laughs. “Stop by and we’ll have a glass of Descallia Red. I’ll bring you up to speed on the virtues of the Mystic Forest and the caverns you now find yourself unable to penetrate. You will need to be armed with more than the mighty sword, Lord Corvinus. And I hate to break it to you, but I highly doubt you’ll convince Embry to leave with you tonight.”

My jaw tightens with barely constrained irritation. Why the blazes this damnable woman is so important, causing me to be away from more important things is beyond me. I seriously wonder how Overmaster Descallia has allowed himself to be pulled around by the nose by his new queen. If she were my mate, I would put her in her place, not allow her to order his lord around on a wild goose chase in the night.

The transport to Master Romano’s house on the other side of the ridge does not take long. I walk through the forested area around the perimeter of his home, just to get a sneak peek of the top of the witches’ academy that sits far enough away, but still, right next door in an area as vast as Romania. All is quiet. Devora and her cackling

witches are no doubt asleep or concocting some brew or another to make life interesting for the vampires.

I've not yet knocked when Romano's houseman opens the door. The older gentleman has been with Romano for as long as time. I've forgotten his name. "Nice to see you again." His smile is warm and sincere. "Romano said you would be arriving shortly and to have you meet him in the great room. Follow me."

The great room is vast, with Italian marbling on the floor. No doubt imported from the same place I imported mine because they provide the best that money can buy. Romano turns and greets me with an amiable smile. "I've taken the liberty," he says, walking toward me with a quart of fresh blood and a full glass of deep red Descallia Red.

The blood goes down quickly, and the mixture of wine and blood calms the edge, settling in my veins as I fold myself into one of the two wingback chairs by the fireplace. "You've redone the space," I say, admiring the blood-red drapes that hang to the floor.

He takes a drink and assesses me for a moment, before placing his crystal goblet on the end table with claw adorned feet. "The witches have not caused us trouble and I don't expect them to anytime soon. The battle with the rogues this year has left both sides, theirs and ours, leery of getting into a war again. They've left us alone, and we've returned the favor."

I nod, taking a sip of my drink, getting the feeling that the invitation to come chat wasn't all about bringing me up to speed about the caverns interspersed and tucked into the mountains. I place my drink on the coffee table in front of me, carefully balancing it on the cream color coaster. Seemingly a woman's touch is at hand in the decoration of his space. "And you want me to tread lightly and not to make any waves that may change the peaceful tides?"

Master Romano does not make me wait long, not one to say much, but usually always speaking his mind. “Exactly.”

It’s a request I plan to honor. “My hope is not to be here another full day. Travel back tonight when the little vampiress is too tired to fight, take her by force if I must, but I need to be back on my way to Chicago before tomorrow night.”

He nods. “Yes, I heard you’re heading up the warriors selections and a group of you are meeting to review some of the most prospective applicants. I think fairly soon you will have your hands completely full.”

Master Romano does not give me a reason, nor as a master does he need to inform a lord, but it seems odd just the same, having been friends for more than three centuries now.

He puts a black booted foot across his knee and leans back in his chair. “The caverns are placed strategically throughout the mountain range, and deep in the foothills, as well. They are impenetrable without an invitation to come in, so unless Embry wants your company, I’m afraid your stay in Romania will either be one that is very long, or you and Overmaster Descallia will need to have a conversation about his expectations and what bringing the headstrong little vampiress home will entail. Embry can be...” He grins. “Embry.”

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My jaw locks tight, my ire hard to veil. “Why on earth would she run? If she’s not guilty of all the rumors, of sleeping with the enemy and spilling our secrets in his bed, why run?”

Romano shifts slightly. “I don’t have all the answers, Corvinus, but what I do know is that she may have been with Lucas, but we shed much blood together she and I when we went after the rogues. Embry was part of the warriors, a very integral part, and was responsible for many of our enemies’ deaths. She not only maimed them, but drove stakes deep in their hearts, ensuring they did not rise again for some time. These are not the actions of a woman who is working with the rogues.”

He’s not wrong, yet the rumors are hard to ignore. “Why would she have been with him, stayed with him once she knew then? It’s hard to reconcile much less to understand.”

Romano stands and walks to the drapes, pulling one back slightly. “The lights are on in the attic of the witches’ academy. They’ve probably heard you’re here and are readying some fantastic and eclectic potions to keep you in your place, or most likely out of theirs.”

Damn it all to hell. Who needs this headache? “Keep me out of the cavern? They will need to do better than one of their magical potions. I’m going to go back, pound on the door and talk some sense into that woman. I could use some help.”

He turns and grins. “I’m afraid you’ve misunderstood the impenetrable nature of the cavern. As long as Embry remains inside, within the confines of that home, she will be untouchable, by you or anyone.”

I scoff. “She’s arrived with a knapsack smaller than a modern purse, filled with what I do not know, but surely not enough to provide any sustenance or deal with her needs for longer than a few days. She’ll come out, and when she does, I will be there to snatch her up and take her home. Two or three days at most, then we’ll be on our way back home. That’s all the time I’ll give to this nonsense.”

The lines on his forehead deepen. “Then a warning. I do not want any trouble with the witches here. If you are convinced that you will keep vigilance on a cavern in the land that we both claim, then you will do so outside of my protection here. Promises were made and I’d rather not know anything more, for the sake of peace in the region.”

I start to argue, but he holds up a hand. “Corvinus, I mean no disrespect, I am highly aware of just what an awkward position you’ve been placed into, and that I’ve made it even harder for you still. But the livelihoods of all those who live in the Romanian land, and wander the Mystic Forest are of my concern, not just one lord and one woman.”

I’d like to say that I don’t understand, that he has no right taking any side with the witches, only paying allegiance to the purebloods who are in power and reign supreme, yet, as a very wise lord, I know all too well that there is a balance, and that I must ensure it is not thrown off by my attempt to take the girl.

“Master Romano, there’s no need to worry. I’ll handle my job with the utmost respect toward the witches in the land, and any others I encounter.” I will be living in this land, right outside that fucking door if I have to, but make no mistake, when I leave for Chicago, I will have Embry in tow.”

His eyes flare. “One thing, Lord Corvinus. You only take Embry if she is willing to go. I want your word.”

Damn it all to hell, this night just keeps getting worse and worse.

Chapter 6

Embry

After all the stress of the last few days, encounters with wolves, shifters, bears, big cats and other creatures alike, at first, I think the voice coming from the rocking chair is a dream. A deep-seated desire to go back in time, when life wasn't as hard and see my grandma again. But when the rocking chair moves, and her sweet voice fills the room again, I know it is far from a dream.

“Grandma?”

I squeeze my eyes closed, and reopen them, hoping to discern more in the dimly lit room. Grandma sits watching me. Her smile lights the room, and still she rocks in her favorite old chair as though she's been doing it since the day she died. “I don't understand.”

I glance around the small home buried in the side of the mountain. “Any of it. I followed the instructions you gave me as a child and ended up here, in safety. The vampire who chases me couldn't get in.” I gesture around me. “What is this? How are you here?”

She nods, still rocking. “An old, abandoned witch cavern. One of many left to ensure that wherever witches roam, they have safe harbor not far by. Essential in the day and age of the burnings, and quite handy in times when the vampires in power would like nothing better than to catch and kill witches with their bare hands.”

My heart beats hard, still unsure if she is an apparition that somehow, I've conjured in my mind. “How are you here? Why are you here?”

Gramma rocks. “It’s my job to keep you safe child, no matter where you roam and no matter what century it is. You’ve just managed to spark the interest of the vampires, which means they will follow, and whenever they are anywhere near the Carpathian Mountains trouble of ill proportions will follow. It’s my job to not only keep you safe, but to ensure problems of a grave nature do not ensue to a point of war.”

“The vampire who almost captured me before I arrived. You saw that?”

“Indeed.”

“The master vampires want me back in Chicago. He said at the request of Lucianna, although I highly doubt that. I left her a letter. She knows I need the space, time to process all that has occurred.” For the first time in days, I allow myself a moment of reprieve and wipe a tear that slowly falls from my eye. “They think I’m an enemy, that I am a traitor, that I slept with Lucas fully knowing he had taken the helm of the rogues and was trying to overthrow Master Descallia. I would never do that.”

She nods, the rocking chair gliding with each soft movement. “It’s a shame about Lucas. I always liked him and never thought he would turn. So unlike the man I used to know.”

I nod. “He was under the spell of the witches for a time, but then the curse was removed. I thought he was fine, but remembering back, I don’t think he was ever the same.”

“Do you think it was because he was under their spell or was he always a rogue loyal, and placed under the spell because the witches needed to get him out of the picture?”

It’s a good and fair question, one I’ve thought about myself so many times, but not one logical answer comes to mind. “I really don’t know. I’ve become so unsure of my judgment in people, especially men, that I really couldn’t even begin to know. What I

do know is that somewhere in time, he changed.

“He became the man he wasn’t when I was friends with him and then lovers. It’s a hard pill to swallow when the man you thought you loved is found out to be a traitor to the very vampires that you hold dear. And then they turn on you and call you a traitor too.”

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She nods. “It is a conundrum, that is for sure. For now, you can stay here, get your mind clear while I work on mending fences that may have been undone as you two stomped through the Mystic Forest’s floor, sending off alarms throughout the forest to anyone that will hear.”

My eyes narrow at the woman who I still can’t even believe is here. “Well, it’s not like I slandered the witches or the vampires. I just needed navigational help, and they were all very happy to oblige when I told them where I was heading. Your description really helped.”

Her kindly eyes roll upward. “Dear child, the description of the cavern is all that was needed to set their tongues a wagging. The story of the woman fleeing from the vampires and trying to find the witch cavern is all over the woods and by now has surely reached Devora at the witches’ academy.”

My eyes roll upward. “Oh, good lord, we all know how that woman can flare.”

“I’m here to ensure that the vampires and witches keep the peace, that they do not invoke a war that has only just started to recess. One day, it will all be clear, but for right now, you need to make peace with Lord Corvinus and sort your differences, for the good of the vampires and the witches. They have been through far too much of late.”

My mouth gapes. “Why does this fall to me? What assurances do I have that the beast won’t grab me as soon as he can? He’s already tried before I got to safety. That man is said not to have a patient bone in his body, and I do not intend to go anywhere with that ass.”

Her kindly eyes warm my heart, but her words do nothing to calm my soul. “You brought this on yourself, child. Instead of staying in Chicago, defending yourself from the rumors, sure not easy to do, you ran. Ran to the Mystic Forest no less where the vampires and witches have feuded over this patch of land for years. What do you expect them to think?”

“I was only running away from the gossip. I have nothing to hide. I did nothing wrong. I went after the bastard, and no one knows what I went through, but they treat me as though they do.” My heart twists at the memories of the chains and that cold hard floor in the cavern of his rule. “No one will ever understand, because I can’t yet explain it myself. I need time.”

She nods and rocks, the chair making a little rubbing pattern on the hardwood floor as though signaling time. “Then you will figure out how to get what you need, keep the peace between the witches and the vampires, and not offend the dark lord, at least any more than you have already done. Am I clear, Embry?”

In my worst nightmares I could not have seen this coming. I seek solace, fight for it even, navigating through the torrential forests to get here, finally finding safety only to be faced with this. Be nice to the beast who tried to grab me around my neck and haul me somewhere I do not want to be. I could just scream, yet gramma remains calm.

She gestures to the door. “It’s time to turn this around, create another story for yourself, my love. There’s a handsome vampirelord at the door. And I don’t think he’s going to be too keen on taking no for an answer this time.”

Chapter 7

Corvinus

I pound on the green ornate door, listening closely but don't hear a word inside. My jaw tightens with mirth. Embry may think she's won this round, and I'll leave, but I'm not planning to go back to Chicago empty-handed. It may be trickier now that Romano has put conditions around the entire thing, but still, I'm known for my ability to solve difficult problems, and I'll figure this out. The little spitfire is not going to get the best of me.

I bang on the door for the umpteenth time. "Embry, I know you don't want to come back to Chicago, or even to leave the forest, but at least give me something to take back to Lucianna besides you left her a letter. She needs to know that you're really okay, at least, if I'm to go back without you by my side." I don't tell her it's hardly what I plan to do. One way or another, she's going back with me.

Her melodic and tired voice wafts through the heaviness of the door. "Come back tomorrow. Then we can talk."

It's good she can't see the smile on my face. I was hoping she had not fled and found another suitable cavern while I was away. "I mean you no harm. Invite me in. We can talk, decide how to proceed, but going back empty-handed will hardly do."

I wait, not patiently, but still, I wait while the gods from the sky decide the forest is drier than it should be and could use a little mist. I pull my cape over my head and keep a watchful vigil, determined that the vampiress will do as I say.

Finally...The door squeaks as it cracks open, and the wide set purple eyes are the first thing I see, then the stark creamy complexion of her alabaster skin. She no longer wears the black cape she had on while racing through the wind and cold. She's shed her own natural black cape that should hang from her shoulders, and instead wears only her black boots, jeans, and a heavy sweater.

A far cry from the Embry I've seen pictures of, usually dressed in a short little skirt

and matching top. But everything seems off, right down to the look on her face, or her sudden decision to let me in. The pulse on the side of her neck is weak. She needs blood, whether she knows it or not. She's been turned for quite some time, but after learning what Lucas did, who knows if he cared for her transition in the manner that he should.

I could best the sexy little vampiress right now, having had my fill of nutrient rich blood before leaving Romano's but for the damned promise I made to him only to take her if she is willing to go. Damn this assignment and everything about this night.

The door shifts, and I realize that I can't see her other arm. No matter my keen vision, there's no way my sight will see through this door. A curse of the witches no doubt, the haven safeguarded with their own brand of protection against vampires.

If the vampiress doesn't want people to gossip about her then she sure as hell should have stayed and told her side, and not instead run and begun consorting with the witches' kind. A vampire who cozies with witches but runs when gossiped about. What did the little witch lover expect?

"I told you I'm not going to hurt you," I speak through the door, only a guess that her mighty blade of steel hangs heavy from her arm right behind that door. Ready to slash me in an instant if threatened by my ire, which would slowly subside if she would do as I ask.

But instead, she tests me at every bend. "I'll come out, but the trees have eyes and ears. The witches will protect me if you so much as lay a finger on one hair of my head."

I scoff. "If I wanted to hurt you, it would have been done. Come out from behind that door. I'm done with these silly games. I have things to do, and it doesn't consist of spending all my time talking with you in the dead of night, especially in the rain."

Her purple eyes flash. “If you want me to come out, then I’d watch your mouth. I’m not going to take the sharp side of your tongue lying down, no matter what your rank.”

The young vampiress should calm her ire. She should know that exerting energy like this unnecessarily is hardly the thing to do right now, not when it’s so obvious that sustenance and blood is what she needs. If Lucas had taken care of her as he should, she would know these things.

She opens the door and her eyelids blink, refocusing as she stands taller yet doesn’t break the five-foot-five barrier at all. “I’ll come outside. Better for prying eyes that you aren’t seen entering a hidden cavern that you have no right even to know about.”

I don’t argue the point that if she didn’t want me to find it then she shouldn’t have left. “It’s raining and you need blood.”

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The purple in her eyes sparks under a streak of lightning as it flashes across the sky. “I hardly need nor want a vampire lord to tell me what to do. I have lived under the rules of the masters, lords, and warriors for far longer than I should. Now, I take care of myself, I depend on myself, not the males of this world. Understand that, vampire?”

The beating of her heart begins to wane, lack of blood threatening to take all of her energy with no notice at all. She opens the door and walks outside, hefting the longsword with the jewel-tipped handle I’ve been warned of before. But lifting that steel takes strength, stamina, and energy that Embry no longer has and her eyes only flutter once before she slumps over and toward the ground.

My arms cradle her fall, drawing the young vampiress into the folds of my cape’s protection, wishing for not the first time tonight that I had not given my word to Romano. A promise that I cannot go back on without severing our friendship and driving a wedge even further between the witches and vampires, which will never do.

Not for the pureblooded vampires, the witches, or the future if there comes a time we must battle the rogues again. Overmaster Descallia is wise, and there’s a reason he’s allowed concessions over this land and allowed the trust, however tenuous it may be.

He is right, now is the time for healing among the groups after so many battles. This land is the only point of contention at the moment, and I will tread softly in order to keep the peace. No matter that I would much rather be in the comfort of my estate than walking through the door of a witch haven without an official invitation and with a very skilled warrior and her blade of steel in my arms.

I've heard all the horror stories about opening a witch's door without being asked to enter. Yet I need to get her comfortable and find a source of blood. Hopefully in that little knapsack that she carries, although I can hardly fathom that she'll have enough to sustain for long.

I approach the door with hesitation with the vampiress in my arms, and at first, I think I've lost my mind, or at least that it's playing tricks on me after such a long and relentlessly fiasco-filled day. The melodic voice speaks in Embry's voice, yet she remains fast asleep. I'll invite you inside, but only because the cavern will protect me from any of your tricks, vampire.

It's not as though vampires communicating telepathically is new, quite the opposite, but nothing of the like has ever happened to me. My black boot pushes the heaviness of the green door, moving it slowly, not knowing what I'll run into on the other side. It protests, squeaking loudly as I enter, while bolts of lightning fly through the sky as though sending a message to the witches to let them know that an intruder is near.

The damnable Mystic Forest, a pain in the vampire's ass since the dawn of time. A place that centuries ago would seclude us, and keep us safe from prying eyes, at least until the intruding witches decided that it was a pristine place to live too. Now the creatures are torn between allegiances. It's no wonder they run whenever they see either side.

The cavern is empty other than some furniture that's seen far better times, but the bed along the far wall will do while I find the vampiress some blood. I walk with her in my arms and her heartbeat is so slow that it feels as though it stops beating against my chest.

I lay her down gently and scan the small living space for her knapsack, unzipping it to take a look inside. Nothing but two small zipper bags of blood in the side compartment, which at the onset of her journey were probably full.

This will never be enough. My jaw tightens as her head turns, rousing from the fog but without the strength to open her eyes. She's fading fast and there's only one thing to do.

I tell myself it's to ensure she can make the journey back home, so that I can finish the mission, and not because the lovely purple-haired vampiress can speak to me without words at all, or because the feelings of protection for her seem to grow with every passing minute.

Somehow even as enemies and adversaries, our souls can communicate.

I don't believe in fate, fated mates, or any such nonsense of the kind. And I certainly have no personal interest in anyone who betrays their kind or runs from the truth, or any of the other things the young vampiress is said to have done.

Yet, when I look at her, I see resilience, determination, a resolve to follow her heart wherever that may take her. Even through the dangers and lurking creatures of the Mystic Forest with a vampire lord on her tail.

But she made the journey and did it all by herself. Maybe with a few navigational tips from the friendly forest creatures along the way, but by and by, she did it by herself when others far more seasoned than her would have likely failed.

I have no doubt she'll hate it when she learns what I've done. But there's not a choice now without blood of any other kind. I grab my pocketknife and deftly open a vein, allowing the blood to pool on my wrist before tipping it and opening her delicate pink lips so my lifeblood can pour into her mouth and give her nourishment to sustain.

Little by little her color returns, and in short order her pulse has returned to normal. The rumors of yesteryear say vampires don't have a heart. The purebloods' hearts beat just as soundly as the humans', only our hearts will turn dark, death taking over

if left without sustenance, and left to that, we'll be just like the rogues. Killing and maiming for any sources of blood they can get their hands on.

No, nothing like that is going to happen to the purple-haired beauty, not on my watch. Whatever the reason, I've been asked to bring her home and I will keep her safe, from the creatures of the forest, the witches, and the rogue vampires, but after watching her take my lifeblood, I'm not certain I want to keep her safe from me.

Chapter 8

Embry

My mouth is so dry, and when I roll over to grab my pillow, my arms wrap around a living, breathing thing. A very muscular vampire lord who has somehow made himself comfortable in my bed.

I sit up in bed immediately, almost hitting my head on the slanted ceiling that's far lower on my side of the bed by the wall than his side. "What do you think you're doing?" I glance around, trying to remember what happened, seeking out grandma in her now empty chair.

The vampire lord rolls, his legs tangled in the sheets, as his dark and intense eyes meet mine. "You passed out and needed blood. You only had a couple packs in your bag, far too low in supply. I had to give you some of mine and needed to recharge with sleep and rest."

He's still dressed, I'm still dressed, maybe no shoes, but other than that, all is intact. Now I remember. And I am feeling a hundred percent better. "Where's my grandmother?"

His eyebrows raise. "I'm not sure. Who is she?"

I suck in a deep breath. “Do not play games with me. What did you do with her? She was here when I opened the door. I pass out, you give me blood and she’s nowhere to be seen.” My chest heaves with panic. “Pretty fucking suspicious if you ask me.”

I literally crawl over the top of his legs to get out without bashing my head on that confounded slanted ceiling.

He laces his fingers behind his head, arching an eyebrow when my calf brushes his junk as I get out of bed. “I didn’t see anyone when I carried you into the cavern. Are you sure she was still here? You were pretty low on blood, so low that you were barely breathing. An apparition perhaps?”

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I inhale deeply, all of a sudden almost feeling sick, and abhorrently embarrassed after all that talk of taking care of myself. Of course, that's exactly what it was. An apparition, but yet. It seemed so real at the time and part of me just wants to go back in time and tell her I love her, at least one more time.

My chest aches, missing her already. "I guess it was lack of blood and a lot of wishful thinking." I pad over the wooden floor and around the long kitchen counter into the full-fledged kitchen space, surveying the appliances that should be ancient but really don't look that old. "Coffee?" I ask, opening a ceramic canister next to the coffeepot.

His eyes heat my skin from behind, and prickles race along the back of my spine. I know I have more than a few apologies to make, not only for my accusatory behavior, but for thinking so badly of him as well. I shouldn't have tossed him in with the other males out there, but just because he did the right thing and saved me from myself does not make him a knight in shining armor. I'd do well to remember that he's still a beast who wants to take me home.

I've been down this road before...

Lucas saved me from certain death. Transitioned me to a life of eternity, promised to keep me safe and protected from all that was evil and wrong in the world, especially the rogues. Lied right to my face and I bought every single word of it, because I was in love.

Love. What a fucking joke. A wasted emotion that turns all sense of logical common sense into a rope that keeps you tied to another person, allowing them to suck the life out of you and drain you of all ability to see through the lies and deception.

Never again... Not in this lifetime.

The coffee starts to brew and yet I wait to turn around until its aroma is heavy in the air, needing the time to just breathe, inhale oxygenated air without sound or anyone gossiping about me or telling me what to do.

The heat of his eyes travels down my front as I turn toward him, causing my skin to warm right through the layers I've worn for days. "Let me find some cups, and then we can sit and talk. I owe you an apology and at least a decent breakfast for saving my life."

His long legs slide over the bed, and he moves his dark wavy hair from his eyes. "You don't owe me an explanation, but perhaps an assurance that it won't happen again. Where is your emergency blood supply? There was barely enough for a light snack in your knap, yet you knew you would be moving through the Mystic Forest? Any number of things could have kept you from your destination, delayed you from its haven and left you vulnerable and in all honesty, dead."

Well, I was going to apologize, but I'm not about to apologize to him if he's going to act like a condescending prick. "For your information, I had plenty of supply, but it was taken by the ghouls who defend some arbitrary line I crossed inadvertently. I'm not some half-witted female like you seem to want to think. I can usually take quite good care of myself and have done it for a very long time. I was a warrior, and not only did I take care of myself but I fought off a lot of evildoers single-handedly and with my group. I know how to fight."

The dark-eyed devil has the audacity to laugh as he closes the distance between us. "The unspoken message. Don't fuck with me vampire or I'll run you in? With your trusty blade of steel, no doubt?"

My chest tightens for a moment, suddenly realizing that I may have antagonized a

beast with no weapon in sight. “Where’s my sword?”

He grins, and walks behind me, opening the cupboard to remove two cups, not waiting until the pot has fully finished before filling us up. “Here, drink this, and take a seat. You’re still recharging and may need some more blood shortly. What else did the ghouls take from you? We use many of them as guards, but then so do the rogues, and witches alike. They hire out to the highest bidder and have no shame at all.”

“Everything except the small knapsack on the floor,” I tell him, pointing to the bag next to the bed that was tossed on the floor, probably without a thought at all. “It had a few extra snacks, but all my real supply was in my backpack. Clothes, money, and blood. All gone with the blink of an eye.”

He looks as though he’s going to say something, but I cut any scathing comment the vampire has for me off. “Look, I had a sword, and all my vampire abilities, but sometimes you have to pick your battles. I needed to get through the ghouls in order to get here, and I didn’t want them as enemies.”

The arrogant lord still doesn’t look convinced at all.

“Look here, I had to weigh the risks of being able to best them all or become their friend. I don’t think I made any close friends, but they let me through after I gave them what they wanted without a fight. I considered that a win after all the gore I’ve heard about them over the years.”

His dark eyes track down the length of me, sending a shiver down my spine.

“I don’t care what you think. I was the one in danger. It was for me to decide.”

Corvinus takes a long slow drink of his coffee, savoring the taste as the dark-eyed devil continues to assess me, every second making me more and more aware of the

rumpled clothing I've been wearing for three days straight.

My heart flutters, beating oddly erratic, hard to tell if it's fear of the almighty lord and his penetrating gaze or the fact that I may need blood sooner than I want to admit. I walk past him to the refrigerator, the old short white rounded relic that is surprisingly clean and well-lit inside stocked with quarts and quarts of whole red blood.

I'm sure my mouth is still open in pure shock as I turn to him. "Did you do this?"

"As much as I could after giving you the lion's share."

My mind runs through every single thing I've said about him, filling me with deep remorse. "You need to eat. Sit, and I'll find something suitable."

"Never to fear, Embry. I come prepared," he says, raising his hand at the start of my scowl, "as I'm sure you did before your backpack was so rudely taken by the ghouls." He walks over to the chair where he's tossed his cape and a black bag of sorts. He opens it pulling out multiple daggers and a longer sheathed sword before holding up a bag of dried meat and nuts.

I try hard to suppress my smile. "That looks scrumptious but save it for your trip back home, vampire. I'll make you some eggs and bacon. Did you leave that in the refrigerator too?"

His eyebrows raise. "No, I did not. That and four quarts of blood were already in the refrigerator when I opened it to put mine in." He smirks and places his coffee cup on the counter. "I simply added to the supply before lying down. I thought maybe I misjudged your ability to fend for yourself. I was going to tell you it was in there, but you so rudely cut me off before I had a chance to speak."

I glare at the brute and point to the small table with chairs. "Out of the kitchen and

out of my hair. I'll make us some breakfast; we can have this discussion you're so insistent to have and then you, Lord Corvinus, can be on your way back to tell Overmaster Descallia and Lucianna that you've seen me and I'm just fine."

That smirk is going to end up getting that dark-eyed devil in the biggest trouble of his life. "Stop smirking. What is so funny?"

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He glances up at me from underneath a long wavy lock of hair that's fallen over his eyes. "Just that you think you're getting rid of me so easy. You see, Embry. I've been sent to bring you home, so you'll be with me when I go."

Chapter 9

Corvinus

That flare of purple in her eyes is a very strong tell. I don't even know if she is aware of the light that flames from her beautiful orbs every time something sets off her ire. She finishes cooking in silence and almost drops the plate filled with freshly cooked bacon and eggs on the table in front of me, doesn't say a word, and then returns with a plate of buttered toast and a quart of blood.

The beauty stands by the counter trying to give me the cold shoulder, gently nibbling on a piece of bacon while the creaminess of her delicate hand rests against the darkness of the quart of blood. The storm flowing from the young vampiress is real, but I am willing to take risking her ire. If I can get her to come home, it will be the best for all.

But she's made up her mind about something, perhaps what I said, perhaps what she plans to do. It's not clear what, but it's clear that all of a sudden, she has a plan. She gulps down the full quart of blood, letting the blood flow down the back of her throat while I watch the tender muscles below her throat constrict with every swallow.

My cock shifts, hardening against my pants while I watch the vampiress in this state. She may be my job, my charge for the moment, but that doesn't mean I don't want to

bend her over that counter and give her blood while relieving us of this desire we both want to ignore.

Damn that arrogant and handsome devil to hell.

My ears perk up, and it's hard not to smirk. I do try, although the minute she thinks it and I smirk, she knows I heard her thoughts. She knows the connection is there and her cheeks turn a lovely shade of crimson that is not from drinking the prepared blood at all.

She points to me and then to her and then back to me again. "This thing, the one where we can communicate. Annoying as fuck!"

I laugh out loud. Not much surprises me these days, but she sure as hell does. "I don't disagree with you at all. Although at times, it can be rather enlightening, no?"

Her eyes narrow at my sarcasm. "Don't flatter yourself, Vampire. I haven't been with anyone since Lucas. The itch was bound to surface. Consider yourself a passing fancy."

"Ouch, a sexy vampiress with a mean bite. You'd do well to hold that tongue, Embry before you find yourself in a position you did not intend."

She rolls her eyes and gives me a dramatic little glare, but I don't think the vampiress is as impervious to my charms as she wants me to believe. And I, like her, have an itch of my own. Damnable fact that she's friends with the new queen, and my boss's wife.

I smirk. "Pun intended. Now bring your breakfast and coffee over here, eat and finish drinking your coffee while we talk like two civilized vampires in modern day. Leave that sharp-edged tongue at the counter, understand?"

She makes her way over, padding across the wood floors with purple painted toenails with a white little design. Her jeans make a whooshing sound as her thighs rub against each other and the material chafes.

Embry's blood races as I watch her. Our connection, no matter the reason, is undeniable and her tight little pants do nothing to curb my unrest.

She places her plate across from me, as far as she can sit while still being at the table. When she slides into her seat, she puts her coffee down to pick up and munch on another piece of bacon.

She eyes me with rueful disdain. "This is what I think. Lucianna read my letter, went to Overmaster Descallia to have someone find me and he sent his trusty right-hand man?"

"That sums it up."

Her eyes roll in a fashion I find amusing. "What I don't understand is why? I was clear. I need time. And it didn't take you long to take the place of Lucas as right-hand man for Overmaster Descallia."

Embry is not quite the open book as I thought her to be. Of course, she would still have feelings for the man. No matter that the bloodthirsty killer wanted to hunt and bury all the purebloods in the ground. "It was not well known, but I've been working with Overmaster Descallia for years as the liaison to the lords."

She pushes a piece of flyaway hair from her face. "I didn't realize that."

"While we certainly were not sorry to see Lucas stopped, I am sorry that you mourn his loss. No matter what he did, he was a friend to you for years, and lover after that. I'm sure his demise was not an easy thing to bear."

Her eyebrows raise. “A beast with a heart? Who would have known?”

I smirk. “From time to time, but don’t let the word out.”

Embry runs a piece of toast around the plate, soaking up the melted butter and remnants of bacon before placing it into her mouth and chewing. Still, she doesn’t say a word until after she’s swallowed and taken another sip of coffee.

I can almost feel the storm of emotion building. Her eyes flash with emotion and the intensity of their vibrance settles on me. “Everyone thinks, poor Embry. She didn’t know, poor Embry, he only used her to get what he wanted, poor Embry, she must have been blind. Used by the traitor to get what he wanted.”

I don’t think that...

I didn’t utter a word, yet the roll of her eyes lets me know she heard every word I thought.

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She puts her coffee cup down. “Maybe you’re in the burn Embry at the stake camp, she was a traitor from the start, Lucas brought her into the vampire fold to infiltrate the friend group giving her access to Lucianna and the secrets that she might reveal. How about that one?” she asks, her eyes glistening as though now fighting back a tear.

I start to say something, but she abruptly gets out of her chair. “Changed my mind. Conversation is over. You’ve saved me from myself, you’ve offered me your condolences, now Mr. vampire lord, it is way past time for you to hit the road. Fuck off.”

Oh, Embry has this so wrong. No one gives me orders. Especially a sprite of a vampiress who thinks she is in control of this situation. I stand from my chair, towering over her five-foot five frame, looking down at her as she gazes up at me with those challenging orbs. The vampiress is not afraid of me one little bit right now. Maybe I should not have shown her my soft side, given her more time to worry instead of saving her life.

The draw to this female is unlike anything I’ve ever known. I should have realized the very first time I caught her scent and wanted to inhale deeper. Destiny has left me alone for so many years. And now, when I’m perfectly comfortable in being alone, she sends a vampiress who tempts me with her sexy little body and sharp tongue at every turn.

An evil little game, destiny.

Half of me wants to turn her over my knee and give her a good paddling, and the

other wants to feel those moist lips on my own and inhale her scent while sinking deep into her heat. She's so close that I almost give in, but this game destiny is not going to win.

Instead, I point to the bathroom. "You go first. Shower up, get ready, we're going to get out of this cave as soon as night falls."

Her eyes narrow at me. "You are not staying."

My jaw locks. This woman is the most confounding creature I've ever met. "I'm not leaving unless you are with me, and since you're not ready to leave the Mystic Forest, I'm forced to make the most of it. At least for a while. Now go shower."

She walks to a door on the wall between the bathroom door and the bed. The minute she opens it, she steps backward. I have no idea what's wrong with her but her heart beats fast, pounding a mile a minute and then she starts murmuring something under her breath that even with the keenest of ears, I cannot hear.

"Embry?"

Her delicate voice gets louder and louder. "No one knew I was coming here. Not one soul except for the creatures in the forest that I ran into along the way. Even then, I was vague, not giving them the specifics of this particular cavern, but land markers like the river, the largest hill in the foothills right under the Carpathian Mountains. How is this possible? Corvinus, nobody knew."

I close the distance fast trying to see what it is that has her so worked up but all I see is a closet full of hanging clothes and shoes in various styles on the floor. "I'm not following you?"

Her purple eyes roll. "The clothes. They are mine. Not clothes that I might wear, that

are my type or style, but these are actually my clothes. They belong to me.” She pulls a short skirt from the rack and caresses a finger over the velvet material. “This was on sale at a boutique in Rome. Almost fifty percent off.”

She bends, pulling up a pair of boots. “And these boots, I always wear these boots with this particular skirt.” She stands, her face getting flushed with excitement, swiping at several hangers until finding what she wants. “This blouse, see this is what goes with it. These are mine. Someone moved all of my clothes from my apartment in the city to this cavern. But not one soul knew I was coming.”

My eyebrow raises. “The blood left in the refrigerator. That too? It was very fresh. I checked before adding to it last night.”

Embry’s eyes are glowing with pure delight and mischief. I smell trouble from the little vamp. “It would appear so. I believe we have a know-it-all visitor who has somehow prepared everything I would need to take care of myself and now has the audacity to disappear and not show her face.”

“I’m still not entirely following. You know the person?”

“I told you, my grandma was here. She is the only one who could have done this. She wasn’t a dream, or an apparition.”

“I don’t mean to be unkind, but I thought she was human and died.”

Embry’s look is more than disbelieving. “Of all people you should talk. How many centuries ago did you die? Before you became an eternal being? Why is my grandma any different?”

My head spins with this twist. “Because, Embry, that would not make your grandmother just a psychic, it would make her a witch.”

Chapter 10

Embry

The vampire lord is not wrong. “I always thought it was a possibility, but then for one reason or another it didn’t seem plausible. But now, how else can all of this be explained?”

The dark-eyed vampire audibly groaning causes me to laugh. “I really shouldn’t be too upset. The vampires, despite what you say, aren’t going to accept me after everything that happened anyways. At least not with the trust they had in me before. I was a warrior. It’s all I ever wanted to be. How can they trust someone in that position with all that happened? They can’t.”

“They will, in time.”

A witch heritage, what the hell. What more in my life could get more complicated. “I’ll get dressed for the night. I’m so totally energized with curiosity that I can barely stand it.”

His lip quirks at my drama. “Since you’re so full of energy, perhaps we can make the journey home.”

I give the dark-souled vampire a wink. “Not on your life big boy. No amount of coaxing will get me home until I’ve learned about my heritage, my grandma, and perhaps gotten to the bottom of what happened to her so many years ago. This is what destiny led me to do.”

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“Destiny,” he scoffs. “She has done quite enough meddling of late.”

My hands find my hips, purely out of habit. “We are getting ready and are going to venture out and find out what’s going on. I can’t possibly sit inside this place knowing gramma is out there somewhere. Besides, look at these clothes.”

He gives them a once over but does not seem impressed in the slightest, shrugging his shoulders at the colorful assortment of organized mess.

“The only reason clothes would wind up in my closet is if she wanted me to put them to good use. And she brought me my clothes. Don’t you see, it’s a subliminal message that I’m supposed to find myself again. Not change anything, just find the real me. I wasn’t dreaming.”

The vampire is far less enthused than I, not that I blame him. But it’s not like I’m asking the cranky grump to stay. I point to the door. “You don’t have to stay. You know the saying. If you want to go, don’t let the door hit you in the ass.”

My heart almost leaps out of my chest when he flies across the room, hovering right in my face, causing me to take a few steps back and lean into the coolness of the wall behind me unsure of what to think. “Don’t do that! You scared the bejesus out of me, vampire.”

Corvinus leans down, invading every bit of my personal space, twisting a long strand of hair that has fallen over my face before whispering in my ear. “You and I are going to come to a very clear understanding of just what I’m willing to put up with, and what I most definitely will not tolerate. Do I make myself clear?”

The big arrogant bully thinks he can intimidate me with his size, but it's not like other larger vampires haven't tried, and some of them with long-ass scary swords.

"I'm not scared of you..." I whisper, having difficulty getting the words past the lump forming in the back of my throat.

His voice is gravelly and sends shivers of the unknown slinking down my spine as his warm breath brushes my ear. "Then clearly your grandma has not taught you well. I have far better things to do than to go tramping around in the forest, the same forest I might add, that is split right down the middle in terms of alliances to the vampires and witches."

"It's been that way forever. It's certainly not my fault."

His breath caresses the sensitive shell of my ear. One or two more inches and his mouth will be right over that sensitive and throbbing spot on the side of my neck. That pulse that beats with a desire to have him plunge his fangs into its delicate flesh, taking what he wants while ravaging me to death.

My body may be in a frenzy of unreleased turmoil. The dark-hearted vampire could take me right here, right now. I don't want or need a relationship, but him, he is sex on a stick and I want to lick every ounce of this mouthwatering treat.

But he raises his head. The passion may be flaring in his eyes, but instead of taking what I would so eagerly give right now, and releasing me from worry, stress and fear all at the same time, he puts just a few inches of distance between the two of us.

"Both sides of which we now seem to be. My enemies will now be your friends, my friends will now be your enemies if they are to learn the secret you've just told."

I sigh heavily, my heart heavy with sadness as what he says resonates in my mind and

then my very soul. I love being a vampire with all of my dark-hearted soul. It's given me a peace and calm that before turning I never thought would come. It wasn't my intent to bring strife.

And walking in the transition ceremony was one of the best days of my life. But they are the same vampires who whispered in the streets, in the woods and in the skies calling me a traitor. I don't do tears, but yet one falls from my eye. The vampires cast me away, as though I never meant one damn thing.

His finger lifts my chin. "You mean a lot to many people, or they would not have sent me to find you."

I feel like I'm choking with emotion. "You heard me again?"

His dark black eyes seem to soften. "You already knew, Embry. You doubted it was real? Just a figment of your imagination? We can connect. It's not unusual for vampires to be able to communicate in this way, it's just unusual for me. I fear destiny is up to her little games, but we have no time to deal with her today."

"I've always been able to connect with some of my vampire friends, and well, Lucas, but never really outside of my friend group."

He nods. "It's new to me as well."

"I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused, but in my heart, I know I was meant to go on this self-reflective journey, to find me again. I used to be a good person, a fun person, and I was never a traitor like they say."

His finger tips my chin again, and my heart beats so hard I think it's going to come out of my chest. "I believe you. Now let's go and explore this Mystic Forest and see if you can learn something that will allow you to return home. I'm growing weary of

this game.”

“I’m not going home, vampire.”

“We’ll see, Embry.”

Chapter 11

Corvinus

If she was in a rush to leave, all thought of that went out the door as she disappeared into the bathroom.

Annoyed with myself for this feeling, I watch the minutes of the clock on the kitchen stove tick away. A quick glance at my phone tells me it may as well be dead for all the good it will do me in the cavern, or many places in the Mystic Forest to be honest.

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The minute we get to a clearing, closer to the side of Romano's, I'll get word to him that I'm definitely staying. Send a message to Descallia and have him move the meeting for the warriors. The applicants have waited this long, what's a few more days? Besides, it will test their endurance and patience and show me how they react to delay. Perhaps not a bad thing after all. But as half an hour passes and then forty-five minutes, my own patience begins to thin.

I give the door to the bathroom a good rap. "Are you planning to be in there all night? By the time you finish getting ready the moon will have made its appearance and the night will be half over."

The door opens slowly, and my groin pushes uncomfortably against the inseam of my jeans. The little seductress is more captivating now than she was before. Her freshly washed and dried hair practically glistens, cascading over her shoulders as her eyes watch, fascinated with my response. Because there is no doubt that my response to her is visceral, an almost primal need to mate with her right here on the floor.

Her heart beats strong, that pulse on the side of her neck ready for what I want to take and to give. That little shirt she has on does nothing to cover up her navel, and the jewel on the end of that silver navel chain tempts me to no end.

The little seductress knows exactly what she's doing, shifting in her little shorty boots, calling attention to her lean and creamy legs, her thighs barely covered with a miniscule wrap of material she calls a skirt.

I've almost convinced myself to put the fact that I am the superior in this relationship as a lord of the purebloods, she is or at least was a warrior, and still best friends with

our queen out of my mind and give in to the temptation of her flesh. Damn destiny all to hell. She has clearly drawn me into the web of forbidden fruit.

She won't win at this game. I've been self-sufficient without the curtails of a mate for many centuries. Embry looks up at me, her eyes now shadowed on the lids and emphasized with black mascara that she didn't need at all. I thought she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen as I laid until the early evening hours just watching her sleep.

Embry closes the scant distance. "This thing between us. It's just a passing thing. You know, an attraction that you have for someone but after a while, it blows over. This too shall pass." She looks me up and down. "Because you are just not my type."

She passes me, the sound of her little shorty boots tapping against the floor as she makes her way to the door. "Are you coming? Night's wasting. Besides, I want to find Rupert again. He'll be able to answer some of our questions, at least I think so."

I let out an inhalation of breath. "Pray tell, who the hell is Rupert?"

"He lives in the forest. He's come to the aid of the vampires many times over the centuries but is friends to the witches and vampires alike. A good friend in a time of need. He pointed me in this direction, and didn't ask many questions. I like his style a lot, unlike yours."

The sexy little vixen is about to get on my last nerve, but still I follow her into the night, my trusty sword tucked into its sheath with two daggers securely in the vest around my chest. "At least tell me what we're looking for so I can try to find it. I'd like to get home before another century has passed."

She stops and pushes some leaves around as we enter the forest floor and the moonlight grows dimmer, sheltered by the canopy of autumn leaves not yet fallen as

we move through the forest.

“Rupert!”

“Shh,” I tell her. “We don’t want to alert the entire world that we’re here. Did they not teach you anything as a warrior?”

I do not expect the backlash that she throws my way, turning on me in a split second, her fangs descended and hissing at me like a little wildcat. Fucking sexy as hell, but a very dangerous vampiress when giving way to her anger. “I was a hell of a warrior, a great warrior even. I trained with the best of them. Days and nights, in forests, over bridges, in tree canopies, just to learn balance and test my might. You, sir, can kiss my ass.”

It's really hard not to smirk, but I do try and fail miserably. Her anger sparks, and her eyes light in the dark of night. “Do not test me, vampire. I have had enough of life and enough of you for one day. It wouldn’t bother me one bit to run you through.”

But yet, I think the little sexpot does protest too much. She runs hot and cold, a visceral reaction to her sexual need, one that I can see and smell from here. The attraction and clawing desire is not hers alone, because this connection, this fated-mates draw is much stronger than people know. It is like fighting a magnet that won’t let go of its hold.

Yet, destiny has got it all wrong this time. This is not a match that will work, perhaps as the little temptress says, a passing fancy to scratch an itch, because the closer we get, the more time we spend together, the more the need.

That is without a doubt. The urge to bed her and sink my teeth deep into her creamy white throat causes my cock to swell with desire just thinking about it at all.

And she knows it, too. The same desire flashes in her eyes, almost daring me to say it isn't so, but she'll not get a lie from me.

Fucking destiny...

What pray tell does destiny and her mingling in history and personal lives have in store for me? I was perfectly happy in my position of authority and now destiny has me chasing this vampiress who could have the heritage of a centuries old witch, halfway around the world.

But Embry seems oblivious to it all as she whispers loudly into the night, calling out for her friend who is nowhere within sight. Until a swooshing sound splinters the air, causing animals to scurry from the trees and a big black awkward bird to land on a branch just above our heads. "Rupert!"

Chapter 12

Embry

The bird comes in for a landing on a branch right above our heads. "I knew you'd come back girlie." He looks left then right. "But it's not safe for you here. At least not while you're with him."

Corvinus openly assesses Rupert, an awkward looking bird, a raven with spiky black hair, a long beak, and beady white eyes. I try not to worry about what he thinks. "I found the cavern, and my grandmother, too."

The dark-eyed vampire's eyes narrow with stark disapproval, but he keeps his runaway thoughts quiet, although I hear every word he thinks. I choose to ignore him, and his disbelief that gramma had anything to do with the quarts of blood or any of my clothes. Rupert flips to a lower branch right above our heads. "She's here?"

It's hard to look him in the eye. Rupert and his family try to stay neutral in the never-ending war between the witches and vampires, but he had to have known my grandma yet never mentioned a word to me. "You knew Lucas before you knew me. Did you know my grandma? Do you know if she's here, in the Mystic Forest?"

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Rupert looks up in the tree, flaps his wings, and then looks back down again. I glare up at the bird, who is usually a friend and has never been a foe. “What are you keeping from me, Rupert, and don’t you dare leave anything out or I will decide a bird’s blood is as good a source as any.”

His feathers ruffle but his eyes roll. “Drama, drama, and more drama. Ever since you came to the Forest. I warned you to go back. Do you listen to me? No, you do what you want when you want.”

Lord Corvinus clears his throat, and his eyes turn a dark bright red in the night. “You’ll mind your tongue, or you’ll find yourself missing one, you impotent old crow!”

Rupert tucks his head into a wing, as if to fend off the wrath of a lane of fire. “Tell her what she wants to know,” Corvinus bellows, causing Rupert to peek his eyes out once he realizes he’s not going to be barbequed by the heat of the lord’s firestormed eyes.

Rupert walks along the branch, shining in the light of the moon, getting some of his courage back now that he senses he has information of value to share. He looks to me and then to the vampire who is about ready to lose his patience.

My eyebrows raise. “I’d hurry this along if I were you, Rupert.”

Those red eyes turn to me, and I swallow hard, mesmerized by the fires glowing deep inside their depths, wondering if his eyes would look like this while plunged deep into my heat.

Rupert clears his throat. “Earth to Embry.”

My eyes roll. “I’m listening, speak.”

He flaps to a lower branch. “Your grandmother saved Lucas and many other vampires one fateful night many years ago, during a battle in North America, Chicago to be exact,” the black bird says. “She was a real warrior but paid for her alliances with the pureblooded vampires and Overmaster Descallia’s vision through a bloody and painful death.”

My eyes mist thinking of my gramma so many years ago, the stories she would tell, her kindness and love for the vampires who she believed were fighting for what was right—an end to the unnecessary slaying of humans in order to drink their blood and kill their souls.

I blink, trying to hold the stinging of tears at bay. “I’ve heard the stories, but everyone has sheltered me from the truth about the way she actually died. I knew it was protecting the vampires. She used to tell me how much she loved them and their visions for the future. I would just lie on the hammock and listen to her talk about the vampires for hours. Gramma meant the world to me and her stories always endeared me to them.”

The vampire lord’s eyes have returned to black, but the magnetism of his gaze still heats my skin. Rupert says something but I barely hear what he says. It takes effort to pull myself away from the draw of the lord’s alluring gaze, which keeps pulling my mind from the task at hand. “What did you say, Rupert?”

He flaps his wings in a tizzy, squawking and ruffling his tail. When he’s calmed the drama he turns a beak to me. “If you had been listening to me young lady and not making googly eyes with the dark beast who you’ve dragged right into the middle of the fight between the vampires and witches, you would have heard me say you should

have heeded my warning and gone back home.”

Lord Corvinus guffaws. “Finally, some words of wisdom from the dismal crow.”

“Raven!” Rupert screeches, but tucks his head back under his wing the minute Corvinus turns those eyes that have lit right up again onto him. “Enough, or I’ll burn you alive!”

Rupert glares at me from the protection of his wings. “Do you see what I mean now? Everything had settled down, there were no rumblings of invasions of the land by the vampires, no mention of putting curses and magic hoaxes on the vampires for stepping foot on sacred land. This land all around us, the Mystic Forest. Now all the creatures are on high alert again.

“Even the shifters who at all costs avoided taking part in the battles between the vampires and witches, who hid out in the forest, and laid low trying to remain neutral are all stirred up. You my young lady have caused a hell of a mess.”

My mouth drops open. “What do you mean I’ve caused this? I’ve done nothing of the sort! I just wanted to find somewhere comforting, my grandma told me to come here if I ever needed safety or refuge for whatever reason, and I would appreciate you minding your tone! What do you know about my grandma that I do not know, Rupert? Tell me now!”

His beady eyes narrow and his plume of feathers ruffle in the wind as I gaze up at the insolent bird, awaiting the answer he seems unwilling to give. My eye catches a flitting of light just past the trees drawing my attention away from the matter at hand. “Come out,” I call, watching closely and stepping softly on the dried leaves to close the distance between us and the intruders.

“Embry,” Corvinus growls.

So intent am I on the dark flowing cape moving in and among the trees I barely realize how far I've hovered when Corvinus grabs me by the waist and lifts me into the air. "You've had quite enough exploring for one night."

"Let me go, you big bossy beast!" I whisper hiss, certain that whoever is wiggling among the trees in the Mystic Forest is spying on us and may just have answers that I need.

"Quiet," he whispers in my ear, holding me tightly against the hardness of his body, causing every neuron in mine to ignite with a powerful desire I have not felt in such a very long time.

His mouth grazes against the column of my neck from behind, finding my pulse with his fang. "This is a bad idea."

He's not wrong, yet the clawing ache every time he gets near is not going away, not without the ultimate consummation. He knows it, I know it, and it is just a matter of time. The only question is how long will we deny ourselves, and hold out for what? "I'm not looking for love. Did that, done that, vampire," I whisper.

Chapter 13

Corvinus

Idon't dare inhale as I turn and take her hand instead of ravaging her right here and now, consummating our need right in the forest with all the eyes of the creatures watching. Instead, I wrap her in my cape, holding her close as I transport us to a place only before yesterday, I would have never been. A sacred witches' cavern with a vampiress whose heart belongs to someone else and crosses the line of propriety in my position.

And if she wanted to be left alone, that's where I would leave it. But we both know this attraction, whether just physical or not, will not be sated with time alone. No, we both crave and desire the other, the feel of our skin, our breath and every little touch. It is an all-consuming drive on both of our parts to mate.

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The minute we're back safely within the confines of the cavern walls, I settle her onto her feet. My finger strokes down the length of her creamy neck, pushing a wayward piece of hair behind her ear. "One chance to walk away, say it isn't time, that you aren't ready or that it isn't what you want. Because if you say yes, I won't be easy, it will be rough, and I won't stop until you're screaming my name."

Her eyes flare with desire, the light gold flecks in the deep purple color glinting with desire while the pulse on the side of her neck beats so rapidly underneath the creaminess of her skin. Her voice is little more than a sultry whisper, but with the answer I wanted to hear. "Yes."

I may have said I wouldn't be easy, and I won't but the desire to see her bared to me overrules my need to take her fast, to quench the smell of desire that seeps from her skin. My hand snakes around her nape as the silkiness of her hair cascades over my arm. I draw her close, inhaling her scent deeply, filling the intoxicating creature's scent deep into my lungs before capturing her lips with a kiss that sears us with its heat.

Her hands find my hair, stroking long fingernails against my scalp, pausing momentarily as I raise them overhead to slip her shirt off, unclasp her bralette and let it fall to the floor as I bare Embry's breasts for the very first time.

She is not immune, the scent of her arousal is strong, wafting under my nostrils, tempting me with the aroma, and that look in her eyes.

Embry groans as I take first one of her nipples and then the other into my mouth, suckling the rose-colored flesh, my cock hardening painfully against the inseam of

my jeans as she moans my name. “Corvinus.” My name on her red-stained lips causes my dick to strain. Those lips, the very ones that were bright red with the blood from my veins just last night. The only lips and mouth that have ever received nourishment from me in that manner, at least for centuries now.

Destiny does not play fair. I may not believe in fated mates, but chemistry like this will not be denied. I worship her skin, caressing her softness as she purrs her delight with every stroke of my caress. When I’ve finally bared her completely, and even her little panties lie on the floor, I pick her up, gently carrying her to the bed. Laying her down, I undress while she watches, those purple eyes fixated on every single button that gets undone, following every move I make until I part her legs to stand between them.

Her scent is erotic, a pheromone I cannot and won’t even try to deny. I want her in the worst of ways. I slide my hands over her thighs, resting on the inside of her knees, watching the inhalation of her breaths speeding up as her desire grows. And when I part her legs, her center is already glistening with dewy wetness, slick enough for me to enter, but not first without a taste.

Embry watches me as my head lowers, parting her slightly, gently stroking with a finger, and then a thumb, licking lightly as our eyes meet, fueled by the passion in her eyes and trembling of her thighs. My finger finds her anus. I stroke gently, testing the tightness, teasing her with each stroke and little insertions of my touch. Her desire boils, and I take the sensitive bundle of nerves into my mouth, sucking her while my finger finds its mark, driving in, sliding right against that special spot until she can’t control it one moment more. “Come for me, Embry.”

She does not disobey, beautiful in the height of her passion as her thighs tighten against my face, but I’m not that easily dissuaded. I keep her open, sucking until she’s ridden the orgasm on the end of my tongue, letting her come down while still collecting the cream that is mine.

Embry tries to close her legs, but that will hardly do. “Mine,” I tell her, possessive in my desire to feast on every bit of the cream in her center, not willing to be deprived of one sweet bit, but gently cleaning my mate rekindles her desire, and her eyes open with surprise when I lift her legs and flip her over.

“Knees,” I growl.

She moans, settling onto her hands and knees, her beautifully round ass positioned perfectly in front of me. Embry does not have time to think before I drive all my length right to the very end of her, hitting that spot deep inside that causes her to gasp. “Again,” she moans.

It wasn’t my intent to stop, and I do it again, and again, and again, driving us both into a frenzy, chasing an orgasm that sears us with its power. I pull her back against me, still building the climax, driving in hard just the way she likes. “Give me what I want, Embry.”

She feels my teeth graze against that sensitive little pulse on the side of her neck and pushes back to accept me deeper and deeper inside of her as my lips mark the side of her throat before my fangs pierce her delicate skin and I thrust the length of my cock into her deep and rough, hitting that special little button time and time again as she screams my name and our desires explode.

The ultimate release, still with her blood on my tongue, and something never experienced before, an experience that I’m already thirsting for again. There is no denying the powers of the temptation that destiny has put before us, barely able to hold out for more than twenty-four hours before succumbing to the sexy female who I now cradle in my arms, still joined as one.

“It’s never been like that for me,” she whispers.

I stroke her hair, watching as the puncture wounds on her neck slowly close and fade. It's sure as fuck never been like that for me either but whatever this is, it's gotten much muddier than before. The woman's scent is like an aphrodisiac that I simply cannot deny, every protective instinct I have roars to life when she steps near danger, and whether I want to believe in destiny or not, I do respect her place in the world.

But she had to have gotten it wrong.

Even if I were looking for a mate, Embry is not mine to have. Her heart is still with another, a tragic loss that will take time to heal. Our connection is something I'll undoubtedly have to get used to, and I realize in just this second that I'm already thinking in terms of the next time and seeing her more. Not just as someone I've been tasked with protecting either, damn it all to hell.

Her hand clasps mine as she snuggles into my front, the curve of her ass still gently nestled against me. Her breathing calm and sated, safe and secure. The very way I want her to be. Safe, protected, and in my arms.

She snuggles against my arm but doesn't turn to face me. "We were so close as friends, closer as lovers, but then something changed. It was before the witches put a curse on him though. Quite some time before that," she whispers.

I stroke the silky strands of her hair, just letting her know that I'm here, to listen, and comfort, anything that Embry needs because in a matter of hours, something significant has changed.

Her head tilts slightly. "I didn't realize it until I really thought about it after he was gone. Maybe if I had figured it out early things would have been different, maybe he wouldn't have turned rogue. But I'll never know, never be able to get rid of this feeling like I could have done more."

I kiss the top of her head, stroking a finger down her arm. “Rest, love. Whatever you did I’m sure it was more than most would have done. No one in the close circle of Overmaster Descallia and Lucianna believe you to be a traitor. And the rest of the world, they simply do not matter, at least while they sputter the nonsense they want to believe.”

She nods slightly, but I have no doubt it is only a simple appeasement as she drifts off to sleep and not a sign of believing me for one little bit. I’ve heard the cruelty of the rumors, hell, believed them myself for all of this time. Until I could hear her thoughts and feel her very soul.

Embry loves the vampires with all her being but somehow and for some reason unbeknownst to me finds herself in the middle of the biggest battleground between the witches and vampires that ever did exist. And she’s right. We do need to figure this out, her heritage, why she was drawn here of all places, because until we do, she will never be accepted back into the fold. The vampire masters have come a long way in accepting witches as mates for the purebloods, but with strict conditions and proven allegiance to our cause.

Which is a problem for the lovely vampiress I now hold in my arms.

I’ve almost drifted to sleep myself when her melodic voice draws me back from the brink of sleep. “Do you think the woman we saw was a witch? I think she was. Probably spying on us. Tomorrow, when it’s dark, I need to find her, learn what she knows and why I’ve been brought here. There has to be a reason.”

I inhale a deep breath. I don’t know what the reason is myself, but I can’t go home without her. Embry isn’t going home without finding out the truth and getting her home without pissing off the vampires or the witches is what I’ve been asked to do. Finding the witch now that she knows we’re onto her will not be easy yet words fall from my mouth as though it will be no problem at all. “We’ll find her tomorrow.

Sleep, love.”

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No matter what she thinks, it is going to be a problem. They are pesky little creatures full of surprises, but the witch may be able to give us information that we don't already know.

Embry squeezes my hand. "You'll really help me?"

"You're not going alone." Deep in the Mystic Forest full of an academy of wild witches, we'll find the one who steps lightly and disappears the minute we see her among the trees, not wanting to be found.

Sure, we'll find her, and then what?

Chapter 14

Embry

His evil laugh has invaded my dreams sleep after sleep since that deadly night when I learned for certain that he was the ultimate traitor. Lucas, the right hand to the powerful vampire overlord for centuries, the very vampire who helped Descallia build a world where pureblooded vampires are now respected and powerful in their own right. Risen to a species that controls the underworld but no longer seeks out blood from unsuspecting victims like it did centuries ago.

Even accepted by the humans as partners in business, heads of corporations, and even by the most notorious criminals of all. No, now they all want to partner with us. Because of Descallia and Lucas, who worked diligently to change the fate of the vampires.

Only Lucas changed, and when he stares at me faced off in the cavern after leaving the safety of the others to find him, that evil laugh and not the steel of his blade that threatens to slice me in two is what I fear the most.

Someone has taken Lucas's soul. He is no longer the vampire he used to be. The one who would have done anything for Overmaster Descallia, any of the master vampires, lords, warriors or anyone without an official title. He loved them all equally, and would have killed, did kill, in cold blood for them many times.

To support a cause, the one he now rails against as he screams at me in my dream, in a fit of rage. "Do you know what we do to traitors of the rogues, Embry? We kill them. Burn them at the stake or run them through with a stake to the heart." His eyes flare red. "But that's not what I'm going to do with you. No, we're going to wait until the masters arrive, and then I'll kill you right before their very eyes. They will see what their actions have caused."

I try to run but he transports across the cavern sealing me into the cave. His hand grabs my neck and squeezes so tight that I'm losing air fast. "No," I yell as loudly as I can knowing that in minutes my voice will be completely gone.

A rough shake to my shoulders and a deep voice calling my name drag me from the terror of my dream. "Embry, look at me."

My eyes are like weights, and it takes effort to open them. "Come here." Corvinus drags me into his arms, stroking my hair, kissing the top of my head, and rubbing my back until I begin to calm. "A bad dream? Your skin is damp, and your heart is racing. Tell me."

I swallow through the emotion, barely able to choke the words out. "Lucas. Same thing, it happens the same way every single time. I can't get it out of my mind. And every time one of those gossiping vamps in the community begin running their mouth

about things they'll never know, about what happened that night, about what I tried to do, it just brings all the injustice and hurt I feel raining down on me all over again. I went after him, thought I could find him where others had failed, but they don't believe that. They think I went to be with him."

"The important people don't believe it."

I swipe at a tear, furious with myself for letting this ruin our perfect night. "I'm sorry. I'm trying to get a handle on the dreams. They don't happen every night now, maybe a couple times a week, which is a hell of a lot better than before, but still, they feel so real. I'm glad you were here tonight," I tell him, because it's the truth. The protection of his arms is comforting. "Just because I sob in your arms does not make us in a relationship, vampire."

He turns my face to him, and his dark eyes meet mine. "We're sure as hell caught up in something but I haven't been able to put a name to it myself yet."

My eyebrows arch. "Secret bed buddies. That's what we'll be."

The devil smirks. "Because you think it will happen again?"

I slide my leg against his, and roll on top of him, pressing my pert nipples against the tattoos on his chest, so close that our lips are almost touching. "Don't tease me. This thing, it's not going to run its course until we've completely sated our desire, vampire. And I'm hardly sated at all."

The power-hungry beast rolls me in one flip, caging me beneath him, crushing his lips to mine while parting my thighs with his leg. "Open," he growls.

A take charge alpha in and out of the bedroom is exactly what I like. I'll do whatever the beast wants me to do because I know exactly what it's going to feel like when he

drives that massive cock deep inside. There is no need for foreplay or games for us. Our chemistry is always on ready. And when it flares to life, we do not hold back. My pussy is already wet for his cock and the carnality that joining will bring.

We know what we want, and we want it now, intense gratification, and that deep cock of his drives home, straight to the end of me while his finger and a thumb toy with my tips, first one and then the other, rolling them, first gently and then with more pressure, finding just that right spot between pleasure and pain, the one that sends streaks of pleasure all the way south.

But the sexy vampire lord is not ready for me to come. “Not yet, love, you’ll spill your juices when I allow it and only while I drink my fill.”

Corvinus drives harder and harder, my legs wrapping around his waist tight as he lifts me from the bed, and into his lap while his lips find my neck. “When I pierce your flesh, then you’re ready, love,” he growls, teasing me unmercifully before taking what he needs and exactly what I crave. The minute his fangs sink deep into that vein, lightening washes over me, heat and energy, and a flood of lust spills from my center over the top of his rod.

When he’s had his fill and emptied all of his load, he cradles the back of my neck, kissing me with blood-soaked lips, the taste of my blood mingling between us, sweet and forbidden, just like us and this relationship.

We both know the rules about masters and lords taking protégés or lesser positioned vampires in their employ as mates, but yet, destiny has put us together for a reason. And rules be damned. I don’t want this to end. We’ll keep it under wraps, and no one will be the wiser.

He strokes my face. “They’ll know love. Anyone will be able to tell the moment we walk into a room. The chemistry will give us away.”

I swallow through the lump in my throat. “Then we won’t walk into a room together around the vampires.”

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Corvinus smiles. “You tell yourself that. We’re sheltered in our little cavern in the woods, and for now, it’s fine, but when we go back home, and we will go back home love, we’ll need to have a plan.”

It may be true but I’m not planning to go home for a very long time. It’s he who will be returning and whether the vampire knows it or not, he’ll be leaving alone. There is no way I’ll go back to being the butt of their cruel jokes, their taunts and all the feelings I left behind.

A fresh start is what I need and falling into a relationship, no matter how sexy Lord Corvinus is, will never do. There’s no way it would work between the two of us, both in different regions of the world. And even if I did return. How is that going to work? I can’t go back to the warriors, especially if he’s the boss like everyone says he will be. A no-win situation. Better to enjoy our company, and then say our goodbyes like two ships passing in the night.

That won’t work.

I inwardly groan. Stop reading my mind, vampire.

He rolls me over, swinging a leg over the top of me and keeping me in place with an arm on either side. “See, this is how things are going to happen. You are going to find out what you need to learn about your grandmother and about Lucas. Overmaster Descallia will want to know what you learn about the situation between the two of them, and if it connects in any way with what’s happened recently.”

“But...”

He puts a finger over my lips. “No buts... We are going to do it in a way that does not upset the delicate balance between the vampires and the witches. You heard Rupert, there are things at play that we are not aware of, things that may matter greatly that we should learn while we’re here. It could be valuable to the vampires in the future. When we’re done with that, you will come home with me.”

“But...”

That finger touches my lips again. “No buts, love... You will come back with me. You will keep that head raised and walk back into the community with a steadfast resolve because you have nothing to be ashamed of, right?”

I shake my head. “I don’t but you don’t know the half of it. Why do you trust what I say now? You didn’t before.”

His dark black eyes meet mine with a gentleness that chokes me with emotion. “Because, love, I can read your thoughts as well as I can hear my own. We are connected in the universe, by some unknown force that so many vampires can use to communicate. We are joined.”

“Gramma was a psychic. I’ve often thought I had the gift.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Or it could make you a witch.”

I suck in a breath. “I’ve always hated the witches, until some of the vampire masters took them for mates. Even then I didn’t trust them at first. Kinda gave them a hard time to be honest. But many of them are very good friends now. I don’t know what to say to them now. What if I am a witch?”

He kisses my lips lightly. “It’s daylight already. Get some more sleep. You’ll feel better before the sun goes down tonight and it will give you time to figure out what

you want to ask and how much you want to learn, before we find the witch.”

Chapter 15

Corvinus

I’ve learned quickly that a shy Embry is something you do not see every day. She tucks the sheet around her and walks to the bathroom and gets showered up when we wake, leaving me to think about the curve of her ass as the water of the shower behind that door runs. If we thought a night of sex was going to rid us of our itch, it has done just the opposite, leaving us both craving more and more. Completely insatiable, but there is work to do.

I throw back the sheet, determined to put the sexpot from my mind, at least for a while. I put the coffee pot on to brew and scramble some eggs with cheese and steak before she’s finished and walking toward me in a mini skirt that leaves her navel bare and a little jewel dangling from her navel piercing. The one that I already adore.

She is not helping my effort to divert my attention from her in the slightest. Just the opposite in fact. She glances down at my pants and gives me a wink as my cock grows against the side of my jeans.

Determined to keep us on our mission and my thoughts away from sex with my charge, I glance down at her shoes. Shoes are a safe thing to look at. They keep my eyes off that snatched little waist and tight abdomen, and those silky and powerful thighs that wrap around my back to hold me close when I’m balls deep in her velvet. “Those shoes will slow you down in the woods.”

She winks at me. “I like it when you’re balls deep in my velvet better than grumping at me about my shoes.” The little sass walks to the counter and pours two cups of coffee and brings them to the table while I gather the plates and silverware.

It's hard not to watch Embry though, as she heads to the fridge in her little purple skirt, swishing from side to side as her ass moves. I slide into a chair at the table waiting for her to join me. She pulls two quarts out of the fridge to bring back to the table. "What are we supposed to do when we run out?"

One of many things that I couldn't quite get off my mind the last few hours. Why leave us blood if it were the witches? That would just prolong our stay. Why not leave us with no provisions and we're forced to leave or at least leave the cavern? It makes no fucking sense at all.

But my money is still on destiny's intervention, leaving us locked here together with enough blood to keep us sustained until we can find some of our own or wear each other out using our own. She knows it's not far from Romano's. Hell, destiny's no doubt the one behind his attraction to the witch from the academy anyway. No, this is her doing. "When we're done in the woods, we'll make the journey to Romano's estate. It's not far from the edge of Mystic Forest."

Her purple eye pierce mine with a sense of anxiety. "He's one of the vampire masters. Who says he doesn't haul me back to Overmaster Descallia the minute I walk through the doors of his estate? He is known to be a formidable master in these parts and puts up with very little between the witches and vampires. He is not going to look favorably on the fact that I'm here."

"You need not worry about Romano, but you do need to worry about me. Now eat, so we can get an early start into the woods. I'd like to find this pesky little witch and learn what she knows before she has a chance to get the drop on us and flee again."

"Rupert's fault. I swear, I've always thought of him as a friend. I didn't expect him to be like that yesterday."

I look up from my cup of coffee. "He is your friend. Very much so. He got you to

safety, did not lead you astray, and was genuinely happy to see you again. He just wasn't happy that you were digging into things that he believes will cause unrest between the witches and vampires. That's fair. I'd feel the same way if I lived here."

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Her eyes widen as she bites into a piece of toast.

“In fact, I do feel the same way. And I don’t live here. If we’re going to keep the peace, we need to safeguard certain things that have always been sacred, on both sides. It’s just how it’s going to have to be if we’re to keep from causing a war.”

Embry is thoughtful as we eat and reaches over to draw her sword from the sheath where she’s left it on the little table next to the wall. She turns it to show me the jewel tipped end. “This long- sword, it was given to me by my grandma. She received it as a gift from a vampire she fought side by side with years ago. The jewel changes colors depending on its surroundings.”

She crunches a piece of toast, taking a bite before arcing the majestic sword in the air. “This sword and my grandma will protect us. You’ll see.”

“I have no doubt that I will. How long were you friends with Lucas before you began dating?”

She glances up at me, places her sword down, and then takes a sip of coffee before answering. “Why do you want to know, so you can determine if I infiltrated the vampires at his suggestion, because of our friendship? Got cozy with the vampires’ matesto give him the low down on their pillow talk? That’s what you thought too, right?”

“Not trusting much, are you?”

“No, not so much. You didn’t answer the question, vampire.”

“Perhaps I thought it was possible before I knew you. I don’t think that anymore.”

“Well, you don’t know me that well, and haven’t known me for long. I didn’t do it just for your four-one-one. I wanted to help the vampires. I begged Lucas to let me come to work for the vampires. He didn’t want to let me but finally caved. He had always had a crush on me. I knew it, we both knew it, but his sense of loyalty to my grandmother kept him from acting on it for so long.

“I pursued him more than he ever pursued me. I should have just left things alone, maybe it was because back then he was kind, my best friend, and he worked for the vampires and made it sound so glorious. I remember the first time Lucas introduced me to Overmaster Descallia at Club Descallia. I was so nervous I could barely talk. That’s around the same time I met Lucianna.”

Club Descallia... now that’s a club I miss. And now Embry is front and center in my mind again, draped over a spanking bench in the lower-level sex club with not a stitch of clothes except for the flat of my hand to cover the creamy skin of her ass.

Chapter 16

Embry

Corvinus smirks, and his eyes have reddened. My eyes widen as his thoughts register.

My hand goes to my hip. “I saw that, vampire. Not funny.” But, just thinking about his hand on my ass in the lower level of Club Descallia has me wet and ready for him again. But we have work to do today, so I play it off coy.

His eyes narrow, and I need to remind myself that he knows what I’m thinking. No getting past that, unless I learn to close my mind off to this connection of ours and destiny seems to have put the kibosh on that. “No, not funny but thinking about you

in the lower level of Club Descallia and spanking your ass while I have you lying over one of my personal room benches sounds more than appealing. I'll take you there when we return to Chicago."

My fangs descend with desire that I have to breathe through to quiet. "You do these things on purpose. Just to get a response, vampire."

His eyebrow raises. "And what a lovely response it is, love."

"We have work to do, if you haven't forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten. But part of finding out the future is connecting it to the past, and learning about your integration to the vampires I believe may be key."

I shrug. "Well, Overmaster Descallia was so intimidating back then. I guess he still is to people who don't know him. He's different with me though, since Lucianna and I are so close." I sigh deeply, not wanting to think about her that hard, because every minute spent in that lower level while they thought I was a traitor slices my heart with pain. "Were so close."

"Nothing has changed in that regard, Embry. You have to know that. She was the one that asked for Overmaster Descallia to send someone to look for you. He sent me because he knew I wouldn't return empty handed and I don't plan to fail."

Maybe, but that's not how it felt while I was barred from helping the vampires because they weren't sure. "You know when Lucianna and I met, we kinda bonded deeply after being the target of a cruel and unusual attack. We wouldn't have made it if the guys hadn't transitioned us. It bonded us like nothing ever could, to Overmaster Descallia and Lucas, but to each other, too. We've been the closest of friends since then."

Corvinus turns to me, his dark eyes gentle. “I remember hearing about the transitions. There was much speculation about how transitions occurred whether they were sanctioned by the committee, whether the way we did things was old and outdated and should be revisited. It’s still being revised. The masters have it on an agenda in the future, but after the warriors are put in place.”

I sigh. “Is Descallia going to get rid of his special ops team now that you’re putting the warriors back together again?”

He takes our plates while I clear our cups and take them to the sink before washing them all up while he dries. “I don’t know the answer to that question right now. The traitors on the warriors who betrayed us made it difficult to trust anyone in those positions. We have a ton of applicants, good solid soldiers who will all make great combat vampires, but the real test is going to be their loyalty and ability to adapt to changing times.”

I grab a clean cloth to wipe down the kitchen. “It’s still hard to believe the rogues were able to get their devious claws into so many of our sacred groups.”

“The warriors who betrayed us didn’t believe in where we were going. That can’t happen again. Until we get the right ones in place, I for one believe we need to keep the special ops team. Probably after that too.”

I swallow through the lump in my throat. So very much has changed. “Silver and I won’t be on it. That takes two psychics out. Lucianna thought she could depend on him and me for so much. Now she’s probably second guessing everything that she’s ever done for us.”

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He hovers to close the distance between us, removing any personal space that existed, which wasn't much to begin with. "You don't know the answer to these things because you didn't stay and talk with her. I heard you helped make the night of her ceremony special, wrote her a goodbye note and then just disappeared. Did you not expect those actions to perpetuate the rumors that were already floating around? Guilty people don't run, Embry. And no matter the reason, that's exactly what you've done."

Fuck you!

Chapter 17

Embry

Maybe it's true, maybe every single thing the vampire says is true, but he wasn't the one who went through what I did. He wasn't the one who dreamed of being a vampire all his life and then was let into their world and transitioned to become one, risked his life to catch the traitor either, and then became an outcast through no fault of their own.

All of a sudden, everything, all the emotions, the dreams, the memories of the gossip, and the way Lucas's once smiling face turned into an evil grin as he displayed the monster he had become floats into my mind and it is just too fucking much.

Everything is all too much.

And nothing about standing here, hashing it out with the vampire lord who is here to

haul me back to endure more of the same is making it any better.

Rupert, I need to find Rupert.

I need to find out what he knows about my grandma that I do not know. And

he'll know who the girl in the woods was, and where to find her. I don't need a bossy vampire who doesn't know what I've been through telling me what to do or dragging me back to a life that I'm not ready to face.

"Sorry, vampire. I'm going to have to do this one alone." With that, I transport without another word or a backward glance to a place deep in the woods, one that grandma told me about long ago, hoping that Rupert and his family still reside there or at least can be seen close by. Someone in the forest will know, they will help me. And if not...

Grandma will guide me.

Who the hell else could have or would have thought to put blood in that refrigerator or my clothes in that closet? It has to be her, and there's a reason she left. I'm suddenly convinced more than ever that I'm here not just on a mission to find myself, but on a quest, one that grandma must have put in place a long time ago.

Psychics can see into the future. Maybe she saw something so many years ago, something that made her believe that I would need help, the guidance of her instruction as I made my way through the forest, and to the very cavern that is my housing and protection today. My grandmother and hers before her had it too and I have the same sight. Psychics. That's what she always said.

We're not witches, but powerful psychics, at least that's what I've been told, but it would sure as hell be helpful if I could see well into the future right now, too.

Because nothing at this moment makes a bit of damn sense. Least of all my unwavering feelings for the vampire beast who wants to drag me back in a wave of shame.

Maybe grandma led me away from the vampires for a reason. Yet, I've let my need for touch, for someone to hold me in their arms, and fulfill basic needs and desires to alter my normal wariness of strangers. I let the enemy in, let him get way too fucking close, and even opened up about things that should have stayed locked up. Sealed in that closed off compartment of your soul that is for your eyes only, and not to be shared.

But yet, that chemistry, the way he looks at me, and the way he touches me is not something that can easily be cast aside. A sound in the distance draws me from my speculation, luring me deeper into the Mystic Forest, pushing long wayward branches whose leaves have still not dropped aside in my effort to get through the densely wooded land.

The backwater stream, a small tributary from the larger main bubbles gently against the rocks on its shore, beckoning me to the fresh and clear water of the forest. I walk softly, knowing that while many of the animals have already come to feed and drink, when day is just turning to night, the blackness of the time now, it will draw the true night creatures.

Predators... The ones with long sharp teeth who would relish a meal of raw meat, no matter the type.

I walk softly, anxious to avoid claws and razor-sharp teeth that will rip your skin to shreds. My mind back in the game, I draw my longsword in my right hand while keeping a firm grip on my dagger in the left.

The large forest cats are fast, and they like the smell of vampires in any shape or

form. Flying would probably be safer, but instead, I transport closer to the area I recall from grandma's stories, farther down the creek bed, closer to the edge of the forest, where anything goes.

The witch side...

At least that's what they claim. But Rupert's family has always nested this side of that and as long as they stayed neutral no one on either side was going to throw them out.

It doesn't take long before I hear the distinct sounds of their caws in the air, their guard alerting Rupert and the others that a stranger is near. The outline of the guard can be seen high above me, just a hundred feet away, perched high in a majestic oak tree that is undoubtedly home to more critters than we know.

"Looking for Rupert," I whisper hiss into the night. The fucking bird probably heard and saw me tromping through the woods a thousand feet away and no doubt Rupert has already been alerted to my arrival. The guard looks down at me, flaps a wing and turns, cawing into the night.

Creatures rustle and scurry from the tree, jumping from one to the other, crashing onto branches and sending a flurry of autumn crisped leaves to the ground in their hurry. Rupert does not make his appearance quietly, instead making a dramatic show, loudly barreling through the trees to take his perch above me on the branch. "I knew you'd be back, girlie. If your grandma wasn't such a good friend to us over the years, I swear, I would leave you to fend for yourself."

"Rupert!" I admonish.

"And don't you ever take that highfalutin tone with me again. Just because the dark-hearted beasts have made you one of theirs does not mean that you forget everything

and everyone you left behind or look down that pretty little nose of yours at us.”

My chest tightens with angst. “That’s not what this is about at all Rupert. I have always thought of you as a very close friend. I’m just frustrated that I came here for peace, and all I keep running into is people who bring up the past but then shut me out when I want to learn more about how I’m part of that past.

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“My gramma sent me here. The more I think about it, the more I think she could see the future and knew one day I’d need to come here. But other than to get my head on straight, I have no idea why.”

Rupert caws but looks into the trees and not at me.

“Rupert, I apologized, now tell me what you know about my gramma, about why you think I’m here and why it’s upset the balance of the forest. Please?”

The damnable bird swings his head, his beady eyes focusing in on me. “Ding, ding, ding. She hasn’t forgotten the magic word. It’s true what they say, please goes a long way young lady, and don’t you forget it again.”

Exasperating bird. “Please, pretty please even. I said I was sorry; I meant it Rupert. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

He sends his beak into the air. “But yet you bring the dark lord of death with you by your side. What do you think the witches will think? When they heard whisperings of you traveling through the forest, they thought you were coming to build a life here. There were discussions of allowing it since your parting with the vampires and your friendships. They took pity on a woman with a heart who had nowhere to go. Even allowed you to get to the cavern without interception.”

My chest tightens. I knew something was going on, something amiss as I walked through the forest. The feel of eyes on me, all around, watching me while hidden from sight no doubt. “I didn’t even know they were watching, or that I needed permission from them to come here.”

Rupert nods. “So much to learn, girly. The witches claim all the land in this area, as do the vampires, but for years they’ve had a truce, witches on this side, and vampires on the other. The witches allowed you, a vampire, into what they believe is their sacred land, their side mind you, and you betrayed them by bringing the dark lord into the forest with you and even further by allowing him into the cavern that you shared.”

“I had no idea. About some of the history, yes. Of course, but I had no idea that the lines were that clearly drawn, that the cavern was still used by the witches or at least controlled, and no idea whatsoever that the dark lord would follow me into the woods. This is not my fault.”

He shakes his head. “But yet, you are being blamed.”

My brow furrows with frustration. I was trying to get away from trouble, from gossip, from being an outcast and now it’s just followed me into the woods. “What about my grandma? Is she alive, a spirit? Tell me something Rupert. And what about the girl in the woods last night? Is she a witch? Watching me? Someone who knows my grandma?”

Rupert rolls his eyes and tosses his head toward the clearing behind me. “Better that you should ask her yourself, girly.”

Chapter 18

Corvinus

I should have known she would run back to the nosy bird who can’t seem to keep his nose out of my business, who shouldn’t be trusted farther than I can throw his scrawny neck. Friends with the witches, friends with the vampires, a neutral party who just happens to keep his family homed on the witches’ side of the sacred land.

Playing both for gain, is what I think.

And anyone protected by the witches is not a friend of the vampires. Rupert flaps his wings as I appear before him, the whites of his eyes in the dark of night popping wide. A protective growl emanates from deep in my chest. That female's scent is everywhere. She's here and I know it, somewhere close yet not within sight. "Where is Embry?" I growl.

He shrugs, absolutely no help at all. The flaunty bird is about ready to be someone's barbeque, at least what there is left of him after I set the asshole on fire. "Speak!"

My fangs descend and eyes heat, ready to do him a massive body of harm if he doesn't tell me where Embry is and do it quickly. She could be anywhere, unprotected from the dangers of this woods.

He doesn't answer and yet her scent is so strong. "Tell me where she is, or I'll burn you and that fucking tree alive, bird! I have no patience for you or anyone you protect."

His wing flaps frantically. "I'm only trying to protect Embry and keep the peace. If you had half a wit about you then you would do the same, you overgrown bloodsucking beast!"

I hover in the air, closing the distance fast, almost instantly right in front of his face midair. "Tell me now, last chance."

He feels the heat and discomfort of my burning eyes. I know he does. "There! There!" He jumps up and down on the branch, his wing tip pointing toward the witches' side of the river's bend, not willing to give up his life for whatever little game he plays. Smart because he didn't have a minute left before I turned him to a pile of ashes and a thing of the past.

“She’s with the witch. In no harm, I promise you.”

And I am not willing to wait one more second or believe a fucking word the con has to say, not when Embry could be anywhere and a target who’s walked right into the witches’ evil clutches. I move quickly, seeking her out, following that intoxicating scent that has somehow weaved itself into my very being. If someone lays one hand on her, I will end them for sure.

Embry does not know the lure of the witches, the evil side of them like I do. A history sealed by centuries and centuries of magic, trickery, potions, hexes and curses meant to send the vampires to hell and take over the land.

The more the thought of her captured by a witch’s snare, the faster the blood courses through my veins as I fly through the air, transporting to the other side of the bend, territory and boundaries be damned. Alert, searching, scanning the forest with my keen night vision, until finally I see Embry sitting with a lone witch on a large log by the light of flames.

Fire... And fucking Embry sits right next to it as though testing the gods above. If it was meant to intimidate Embry or show her that the witches know our weakness, it failed miserably, because she sits so close that I’d like to wring her little neck.

And if the witch thinks that heat will deter me from ruining her plans, she couldn’t be more wrong. No, it just confirms that she is a manipulator, intent on drawing Embry into her evil web while trying to keep me at bay. That she knows a vampire is nearby, but she only knows what we want them to know. The myths that we’ve allowed to perpetuate and fill their heads as they’ve planned our demise for centuries now.

Fire will not stop me or Embry. It may slow me down, and I may not fucking like it, but I’ll deal. For Embry, I’ll do what I have to do, but right now, getting information is important as long as she’s safe. And she does not look to be in any harm, at least

immediately from my vantage point and she doesn't look intimidated one little bit at all.

I push behind the great girth of a hundred-year-old oak tree, taking refuge in its sturdy round trunk, peeking around to watch as the caped woman from yesterday and Embry sit next to a campfire, Embry rubbing her hands together as if to show the witch her strength, listening while the witch speaks softly to her.

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Her voice is so soft that even with my keen hearing, it's difficult to hear everything that's said, but I catch most of it, making me wonder what her game is and why she's come alone. "I'm Belinda. The witches knew you would come one day, and with everything that happened with the vampires recently, we should have expected your arrival, but still it caught many of us by surprise."

Embry is quiet for a moment, just digesting the fact that her venture into the woods was already known. "Do Willow or Raven know?" Embry asks softly, pulling her cape around her shoulders against the sudden coolness that breezes through the forest.

Belinda shakes her head. "No, Devora asked us not to mention it to anyone, more out of respect for you. To allow you time. She thought if your whereabouts got back to Raven or Willow it would inadvertently get spilled to their mates, and Masters Romano and Campania would say something to Lucianna and Descallia. 'Better to let Embry have time and space to wander, and determine where she wants to rest,' that is what Devora said."

"Please tell her thank you for me. I won't let anyone know I'm here from outside the forest until I'm ready, but what about my grandma?"

The witch reaches out and places a hand on Embry. "Are you sure you saw her, dear? Things in the forest have a way of not being at all what they appear to be."

"Did you or the witches put my clothes in the closet and blood in the refrigerator? Of course you did! You knew I was coming." Embry sighs heavily. "I've been so distraught I almost led myself to believe that Grandma was here, even though she passed years and years ago. I just wanted it to be true so very much. She was always

my best source of comfort and at a time I need it the most, maybe I did just conjure the whole thing up in my head. Wait until Raven and Willow find out. They're going to laugh at me, or make fun of me."

She laughs. "Probably both."

My jaw tightens. The head witch Devora has known Embry has been in the Mystic Forest heading her way, and while she swore to Overmaster Descallia to put all feuding aside, with the exception of the land, here she is keeping secrets about someone everyone in the vampire world is searching for in every area of the world. "Blasted witches," I say beneath my breath.

I feel you, vampire.

The trees above me begin to sway, and the oak begins to crawl with large insects and worms, swarming all over the trunk. I swipe at my cape, pushing the pesky creatures onto the ground, quickly moving to another area to get away from the invasive pests.

But the wind begins to blow, knocking down branches, behind and in front of me. Embry turns to the witch. "Tell Devora thank you and that I will take her offer of refuge up until I've determined my place in the land. And thank you, Belinda. I've heard Willow talk about you before with a lot of love and affection.

Embry stands, and the witch disappears, leaving Embry to make her way toward me. Streaks of gold flash amidst the purple of her eyes. "If I had wanted you with me, I would have invited you. I need time, away from the vampires and from life in general. Just an escape."

My eyes capture hers, holding them hostage, knowing it's as hard for her to turn away as it is for me. This damnable connection destiny has put in our way.

Embry's eyes swirl with purple, gold flecks sparking. "You don't have the right to follow me. You don't own me, have any rights to me or anything of the sort. We slept together. Maybe it was pleasurable, but that doesn't give you the right to stalk my every move. If I had wanted your help or intervention, I would have asked."

She gestures toward the fire that has magically gone out as though the flames never existed. "These are my friends. Friends of friends. There was a time, and I'm ashamed to admit it, that I thought the witches simply couldn't be trusted. But that was before I met the mates of the masters. Each and every one of them have become a friend. And they are also friends of Lucianna, our queen, so I would advise you to pay some respect, regardless of your feelings toward witches in general."

My growl is low. "And what about the vampires who took you in, saved you from certain death, transitioned you and made you one of us? Vowed to protect you and keep you for eternity? Now you turn your back on us and shelter with the enemy, at the time you need us the most?"

Embry pins me with a stare. "They turned their back on me, not the other way around. I lost everything, threw everything away for them. Went after Lucas on my own, knowing he was dangerous, but thinking that I could talk him down and get the best of him. I chose them over him, and what did they do in return? Treated me like a prisoner, like an enemy."

This is what she hasn't talked about, not one word in her own defense to the vampires, to Lucianna, and instead has remained steadfastly silent when called to the masters of the consulate board. Saying not one word in her defense, not a damn single word. "Tell me."

Her eyes fill with tears, the light of the moon shining down through the clearing in the treetops above and making them glisten in the night. "They didn't even come after me that night. They waited, thinking that I had it under control. I didn't but still I

tried.”

Embry’s small body is wracked with emotion, and it takes effort not to sweep her into my arms and transport her back to our bed. Instead, I wait, giving her the time needed for her to process what she wants to say, and perhaps what she doesn’t. Embry needs this as much as I need to hear it.

She looks pointedly at me and swipes at her tears. “I’m supposed to be a badass warrior, and I was. Until Lucas broke me. That night, I couldn’t get the upper hand. No matter how good I was at wielding my sword, that fucker was better. Every swing he anticipated, every time I moved it was like he knew before I did it where I would land. He’s never been better than me with a sword.”

I don’t say a word. This is her time, and Embry will decide when she’s through, when she wants input, or my thoughts, but it takes every bit of self-control I have not to speak before she’s ready.

Her breathing starts to return to normal, but slowly, stretching out like hours instead of mere minutes. “Why couldn’t I beat him in battle like the hundreds of our enemies before him? I’m a warrior, a trained warrior. I let everyone down, including myself and he won the night. Why?”

And now she’s invited me, invited me to do more than listen, asked for my input, but we’re not having this conversation in the middle of the fucking witches’ forest. I scoop Embry into my arms, cradling her against my chest. “Hold on.”

She does not hesitate. Her arms wrap tightly around me, hanging on for security of the transport. But it’s more than that, I can feel it and so can she. The minute we arrive in the cavern, I set her down on the barstool and hand her a quart of ice-cold blood. “Drink this first, and I’ll pour us a glass of red to take the edge off and recharge, and then we talk.”

Embry is quiet, but I assume she's gathering her thoughts, contemplating exactly what it is that she wants to say while I'm pouring the Descallia Red, and what she is not yet ready to divulge to someone who's barely been in her life a few days.

I turn to hand her the tall glass of nourishment, but Embry is no longer sitting on the stool, but instead has vanished into thin air again. "Embry?"

Chapter 19

Embry

It's too soon...

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Too soon to talk about anything with Corvinus. At least to tell him anything of substance because he thinks the vampires walk on water, well, at least that they are the best creatures in the world. And I thought that too, until I was ostracized and outcast by many after giving them my life. My entire life given to the vampires for an eternity with no way to reverse that decision.

Stuck in a world with vampires who don't trust me, who talk behind my back and send vampires like Lord Corvinus after me. Maybe he's trustworthy and maybe he's not, and I need to remember that his allegiance is to them, for an eternity, as is mine. But I need to reconcile my anger before I can be of any good at all to them.

I thirstily finish the entire quart of ice-cold blood wishing that I had another one readily available to guzzle. But it doesn't take long before the thick red liquid starts circulating in my veins.

Every nerve and instinct in my body feels Lord Corvinus before I see him.

He's quietly transported through the door of the bedroom and stands watching me with an elbow on the door frame, now wrapped in black pants and a black sweater, the perfect backdrop for those deep red eyes that are alive with an energy that I've known in a very carnal sense, and desire to know again.

My breathing quickens, inhaling his scent, arousal racing through my blood and directly south to heat and wet my core.

And there's no calming this storm, not until its culmination is through because I want what he wants, that clawing desire that almost suffocates me with its strength. He

smells my craving, inhaling it in the air, undressing for me as my body heats beyond cooling, closing the distance with a quick hover that leaves me against the wall, his arms of steel wrapped around me in less than a blink of an eye.

A personal cage just for me, one I don't have a desire in the world to be freed from. I hunger for everything he has to offer, every touch, but most of all, I want the storm, in all its glory, the fury of passion, raw and dirty, primal and somehow so life affirming. When he rips my clothes and tosses them on the floor along with his own, I'm already soaked, needy and ready for the strength of his power as he lifts me by my hips, pushing me deeper against the wall as he thrusts to the very end of me.

His hands lift my body up and down, driving his shaft deeper and deeper, his lips and teeth teasing the tips of my breasts, marking the tender flesh of my neck as he prepares me for what I need, what he needs and what we both know will consummate the feed.

When his fangs sink this time, every neuron in my body ignites, hungry still for every inch of him, driving into that special spot, making me dizzy with need until the blinding light behind my eyes is freed, the release so shocking and powerful a climax that I forget to breathe.

His hand cradles the back of my neck as his other slides under my thighs and lifts me into his arms, kissing me with bloody lips as he transports me to my bed. Corvinus lays beside me, cutting a slit in his wrist, allowing the fresh and pure blood of his body to stream into my mouth, replenishing what he took in the most intimate of ways.

He caresses me as I finish drinking, stroking a finger down the healing skin of my neck, mesmerized as he watches me with such interest and intent. "Not much surprises me love, but you certainly do. But this running away, this will have to end, or it won't wind up well for you. You'll find yourself continuously punished on the

end of my tongue until you slowly lose your mind.”

I grin, spooning against him as he strokes my arm. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I wasn’t supposed to fall for anyone else. This was supposed to be my time to find myself, stay away from the vampires, but yet...”

“Shh ... there’s no need for worry, love. I feel it too. We don’t have to label it, at least not right now. For now, we enjoy the experience.”

He’s right. We’re both adults, and if we want hot, sweaty impassioned sex with each other, all night long even, then who’s to say that’s not what we should do. The consulate surely shouldn’t get a say in what we do, although they’re the ones who will take issue with it. But there’s nothing to take issue with if we just keep it low key, between ourselves, our private little guilty pleasure. Away from the prying eyes of the other vampires. Nothing more, and nothing less.

My eyes pop open, having almost drifted off to sleep, suddenly overwhelmed with the need to make sure he knows. “You have to know. I’m not a traitor. I was never a traitor. I was a warrior who did her job, despite the fact that my lover was the one I had to go and kill. I was always true to the vampires.”

Corvinus wraps his arms around me tight. “When Descallia came to me about Lucas, he shared a lot about his past with me. He joined Descallia at a time when our overmaster was young, brash, and ready to burn the world down after losing his mate. Lucas helped him and earned his trust. Descallia doesn’t believe you were a traitor, he believes something happened to Lucas after he met you that changed him.”

“A couple of days ago I wouldn’t have cared what you thought, but today, I do,” I whisper in the dark.

Corvinus pulls me closer, kissing my hair and nuzzling into my ear. “I believe you,

love. I had my doubts at first, but they're gone. Take some time, but not too long. The vampires are your family, they always have been. Your grandma knew that, and you know that deep down too."

I swallow through the emotion, a lump forming in the back of my throat when talking about the past. "Being part of the vampire life is what I've wanted all of my life. I fought hard for them, but they saved my life too. Lucas turned me but Overmaster Descallia was the one who blessed it. That's a pretty special feeling. I always wanted to be a vampire. These feelings are hard.

At least since I was younger, and my grandmother told me stories about their plights. And once I was, it made me so happy, until they didn't trust me, until they thought I was a traitor, cast me out, even had me locked up to keep me under lock and key. I won't do anything to endanger the trust they have in me, with the witches that is, but I need time. They hurt me, Corvinus. Lucas hurt me. And it's not just going to go away overnight, but I hope it will diminish with time."

He doesn't say a word, he doesn't have to, the strength and the power of his arms holding me tight speak volumes, but still, he comforts me anyway. "Sleep, love. Tomorrow is a new day."

The vampire and I, we have an understanding, at least I think we do. Sex, pure uncomplicated sex, a mutual understanding and caring.

And the comfort of his arms is not a bad place to spend the night, nuzzled in his protection, inhaling his masculine scent, and dreaming of chemistry so hot that it is impossible to ignore until I drift off. Yet chemistry and emotions are two completely different things, and my mind wrestles with these new feelings as I slumber.

Until Lucas flies through the dark of the night, red eyes blazing, wings laid back and fangs descended chasing me through the sacred land of the Carpathian Mountains, in

and out of the trees of the Mystic Forest, but he doesn't know these woods like I do. I weave between the canopies of the large oaks at breakneck speed, animals scurrying with haste as they jump out of my way, while still unable to shake the ferocious beast who I once thought was my mate.

My mind spins and quickly changes strategies. Let the bastard come, and close the gap between us, then he'll see how skillful I can be with my trusty blade of steel.

The closer I draw him in, the easier it will be to run him through and stake his black-hearted soul. When I have the traitorous bastard exactly where I want, so close behind that I can almost feel him, and I'm just about to swing around, his image stops me cold.

In the tree right in front of me, and in the next one, and the next one until ten images of Lucas have me surrounded in the night, all closing in on me with that same evil fucking laugh.

"Bastard, traitorous bastard! Do your fucking best," I scream, somehow finding the strength through all of my fear, and my despair. Because no one is coming, the vampires have left me to fend for myself, or they would have caught up to me by now. My sturdy blade of steel is drawn, but I can already see my demise. I'm not going to make it, not with that many of the evil bastard ready to run me through. And then they fly toward me in a rage, all at once. "Lucas no!"

A rough shake to my shoulder pulls me from my reverie. "Wake up love, wake up. Lucas is gone. He'll never hurt you again."

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Corvinus rocks me as I cry. Maybe it's always going to be like this, dream after dream, night after night, never being able to shake the evil monster from my mind. "You know what hurts the most?" I sob.

He strokes a finger down my cheek. "Tell me."

"If I hadn't tore off from the group and followed Lucas that night. He may have taken what he wanted and left, went back to the rogues, or at least what was left of them after the battle was done. And the purebloods may not have ever seen him again. Or would still be dealing with his wrath. But instead, they think I went to be by his side. Fucking losers."

Corvinus holds me. "Maybe you feel a little guilty for his capture and death? Sometimes these emotions can manifest, turn into something that they're not."

I turn, looking him straight in the eye. "Guilty, after what he did to them, to my friends and to me? No, I don't feel guilty. Not even in the slightest, Corvinus. I feel used, run through the mud, shit on and absolutely betrayed by the very ones who said they would take care of me for an eternity."

He strokes the side of my arm. "Including Lucianna?"

My chest tightens with angst. "She didn't stop it or defend me and could have, but I understand her first allegiance has to be to the vampires as a whole and not just to me. It still fucking hurts."

"So that's a yes."

“It’s a maybe.”

“And Descallia?”

“A definite yes.”

“What do you think you’ll find here that you wouldn’t find if we went back? At least back home, in Chicago, you could face what’s bothering you about them. Maybe even face to face.”

“At least here, I can find out if the witches were involved in any way and make them pay.”

Chapter 20

Corvinus

My chest tightens with unprecedented wariness. I’m in foreign territory where worrying about a female is concerned, but especially one with enough guts to defy the orders of Descallia and the witches. And that’s exactly what it sounds like she plans to do.

“I thought you were trying to befriend the witches, not start a war.” I swipe a hand through my hair. “Embry, this changes everything. Why didn’t you say that before?”

Embry shrugs. “Because I didn’t know it before. You know how sometimes you just have to follow your heart and let things work themselves out as you walk through life? I think this is one of those moments of clarity, perhaps because of the talk I had with Belinda earlier, coupled with the fact that they knew I was coming, didn’t say anything, and had blood and clothes put in the cavern.”

My eyes narrow. I have thoughts of my own, and should keep them to myself for now, at least where the pesky witches are concerned but that's probably not going to happen.

Her eyes meet mine. "Why would my grandma send me here all those years ago, after a thing like this with Lucas? It's like she intentionally threw two volatile groups in with each other. She knew this land was one of contention, whether I knew the exact area or not. She did, yet that's where she sent me."

"You're sure you're following your grandmother's instruction and not some trickery of the witches?"

The gold in those purple orbs flashes a warning. "I'm missing something and I want to know what it is, and I want the truth about my grandma. I'll tell you what," she says, "you help me get this figured out and I will go home with you. I promise not to start a war, only to find out why the witches know so much about me, how they knew I was here, and let me stay in the cavern, and in all honesty? My grandma, I still can't shake the feeling that my grandma is here, watching me."

I pull her to me and gently kiss her on the lips. I'm not leaving you. "I do need to go to Master Romano's estate though. It's not far from here. You'll come with me, then we'll return."

She shakes her head. "I can't go with you. Devora didn't tell Raven because she didn't want her to inadvertently tell Master Romano I was here. If it gets back to Descallia that I'm here, who knows if a war will erupt. No, I made a promise to the witches, and I plan to keep it. You go, and I'll be here tomorrow."

"Love, Descallia already knows. Everyone knew you were here. There are creatures in and around this sacred land that have loyalty to both the vampires and the witches. Descallia knew where you were the day he sent me. But I don't know that Raven

knows.”

Embry’s eyes meet mine. “I’ll stay here, keep a low profile until you return.”

My eyebrow arches not fully sure if she intends to keep her word. “And promise to stay out of any trouble. Understand?”

“Yes, lord,” Embry says, grinding her bare ass against my dick.

I grin into the dark and roll her over, because it’s too late to venture out now. Daylight will be here soon, so I’ll head out at first dark tomorrow. Plenty of time to play, and then get some sleep. Besides, I’m more than awake now.

The next day, I lie awake as night approaches, watching Embry sleep for longer than I should. Destiny is definitely to blame for this and for so much that has entered my life.

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I get out of bed and ready without making a sound. The journey to Romano's estate is not long, a quick transport, but when I arrive inside the perimeters of the tall wrought fences it's the witches that I see.

Sure, the ghouls who protect many of our homes are there, sitting sentry and ready to attack, but high in the oak trees that line his estate and are a divide between his home and the academy they built some years ago. Spying witches. The dirty little cheats.

Romano opens the door, and I follow him into the foyer of his home. "Do you know there are witches watching your every move?"

He laughs. "They've been watching since day one. How do you think I met Raven? She was snooping in the tree line, but on my side when I caught her. Raven's actually over at the academy right now talking with her aunt."

My brow furrows as he leads me through the foyer area with a large ornate mirror and a glass vase full of dark black roses, and into the massive great room with marble floors. "Take a seat. Descallia Red?" he asks, pouring a tumbler full of the blood and wine mixture for himself and then pouring another as I nod. "Please."

Romano brings them to the long leather couch and hands me a glass before we sit and he takes a drink of his own. "When we're here at the estate, it's easy to overlook the feuding between the entities," he says as though reading my concern about the witches.

I inhale the wine's fragrance. A great year at the Descallia vineyards. "It seems to me it would be just the opposite."

Romano laughs, a deep guttural sound. “The witches were once the reason I almost got booted from the consulate. I hated them with a passion hard to describe. But time and understanding the other’s position changes things, at least for me. They are only trying to protect themselves from the persecution that’s followed them for years. You have to admit, we haven’t been friendly to them at all.”

“This change of heart, no doubt Raven’s influence. I’ve heard how committed she’s been to the vampires, her and the other witches the masters took as mates. But yet, the history, the culture and evidence tell me that the head witch no matter what will never allow there to be peace. No disrespect to your position, but it’s a little different than most of the vampires. You live in the same region as their academy, right the fuck next door, and Raven is her niece.”

He smiles. “It’s true. Devora isn’t going to hurt family, but we’ve learned a lot about each other over the course of time. She knows that I would do anything to protect Raven from anyone. Devora trusts me, and as a courtesy we have a mutual understanding because of Raven. But getting along takes two. Neither Devora nor I give the other any reason to question that trust or to test it. At least we haven’t. Until now.”

My jaw tightens as I finish the blood and wine mixture that usually calms my mood but hearing about trusting witches right in his backyard while they’ve been our nemesis for years is not something that keeps me calm. “And that trust has been broken how Romano? By me, Embry?”

The vampire master sets his glass on the table. “You just being here, in the Mystic Forest without their knowledge, without Overmaster having gotten permission from Devora or me alerting her and paving the way—when Devora finds out it will spark outrage. And perhaps rightly so.”

He may outrank me being a master and me only a lord, but no matter the rank,

vampires come before witches. “We should care why? This entire area belongs to the vampires, has always belonged to the vampires and now we pussyfoot around the witches?”

His eyes grow dark. “Look, we worked together to best Lucas, we promised each other at the last consulate meeting that we would respect these drawn lines going forward.” His eyebrow arches. “I thought given your position with Descallia he would have shared that little piece of information with you before now.”

Devora certainly hasn’t been as forthcoming with information as he believes based on the conversation I overheard last night. “Overmaster Descallia shared what was important, but there’s something you need to know, Romano. One of the witches lured Embry out last night. Sat with her by a campfire that sure as hell wasn’t there when I came through the area just moments before. She conjured it up in a minute. Fire. She fucking knew I was there watching from a distance.”

His eyebrows raise. “They were testing Embry. They knew you were watching? A fuck you or a threat not to get too close? Either one is not good for any of us. Damn it all to hell. When those witches get pissy you can be sure havoc will follow.”

“It’s not like they don’t know our aversion to fire, so I’d say either one or both. The point is, she told Embry that Devora knows that Embry is in the forest. And that she intentionally did not tell Raven, because she didn’t want it to get back to you, or for you then to carry that information to Descallia. The witch you are so worried about being kept apprised of what’s going on in the forest is not holding up her end of the bargain either.”

Romano stands, walks to the bar, and pours himself another Descallia Red. “Another?”

I shake my head. “No thanks.” I plan on receiving a much more pleasurable infusion

of blood when I return to the sexy little vampiress who has managed to toss all of my good intentions away. Just the thought of her ivory skin and purple eyes hazed over with lust is enough to draw my thoughts rapidly from the task at hand.

Romano clears his throat as he sits on the smaller couch across from me. “You’re a thousand miles away my friend.”

I smile. “It’s been a long few days, that’s for damn sure. I felt compelled to bring you up to speed on everything going on because I don’t believe this is all happening coincidentally. When Embry arrived, she swore she saw her grandma, and that she spoke with her in the cavern.”

“Her grandma was in a witches cavern? In my region? In the Mystic Forest?”

I shift on the couch. “Only in Embry’s dream. You have to understand, she’s been through a lot. She’ll share her feelings with the vampires when she’s ready. Until then, I’ll keep her safe.”

“I have no doubt you’ll do just that. Overmaster Descallia speaks highly of your work with the lords.”

As part of the council of master vampires who rule the land, he is diplomatic, but I sense he still wants a better explanation than Embry’s dream. And I probably owe him at least that.

I clear my throat. “To answer your question, whether it was real or not, she believes it could have been real, or at least that there’s a reason she was given directions to the cavern so many years ago. Personally, I think right now she needs to feel that bond, that emotional connection to someone who really gave two shits about her, after what she’s been through. And that’s her grandma.”

Romano's forehead wrinkles and he puts his glass goblet down on the end table with a thud. "Nothing is making any sense. Devora should have told me if she knew Embry was coming. But she didn't say a word. And I have no idea about Embry's gramma. All I know of her is that she helped the vampires, specifically in a battle in North America, and saved the life of Lucas and probably that of a whole lot more."

I take another drink. "That is what I heard. I'm not sure about the relationship that led her to be aligned with us, but I did hear she was fierce in her commitment to our cause."

Romano nods. "It's the reason Descallia wanted the counsel to allow Embry to become a warrior. That and her skill, obviously. If you haven't seen her in action with the blade, it's something to see my friend."

"Embry's gramma was a psychic, so it makes sense that she could communicate, and Embry's highly telepathic herself. She's the only one I've been able to communicate with on that level too."

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The shift of Romano's eyebrows and the quirk of his lip gives away his attempt to hide his amusement. My eyes narrow at the nosy master. "The business at hand."

He grins. "Fair enough, we won't talk about why you're not pacing the floors, angry as hell at me and the other masters and Descallia for leaving you in this godforsaken place while there is real work to be done."

I laugh. "Fine, fine... So, there's a story here, but it's not one I want to talk about yet."

He picks up his drink. "Understood," he says, as a dark pixie-faced little witch appears in front of both of us. She narrows her sparkling eyes, looking from one to the other of us. "Alright, somebody is going to tell me exactly what's going on around here and where my friend is at, right now. She waves her magic wand as her eyes sparkle with mischief. "Romano?"

Chapter 21

Embry

There is no better time than now, especially with Corvinus at Master Romano's. I don't know how much time I have, but surely it's enough to transport to the witches' academy, have a quick look around and then get back home before he's back and any the wiser.

I shower and get ready in record time, donning a long black cape to cover the wispy skirt, bare navel, and legs from the cold. The transport may be quick, but the wind

can be brutal in Romania. The silhouette of the academy falls over the lawn, giving me an eerie feeling as I arrive, but perched in the oak tree in the shape of a small black bat, nestled in a branch's nook I blend well, even from the keen eyes of the ghouls who patrol from the treetops above.

A silent touch from behind almost makes me jump right out of my skin. I turn quickly, dagger in hand, but as soon as I see Raven my blood begins to calm. "What are you doing here?" I ask.

Master Romano's mate's wide eyes narrow. "I should ask you the same thing. You've had Lucianna scared to death. Do you know how many people are looking for you, trying to find you in every location across the globe? You're just lucky you didn't run into enemies of the vampires, ones who would like to shred you to pieces and leave you in little bits on the ground. The animals that scurry the forest floor would have a great time with that."

"I missed you too."

Raven laughs, throwing her arms around me as I take shape. She pats the branch, and I sit next to her, our legs hanging below, far above the ghouls who think they are good at patrol. She points towards the academy. "Everyone is asleep, well, except Belinda, who has made it her mission to learn as much as she can about you and keep the vampire who stalks you away."

I smirk. "He's not stalking me, not in any sense of the word. Overmaster Descallia and Lucianna sent him to find and protect me. He's doing a good job."

She laughs, kicking her shorty boots together. "Oh, you should have seen his face when I walked in on him and Romano. I demanded they tell me where you were, acted like I had no clue those two connivers were up to no good. They both have known damn well you were here, yet not one word to me or to Auntie Devora."

“Did you talk to Belinda?” I ask softly, hoping her friend has talked to her, at least now that she knows.

She shakes her head. “Uh-uh. She was sworn to secrecy by Devora. I wouldn’t have expected her to go back on a promise like that, no matter the reason, but I already knew, so she filled me in on the rest.

My scowl deepens. “How so?”

Raven laughs. “Because I saw you slip away into the night and followed you. I knew you were keeping something from us when we were getting things ready for Lucianna’s ball for queen. You just weren’t the same jovial, kickin’ ass and taking names badass warrior that we all know and love. I couldn’t let you leave with just a note and nothing else.”

I glare at the witch. “Just how long were you spying on me, Raven?”

She shrugs. “Long enough to know you needed to get away, and to decide that you weren’t going alone. And that I was going to keep it to myself for a little while and give you some space, as long as I knew you were safe.”

A tear falls down my cheek, and I hug the woman who over time has begun to mean so much. “Too much happened, I just couldn’t reconcile it all, and everywhere I turned, more gossip, this whisper and that whisper, as though I couldn’t hear a word they were saying.”

Raven takes my hand. “I know. They were mean, cold, and incredibly wrong. You know it, and the people who matter know it.”

“Why is my word good enough now, and not then? I’m still the same person who fought for the vampires every single day of my life since my own transition. I walked

in the transition ceremony, I vowed to put them above all else, and I did, even against my own traitorous mate, but where were they, or you, when I needed you the most?" I turn away and wipe angrily at a wayward tear because the last thing I need or want is for her to see me cry.

She sighs heavily, turning me to face her. "Many of us believed you, and so did Lucianna, but her situation was different. She could not take the slightest chance given all the traitors in our midst. And need I remind you, it wasn't just that you could have been a traitor. It was a very real likelihood that a witch, not the friendly ones you know and love, but others, could have gotten to you and put a spell or hex on you. She had to be sure. It is her job."

Logically all she says is true, but it doesn't make it a damn bit easier. "I know, I'm trying to get past it. Because she means so much to me. All of you do."

She smiles gently. "Lucianna took a vow to protect the vampires and that's what she was doing. She told us herself that she knew in her heart that you were not the enemy, but she had to be certain. For the lives of the entire vampire community, she had to be right. If you were in her place, as future queen, wouldn't you?"

"You believed me?" I ask softly, turning toward one of my dearest friends.

"Always, and unconditionally. Now tell me about this quest you're on. Why here, why now? Belinda told me about your gramma, but how does that even make sense? She wasn't a witch, and neither are you."

"You know that for sure?"

Her eyes spark. "Yes, I do, but what I don't understand is how did she know about the Mystic Forest unless she was with the vampires when they were stomping across our sacred land?"

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“Wait, that’s not fair. I don’t know much, but I do know that she spoke highly of the vampires. This is true, but many people thought she had magic too. I think in the end it was just pure psychic ability, like me. Mine is very strong. I lean in closer to my friend. “Very strong with Lord Corvinus. I’ve seriously never experienced anything like it. Even on our best days, Lucas and I were never like this. The connection is unlike anything I’ve ever known.”

She smirks. “Destiny. Perhaps she owes you something real after what she put you through with Lucas. You two were simply not a good match. It was clear to many if not to you.”

I push her shoulder. “Maybe I deluded myself into thinking it was real love, when it was real love but not of the mating kind. He was always more the older brother type to me; someone I worshipped since he helped my grandma. But it was up and down with Lucas. He never did anything horrible to me, but I think in my heart I always knew we weren’t destined to be.”

Raven nods. “I felt that Embry.” She touches her heart. “Right in here.”

“There was a time when things were pretty hot, believe it or not. Lucas was a little older, and we had been friends for years. I think he always had a crush on me, but he was torn with the promise that he made to my grandma that fateful night she died and he promised to take care of me. He swore to her when she was dying in his arms that he wouldn’t let anyone hurt me.”

She scoffs. “Until the bastard did it himself. How did you two become a thing?”

“I have to admit, I was a little bit flirty, okay a lot flirty, but he didn’t give in to the feelings between us until I put myself in danger. It made him go back on his promise to my gramma and he always felt guilty about that.”

“Not guilty enough, the assbag.”

I meet my friend’s eyes. “The rumors going around? You know about me following him, and getting into the vampires’ lives through him?” I sniff. “It’s true. Not like they make it out to be but true nonetheless.”

Her wide eyes swirl. “We know you didn’t become a vampire to infiltrate their community and turn on them if that’s what you think.”

“Maybe not you, but there are enough who do. They’re not all wrong, but it wasn’t to hurt the vampires, it’s because I was kind of obsessed with them. I asked Lucas for a chance to work at Club Descallia, and he allowed it, and then ended up having to turn me when the casino came under attack. Lucas blamed himself for the danger, for what happened, even if it was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Raven sighs. “We know nothing you did was intended to hurt the vampires or the witches for that matter. In all honesty, the other witches and I were not all too sure about the feelings Lucashad for you from the start. Call it witchy intuition. It just didn’t, what do you say, spark?”

My chest hurts with the thought. “It really sunk in that things were off when the witches put a curse on Lucas. He wasn’t himself. Every time I thought we were getting one step closer to actually being together, he did something to push me even farther away. I seriously began thinking he was intentionally trying to get rid of me without actually telling me.”

Raven nods. “At one point, I think he may have been doing just that very thing.

Maybe to safeguard you. I think like you said, perhaps he cared for you and wanted to see his promise through. At least until the end when he turned into the asshole of the year.”

“I thought it was because he didn’t want to be with me, and maybe that’s part of it but I honestly think he was pushing me away to protect me. He changed, his values changed, and he wanted to protect me from it all still. Maybe just to keep that promise to my grandma.”

Her eyes narrow. “I thought that too until the bastard chained you to the wall of that cavern.”

Tears roll down my face at an unprecedented speed. “Me too. I think by that time all of our feelings for each other were gone, but in his own way, I think he was still protecting me.”

Raven doesn’t look convinced.

“Lucas was in a mind-boggling rage. He could have killed me more times than I want to count that night. But he didn’t. Came close when defending himself against my attacks, but he didn’t. Whatever changed him to side with the rogues, the power he got, I don’t know, but it became way more important than the vampires he’s protected for centuries and me.”

She leans over and pulls me to her, giving me a warm hug. “I’m sure at one time he loved you very much, and maybe you’re right, he wanted to keep the promise to your grandma too.”

Maybe I should have confided in others sooner and not kept it all bottled up inside. “Talking through it is helpful. I haven’t really allowed myself to do that too much. Just with you and lately Corvinus.”

She snickers. "I bet a good talk is not all you're experiencing with that philanderer." She looks at me, right in the eye. "You do not take one thing that vampire says seriously. It's all ploys to get into your pants. I've heard all the rumors about him. Billionaire ten times over with not one interest in spending more than a night with anyone in particular."

My face breaks into a wide grin not having felt like myself for so very long. "Little late for that. Sorry not sorry. I could climb that six-foot-four tree all night long and still want more in the morning."

Raven shakes her head and her wispy black hair blows from her face into the wind. "You be careful that you don't let your feelings get involved with that one. He's a love 'em and leave 'em and ..."

I take her hand. "It's okay. We're both adults, and we know the rules, and neither of us is looking for a mate. We're just having fun, I'm working through some things, and it helps, that's all. No harm, no commitment, okay? Just a whole hell of a lot of fun."

She lets out a sigh. "That's a huge relief. Now there's one more thing I need to confess before we go."

My eyes narrow at my mischievous friend. "Let's talk more tomorrow. Tonight, I'm going to take a look around the academy. Someone or something has to lead me to a clue about my grandma. She wouldn't just lead me here years ago, than appear in my dream at the very location she sent me to, only to leave me all alone to fend for myself. She's here, somewhere, I can feel it. And I only have so much time before Corvinus is back."

Raven puts her arm around me. "This one can't wait. I'm so sorry to be the one to tell you this, but I was the one who put your clothes in the closet and blood in the fridge."

My heart sinks as I look at my friend. “Not the other witches. Not my grandma. When I mentioned it to Belinda she didn’t outrightly admit to it or deny it, so I guess I held onto the possibility that it still could have been my grandma who did it.”

She shakes her head. “Belinda told me. I’m sorry, Embry. I was just trying to help. I saw you drop your bag when the wolf was chasing you. I dealt with him, but you had already tossed your bag and I didn’t have time to chase his ass down to retrieve it. Next time I come across that asshole though, you can be assured I will get that stuff back, or he will reimburse you for every single thing. No matter if it’s from the skin of his backside.”

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“It doesn’t matter. I just thought, hoped, that it was my gramma, that somehow, she had drifted across that divide and could communicate with me. Because our powers are so strong. It made sense in my head. Maybe not so much now.”

Raven commiserates with me, listens and gives me a different perspective to look at. “It’s hard losing someone you love. My own mother is gone, too, but we do communicate. It’s different with witches.”

“Thank you for being here and for everything you did, Raven.”

Her eyes sparkle with the mischievousness that I’ve missed for a little while as she grabs me and hugs me so tight I can barely breathe. “Of course. You’re one of my dearest friends.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure I’ve crossed a major line. I mean, having me here is one thing, but a vampire in the Mystic Forest, and staying in the cavern? Your Auntie Devora is going to be furious when she finds out that Corvinus is here, too. Maybe she won’t find out until I’ve learned what happened to Gramma and leave.”

Raven’s eyes begin to swirl and her fingertips spark with an electrical energy I’ve seen before. I follow her eyes, high in the air and gasp at the green line of fury streaking across the sky.

“I’m afraid it’s far too late for that, Embry.”

Chapter 22

Corvinus

The minute Romano tells Raven that Embry is here, she glares at both of us, her eyes sparking and flashing but not saying a word as she disappears into thin air.

Romano shakes his head and grins. “That little witch is more than I can handle some days, but I wouldn’t trade the life for anything. I used to curse destiny’s name, and now I thank her every day. Even at times like this.”

I smirk, not yet ready to thank her, but I am much closer to believing that she has a plan for our future that might not work out so badly for me. If we can get through this rough patch, and if I don’t get demoted for having an affair with a warrior, or ex-warrior, when my job is to oversee the entire regrouping of their team.

Romano sits and crosses his foot over his knee. “You know Raven went to see Embry. Those two are probably cooking up something just and painful for the two of us. Paybacks are hell, especially witch style.”

It’s hard not to grin.

“If it helps, Master Tuscano and I were both in the hot seat over what the masters considered a taboo relationship at the time. It’s not an easy climb my friend.”

“You’re not wrong.” Just another reason a relationship with Embry should be off the table. I should insist on keeping an arms distance, for a half dozen reasons, but I already know it’s far too late to take back the actions that have crossed their stringent lines of conduct now.

“Do you mind if I use your office? I should give Overmaster Descallia a call while I have cell reception. Once I get back into that damn Mystic Forest there’s nothing but wild creatures, witch caverns, and absolutely no digital communications. It’s like the

whole place has reverted back to the stone ages.”

Romano laughs. “You can use my study. The reception here is good, and now that Raven knows, and Descallia will know all the details, there’s no reason that you and Embry can’t stay here. We have plenty of room and Raven would love spending time with Embry. It might help her,” he adds.

It definitely might and keeping her to myself just for personal reasons would be a shit ass thing to do. “I appreciate the offer and will talk to Embry once I get back. That is if I still have the job after talking with Descallia.”

He nods. “Yeah, make sure to tell him that Devora already knows about Embry and was giving her a little time. Didn’t want to cause any waves. Maybe that will settle things down a little, but my guess is Devora is going to get on that broom of hers as soon as she learns you’ve been stomping around in what she believes to be her forest. Probably better that you stay here now, anyway come to think of it.”

I close the door behind me and sink into Master Romano’s leather desk chair before connecting with Descallia’s phone.

“Descallia,” he answers gruffly.

“This is Corvinus. Embry’s safe. It took a while to track her. She’s very good at evasive maneuvers and had a lot of friends in the forest covering her tracks and trying to keep me off her trail. She’s doing exactly what she said in the note she left. Taking time to process.”

There’s quiet on the other end. He doesn’t even need to ask the question aloud. I know exactly what he’s thinking. We’ve always worked like that and in this case, the only forest we’ve fought over for years, is exactly where she went. “The information you received was accurate. I tracked Embry into the Mystic Forest. She’s been

staying at a cavern in the woods.”

I pull my ear away from the phone as his growl reverberates in my ear. “What is she doing there?”

The need to protect Embry, even in this is almost primal. “She was drawn to this place by a story her grandma told her years ago, about a place of refuge if she ever needed to be by herself, seek shelter, or was in danger.”

Descallia roars his protest. “And she thought she was in danger here? We’re the ones protecting her, we always protect our kind. The purebloods stand together in everything for an eternity. She knows this yet she runs to the forest, to the witches and at a time we’ve just called a truce?”

I inhale a deep breath, ready for his wrath because it’s sure to come. “I haven’t told you everything.”

He sighs heavily into the phone. “At least she’s safe. The rest we’ll deal with. Lucianna has been beside herself with grief since she opened Embry’s letter. What could be worse. Tell me.”

Here goes. “Embry sought shelter in one of the old witches’ caverns. Abandoned quite some time ago but furnished with all the necessities and updated amenities. I personally don’t think it was abandoned for long, or if so, recently updated.”

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“You’ve seen her, been to the cavern?” he asks, amazement in his voice coming through loud and clear instead of sheer anger as I thought.

“I tracked her there. I’m at Romano’s now because reception in the woods is shit and I wanted to give you an update. Embry needs some time. She has to process losing Lucas, that and all the rumors, the gossip about her role in everything related to Lucas. She’s hurt that anyone would ever have thought she was part of a scheme to hurt us. That’s what’s troubling Embry. At a time when she needed us the most, she felt the most outcast.”

Descallia growls from deep in his chest. “No one really believed she was a traitor, but as the overmaster to twelve regions and vampires across the globe, I do not have the luxury of taking chances with their lives. She must realize that.”

“I’m sure knowing it and separating it from the feeling of abandonment will just take time.”

“When did you become a psychologist? Bring her home Corvinus, Lucianna will deal with this.”

If only it were that simple. “Something else I should tell you. The witches knew she was coming or at least learned she was here through her friends in the forest.”

“Impossible,” he growls. “Devora and I have a pact. An agreement reached after we bested the rogues. Who told you they knew?”

Damn this is getting dicey, but I can’t lie to the overmaster, not knowing the history

of the witches and what they've tried to do to us in the past. Who knows if this is another of their ruses, trying to draw us in so they can curse us all. "I heard one of the witches telling Embry that Devora learned she was in the forest and that Devora told the witch to give her space, let her find her way, and not to even tell Raven in case it would get back to you."

"What the fuck is going on! Embry goes to the witches. Leaves the sanctity of our community and straight into the arms of our enemies. And they protect her behind my back?"

In all fairness to him, it's hard not to see it that way from a vampire's point of view. "Well, technically, she thought the two groups had called a truce. Embry, Raven, Willow and the other witches the masters have taken as mates have become very good friends. I don't think she meant it as a slight to the vampires, but my understanding is that the witches fought hard to get her out of lockup, when maybe many of the vampires did not."

I don't need to tell him he was one of the ones on the side of keeping the vampires safe, no matter what it cost Embry. He already knows that. But still, I try to soften the blame. "I wasn't the most supportive of her plight at first either. I didn't know her personally but had heard the stories. Her grandma though, fought for us, was killed battling for us, and Embry herself would have died if we had not brought her over. She still loves the vampires with all her heart, but she's hurting. She needs time."

Descallia growls below his breath but I try to appeal to his emotional side, although I've only seen it a few times other than with Lucianna. "Romano said we can stay here for a little while, until she's worked through a few things and is ready to return."

His growl pierces through the phone with a boom. "Embry comes home now! She can work whatever it is out here, with Lucianna and her friends, not the fucking witches!"

“There’s one more thing, Overmaster.”

His dead silence tells me his patience is beyond tested. “Her grandma. Embry knows her grandma died, but she swears she’s here somewhere. She believes her grandma told her the stories long ago and gave her specific directions and that she was meant to be here at this very time. She’s not going to leave until she finds her, not on her own, and I’m not about to make her my captive. Not after what she’s been through.”

I wait, not so patiently, knowing he could order me to do just that, or worse, haul me before the council of masters for insubordination no matter our friendship over the years.

He sighs loudly. “We’ve known each other too long for me not to give you the leeway you ask. I’ll talk with Lucianna, let her know what’s happening. Hopefully in the meantime, we can keep the peace.”

I’m going to find out from Devora though, just why she felt the need to keep this from me. We have a pact, and I damn well expect her to keep her end of the deal. Better that you stay with Romano, away from the woods which seems to be the sore spot for everyone all the way around until I get some answers. I’ll take this back to the masters at our next meeting. Give them an update on what’s going on in this region. Obviously, Romano is aware.”

I don’t confirm or deny. I’ll let Romano handle Descallia’s questions in his own way and time and he doesn’t push me one way or another on that issue.

He’s quiet for a moment though. “We’re in the middle of putting the warriors together. We need you home soon and the last thing we need is some cackling biddy getting in the way of our plans. You’ll have to find a way to keep the peace, while getting Embry safely home.”

Descallia's not wrong. "Agreed. The last thing I need is a witch out of hell riding her broom up my ass," I tell him, just as the loud cackling of a witch can be heard screeching so loud it sends shockwaves through the air.

Chapter 23

Embry

Raven takes my hand. "We need to get back to Romano's estate. Devora knows about Corvinus and this is not going to be good!" She points as the streak of electrical light flashes through the dark of night, speeding through the atmosphere, making circles and then a beeline straight toward the ground.

"Transport to Romano's! I'll meet you there," she screams, disappearing before my very eyes. That little witch is faster than anyone thinks, and when I reach the estate, the door is wide open and Raven is already pleading with her aunt who rides through the air in all her furious glory.

Devora turns those mean green eyes on me, hovering in the air on her broom while strong electrical currents spark from her body. "Vampires! Not one single one of you can be trusted!" She hovers so close to Romano that Raven jumps in front of him.

"Get out of the way or I'll turn him into the ugliest toad in the pond! How dare you keep secrets from me, especially about him!" she screeches, pointing to Corvinus. "And how dare you walk across our land, pretending you own property that is not yours, will never be yours! Descallia and I had a deal. One that you've broken intentionally!"

Raven puts up a sparking hand. "I can explain everything, just give me a minute. I didn't want to tell you because I thought it was over. I knew Romano would offer for them to stay at our estate, and he did. There was no harm. Lord Corvinus just

followed her into the forest to find her and keep her safe. Which was everyone's intent. Keep Embry safe. She'll stay here at our estate."

Wrong choice of words. It just gives Devora one more thing to cackle about. "Our estate? You and the vampire? No, this is a vampire lair! I allow you to be with Romano, because I thought I could trust him, but you have a responsibility to take your rightful place at the academy if the pureblood wants to take the side of the vampires and not keep the peace in our land."

Raven rolls her eyes. "That's not your decision to make anymore." She pulls a wand from her skirt and waves it in the air, a broom appears midair, and she jumps on it going head-to-head with her aunt. "You allowed Embry to be here," she admonishes her aunt.

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“Embry! I allowed her to seek shelter in the Mystic Forest, not the bloodthirsty beast!”

Corvinus steps forward, in front of me. “The blame is mine. I should have sought you out and asked permission once realizing I was in the territory that we both call our own. I understand there is a truce and an agreement with each other. I apologize.”

The witch’s eyes spark electricity across the room in response and she waves her wand.

Threat or real, I step out of Corvinus’s shadow, but warily, keeping my eyes peeled on the evil witch who’s caused problems for the vampires for centuries no matter her acts of truce every now and again. “The blame is mine. Not his.”

She zaps a streak of gold electricity through the room. “Vampires all of you!”

I try to appeal to her softer side. “I’m sorry, Devora. I appreciate you letting me stay here so much. I needed a little space, away from everyone really and it was gracious for you to let me remain. I was just drawn to it.”

Devora doesn’t need to know anything about gramma, at least not until I figure out what it all means myself. “I did not realize that Lord Corvinus, or anyone for that matter, would follow me until it was too late. The forest creatures helped me avoid him, but he found me. He wasn’t trying to harm you, or spy. He just wanted to find me and take me home. It’s my fault for putting him in that position at all. Neither of us meant any harm or disrespect to the witches.”

Corvinus stands tall beside Romano, neither looking as though they're tolerating the witch's outbursts well, but they haven't drawn steel or turned her to ashes with those heated eyes, at least yet. The look Romano passes Corvinus is slight, but I don't miss it. A plea to keep the peace. Please Corvinus, let it go. Let her vent. Then it will be over. No battles again.

His fangs ascend and his eyes begin to calm, turning from the flaming red heat until they have gone black as night. "Devora, I owe you an apology. I did not intend to flagrantly go through the sacred land that we both call our own, intentionally. I followed Embry and she was my main concern. I apologize. I'll talk to Overmaster Descallia, let him know what has occurred."

The witch cackles loudly, her eyes flashing spears of gold.

He is not intimidated by her one bit, but handles himself in a manner of professionalism that seems to put her raging ire at least a little bit to bay. "I'm sure you'll receive a call or visit from him. Please know the vampires appreciate you providing sanctuary for Embry. Romano had absolutely nothing to do with this. He only just found out, and as Raven said, he invited Embry and I to stay at the estate and I've accepted on our behalf."

If that's what it takes to keep the peace, I'll stay with Raven, Romano and Corvinus in a heartbeat. As long as Devora doesn't send us packing, or at least me, until I've uncovered the mystery around my grandmother. That's all that matters now, but something deep inside tells me to keep that to myself. Not to divulge something so personal and maybe deep down it's because I simply don't trust Devora.

Corvinus meets my gaze. On that we agree.

The ability to communicate so intuitively is almost surreal but somehow it makes me feel completely safe, connected and far closer to this vampire than I intend.

Devora flies in circles, cackling as she swoops this way and that. Then she hovers right in front of me. “You were the one who should have asked permission. You know the rules just as well as these vampires. The minute you transitioned, you became one of them. You are the one who owes us an apology, but yet you haven’t said a word. What say you, vampire!”

My heart beats fast and then faster. No matter that she’s been kind enough to give me sanctuary, my vampire instincts have never really bought it, at least fully. So many centuries of tricks, intended to run the vampires right into the ground. The magnetic gaze of Corvinus’s eyes draws me to his. You were right. Let it go. It’s not worth the fight right now.

The head witch is right. I’ve caused this, following my gramma’s directions, but still, she doesn’t know that and I’m not about to tell. “You’re right Devora. You’ve been more than generous, and it was I that owed you an apology. I should have come to you the minute I reached the forest.”

The sparks in the tips of Devora’s fingernails begin to calm, the electricity floating in small waves, pulsing through the air.

Romano may have been quiet until now, allowing us the time to say our peace, but now he takes the opportunity to set things straight. He walks right up to Devora as she hovers in the air. At over six-foot, he’s not worried at all about the fact that she’s almost eye to eye with him. “I respect your position on not being conferred with, not because we believe the land is yours, but because of the deal you made with our overmaster.”

Her eyes flash defiance as she twirls her broom in the air, sending her skirt swirling as she turns around.

Romano is not to be dissuaded. “That does not give you permission to disrespect my

home, or those who reside in it. This should have been a conversation between either you and Overmaster Descallia or myself. A calm and civil one, not you barging into our home in a rage. Don't let it happen again. Raven has free will, free will to choose wherever she wants to be, to live and to breathe. That is her call, not yours, nor mine. If that's all, see yourself out and shut the door behind you."

Devora's eyes home in on Master Romano. "Don't you speak to me like that you impotent asshole. I will turn you into the largest toad in the pond and leave you there for a century!"

Raven shifts her right hand, holding her little black wand tightly. "Aunt Devora! Seriously, the two of you, stop. This is all getting blown out of proportion. No one meant any harm, everyone is sorry, so let's just leave it at that."

Devora's fingers snap with fire. "And you, are you staying with the enemy? Where the other witches and I are not welcome?"

Raven holds her own. "You know that I am. I love Romano, that's never going to change, and it was fine with you up until a few days ago. Why the sudden change of heart? He has done nothing, and the land is not in jeopardy just because Embry and Corvinus walked through it."

Devora screeches... "You know nothing child, absolutely nothing. You will be the end of the witches if you persist in bedding with the bloodthirsty beasts and don't come to your senses!"

Romano's eyes blaze flame red, ready to shoot fire at the slightest provocation and turn this whole thing into a war.

I step forward. "I'm sorry this happened, Devora. We're going to stay here for a little while, and then we'll go."

The head witch shakes her head, electricity flaring from every tip of her fingernails. “Not one of you has a clue what you’ve done, what you’ve started, or what’s to come...”

Chapter 24

Corvinus

Idon't like the way this is playing out one damn little bit. A threat from the witches is never good, and always comes with a price to pay, no matter the winner of the battle. Romano points to the open archway of the great room. "Call Overmaster Descallia and talk to him. I'm sure he's far more interested in what you have to say than I ever will be. Leave our home."

Raven gasps. "Romano! You are not helping."

The witch's eyes rage and she lets out an evil cackle, glaring at her niece. "Stay with the bloodsuckers, but do not come crawling to the academy when the world you've chosen isn't as safe as it appears to be."

Raven puts her head down as the electricity around her generates to a dynamic speed. "Go," Romano says, pulling Raven into the protection of his arms as the witch flies out the door. "We're not done by a long shot, bloodsuckers!" Devora screeches.

Raven wipes a tear. "I knew it wouldn't last. She says she wants to keep the peace, but then something always happens that throws her into a rage. Now she'll go back to the academy and all the school mistresses will be instructed to double their efforts in teaching hatred of the vampires." She wipes another tear. "She was all for Embry staying at the cavern. Belinda told me so. Then everything blows up."

Corvinus clears his throat. "I'll take the blame where it's due. I should have talked with Romano before I went into the Mystic Forest, let him clear the way with her. I just felt the need to stay with Embry. I wasn't sure where she was going or who might

be lurking. My job was to keep her safe and bring her home. Now we have a clusterfuck with the witches.”

Romano shakes his head. “No, this isn’t on you, Corvinus. I should have held my tongue but damn it, that woman gets the best of my temper no matter what I try. The minute she uses Raven to get to me, I’m done.”

Raven sinks into the protection of his arms. “She knows it too. That’s why she goads you that way. It’s not your fault, it’s hers. She’s never going to be happy unless she’s got a reason to put curses on someone and we all know how much she and the other witches they teach love to hate vampires.”

Romano’s eyebrow arches, looking to Raven. “What do you make of her comments, though? About not knowing what’s coming?”

She shrugs. “Honestly, I don’t have a clue. The witches are up to something though. Something they’re trying to hide, and Corvinus walking through the Mystic Forest threatened what they are up to in some way. It has to be. She was fine with Embry, it’s just Corvinus who set her off.”

My cell rings. “It’s Descallia. Guess we’re about to get an earful.” I hold the phone a little away from my ear, placing it on speaker phone and not one person upstairs in this huge estate wouldn’t be able to hear his growl. “You know who I just got off the phone with? A very pissed off witch, that’s who. Devora is livid. She says you were both tromping all over the ground without permission, that you were disrespectful when she came to talk about it, and that Romano better send Raven back or the entire region will be at war.”

I clear my throat. “She was in a rage, and very disrespectful. She told us that we don’t know what we’ve started and we don’t have a clue what’s coming. We weren’t disrespectful but Devora was put in her place and didn’t like it,” I tell Descallia as

Romano raises his brow.

Romano may be a master, but if I'm going to work closely with the man it's as good a time as any to see exactly how that's going to work and not impact our friendship. He should know right away that I'm not going to let anyone take the blame instead of shouldering shit myself. Letting Descallia assume it was me who let my temper go with the witch is fine by me. Because Descallia is going to need to trust me if I'm going to run the warriors and this is a good way to find out.

"I specifically asked you to keep the peace. Is this your idea of keeping it?" Descallia bellows.

"You gave me a job, and I'm doing it. And there's more here than meets the eye." I scan the group and turn, leaving them to walk out into the foyer, and outside into the cold night air.

"Are you still there?"

I take the phone off speakerphone, careful to keep my voice low. "I am, just stepped outside." No matter that the ghouls are high up in the treetops along the perimeter patrolling, but they may have been hearing as well. "Raven may have stood up for us, and from what I've heard has been a strong advocate since meeting Romano, but the fact still remains. She's the niece of the witch who has always wanted to run us into the ground. You're sure we can trust her?"

Descallia doesn't hesitate. "Absolutely. Her dedication is not a ploy. She's proven it in battle time and time again, Corvinus. I wouldn't have allowed her by Romano's side otherwise."

His judgement I can respect, but traitor after traitor has popped up out of the wood over time. "Apparently, Devora was fine with Embry coming onto the property to get

her head on straight but get this. She didn't want Raven to know because she thought it may get back to us. So, she didn't want us to know that Embry was here, but Embry didn't know that. Then she finds out I've been in the forest and goes berserk."

"You think something is amiss."

"I would bet anything on it. I'm telling you. This wasn't just about a breach of trust. Any number of the forest creatures could have told her that I didn't do a thing that would cause her concern. The witches are up to something, and they don't want the vampires anywhere nearby."

Descallia sighs heavily into the phone. "I knew the truce wouldn't last long, but had hopes it would last long enough for us to get the warriors into place. For the record, I may not be happy that the peace was broken, but good job in setting her in her place."

I'm not a man to take somebody else's credit, and I don't do it now. "I had to bite my tongue, but this is Romano's territory, not mine. He made damn sure she was put in her place and knew we did not appreciate her behavior, but I don't think this is the end of anything, Descallia.

"I think this is the beginning of something new. Something spooked her about me traipsing through those woods and being at the cavern. Embry isn't ready to leave. I'd like to stay a bit and nose around."

The silent pause on the other end of the phone is long. "A week. No longer. If we haven't figured it out by then, bring her home. We're not letting that witch up end the plans we have for the warriors. We need them. We're completely exposed without a group we can trust completely," he says before disconnecting.

I'm not sure if a week is going to be long enough to settle whatever it is that Embry is after, but a week is longer than I had a few moments ago. And shows that he's willing

to let me handle things my own way. At least after he thought about it for a while. Letting go of some of the reins after all the betrayal he's dealt with can't be easy.

Raven and Embry are talking quietly in the corner when I walk back into the great room. "Where's Romano?"

Raven gestures toward the kitchen. "He's fixing us a snack. It's how he relaxes. Devora's got him all worked up this time." She grins. "He'll probably make a feast."

I walk through to the open concept kitchen and that's exactly what he's doing, cutting cheese into squares to go alongside the slices of rolled beef. He gestures to the far wall. "Make yourself useful. Crackers are in the pantry," he says, layering the cheese into long rows.

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One of his kitchen staff with a big white hat on bustles past Romano and takes the crackers from my hand. “It’s bad enough to have Master Romano underfoot in my kitchen, now you too?” she says with a smile and a wink at me. “Raven told me you would be returning soon, Lord Corvinus.”

“Just Corvinus, please.”

She maneuvers her way in front of the platter and tsk-tsks, rearranging this and that and adding some dill sprigs and fruit to the arrangement. “The guest rooms are all set. Raven went to show Embry around upstairs.”

Romano grins from behind her. “That’s her way of letting us know to get out. I guess we’ll go make ourselves useful somewhere else.”

Her eyebrows raise. “Sure, go find some of that Descallia Red. I replenished the blood and filled the decanter and put out some extra glassware.”

“Thank you.”

Raven and Embry are walking down the curved stairway as we reach the great room. Romano pours Raven a glass of wine and turns to Embry. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you like?”

She gives him a smile. “A quart of blood and then a Descallia Red will be fine, thank you.”

Raven laughs, taking a drink from her glass. “Sure, since the dance music isn’t on.

Usually she's a margarita girl."

Embry laughs out loud, and something about that melodic sound sends a tightness to my chest realizing that it's the first time I've ever heard her laugh. Not once in all of our encounters has she laughed. Smiled, even a grin once, but a laugh, not once. The thought is sobering, but fuels my desire to make her do it time and time again.

Romano clears his throat, causing me to glance his way as he hands a quart of blood to Embry. He gives me a grin and shakes his head before turning away to take a seat on the couch. Raven tucks in next to him barely leaving any space at all between the two of them.

I fold myself into the couch across from them, watching with curiosity as Embry decides where to sit. She could take the seat next to Raven, or the large chair that faces the ends of the couches, but instead, she joins me, crossing a bare leg over her knee. "It's been a minute since the ladies got together for girls' night. Now that's definitely something I miss."

Raven smiles. "We can fix it, just like that!" she says with a snap of her fingers.

Embry grins. "Right! With a flip of that magic wand of yours the whole gang will be here, and then the entire reason for leaving will be for naught. It's nothing personal, Raven. I just need time, that's all. I can't just pretend nothing happened."

Raven nods, taking a sip of her wine before speaking. "I won't push. I'm just worried about you."

"Well, there's no need. It's just going to take time to find myself again and maybe even longer to decide if I can forgive. But I'm incredibly tired tonight. I think the long days have caught up to me."

She takes a few crackers and cheese and then yawns. "I'm going to turn in, it's been a long few days. Thank you for letting me stay here," she says, standing.

Raven stands and gives her a big hug. "Anytime. You know that. You remember how to get to your room? You can take either of the guest rooms."

Embry smiles at her friend. "I'll manage just fine," she says, walking to the door as I follow the gentle sway of her ass. Coming vampire?

Chapter 25

Embry

The minute I've undressed Corvinus appears in my room. "Your scent drives me crazy," he says, hovering toward me, caging me to the wall, but even the coolness of the drywall does nothing to cool my skin. He lifts my hair, pushing it to one side while kissing my lips, then nuzzling my neck letting his fingers slide into the wetness below. "So wet for me, love."

My fangs descend Everything about this man brings out the animalistic need to consume and mate. "Desperately wet."

His dark eyes redden around the periphery as he lifts me against the wall, sliding deep inside of me with one long hard thrust that sends my heart racing for more. His fangs rip through my clothing, gently tugging the material from my skin, marking me with his lust while sending me into a writhing mass of need. "Take me now, Corvinus."

He lifts my leg higher, thrusting so deep that I can feel him right at the end of me, at the little bullseye that makes me tremble with need. I stroke his hair, gripping him tight, piercing his neck with a nip.

Corvinus locks my hands in his own, pushing them up against the wall and over my head. “You’re no longer in charge of your pleasure, love. It’s far too late for that now. Wrap your legs around me,” he growls, driving deep, thrusting over and over, hitting that button again and again before sinking his fangs deep in the vein of my neck while my entire world explodes into a fierce and explosive light.

He raises his head, his red flamed eyes meet mine, and his bloody lips caress mine as he carries me still joined as one to our bed. His arms hold me tightly pressed against his body, the warmth of his breath by my ear. I stroke the strong forearm as our breathing calms. “I talked to Raven while you were outside. We came up with a plan.”

Corvinus nips my ear. “What trouble have the two of you concocted now, love?” He slips from my warmth and covers us with the blanket.

“I told Raven that I have to find out why gramma led me here. She said she’ll help.”

He raises up on an elbow and turns me to face him. His dark eyes, still lightly red rimmed, meet mine with concern. “I don’t like it. Something doesn’t feel right, Embry.”

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I stroke his arm. “It’s going to be okay. It won’t take long to find out, and if Raven helps maybe it will be easier than I thought. I’ve been giving it a lot of thought lately. You know how the witches always use the shadow books, for instruction and for documenting history? They’re kept in the academy.”

His eyes flash and he growls his frustration. “You are not going to the academy. You’re not getting close to that witch-infested place.”

My chest heaves with angst. “It’s the only way I have of finding out what I want to know. And you and the other vampires should want to know why too. Think about it, Corvinus. Why in the hell would they allow me on their land, unless they thought I would turn on you? In which case, so much for a truce. And they sure as hell don’t want you around. Look how mad Devora was that you were here. Tell me why, vampire?”

“No matter. You’re not going.”

My eyes widen with surprise. “You are not the boss of me.”

Corvinus rolls me over with one flip, caging me with his body, and looks down at me. “Mine to protect even from yourself,” he growls.

“I’m not,” I whisper into the darkness. The thought of belonging to someone again, to even trying to commit sends my heart racing like a runaway train. I can’t, it’s too soon.

His silence hangs between us as thick as fog. “I’m not letting you go. That’s not our

destiny. If you can't commit to being mine for an eternity, you'll do it for a year. A year of belonging to me, spending most of our time in Chicago at my estate, taking you to clubs, allowing you to experience things you've never been able to feel before."

"And in exchange," I whisper.

"I'll protect you while you find yourself, locate your gramma and whatever it is you believe is in the witches' shadow books. But you'll be hooked to my side, and you'll do as I ask, when I ask it, and be at the mercy of every sexual pleasure I wish to explore. That's the deal."

Deep-seated arousal floods through me as I contemplate an entire year of lust-filled rendezvous with the devil. I've been warned about the dark-souled lord and his proclivities. The billionaire is used to getting exactly what he wants when he wants it and I should proceed with extreme caution. Yet, my lips begin to speak before my mind can slow the words. "It's a deal, but first, there's one thing I must do. Coming with me, vampire?" I ask, watching as his eyes flare red, gazing at me as though connected to my very soul.