



Justice

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Description: Since finding out I was to rule the paranormal world, I've learned a few things. 1.Vampires bicker like children. 2.Never wear a skirt into a cave. 3.The Fates have a wicked sense of humor. Armed with the pages of James' magic book, my vampire crew and I embarked on a journey to find a powerful necklace to help aid me in the overthrowing of Greta, the witch that wants me dead. Seems simple enough, right? Wrong. Greta had her own tricks, each designed to see me fail. Only one minor problem. She didn't foresee the desire for vengeance in her plan, and now, her weakness just might be my greatest strength.

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Chapter 1

LIBERTY

I felt sick.Nauseous. Numb.

“It’s just a prophecy,” Ellis offered as he lazily drew circles on my stomach. My body tightened in response, shivering at the feel of his fingers against my skin.

It had been a full day since Maggie dropped the little bombshell that more than likely would change my life forever. Not only was I probably a vampire hybrid, I wasthehybrid. The gal who was supposed to unite the paranormal races and save them from the destruction they were spiraling into. A destruction caused by one person.

Greta.

Turns out, she didn’t just want me dead because of my stellar good looks and charming personality. Not because I was the remaining family of her ex-lover. Not even because I was currently doing the horizontal tango with her grandchildren. She wanted me gone because I might be her downfall.

I can’t even stress the wordmightenough because from where I stood, I highly doubted this fate was real. I could barely pay my rent on time. There was no way I could be a ruler of people, paranormal people at that. How would I even go about that? Would I get like a magic staff to clunk on the ground that forced all those around to listen?

“I think you’re reading too much into this, Liberty,” Sterling said before he kissed my stomach, down to my thigh. “You’re going to have to take it one step at a time.”

Damn it, but they all believed I was the girl, and the fact was, I was equally scared that it was true, and I would disappoint them. “What’s the first step?”

Sterling bit my thigh, and my body arched off the bed. Ellis’ brows pulled together in a scowl, not thrilled that his friend was ruining his snuggling time. “First step is, well, finding info on the first step.”

“You are completely unhelpful, Sterling, and it’s important you know that.”

His lips hovered over the apex of my thighs as he blew warm air on my skin. “I find I can be really helpful.”

God, he could. He really, really could.

The door opened, and Oak stormed in, his usual solemn face firmly in place. I adored that face. “We need to start our day before noon, children; we can’t stay protected behind wards forever. Wards will fade. Greta will strike again.”

I should correct my previous statement. I adored that face when he wasn’t the voice of reason and ruining my sexy time. “It will take five minutes, ten tops.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “I think you’ve had enough orgasms for the morning, Liberty. Get dressed; there are still tons of books to sift through.”

“I beg to differ. Can one really have too many orgasms?” As if proving my point, Sterling bit down on my sensitive flesh, and I hissed as my body flooded with sensations.

Oak stomped forward, his heavy boots thumping against the ground and making the floor vibrate. He stopped before me and leaned down, licking his lips as he brought them close enough to me that I could catch the slight glistening of moisture. “If you get up now, Liberty, I promise that later we could try anything from that book you found.”

My eyes grew enormous. Excitement coursed through me. “Really?”

“Really.”

He really knew how to convince a girl. “Fine.”

He held out a hand and pulled me up, ignoring the grumbles from Sterling and Ellis. “Go shower.”

“Why? We aren’t going anywhere.” We’d been stuck indoors for two days, and honestly, just not being able to leave if I wanted was making me stir crazy.

“You’re ripe.”

“I am not.” It offended me he would say so. I always smelled amazing.

A single eyebrow rose in challenge, and I subtly tilted my head to sniff myself. Eww. He was right. Too much time in bed with these guys had definitely added a bit of odor to my usually delicious self. I was talking about sex. I smelled like a damn sex club that’d been rocking it all night long.

“Fine.” I huffed, even though honestly, a shower sounded good.

He leaned over slightly and picked me up, tossing me over his shoulders as he walked toward the bathroom. I could fight this, but as I watched his ass flex in his jeans, I

decided why would I? Who was I to ruin such a good thing? I reached down, patting his cheeks like they were a bongo drum, and felt his silent laughter vibrate through his body.

My body pitched forward, and I'd barely gotten my footing before a stream of ice water peppered down on me. "What the hell!"

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“I thought you needed a cool down.” He smirked as the water turned warm.

I did, but not this way. I rolled my eyes and turned, giving him my back and dismissing him. His hand found my ass, smacking it like I had done to him a minute earlier before the sound of his steps echoed off the tile. Right as he got to the door, he paused. “I’ll see you in the library in fifteen.”

“Forty,” I countered because he would not control me.

“Twenty.”

“Thirty-five.” That was my final offer.

“Twenty-five.” He tried.

HA. “Thirty.”

“Excellent. See you then.” He laughed as he disappeared, and I blinked. Had he just played me?

Thirty minutes later, I found them all in the library. Both Sterling and Ellis were freshly showered and looking delicious, while Oak’s face pinched as he examined a book, also looking delicious. When had a constant need for these boys appeared? It had to be the genetics, right? A few days ago, they were hot. Deliciously so, but I didn’t feel the need to strip them of every article of clothing then.

Maybe it was their blood. The rich, homely taste called to me in such a way that I was

sure there was no place else I was meant to be. I'd changed. I could feel it, and I couldn't help but wonder if, "Am I dead?"

All heads turned to me, but it was Ellis who answered, "What?"

"Like you three are dead. Right? I mean you're alive, but your heart beats like twice a minute or some shit like that. Am I dead?"

Oak put down his book and cleared his throat. "You have a heartbeat."

I sensed there was more to it. "But?"

"It's slowed," Sterling answered for him.

I felt panic claw at me. "Slowed?"

"Not to dead level." Sterling held out a hand toward me, acting like he was going to calm a feral animal. "Just not as fast as it was when we first met you."

I tried to reason with this. "To be fair, when you first met me, I was attacked by a bloodthirsty vampire who wanted to suck the life out of me while dry humping my body."

This time it was Oak's turn to try to calm me. "We mean after that. Your heart rate used to range about eighty beats per minute while awake."

"Now?"

There was a throat clearing. "Forty."

I was sure my eyebrows shot straight to my hairline and disappeared. Forty! What if

it continued to slow? What if at some point it just stopped altogether and I would be dead at the ripe age of twenty-three? I flopped onto the floor and threw myself back onto the rug, positioning myself to stare at the ornamented ceiling.

“It’s better than two beats a minute.” Sterling tried to console me. “Besides, it’s steady. It hasn’t dropped since.”

I flung my head to the side to look at him, determined to tell him just how little he was succeeding at comforting me, but instead, all I said was, “Hey, a book,” as I stared at a thick leather-bound book hidden under the couch.

Chapter 2

ELLIS

Liberty mentioned the book so fucking casually, as if she hadn’t just uncovered the key to the information we had all spent days trying to discover. Beside me, I could have sworn I heard Oak mumble with a hint of annoyance, “Hey, a book,” before verbalizing his feelings, “Of course you would find a fucking book under the couch that we’ve sat on for days.”

She reached under the couch, not even bothering to be speedy about it as she lay on the floor in her pitiful state. When her arm pulled back, and the book came into view, I knew without question that when opened, that anciently bound book was about to rock our world. Whether it’d be in a good or bad way, that was yet to be determined.

She swung the book carelessly as she asked, “Anyone want to read this one?”

We all stumbled forward at once, every one of us recognizing the book’s importance. A book so aged that the paper was unevenly bound, and the cover was made from actual hide. Oak got it first, already having the pages opened before Liberty’s arm fell

to her side.

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“If my heart stops, you will revive me, right? I feel like you can’t be as old as you are without knowing some basic CPR.”

“Liberty. Stop. You’re not dying; you’re fully alive.” Sterling finally said what we all were thinking.

“I just-”

Oak cut her off. “This book is,” You heard him audibly swallow, “Amazing.”

It really was. From where I stood next to Oak, I could see just how unique the details were. Each page was handwritten, hand-painted, and painstakingly bound. Oak’s finger ran softly along the parchment pages, tracing the details in awe.

Liberty suddenly sat up. “Do you think it’s what you were looking for?”

“If I had to bet, I would be nearly positive,” I offered, dying to get my hands on the book myself.

Oak gingerly flipped the page, the title so smudged with age we couldn’t read it. My heart stopped completely, nearly plummeting to the ground at the possibility that this entire book might be illegible. I closed my eyes, not wanting to look until I knew if my disappointment was warranted. He turned the page, then the next. “I think it’s a journal. Maybe not James’, but he definitely added notes in the margin. I can tell by the handwriting.”

I opened one eye, peeking at the words sketched into the book. “It’s research.”

“He had all the time in the world to do research, but is his research useful to us?” Sterling asked as he came up next to Oak, peering over his shoulder.

“I don’t know.” Oak sighed. “Not until we sit down and read it.”

We were all itching to read it, but Oak deserved it the most. He was the closest to James, almost like a real family, one that Oak never really had. “You should read it, Sterling and I, we will continue looking.”

I held a silent conversation with Sterling before he nodded his agreement. “Yeah, I’ve been learning stuff I never knew in this current book. I’d like to read further, anyway.”

Oak absentmindedly nodded before he sat in the nearest chair, submerging himself in all the handwritten words in front of him. Liberty leaned close, her lips so close to my ear that I could feel them brush against my skin as she whispered, “Thank you.”

I tilted my head toward her. “Hmm?”

“I know you’ve all been trying to help me, and I appreciate it. But Oak – he’s intense about it. He needs to figure it out, and he needs it this very second. He’s hard on himself, and since he is dead set on protecting me, he won’t even allow himself to sleep.”

It was true. Oak tried pretending, but the moment Liberty’s eyes were closed and her breathing had leveled out, he was crawling out of bed, trying not to fumble as he blindly put his pants on. “He feels personally invested now, and I understand. It’s his find to be found.”

She grabbed my fingers, lacing our hands together before announcing, “We are going for a walk.” Oak opened his mouth to protest, but she held up a hand, cutting him off.

“Within the estate’s gates.”

She pulled us through the hall and out the door, then shut it behind us before she spoke. “I seriously feel like that house is suffocating me.”

I’ve felt like that every day I’ve stepped into this place for the past two hundred years. “I can understand that.”

She fanned at her face, trying to cool down as she lifted her hair from her neck. “I feel like I haven’t felt fresh air on my face in ages.”

“It’s only been a few days,” I reminded her.

“Still.” She walked to the corner of the garden and found a stone bench where she sat. “What’s it like?”

“What?”

“Living dead? I figure since I’m now practically ayou, I should know, right?” She kicked at the dirt with her feet.

I laughed and sat down next to her. “You most definitely are not becoming me.”

“I’m pretty sure I am.”

“For one, you have boobs. That is something I never imagine I will gain.”

She gave me a half-smile. “You know what I mean.”

“It’s boring, to be honest. But the way you describe it, you make us seem like something out of a movie. Living dead.”

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“Well, what was it like to live?” Her foot drew a circle in the dirt; then, she used her toes' tip to draw eyes and a mouth of a smiling face.

“Hard, but I think I had it better than Oak and Sterling. I had a wonderful family. We lived there.” I nearly choked out, as my finger pointed to the house in the distance. Her eyes followed to the house far into the horizon, at the furthest corner of the street. “Back then, there was more space between the dwellings and the land went further back into fields. We had a barn toward the back, and when we were young, Sterling, Oak, and I used to sneak around and hid in there.”

“What happened?” Her fingers found mine and intertwined. “I mean between the three of you?”

My chest heaved with a silent laugh. “A girl. It was why we were turned. In a way. We were duking it out right behind James’ barn during a harvest party.”

“You loved her?” Her fingers squeezed.

“I thought I did. I think Sterling and Oak thought so too. I spent so many years after comparing women to her beauty. More than I would like to admit.”

Liberty watched the house, taking in all the details of my former life. “What changed?”

“I saw you.” It was a sappy statement, but true. I mooned over a woman who died so long ago; her memory should have long but faded. But it hadn’t, and I don’t think that had to do with my lust, I think it had to do with my obsession of losing a life and

gaining an eternity.

She turned her head away, keeping her face out of my view. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Nah, I rarely make it far after admitting my love for blood,” I teased, and the smile I was rewarded with stole my breath away.

“Do you think he will find what he is looking for?” She finally asked, and I knew the question was heavy on her mind. Hell, it was heavy on all of our minds.

“We have no other choice than to find what we are looking for. If we don’t, what would that mean for you?” I sighed. Death, most likely. Greta wanted her dead, and if we didn’t find a way to stop it, I suspected she would continue trying until she was successful.

“Do you think –” she paused and licked her lips, “– do you think I’ll survive this?”

“Babe, with us around? Of course.” Though honestly, I wasn’t nearly as confident as I sounded. The three of us intentionally isolated ourselves from this world, keeping our distance and living as normal of a life as we possibly could. But look where the effort got us. Whatever the journey in front of us was, I knew it would be touch and go. Rocky. Okay, I’d admit it – we were about to enter a fucking shit show.

“Why is this happening?” Liberty sounded so defeated when the question left her, and I wished I could comfort her more than just holding her hand. I got it. This world was a lot to take in, especially for a freshly turned or – or sort of turned – vampire. Still, I didn’t have more answers now than I did yesterday.

“Hey, if this didn’t happen, you totally wouldn’t have had some hot three-to-one sex, and I know you favored that.” Hell, even I favored that. I didn’t even give a fuck that

my childhood friends were sharing her with me, though I could do without their orgasm sounds etched into my brain.

“That’s true. But I would have been none the wiser, either.”

“Hmm, you have a point.” I nodded. “But the way you worked with the three of us, I suspect your body would have missed what it never got.”

She blushed, a color that looked so fucking alluring on her I couldn’t help but reach up and rub my thumb along her cheek. She bit her lip as she watched me before saying, “I imagine you are right.”

Behind us, we could hear the door slam shut and the heavy footsteps of who I could only assume to be Oak coming to search for us. He couldn’t stand it, I knew. Couldn’t stand the fact that I had her attention, that I took her out of that place, that she would rather share us all than picking just one. Than to pick just him.

His steps got closer, and when I knew he was within earshot, I spoke to him, “It kills you, doesn’t it? To have her out here with me while you’re inside. I told you I would keep her safe.”

I turned slowly, looking at him over my shoulder only to be met with gleaming eyes of excitement and a look of anticipation on his face. When our eyes locked, he didn’t bother to acknowledge my previous statement. Instead, his words rushed out so fast, and in a such a tumble, I nearly missed them. But what I did manage to hear had both Liberty and I jumping off the bench.

“We’ve found it.”

Chapter 3

OAK

My hands were shaking as I opened the door for Ellis and Liberty to enter the house. I was so excited to share my findings with them that the slight ping of jealousy hardly distracted me. When I first held the book, I thought that though it was interesting, the chances of it having anything useful were practically impossible. The book was ancient, older than any other in this library, but James writing in the margin of books wasn't that uncommon. I would dare anyone to find a book here without his writing scrolled on the side.

But once I saw it, saw what utter importance the book in my hand contained, I could hardly swallow, my throat felt clogged, my air short. "I didn't think we would find anything," I admitted the words out loud as I rubbed my palms on my thigh, Liberty's eyes watching the movement, insatiability dancing in her eyes. She licked her lips. "But you found something useful?"

I sat down on the old wing chair and pulled Liberty into my lap while Ellis picked a spot on the ottoman. Sterling sat on the couch a few feet away, skimming through the book himself. "So first, I would like to clarify that James also suspected you are the girl from the prophesy. Honestly, I wouldn't doubt it. Now, what we don't know is how you will come about this leadership."

"I don't want leadership; I just want to not fear for my life." I squeezed my arm around her middle and kissed her shoulder.

"I'm aware, mo chuisle." I gave her another kiss on her cheek. "However, we can't control fate."

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“I beg to differ,” she grumbled.

“At this point, I don’t doubt that you would try to challenge fate to a duo.” Sterling laughed. “But something greater than us is at work. This book has so many answers; it’s – well, it’s almost creepy. It’s like it’s writing itself as we go.”

I cut in, “I don’t doubt that it is. In the first half, it talks about legends and history, the prophecies. Past that, it gives us geological locations of importance. Some make sense, and some don’t. Some location’s powers were never hidden and tend to be a hot spot to recharge for the paranormal, like Niagara Falls, for instance.”

“What does this have to do with me?” She wiggled in my lap impatiently, trying to get me to get to the point.

“This book has information that corresponds with the prophecy and links you to it,” I began, and she stopped me.

“That doesn’t mean much. It could be a total coincidence.”

Sterling cleared his throat, and her eyes fell to him. “That may be true. Except there was this.”

He flipped to the page of the book he needed and held it out to her. “The page on the right is blank. That’s because it hasn’t written itself yet.”

“Written itself?” Honestly, at first, I didn’t want to believe it. I couldn’t, but the evidence was too strong.

“Read it. Read the pages before that one,” Sterling instructed.

She took the book from his hand, skimming over the words before her hand came to her mouth, shock written all over her face. “How is this possible?”

“I would have thought it wasn’t,” I admitted. “But it’s there. Everything that has happened from the moment we got summoned to this house until the sea creature’s defeat and you healing Sterling.”

“I’m a little disappointed the page after that is blank. I definitely thought that was something to write about,” Sterling added, and I ignored him.

“Every key point of our journey together is documented.”

She dropped the book, letting it fall to the floor like it was a hot ember, painful to the touch. Its nearly translucent pages fluttered as it fell until it landed open at my feet. I reached down and picked it up before skimming over the page it landed on. “According to this, you need to collect some powerful artifacts that will give you strength when the time comes to defeat Greta. Greta isn’t the ultimate power, but she could be if you fail. Her willing followers are slim, but she controls a wide variety of paranormal unwillingly. She has camps she uses to harbor her strength.”

“You got all that from a book?” She seemed suspicious, but the more I read from the book, the more it all seemed to fall into place.

“Page fifty-four,” Sterling responded.

“I have to admit,” Ellis spoke, and he had been so silent, I nearly forgot he was there, “I’m skeptical. But stranger things have happened recently. I know Liberty feels the same. So, then, what’s next?”

I help up the book where it had landed, displaying the page it had fallen open to. “It appears that we go get a necklace.”

“From?” Liberty asked.

“I’ve not figured that out yet. Truthfully, we’ve only skimmed. I haven’t read the full book.” But I had skimmed enough to know that she would not be thrilled about some of her future. Fuck, I wasn’t thrilled either. Call me selfish, go ahead, but if there were any way to prevent what would inevitably take place, I would choose that option every damn time.

Liberty grabbed the book from my hand and read the pages. “Somewhere in England.” She squinted at the notes in the side margin before listing off the cities James had left us. They sounded familiar, but I hadn’t pieced together the details.

“I know those cities. They came from my research. They used to belong to our families.” Ding, ding, ding. There it was. “What do we do with them?”

Liberty’s eyes lit up before she squirmed off my lap, and it took all my power to let her leave. I wanted to clamp my hands down harder, will her to stay. I didn’t fucking want things to stay this way, but I didn’t want fucking change either. Couldn’t we just be for a moment? Have a few days, a week, a year of tranquility? But no, the moment her feet hit the floor, she was pulling and searching through piles of maps James had hoarded until she found the one she wanted. When she laid it down, she put a pin through the city names.

We all rose to watch her work, and when all cities were pinned, a perfectly even triangle was formed. We hovered above the map, staring, trying to figure it out. “Everyone willing to agree that where we need to go is within this triangle?” I heard mumbled agreements. “So, now what?”

Liberty bit her lip, working the tender flesh as she stared down. Time dragged as if we thought something would magically appear and make itself known. It didn't. The longer I stared, the more I doubted we would get anywhere.

“Anyone else wants a sandwich?” Ellis finally asked.

“Didn't you just eat?” Liberty questioned.

He shrugged. “I'm a stress eater.”

She tilted her head from side to side as she contemplated. “I'll take one, no mayo.”

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“Done.”

He took two steps away when Liberty whispered Lancashire before saying the word boldly out loud. “Lancashire. It’s the center of all points.”

If she thought it to be accurate, I believed her. I snagged the laptop off the desk, opened up the browser, and typed in the location. We needed more than that. We needed more specific information, and we needed it now. I looked at the screen, nothing screaming this is a powerhouse of a hot spot. Until . . .

“Dragon’s Eye.” I felt it. I knew the moment the words left my mouth that this was where we were going, where we needed to be. Around me, everyone gathered to look at the screen in front of me.

“That’s it,” Liberty announced. “That’s where we need to go.”

She must have felt it as I had, the same with the others because no one disputed the location. Instead, Sterling rolled up his shirtsleeves. “Alright then, pack your bags; I’ll set up a private carrier.”

“Now?” Liberty’s eyes were wide as she asked.

“I’m sorry. Did you have other plans, doll?”

She looked at him, hurt on her face at being the recipient of his superiority. “No, I just – it’s just – so soon.”

“Well, the prophecy isn’t going to wait for anyone, not even you,” Sterling explained as he grabbed her, his hand roughly holding her chin, and he kissed her. When he pulled away, he explained, “It’s time to get it over with and meet your fate, Liberty. Lord knows we’ve been stuck for two hundred years in ours.”

Chapter 4

STERLING

It took no time to arrange a carrier. The fact that Liberty owned a passport from one wild spring break in Mexico was useful. What wasn’t so helpful? The bitching and complaining as we trudged our way through the airport at one in the morning.

“Shut the fuck up. Seriously,” I growled at Ellis under my breath when I was sure Liberty was out of earshot. Her hearing had improved, too, because she turned around and glared.

“It will be fine, Ellis,” she cooed. “We will work out the rest of the details on the plane.”

Only, when we got on the plane, she took a blanket out of her bag and snuggled against my side. Discussing our plans, which surely entitled doom and gloom, became the last thing I wanted to talk about. My fingers found her dark hair and twirled it, the softness soothing me in ways I hadn’t realized I needed.

“Do we have a plan when we get there?” Oak asked as he plopped down across from us. His voice sounded tired. The book was clutched tightly in his hand.

“Find a way in, mainly. I suggest we go after dark when there are likely fewer people around,” Ellis said as he threw his head back onto the headrest.

“I have some contacts in the area, they are gathering equipment we need, and it should be ready in no time. There’s also a little cottage along the way. Close enough to gain access, but not close enough to be suspicious. It was available for rental on a day-to-day basis, so I’ve secured our lodging,” I informed them as I absentmindedly toyed with Liberty’s hair.

She twisted her body so she was looking at me. “You love this stuff, don’t you?”

“What? Traveling? No, I hate it.”

“No.” She gave a mischievous smile. “The whole organizing thing. I bet if we went into your penthouse right now, everything would be immaculate and clean. Exactly in its place.”

I let my shoulders rise then fall. “Well, yeah, I have a housekeeper.”

She raised an eyebrow. “A housekeeper? Is she gorgeous? I bet you hire only gorgeous people. Like your friend at the coffee shop.”

“Is Jackie gorgeous? I hardly noticed,” I stated, trying to play it safe. “And my housekeeper is like eighty, with four children and thirteen grandchildren. I’m sure she was a beauty in her day, but unfortunately, or maybe, fortunately, I didn’t know her then.”

“If you didn’t have this housekeeper, how clean would your place be?” I tried not to smell her hair, but fuck, it smelled amazing.

“He organizes his sock drawer by color,” Ellis offered.

“I do not,” I answered all too quickly because, honestly, Ellis wasn’t too far off.

“It’s because you only wear black now,” Ellis laughed.

Fuck. He caught me. “Black’s a wonderful color.”

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Liberty laughed. “He nailed it, didn’t he?”

Oak’s throat cleared, saving me. “About Dragon’s Eye . . .”

He let the words trail with nothing, in particular, to say about it. He was clearly trying to keep us focused, but my mind was running a million miles a minute. I wouldn’t be able to offer much help past what I already had. I looked down at the girl attached to my side, trying not to smile as she stifled a yawn.

“I think I’ll just sleep. We can talk in the morning when we land,” I said before reaching under my seat and grabbing a blanket to throw over Liberty.

“You can sleep when you’re dead,” Oak stated, no humor in his voice. “We need to do this now.”

Ellis’ eyes danced with humor. “Did Oak just make a vampire joke?”

Liberty sat up, and I had to fight not to chase her body warmth when it parted from my own. Laughter coated her voice. “I think he did.”

“I did not make a joke, only stating facts.” His voice held no humor.

“Except –” she leaned forward and grabbed his shirt, pulling him closer to her, “You all have been dead for two hundred years.”

She kissed him then, and the sight never got old. Over and over, I could watch her kiss Ellis or Oak, and it never once stopped the appeal toward her. It made me crave

her, long for her, anticipate the next time it would be me under the assault of her lips. Oak made a sound before his hand wrapped around her hip and pulled her forward, letting her fall onto his lap as she straddled him.

She pulled away. “Can we please sleep, Oak? It won’t matter how much we plan if we are all too tired to carry it out.”

I could tell he wanted to deny her request. Oak was the person who needed everything in perfect order. He needed a plan laid out and a back-up plan in place. But we were going in blind, restricted to online photos and possibly dated information. There would be no plan b to create. We only had one chance.

He buried his head into her neck, and I was jealous, wishing it was my lap encased in her thighs. I saw his head shake in agreement before he pulled back. “Fine, we sleep. But as soon as we get to the cottage, we form a plan.”

Then he lifted Liberty into his arms as he stood before carrying her to the far end of the plane where plush couches and feathered pillows sat waiting. He gently laid her down before crawling into the space behind her.

When I opened my eyes again, the seatbelt sign was blinking, reminding us to buckle up for the plane’s descent. I yawned while stretching my cramped limbs, trying to work out the kinks that I had accumulated over the last few hours. In front of me, Ellis was wide awake reading a magazine. I turned my head, searching for Liberty.

She and Oak were asleep, though I always suspected he never really slept. Still, his eyes were closed, and his arm held her close, and if I didn’t know he was a two-hundred-year-old fucker, or that someone was trying to kill her, I would almost say they looked peaceful.

“Stop staring. It’s making my skin crawl,” Oak mumbled, his voice thick from hours

of silence. How the hell did he see me with his eyes closed?

“Don’t flatter yourself, Oak; I wasn’t staring at you.”

“Stop staring; it’s making my skin crawl,” Liberty repeated Oak’s words. Then she giggled before opening one eye to watch me. “Did you sleep well?”

“As well as I could considering we were thousands of miles in the air, your life is in danger, and my seat didn’t recline.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Whose fault is that? I see plenty of couch spaces around.”

“None with more of you on them.”

She laughed, the rich sound filling the cabin, and I wasn’t sure if the flopping in my stomach was from her or the plane’s sudden descent to earth. “There is room by my feet.”

She needn’t hint more; I was up and slipping into the spot by her feet before she could blink, disregarding the seatbelt sign to do so. Her feet fell into my lap as she stretched out, and I grabbed them, squeezing her toes. “Perfect.”

My sigh of content was quickly stifled by Ellis’ body plopping down on the couch in front of ours. “So, we are about to land.”

“No, shit,” I scoffed. “What gave it away? The blinking signs or the announcement that woke everyone up?”

He ignored me. “Are we taking a cab to the cottage?”

Oak and I both looked at him, gaging what he was thinking, before we both said,

“No.”

Ellis groaned and threw his head back against the seat. He looked at Liberty with a pout. She sat up. “No, what?”

“We have a brother here, one of James’ other children,” I told her. It wasn’t that we disliked the others; we just didn’t know who we could trust without James here to compel loyalty.

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“How many children did James have?” Liberty asked, and honestly, the number was embarrassing.

“Upward of a thousand. We were the only ones turned involuntarily. James liked to help people. A lot of times, the ones he turned were going to die, and he just . . . saved them,” Ellis explained. “Mostly, everyone is a good type of people.”

“Mostly?” She questioned.

“There are always a few pricks in a crowd,” I elaborated.

She turned to Ellis. “Do you trust him?”

“I do.” He shrugged, and before the words even left her mouth, I knew Ellis was about to get his way.

“Then contact him.” She leaned back against Oak again, his arm banded around her, his fingers flexed.

His voice was almost a growl when he spoke, “The more people involved, the greater the risk.”

“The fewer people involved, the weaker we are,” she countered, and she wasn’t wrong. “Plus, I trust Ellis, and he trusts . . .”

She waited for someone to supply her with a name. “Ramsey.”

“If Ellis trusts Ramsey,” she continued, “then so do I.”

Oak groaned. “If things go wrong, you are responsible for him, Ellis!”

The plane jolted below us, our bodies jerking as the wheels hit the runway. “It will be fine, promise.”

An hour later, we were all piled into the rental car, driving down an empty country road to a cottage in the middle of nowhere. Ellis had called Ramsey when we landed, and through the speaker of the phone, I could hear his excitement at meeting us there. The excitement wasn’t mutual. In fact, I dreaded it. In the years since deciding to part ways, I avoided James’ other children in any way possible. But here we were, about to team up with one.

The vehicle rolled to a stop in front of the cottage, and a small sports car sat parked in front; a familiar man hidden behind dark shades waited. My body tensed. I was terrified to speak my greatest fear – what if this thing was meant for more? What if he was meant to join Liberty too? My stomach rolled at the thought of Ramsey joining Liberty in our bed because wherever she slept was ours now, regardless if we were there or not.

“Is that him?” Liberty pointed to the figure.

Oak grunted out a response before pulling off his sunglasses and turning to Liberty. “Until we figure him out, be cautious. I would like to trust him, but it’s been years.”

“Okay.” She agreed quickly enough, before leaning over and kissing Oak’s cheek. His body visibly relaxed. “I’ve got this, don’t worry.”

Before they could exchange another word, she had the passenger door open and her feet on the ground. Her hand already outstretched toward him as she introduced

herself. “Hi, I’m Liberty; you must be Ramsey.”

Ramsey stared at the outstretched hand, not making a move to shake hers until he assessed the surrounding situation. When we were all close enough, he removed his shades slowly and tilted his head to the side, examining her. Finally, the moment I thought she would lower her hand was when his hand grasped hers to shake. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Liberty. I’m Ramsey, and I can’t wait to find out just how well you know my brothers.”

Chapter 5

LIBERTY

I leaned over to Ellis. “He’s staring again.”

I knew Ramsey heard me; these men’s hearing was top-notch, but the part of me that was still human felt it was better to whisper.

“I can’t figure it out. You’re not dead. But you’re barely alive. Yet you seem to be thriving just fine.” He eyed me curiously. “Who has fucked her?”

I blinked a few times, ignoring the growls coming from the guys. “Excuse me?”

“Look, love, there is no way you could get a bite like that and not fuck. They go hand in hand.”

My hand went to my neck, and I tried to hide the smug smile as I remembered the quick and honestly, mind-blowing fuck in the plane’s bathroom with Sterling right after the plane landed, and everyone else went to gather our bags. “I’m not sure it matters.”

He shook his head. “No, love. I don’t imagine it does. Not when you are coated in the scent of all three.”

“I’m feeling interrogated.” Not that I was threatened at all by it, but definitely humored.

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“Just looking out for my brothers is all.” His eyes roamed over me. “What is your intention with them?”

Ellis spit out the sip of water he had just taken, spraying droplets over all three of us. “You’re fucking with us now, right?”

A slow grin spread across Ramsey’s face. “Maybe a little.”

With no hesitation, I spoke, “I plan to degrade them. All three of them. Single. Together. It makes no difference to me.”

Ramsey’s eyebrows shot up, and he coughed, trying to hide the smile I knew was there. “Well, then, if you need any extra –”

“Absolutely fucking not,” Oak said, cutting him off. “If you touch her, I’ll stake you myself.”

Oak’s threat got no reaction from Ramsey. Instead, Ramsey turned to Ellis. “Is this the type of hostility you brought me into?”

“You’ve known him to be more hostile.” Ellis’s voice didn’t give off any emotion as he said the words. “Besides, we don’t fuck around when it comes to her.”

I bit my lip. “I mean, you kind of do.”

All eyes turned to me. Ramsey’s danced with laughter while my boys’ gave more of a glare. Finally, when the atmosphere grew stifling, Ellis broke the silence. “Are you

going to help or not?”

Ramsey’s eyes caught mine, staring intently for a moment longer than necessary before he threw his hands up and shifted his shoulders. “Sure, I’ll help. Not because of you bastards, though, I’ll help for Liberty. But it would be a bald-faced lie if I said I wasn’t curious to see how this -” he used one finger to do a circle, pointing at each of us in the process, “plays out.”

Oak growled again before grabbing a chair and turning it, taking a seat. “Great. Now that we have that out of the way let’s get this shit planned out.”

As it turned out, you don’t really need much of a plan when you hang out with a bunch of vampires. Their plan? Park a mile away, super speed it to the cave entrance, slip past the singular guard, and head into the unknown. Good news? They agreed to use flashlights. Bad news? Spiders. Chances were we’d find tons of spiders. I wasn’t a huge fan of the running part, either. Even with the boys suspecting I had super speed like them, a mile is a damn mile, and how’s a girl going to appeal to three hot vampires if she’s covered in sweat?

Oak pulled the car into a wooded area, overgrown with brush, and parked it. As everyone got out, he reminded us of our main objection. “Get in, find the necklace, get out. Be careful. We know that at least four of us can’t die, but Liberty is human. Partly. And I don’t want to test it today. Got it?”

We all nodded, but when his eyes fell on me, I was giving my best puppy dog eyes and sad lip. He sighed in defeat. “What is it?”

“I don’t want to run.”

“Mo chuisle, running has never killed a person.”

I was sure that fact wasn't true. Still, I didn't get a chance to point that out because Ramsey's laughter filled the night. "Mo chuisle? Really. Love, you've got that noose hard around those balls, don't you? You know what? I'm a team player. I'll give you a fucking ride so that I can see the looks on these fuckers' faces."

He knelt in front of me, offering his back for me to climb onto, and I was not about to let this offer go to waste. I stepped closer, ignoring Oak's warning, "Liberty, don't you –"

I wrapped my arms around Ramsey's neck as Sterling chimed in, "Come on. I'll do it. We just wanted to see if you had speed first."

I shook my head as I hopped onto Ramsey's back, his large hands grabbing my thighs to hoist me up as he stood. Ellis tried as a last resort, "Babe. Honey. Come on; we said, you wouldn't have to run."

"Must be a golden pussy," Ramsey mumbled as I slowly raised my fist in the air before popping up my middle finger and whispering for Ramsey to start moving. We didn't have all night, after all.

We made the mile in under two minutes and the guard, who was reading a book at the time and not paying nearly enough attention to his job, was a non-issue. He didn't even blink as we passed, even though the pages to his book fluttered with the breeze our movement created. The boys didn't stop until they were already deep inside the cave where not a single flicker of light would be seen if the light was turned on.

When they stopped and Ramsey put me down, I was clawing at whoever was closest. Super seeing eyes. Nope. We could mark that off the list of maybes. Oak turned on his flashlight first, and I jumped from whoever I clung to toward him, taking his hand and hugging his arm. He didn't seem one bit bothered by my clinging; instead, he squeezed my hand as he put his pack back on his back and waited for everyone else

to get situated.

“Do you know where we are going?” I whispered.

“Nope.”

I turned to him. “But you’re the planner. Shouldn’t you have a map or something?”

“No map.” He squeezed my fingers again, a motion that I assumed was to try to comfort me, but I wasn’t feeling comforted. “We go in, get the necklace, and get out.”

“What’s this necklace supposed to do, again?”

“It strengthens you. Somehow. We hope,” Ellis said as he flicked on his lamp.

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“I’m already strong. See.” I flexed my muscles, suddenly trying to get out of going further into the cave instead of diving deeper.

“You’re barely able to harm an ant, love,” Ramsey commented. “I think you tried to do some kinky choking shit to me while hitching a ride, but it was hardly enough to even get a rise out of me.”

Sterling punched him in the bicep so forcefully that he flew backward, his body slamming into the stone behind him so hard that tiny flecks of rubble crumbled from above. Then Sterling turned to me. “What he meant to say was, you aren’t strong enough to defeat Greta.”

“But I have you three, and you are the strongest beings I’ve ever seen.” It was true. I could ask Oak to lift a box of bricks all damn day just to see his muscles flex. Who knew a back could be so sexy?

“And if we aren’t around, the threats will still come,” Oak said, and I wanted nothing more than to drop his hand just to be petty, but I also was terrified of how dark and eerie this place was. He had some nerve even thinking any of them would get away with leaving me with this bullshit.

“Then Ramsey can help,” I pointed out, even as all the heads were shaking, making their disagreement known.

“Ramsey doesn’t help anyone but himself,” Ramsey pointed out, talking about himself in the third person. “Ramsey only joined this bullshit brigade because I needed to see how this dynamic worked with my own two eyes. I need something to

talk to our siblings about for the next decade.”

“I can confirm,” Sterling added, “I’ve known them all long enough to know they need something to keep them going. We weren’t the center of ridicule last decade, but it looks like our time’s up.”

Ramsey snorted. “I only hope that you three can top Diane and the horse incident.”

All three of my boys snorted, and I needed to know what happened. “What?”

“You had to be there.” Ellis’ voice held suppressed laughter.

“I hate you all,” I mumbled as I stomped forward, forgetting that one – I was still holding Oak’s hand. And two - I was in the darkest depth of earth.

Oak followed along without resistance. I didn’t think he would. He was the one who wanted this over with the most, even if he didn’t verbally say it. His fingers dug tightly into my hand, his nails almost grinding into my palm. I paused in my steps. “Oak, are you afraid of the dark.”

“No.” He sounded offended that I would even ask. He pulled me forward while mumbling, “I’m just not fond of shit we find hiding in the dark.”

I huffed out a soft laugh because I was right there with him. Over the last week or two, I learned that things lurking in the dark are absolutely not my friends. Liberty eating vampire? Check. Dream invading serpent? Check. The damn spider that crawled under my couch and was never seen again? Double-check.

I shivered at the thought of that fucking spider, causing Oak to lean in close, his mouth brushing my ear as he asked, “You okay?”

“Never been better.” An outright lie, but also a truth. My life was in danger due to no fault of my own. My world had been turned upside down and into complete chaos, yet with these three hunks around, it’d probably been the best few days of my life. I was not just saying that because of the intense orgasms they were continuously providing or because when they shared their blood with me, it’s like having the richest chocolate and best pie after coming off a diet.

The further we got into the underground structure, the harder it became to walk. There was no roped-off tourist area for us; we headed straight to the center, into the no man’s land part of the cave. Each step became slightly rockier and bumpier until we were no longer walking and instead were practically climbing as we found the best and safest path to our destination.

Around us, stacks of cement blocks creating a pillar held up the ceiling. Well, at least I hoped they supported the weight because if this cave came crumbling down on us, we would be trapped. How long could a vampire live while trapped? Would he die or just become a husk of a being until he was found a millennia later?

“How long could a vampire live without blood?” I blurted out.

“We would never die,” Ramsey supplied. “We would just lose all our humanity, become savage beasts until we’ve thoroughly fed about fifteen villagers worth, I’d say, then become conscious and feel like shit for what we’ve done.”

That seemed oddly specific, but okay. “If we got trapped, how long could we survive on each other?”

“We can’t survive on each other, love. Vampires can’t drink each other’s blood.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Ellis scratching his head. “About that. We can survive off her, and she can only drink from us.”

Ramsey was quiet for too long. Long enough for us to hurdle over two enormous boulders and get halfway up an incline that my under-worked thighs were not particularly fond of before he said, “I can’t even think about what to say to this. Like, honestly, I want to play this whole thing off as if it’s fucking nothing, but I’m just going to say it. This is all a jumbled mess. Something is happening, and I don’t fucking know if I should dive in and help or abandon ship before it gets so far fucking out of hand I’m permanently linked to this fucked up situation.”

“You’re already involved,” Sterling pointed out, and Ramsey ignored him. “I am curious, though, how does it feel like to be saddled to these fucks for all of eternity? I mean, you can’t leave them, or you will waste away into a savage, but well, look at them. You can’t very well survive hanging out with them for the rest of your life. I’ve tried it; they are definitely men to take in small dosages.”

I heard Ellis snort at that, but none of them denied that they make communication and hanging out difficult, so I answered Ramsey’s question. “Well, I had three orgasms for breakfast.”

Ramsey’s rich laugh echoed off the cave, causing tiny pieces to crumble down over our heads. He immediately went silent before whispering, “And that, my new little friend, explains nearly everything.”

The ground suddenly rumbled, and I clung to Oaks arm; the floor below our feet pitched and rolled as rocks flew every which way. Our bodies crumbled to the ground, covering our heads as we huddled together for protection. The rumbling slowed, and we suddenly rose back to our feet, looking around. A low humming sound came from deep within the cave, a sound that slowly became louder until hundreds of bats burst through a thin crack in the rock. Their bodies sailed overhead, and I opened my mouth to scream, only to have my voice silenced by a palm covering my mouth.

Ramsey's voice was close to my ear as he whispered, "They can't see you, love. Don't draw them here." I nodded my head in understanding, but that didn't stop the panic I felt. If I still had a regular pulse, I knew with absolute certainty that it would be racing out of control.

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We didn't move until the last bat escaped the crack, and even then, we stood frozen for minutes longer than necessary. Oak never let go of my hand, his solidarity a comfort. When he spoke, it was with equal part resolve and dread, "That crack in the rock, it's wide enough to fit through, and that's where we need to go."

"Are you fucking crazy?" Sterling hissed, and I was right there with him. Why the hell would I want to squeeze my ass through a crack in a cave wall, knowing that an infestation of bats or worse was waiting on the other side?

"No, he's right." All heads swung to Ellis, and although he looked deliciously alluring in his dirt-covered clothes and roused hair, his agreement made him less attractive at the moment. "Most people wouldn't walk toward a cave of bats, let alone through a narrow crease of rock."

I groaned. "But naturally, my boys aren't like most people, are they?"

"Nope," Ramsey offered cheerfully before patting me on the back as he passed, "I could have saved you some time and told you that from the start."

The narrow entrance was a few feet above my head and nearly impossible for me to reach if it hadn't been for my undead men giving me a boost then literally pushing me through the slit in the earth. The fit was tight, my hip bone scraping against the jagged rocks as I shimmied my way through for about five feet before the enclosure opened up into a larger area.

"Can you feel it?" I asked, awe coating my words as I was pulled forward.

“Feel what?” Ramsey asked as he made it through the rocks, the last of our team to do so.

“The energy. It’s like little fingers grabbing at my skin while the warmest, softest blanket wraps around me.”

“It’s it. It has to be it.” Ellis was excited about that fact; I could tell by the lilt of his voice and his suddenly antsy posture.

It what? I wasn’t exactly sure. I felt nervous, terrified that instead of finding something helpful to our venture, I was possibly leading us all to our deaths. Could I hold that on my conscience? Could I carry around the thought that I killed three immortals and the equivalence to a foster brother just by being close to me?

“I want to go back.” I let go of Oak’s hand without warning, turning fast and plowing straight into Sterling’s chest.

Sterling’s hand came out to catch me, righting me before I lost my balance and fell down the steep incline. Behind me, Oak’s voice boomed loudly for such a whisper of a word, “No. You’re not leaving.”

“I can’t do this.”

“It’s too late for that; we are here.” He tried to reason.

“But -” I let the words trail off. I couldn’t muster an argument that portrayed how I was feeling. I didn’t know how to let them know how afraid I was for them.

“But, we are going deeper into this place, Liberty. You will follow the calling and get the damn necklace because we need you alive more than dead.” When my boys used a stern voice like that on me, it was nearly impossible to disobey.

“I’m scared,” I confessed.

“You think I’m not? It’s fucking dark as hell in here,” Oak reasoned.

I tilted my head to the side. “So you are afraid of the dark!”

“This dark, of course, I fucking am,” he admitted. “But it will not stop me, and it’s definitely not going to stop you.”

He was right, and I knew it. If I ever wanted to explore what this was between us all, I needed to push forward, get the necklace, gather whatever power I supposedly required, and eliminate the threat. I only hoped the threat didn’t destroy me or any of my boys in the process.

“Okay,” I said to Oak, his knees bent as he leveled his eyes with mine.

“Okay.” His eyes searched my own.

I nodded and pulled forward. “The pull is coming from the left.”

“Then we go left,” Ellis announced, not like he needed to; it was evident that we were going whichever way the pull took us.

The left held a steep incline, littered with sharp rocks and sand that ended into a boulder-filled valley. But despite the rough visual, the boys didn’t act afraid as they approached, instead opting to go down the slope on their asses, dragging along slowly with their heels into the dirt to ensure they didn’t rapidly descend into the wall of stones below. I followed their lead, waiting until the last of my boys was down there before sitting down and scooting slowly. Behind me, Ramsey waited, not bothering to sit until I was fully standing on the surface below.

We worked our way through the valley of boulders, climbing over the thick mounds of stone one at a time until we made it to a smooth expanse. Above us, the rocks formed a circular dome – the dragon’s eye. Below us, our feet walked on ground stone, pulsed so fine that if it weren’t for the occasional chunk, I would think I was walking on a beach full of coarse sand.

The feeling became more intense, and when the cave forked into two directions, the boys followed me without hesitation as my feet carried me to the right. We had been walking for hours, it seemed. A collection of intense minutes that dragged on to eternity. With each step, my stomach balled, the pull calling me. Screaming at me, warning –

Warning me? I paused in my steps at that thought. The concept that an inanimate object was sending me a warning seemed crazy, but this week and all my new discoveries had taught me that crazy was an honest reality, and maybe I should accept it instead of fighting it every step of the way.

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I held up my hand. “Stop.” They obeyed me without question. “The object, the feeling, it’s warning me.”

They didn’t ask against what. We all knew a threat was always looming over our heads. Instead, I heard Ellis’ feet shuffle forward on the gravel. “What would you like to do?”

I took a few calming breaths. “We do what we came to do. We move forward.”

Chapter 6

LIBERTY

In the distance, I spotted a tunnel. Just setting my eyes on it, I knew that was my destination, but my fear combined with the warning made it hard for me to move my feet. Each step felt like lead, making it nearly impossible to move, but I kept pushing, knowing the men were at my back. The closer we got, the more a faint glow seeped into the clearing, lighting our steps as we moved. The glow hadn’t been there when I first spotted the tunnel, its appearance causing my body to tense.

When I reached the mouth of the tunnel, Oak’s hand squeezed mine hard. “That’s it.”

This was it.

The moment I stepped into the tunnel, I felt a giant wave of power rush over me, rolling over my skin, tousling my hair. Each of my vampires followed me through, temporarily swaying as the power clashed into them. Then we moved, taking a step at

a time toward the light. Each step harder than the first, each one filled with more resistance.

The light grew brighter as we approached the end. My anxiety heightened. My skin tingled, and although every nerve in my body screamed at me to abort the mission, to turn back, to call it quits and excuse myself from this insane mess in a world I never belonged, I did it. I stepped out of the cave and into the light.

There was a heavy pause, a lull in the cavern's energy where I now stood. This lasted only until the last man's foot crossed the tunnel's threshold, then our bodies were tossed backward with a force of energy, the flash of light nearly blinding us after a long stint in dull low lighting. My eyes adjusted, but my mind refused. Not until Oak growled a sinister sound, his body already moving to block the massive spiders coming at us.

Behind me, I heard someone curse, but my concentration was fully set on the cluster of spiders running full force toward us. Their legs towered over me in height, their sheer mass would surely give me nightmares – if I survived. My name was called, but I didn't move. Again and again, I heard it screamed until a body slammed into mine.

“Take this,” Sterling shouted as he shoved a knife into my hand, jarring me out of my paralyzed state. “They are coming fast!”

Fast was an understatement. Their speed rivaled that of my boys, their movement lightning. They reached us, their legs and arms going for me, ignoring the surrounding men completely. Oak swung his blade, the leg of the first spider falling to the ground in front of it, still moving as it pulled along the floor toward me. He swung again, another arm fell.

“It's not working,” Sterling shouted as he cut into a spider leg. It fell to the ground in front of us, its blood oozing out and splattering my clothes.

A tug on my left leg drew my attention away from the pooling gore to the spider's leg wrapping around my ankle, its fine hairs brushing against my skin like tiny sharp razors, causing blood to weld wherever it touched. I screamed, shaking my leg frantically, hoping to free it from its hold.

Suddenly the leg went limp. I looked up in time to see Oak slicing through the spider's stomach, spilling its insides on the floor. He used his shoulder to wipe the gore from his face, not like it did much but smear it before he shouted to the others, "You need to slice it open. It's the only way to kill it!"

I heard male grunts of acknowledgment before sprays of moisture flung every which way. They would tear one down, and two more would come. The massive spiders, an unending sea of legs. Still, I stood frozen. Afraid to move because those creatures didn't want Ellis. Or Sterling. They had no interest in Oak or Ramsey. They wanted me. They were after me. They –

"Liberty! Move!" Ellis' voice broke through my fog, giving me enough of a warning to turn, coming inches away from the needle legs of a spider. This close, I could see its teeth, giant fangs hanging out of its mouth, moving like pinchers as it eyed me as if I was its last meal. "Stab it! Don't just stand there!"

Ellis' voice echoed through the cavern as the spider lunged for me, and I dove under its body, screaming as its razor hairs brushed against my arm. Blood traveled down my limb, coating the hand that held the knife, making it nearly impossible to hold. Still, my grip held tight as I arched the knife Sterling had given me above my head, pulling it as far back as I could. When the spider moved again, I jolted forward with all my strength, plunging the blade into its stomach.

The knife made a sickening wet slurp as it tore through its skin, the sound and feel of skin ripping as I dragged the blade forward, making me gag. The smell that expelled from its body and landed on my head, shoulders, arms, legs was so rotten I nearly

vomited. I hardly had time to move out from under the beast before it fell to the ground, almost crushing me under its weight.

“Keep going!” Ramsey screamed, and I did.

One after another, I plunged my knife in; one after another, I watched them fall. It could have been an eternity; in fact, I was sure it was. But when the last spider’s guts littered the floor, and we all stood in a weary circle, our backs together, searching for the next threat, I was sure there would be more.

“I think we got them all,” Oak panted, his chest heavy with exhaustion.

“I fucking hope so,” Ramsey grumbled.

“Bet you didn’t realize this was the shit you were volunteering for, eh, brother?” Ellis’ shoulder jabbed into Ramsey’s, and he only grunted.

“What now?” I asked, knowing the answer but dreading it.

“We keep going,” Oak confirmed. We slowly stepped apart. “I suggest in whatever direction those spiders came from.”

“Really? I was going to suggest the opposite direction,” I mumbled.

“Liberty, we are almost there.” Or at least he thought we were. I, for one, was questioning it. Our proximity. My sanity. These fucking vampires.

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Oak took my hand, pulling me forward, trying to keep me upright as we slipped and slid through the gore, stepping over limbs and skimming our way around bodies. The others followed our lead until we passed the final lifeless body and entered a clearing.

There was only one way to go, and it was hard to push my foot forward. Above us, vines decorated the ceiling, making me feel closed in. I breathed hard, trying to work through the claustrophobia I felt when my eyes caught something. I stopped, pulling Oak's hand until he fell back toward me.

"The vines are alive."

His brows pulled together. "Of course, they are alive. They are green."

"I meant, they just moved," I sputtered.

"Like poised to attack moved or like a gentle sway in the wind?" Ellis asked.

My head turned to him. "What do you think?"

All four of the men cursed in unison. No one had fully recovered from the spiders yet. All our bodies were exhausted. And now, vines? As if on cue, they began to slowly creep toward us, leisurely covering the ground in leaves and eliminating space for us to roam.

"We need to run!" Oak instructed, only I was still a human, with human speed, while these boys could cut the distance easy as pie. There would be no way I was making that before the vines snaked up my legs and pulled me under the layer of leaves

they'd just formed.

Oak's hand gripped mine hard as he pulled, trying to urge me to move faster as I stumbled after them. But I couldn't keep up; I was only slowing him down. I released his hand at the exact moment a vine caught up to me, pulling me backward until I fell onto my stomach, then dragged me back toward the wall. My fingers fought for purchase, searching for a hole, a rock, a stick – anything to grab on to, anything to buy me time, but I only felt the smooth sand-like gravel as I fought and resisted.

Oak appeared before me, falling to his knees to grab my arms and pull me back, trying to hold me in place long enough for Ramsey to cut the vines at my ankles while the others chopped through anything that approached. Each time he freed a leg, another vine grabbed it. The task seemed impossible.

“Just go!” I kicked at a vine, then used my knife to stab another as he crept toward my torso.

“NO!” All voices yelled in unison right before Ramsey shouted, “I got it!”

With his words, Oak pulled my body hard, freeing me before throwing my body over his shoulder and running. I clung to him tightly as the surroundings blurred around me. The scenery changed, faded to tan stone walls, and still, he kept going until he was sure the vines were out of view, and we were in the clear.

He sat down on a patch of grass before running his hands through his long hair. “We weren't prepared enough for this shit.”

Sterling's chest heaved. “I don't think we could have ever been.”

Beside them, Ramsey grinned. “Well, I, for one, think this is a fantastic field trip.”

Everyone ignored him as Ellis asked, “How much more do you think there is?”

Ha, wasn’t that the question of the hour?

Oak’s fingers tugged at his scalp, gripping the hair tightly as he looked around. “One problem at a time.”

“Yeah? What’s the current problem?” Sterling had to ask like this whole situation wasn’t a complete fucking problem.

Oak walked over to the cliff’s edge and looked down. “It appears there is lava down there.”

His voice was calm, a complete juxtaposition to my panicked screech. “Lava!”

“Yup.”

“How are you saying this so damn calmly!?” Lava. There was fucking lava.

“Well,” he sighed, “I figured if it isn’t attacking us at the moment, there’s no need to panic. I did just murder some spiders bigger than my body and had my butt felt up by vines.”

“The vines touched your butt?” I wasn’t sure why that perturbed me so much, but I felt a strong sense of ownership to that butt.

“Yup, slithered its leaves across on its way to strangle you.”

I sighed. Well, at least it had good taste. I took a few steps closer to Oak and peered down into the canyon below. Definitely lava. And judging by the bubbles it kept spitting and the steam rising from its surface, definitely hot. Couldn’t there be cold

lava? I liked that idea much better.

I was too concentrated on my potential pain; I hadn't noticed Ellis had joined us, walking around the edge of the cliff as he searched for a way across. "There are some rocks over there."

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Mine and Oak's head turned in unison, but Oak spoke first. "Rocks? To cross?"

"Yup. Floating in midair."

Oak cursed, "I would almost prefer for them to be in lava. At least we would know exactly what we're getting."

"It's the only option." Ellis sighed.

"Remember when our lives were boring," Sterling chimed in before following it up with, "last week?"

"Who's going first?" I asked.

If Oak kept pulling at his hair, he's going to go bald. "I think you should go first."

"Excuse me?" My eyebrows nearly hit my hairline with his words.

"It makes sense. You aren't as fast as us. If those stones fall when touched, we could still maybe manage to bounce off them with speed. You wouldn't make it past two of them once they began to sink."

"Can't you just, you know, carry me?"

"You realize you are supposed to be at the top of the paranormal world someday? You. Not me. And when that happens, I'm going to remind you every day how weak you sound."

How dare he say – “I don’t sound weak!” But as I looked to the others, their head was nodding their agreement. Well, damn. “Fine, I’ll do it.”

“That’s taking one for the team, love!” I glared at Ramsey, and he only smiled.

I fully intended to show all of them what taking one for the team meant, and when we were back on safe ground, each and everyone one of them would pay for their abandonment. Had they forgotten that I’m just a mere human? A mere human who’s suddenly taken on some vampire qualities and is expected to save single-handedly, rule, and govern over this hot mess of a world. But nonetheless, a mere human.

I stared down at the first rock and took a deep breath. Would I plummet to my death? The odds were likely. Still, after giving myself a solid shake off and massive pep talk, I leaned over the ledge and let my foot touch the stone. It seemed solid, completely suspended in the air with absolutely no give to it, so I let my other foot touch it.

“You’re going to have to move to reach the other side,” Sterling pointed out. Had I been on this step for that long? I didn’t think so, but who could keep track of the passing of time at this point? I took a step. Then the next, jumping from stone to stone with the comfort of knowing someone was one stone behind me at each jump.

We were halfway across the stones when the first one fell, falling to the lava below, making a hiss as the thick liquid ate it up and consumed it into its folds. Behind me, Sterling hissed, “Go! Go now, go fast!”

There was another echoing plop as another stone fell, and my body froze with panic. Behind me, Oak hissed, “If you don’t move, we all will die.”

Could they die? Not easily, but I had no doubt that being consumed by molten fire would end an immortal’s life. I stepped to the next stone, a new sense of urgency forcing me forward, but it wasn’t enough. The rocks behind us fell faster, the

plopping as they hit the lava echoing louder.

“Faster!” Oak urged, and I moved as fast as my mortal legs could carry me, nearly toppling over as one foot touched the last stone before I changed my projection and fell onto the solid surface in front of us. The men almost stumbled and fell over me as they reached the end, Sterling barely making it to the edge as the last stone fell.

His chest was heaving as he said, “I doubt we are leaving the same way we came.”

“I doubt we are leaving at all,” Ramsey added, and I shot him a glare.

“We are leaving.” I was sure of that. Why force me on this insane journey and make it seem like my existence was important if I would die during the first round?

I stood, dusted myself off, and hated myself for not listening to the men's repeated begging for me to just put on some fucking pants. Their words, not mine. My skirt was cute. Before it was coated in my blood, various degrees and colors of dirt, and bits of green resembling grass stains. Fucking vines.

“Alright.” I clapped my hands in fake determination. “Let’s do this!”

As if summoning trouble itself, the surrounding walls moved, and I saw the creature made of complete stone pull itself away from the earth’s foundation. I was positive I heard Sterling grumble, “For fuck’s sake, can we have like ten minutes to fucking recover?”

Ellis, never missing an opportunity, added, “I bet you wished you worked out more. You’re out of shape, and it shows.”

I cleared my throat. “Guys, we are going to need a game plan.”

“Don’t get dead,” Ramsey offered.

“A million fucking years old, and that’s the shit you offer?” I stated as the first stone monster’s foot stepped forward, causing the ground to rumble and shake.

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“We’re going to talk when we get home, young lady. It’s fucking offensive to call me a million years old.”

On the opposite wall, another stone foot stomped down from its resting place, shaking the ground with such force, I stumbled down. The moment my butt hit the dirt, a hand was in front of me, offering to pull me up. I took the hand and was up in an instant, unsure of what to do. Hell, none of us were sure what to do at this point.

“Um, guys? We have a problem.” Ellis’s voice broke through my panic. I searched him out, finding him peering over the edge of the cliff into the lava.

“We have a lot of fucking problems right now; I doubt it could get worse.”

He had to say it. Oak had to fucking verbalize that shit couldn’t get worse, so naturally, they did. “What about lava monsters? Who has those on their bingo cards?”

“We are playing fucking monster bingo?” Ramsey moaned, “Why didn’t anyone tell me? I love that game!”

I couldn’t even concentrate on the ridiculousness of the conversation because I dumbly looked over the edge, staring down a smoldering stone monster scaling the wall. I jumped back, trying not to panic but knowing damn well that panic had set in. In the distance, the sound of dogs barking grew closer, the snarls and growls approaching, and I knew that in minutes if not sooner, they would surround us, a beast on every side.

“I don’t know what to do.” I couldn’t even hold back the tears that now spilled onto

my cheek.

Oak grabbed my chin and forced my eyes to look at him. “You do what you’ve got to, Liberty, and don’t worry about the consequences. The hag stone will protect you.”

I took a deep breath, replaying his words in my mind. The hag stone around my neck would protect me—a gift from Oak. I was protected—another deep breath. Then, I gripped the handle of my knife and charged at the closest obstacle.

Chapter 7

JUSTICE

Once upon a time, there was a king. A handsome king, a charming king, a damn worthy as fuck king. He ruled his people with dignity and grace, abiding by a solid moral code and a personal code that was iron.

But the king was lonely, as most are, never really sure who wanted him for who he was instead of the power he wielded. He was cautious with his trust, careful with his love, unwilling to give it to anyone less than deserving.

Until he met her.

A goddess so beautiful and graceful, it was hard not to fall. And the king fell. He fell hard. Unwilling to see the trap that was laid, the foolishness he possessed by trusting the beauty. He gave all she wanted, did all she asked. Sacrificed what was most dear to him – his life, his people, his beast.

He never suspected, never imagined, his beauty would harm him, would trick him, would trap him in his alternate form until it was too late. Until the fur pulled forth from his skin and his teeth elongated into deadly fangs, until his vision changed, and

his back arched so painfully from the force that he knew he might never go back.

His Beauty stole his man.

For sixty years, delirious thoughts crept in. He was consumed by a mind that was part human, part creature. Longing to be whole again tugged at every nerve, but his beast's body became his cage. A cage he was destined to live in for the rest of his days until his beast's heart gave out, and he died alone on a cave floor.

Once upon a time, I was a king, and I – I fell in love with a beauty. And she stole my life away.

Chapter 8

LIBERTY

As it turns out, the hag stone was more of a spiritual protector, not a physical one. I learned that piece of information quickly when my body was tossed back like a bag of foam on a windy day. Oak, bless his heart, was there, already chipping away at the offending stone monster as he searched for a weakness. He was barely pushing it back, but it wasn't advancing either.

Behind me, I felt the heat of the creature as he breached the cliff, pulling himself onto level ground with a burning, gurgling roar. I shifted as far from him as I could, more willing to be crushed to death than burned alive.

The roars of beasts I once heard sounded closer as giant wolves broke through the stone creatures, hissing and snarling. Their jaws snapped as they attempted to bite into Ramsey. Panic surged through me as I ran under the legs of a stone monster, trying to find safer ground. My men followed, each of us advancing a few steps before being pushed back.

“I don’t know what to do!” I shouted.

“Just keep moving forward; maybe we can ditch them like the vines,” Oak screamed.

“That’s a solid idea!” Ellis countered, “Except for the snarling beasts waiting to rip out our throats.”

“Fuck,” Oak growled as he barely missed the stone foot that nearly flattened him.

“Get them in the knees!” Ramsey instructed, and his assessment was successful. The minute Ellis’ long blade sliced into the space between rocks that formed the knees, the boulder monster crumbled to the ground, shattering into smaller rocks and debris as it hit the earth.

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“Be fucking careful,” Oak, always my protector growled, “That rock almost hit her.”

It honestly was a pebble, but I appreciated that he was looking out for me. Not like I got to enjoy it long, though, because taking down one of the stone creatures only made the others furious. Their feet stomped harder onto the ground, shaking it so hard that we fumbled and fell, trying to keep our footing but not willing to stop our advances.

Balls of fire flew above our heads, nearly missing us as they collided with the ground. The heat so close, it almost seared our skins. The smoke rose around us, making us cough and choke. Tears poured from our eyes uncontrollably, the sting from the smoke burning its way over our skin, down our throats, and into our bodies.

“I can’t fucking see,” Sterling growled, and I reached a hand back, grabbing onto his arm and trailing my fingers downward until I found his, pulling him along with Oak and me.

He did the same for Ellis and Ellis for Ramsey. We formed a chain, each of us holding on to each other for dear life as we fought to breathe and see. None of us were willing to lose each other as the ground rocked under our feet, tossing us from side to side, making walking without stumbling nearly impossible.

The force of stone landing directly by me knocked me to my knees, and though Sterling couldn’t see even an inch in front of him, he jammed his weapon forward, landing a perfect blow, causing rocks to shatter in all directions. His chest heaved with exhaustion. “We need to get to a clearing. We can’t handle this blind.”

He was right. The next stone foot could crush any of us or all of us. There was no telling where it was or when it would strike. But, I could feel the ground move under my feet, my body vibrating with the movement, and I knew the next one was coming. Another round of fire hit the ground in front of us, and I pulled back, clinging to Oak and Sterling like my grip on them alone would protect us all.

“We have to go forward, Liberty.” Oak’s voice boomed over the growling, barely audible through the pounding of blood in my ears.

“There are monsters going forward!”

“There're monsters going backward too!” Ellis shouted from the back, his body barely missing the flames being flung at him.

Fuck, this was impossible. But I knew they were right. We couldn’t fight what we couldn’t see. If we got away from the flames and smoke, we could assess the situation better. See what was about to attack us, plan to do better than now. “What if we stick to the edge of the rock wall? That eliminates one direction!”

Oak stopped, and though I could hardly see him, I suspected he was looking at me. “Do you think we could make it under their feet and to the rock wall, Liberty?”

Did I? It was a far stretch, but what choice did we have? “I – I, I think we can.”

“Put more confidence in it; a lot of lives depend on it. Trust your instincts. What does your gut say?” he instructed, and I knew what he was doing. He would follow me regardless, but if I was going to lead anyone, which honestly, I was still doubting, I couldn’t double guess myself. I couldn’t just think. I needed to know.

“We can make it,” I told him. “But we need to do it now while they haven’t formed a solid line at our sides.”

“Do you think that will trap us?” Sterling asked as he squeezed my hand, letting me know he wasn’t doubting me, just trying to be sure.

“We could go three ways. As long as we move fast. If we let them get too close, then it could be risky and possibly fatal,” I explained, already tugging Sterling in the direction.

“Possibly fatal? Well, by all means, lead the way,” I heard Ramsey echo.

The act of actually getting to the wall wasn’t nearly as hard as I thought it would be. Oak and Sterling took down three giant rock monsters while I stalled one long enough for one of the boys to help me. The wall was cold against my fingers when I finally ran into it, the feeling of safety and shelter overwhelming me.

When all our fingers touched the wall, the rock monsters pulled back, though fire was still being flung in every direction. It was baffling, but I suspect that was the point. If their sheer size prevented them from reaching us at our current location, then confusing us with their intent and threats was a brilliant move.

In front of us, there was a harsh growl as the wall morphed under our fingers, turning into tiny caterpillar-type bugs that nipped at our fingertips. Sterling groaned as his body jerked away, keeping his touch away from the wall. “For fuck’s sake, enough with the damn bugs!”

“Anything, in particular, you would like to request? I’m sure they are taking suggestions,” Ellis mocked.

“I plan on feeding you to the beasts first,” Sterling replied.

I sighed audibly. “You’ll do no such thing. Can you get along for once? It’s like I’m lugging around children.”

That was harsh, I know. But being around these boys and their immaturities sometimes was a bit too much. I needed a break when this was over. Maybe some girl time. A mani and pedi. Too much masculinity was beginning to fuck with me.

Sterling raised our joined hands and kissed my knuckles. “I’m your favorite child, right?”

One of the disgusting caterpillars reached for me, and I jumped back with a squeal. “I like all my children equally. Do you realize all the grime that’s on that hand you kissed?”

“I prefer not to think about it,” he mumbled as he dodged the bug reaching his direction.

Despite the biting bugs on the wall, taking this route was a wise choice. The stone creatures only went in one direction, forward. This meant once we passed their legs, they never tried to search us out. The fire-throwing monsters, well – those were still a threat. They were just throwing fire in all directions because they couldn’t see us, so we just had to move farther away.

We had just put enough distance between us that the air had finally cleared when the growls we had been hearing echoed louder. I didn’t see any monsters or beasts, but that didn’t mean they weren’t there and ready to attack. My eyes strained to look over the horizon, searching for the next threat as we followed the curve of the wall. Taking the twists and turns in stride until Oak stopped, causing us all to crash into him.

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In front of us was a row of wolves, taller than any of us. Their muscles bunched tightly as their wide frame coiled with aggression. There weren't many of them, maybe eight of the wolves against the five of us, but what they lacked in numbers they made up in mass. The largest of the group took a slow step forward; its eyes fixed on us as it stalked its prey, and I stepped back, straight into Sterling.

"We've got this," he assured me, though I didn't feel the usual confidence that came with his words.

A low growl sounded from the lead wolf, and those behind him followed, mocking his sound with a rumble of their own. They were furious, their bodies shaking with their need to destroy us. Their leader took another step forward, his teeth bared, glistening in the rays of our flashlight. It was easier to have confidence in our success when the danger wasn't so immediate. The row of wolves in front of us and the wall of molten lava and stone monsters behind us made our situation dire.

Oak dropped my hand, and I immediately missed the faux protection his touch had offered. His voice nearly resigned as he broke through the growls with his words, "Liberty, get behind us, we'll try to clear the way."

It was sacrificial, really. But I couldn't allow it. I may have started off this journey weak, but I was gaining my strength and confidence, and if these boys were going to die on a mission I dragged them on, then I was going to die alongside them, our blood mingling and pooling together on the stone slabs below our feet.

"No."

“Liberty. Now is not the time to –”

I cut off his words. “We were tossed into this mess together, and we do it all together.”

He glanced at me over his shoulder, his beautiful eyes locked onto mine for a pause longer than was deemed safe at the moment before he gave me a slight nod. “We do this together then.”

Oak took a step forward at the same time the wolf did, its snarls growing louder. It would be another five seconds before they pounced. Ellis struck first, his knife swinging at the beast as its jaws opened, prepared to lock its teeth around Ellis’ throat.

Within seconds, the others followed, their bodies jostling under the weight of the wolves. But right in their midst, a single wolf stood, large and looming as he stared at me, his golden eyes unblinking as he moved a paw forward. I heard someone scream my name, the sound followed by words, but I couldn’t register them, not when I was locked into the wolf’s gaze.

“The necklace!” It was Oak. “He has the necklace around his neck!”

Oak screamed the words at me as he shifted his feet, merely avoiding a jaw chopping onto his legs. His words, though, barely registered—those eyes. I was mesmerized. Trapped. The wolf growled, and still, I stepped toward him, not even raising my blade for protection. He snarled before falling back to his hind legs and springing forward, clashing with my body and taking me to the ground.

I felt his jaw clamp at the base of my throat, and though I tried to move from under his weight, it paralyzed me. I couldn’t fight him; I couldn’t stop the teeth from tearing into my skin or my blood from trailing down and pooling into the dirt below me.

Oak appeared, his body glowing with rage, and reached around the beast's neck and jerked him backward, using all his weight to pull him away from my body, stumbling to the ground while struggling against the vicious animal. He turned in Oak's arms, this time, his rage amplified as he bared his teeth, saliva dripping down and gathering on Oak's chest.

"Liberty, you have to do something! He has the necklace!" Oak's words were clipped. My brain too fogged to understand them.

Sterling appeared, and without a second thought, he jumped onto the beast's back, struggling along with Oak to contain its strength. But the creature didn't seem to notice Sterling, past the nuisance his weight was, and shifted sharply, throwing Sterling against the stone before bringing his focus back to Oak.

His jaw widened above Oak as he leaned in, hovering over Oak's face. Oak was struggling, his strength waning after repeated fights for the day, but still, he pushed against the animal. Grabbing handfuls of fur as he attempted to shove him back while trying to grab at his neck.

A glint of stone and metal caught my eye, and Oak's words finally registered. The necklace was on this wolf's neck. This was what we needed to get and be gone. Oak wasn't trying to save himself; he was trying to break free the necklace, and while he sat and struggled, I stared on in an uncontrollable trance. And now, it was too late.

The wolf's mouth was open, its teeth only millimeters from Oak's skin. He snapped, the sweet scent of Oak's blood floating toward me, but it was only a graze. Oak's skin brightened with power as the beast roared, and they both fought, equally matched with will and strength. But the wolf hadn't been battling obstacles for hours, and it was getting the upper hand.

His colossal head rammed into Oak, pushing his skull back into the dirt, stunning Oak

long enough to allow the wolf's mouth to open one last time. His jaw pulled wide, stretched to the max as he leaned toward his next meal, and Oak, he was dazed, still recovering from the blow, not seeing the threat coming. I screamed, the sound of Oak's name leaving my body in guttural torment a moment too late. I'd done nothing to stop it, nothing to save him. I froze. The wolf made a sound of satisfaction as his teeth touched Oak's skin, and I couldn't . . . I couldn't handle it, I couldn't watch him die.

"STOP!" I screamed, the words leaving my mouth with such force that my eyes slammed closed for a moment, and all sound around me stilled.

Silence encased us, and I opened my eyes, seeing the last remaining wolf's body poised over Oak's, frozen in place before it pulled back slightly. Oak wasted no time. He used the stillness of the beast to his advantage, reaching up and pulling the necklace from the wolf's neck before throwing it to my feet.

I stared down at the jeweled treasure for a moment before bending and picking it off the ground. My breath came quickly as the jewels pulled at me before pushing energy into the surrounding cave. I looked up at Oak, his watchful eyes curious as my hair lifted, and there was a shift in the air around me.

Then as quickly as it started, the motion stopped, and there, before me, crouching over Oak where a wolf once was, appeared a man. One furious, ticked off, naked man.

Chapter 9

JUSTICE

I stumbled backward, pushing myself away from where my naked body was straddling some guy's thighs, and practically crab crawled against a dirty stone wall.

Me? The fucking king, covered in dirt and grime and using a wall at my back as my only protection. Where was Horo?

The eyes on me sat heavily, waiting for me to speak, which seemed presumptuous since I hadn't the slightest clue what the fuck was going on. Still, I swallowed past the dryness in my throat and pushed a scratchy word out. "Horo?"

Why did it hurt so much to speak?

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The guy whose legs I was just rubbing against sat up. His long hair a mess around his face, but he didn't bother to fix it. "Who's Horo?"

"My second." The pain that the speaking caused ripped up my throat. The man raised a brow without uttering another word and gestured his arms to the surroundings where bodies of wolves littered the floor. I inhaled, tasting the surrounding air. "Those are mere dogs. None of them are Horo."

For that, I was thankful because they were all dead. "You're here to kill me then?"

Speaking became more comfortable, but the pain was still there. My throat so dry; it felt like I hadn't used it in years. The man stood up from the ground, his solid structure not wavering or looking weak, though I could sense the exhaustion. I strained my ear to listen, only coming up with the weakest of heart thrums. Vampire.

"We only came for the necklace."

We? I let my eyes roam into the darkness, pinpointing more of his kind. "What necklace?"

"The one you wore around your furry neck." His voice seemed unamused by the situation. Meanwhile, I was confused as fuck with no recollection of a necklace. As if they sensed my confusion, the men off to the side parted to show a female holding a vaguely familiar string of gems. I inhaled, tasting the air. My heart jumped, and though I wished I could control it at this moment, my cock hardened from the taste of her on my tongue.

I stepped forward cautiously, expecting them to strike. But they let me move freely, though their eyes never left me, always on guard. When I stood in front of the female, a growl came from behind me, but it wasn't a threat, only a warning. My fingers reached for the jewels, and the instant they touched the stones, a flood of memory came back.

Falling in love.

Being betrayed.

Becoming trapped.

Spending every day for years trapped inside my animal.

Being –

I took a step back. "You commanded me."

Her brows pulled together. "I didn't."

"You did." She uttered the word and though my jaw was poised over the vampire, ready to take pleasure in ripping into his face, the words made me freeze. The thought made me angry. Years of my choices were taken away, and when I was finally freed, I was under the control of a vampire. My stomach balled with disgust.

She stepped forward, and I stepped back, "I – I, I just didn't want Oak to get hurt. It wasn't a command, only a plea."

"I could have your head for this," I growled. "Commanding the King, ordering him around like he's a mere omega. The council will hear about this."

“The council has been disbanded for years,” the man to her right stated as he stepped slightly in front of the girl, letting me know subtly that she was under his protection.

Disbanded? But – “How?”

“How does anything happen in our world? Corruption. Dishonesty. Disagreements. Disappearances.”

He eyed me knowingly, waiting for me to confirm my identity, but he already suspected. “I -” I didn’t know what to say.

“Who are you?” The girl asked with no formality at all. She was young; I could smell her newness, taste it.

I pulled my shoulders back, straightening my body to its full regal height and towered over her as I said, “My name is Justice, king of the shifters.”

The men inhaled sharply, as I confirmed. The one she called Oak spoke, “You’ve been presumed dead for what, sixty years.”

“I’m very much alive,” I stated.

The man guarding the girl glanced down at my cock. “Yeah, I can see that.”

“My people?”

“They disappeared shortly after you. Some say dead, others presumed they went into hiding.”

Horo would have taken them underground if he suspected foul play, of that I was sure. Our people were sacred; their ancient blood spilled onto this soil since the

beginning of days. My ancestors leading the packs, teaching, growing, building our people. And it was all brought down because I fell in love. Never again would I let that happen; never again would a woman interfere with my business.

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My eyes fell on the woman again, her shoulder bleeding from a bite. Hmm, such an odd position. A wolf goes for the throat. Instead, the attacking wolf bit her intimately, as one would bite what they owned. “Which of the carcasses caused you harm? I’ll burn their corpse as payment for setting me free.”

“I don’t think –” She started, but I cut her off. My mind had become less blurred as the minutes passed, and I was beginning to feel like myself again.

“It’s a fucking disgrace to have your body burned in death for our kind. Point out the wolf.” She took a step forward, and I held out my hand, stopping her with a palm just below her throat, “I will repay you by dishonoring your attacker, but after that, I do not wish to see more of you, and I ask that you never use your ability to command me again.”

“I –” she opened her mouth to object again, but I didn’t let her.

“Never again. Which one caused you harm?” My eyes fell to my hand that held her at bay. For a moment, her creamy skin next to my hand had me captivated. “Who?”

“It was you.” I jumped backward, nearly falling as my hand pulled away from her skin. I felt my soul tug outward as a pop of light appeared on her chest.

No. No. No.

This couldn’t be happening. It couldn’t. I hadn’t once thought of this possibility being an option, but now, now that my mark, the mark of my family, the mark of mates appeared like a tattoo on this female vampire’s chest, I knew it to be true. And I hated

it. I despised her for it. I never wanted to look at anyone less in my entire life than I did the female in front of me.

Her hand went to her chest, no doubt feeling the burn as my mark seared into her skin. “What did you do to me?”

“I did nothing,” I spat, which was the truth. I could not control the fates and their ill humor.

She looked down at her skin. “You marked me.”

“Give me a dagger, and I would gladly carve it out of your skin because no mate of mine would have the ability to take my control away. No mate of mine would dare do as you have done,” I growled.

“Mate?” Her voice screamed in the most ear-piercing way.

“You’re just gathering men like one gathers phone numbers after a night at the pub, aren’t you, love?” A man standing behind her stated.

The other men ignored her as they stepped closer to her, examining the mark left on her skin, trying to rub it off. Jealousy and anger rose within me. How dare they try to eliminate the mark of the king? How dare they touch her? I growled, and all heads turned to me.

“You cannot just rub off the mark of the king!”

“But you could carve it out of her skin?” One of the men challenged.

“As her mate, I can do as I please with her.”

All the men laughed, the heartiest of laughs that would have a lesser man embarrassed. “I hate to break it to you, Justice, King of the Shifters.” Was this man mocking me? “But times have changed drastically; women hold power. All the power these days. And as her mates, we can’t and won’t allow you to get near her with a blade.”

“My mate does not have others,” I growled, and I’m not sure why it mattered, I didn’t want her, I didn’t like her, I despised her and all that she stood for.

The one called Oak held up three fingers. “Three of them.”

I snarled. “Impossible. I’m the king.”

“And you’re a bit of a douche,” she mumbled before taking one of the surrounding men’s hand. “I want to leave.”

“Do we take him with us?” another asked as he brought his hand to my bite mark, letting his palm glow as he sealed her wounds. Phenomenal.

She looked over at me. “He can follow if he wishes. We’ve got what we needed.”

Then she walked away. Dismissing me. The king.

“Stop!” I ordered.

Instead of stopping, she only slowed before looking over her shoulder at me. “What?”

“I don’t know your name.” Not like it mattered.

“Liberty.”

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My face pulled in disgust. “I absolutely will not call you that. I will not have my mate mock me with cliché names.”

Liberty. Justice. What a fucking joke these fates were playing on me.

“I don’t care what you call me.” She sighed. “I don’t even care if you follow me.”

But as they all climbed the stones, not a single one looking back, I followed. Because like it or fucking not, I couldn’t let my mate out of my sight.

Chapter 10

LIBERTY

I fought to breathe but still tried to remain calm as we trudged up the rock, back into the cave with the disk-like eye of stone over our heads and toward the freedom of the outside world. Most of the obstacles disappeared the moment I held the necklace—most obstacles except the naked, entitled prick that was following behind our group.

Mates? Are you kidding me? If everything I learned about fate this past few days weren’t so serious, I would think it was a joke. But I wore a mark on my chest, on display for the world, claiming me as his. A mark that neither of us wanted.

“You’re freaking out inside.” It wasn’t a question, just a statement.

I turned, looking into Sterling’s concerned grey eyes. “I don’t know what to do.”

“First, we will go back to the cottage, have some coffee and a biscuit.” He smirked, and from behind him, Ramsey mumbled, I hear your mockery. “Then, we can worry about the extra body later.”

I groaned at how heavenly coffee sounded and leaned my shoulder into Sterling’s for a moment, ignoring the very animalistic growl that was coming from behind me. “Coffee sounds amazing.”

“Good, because it will be near morning by the time we get out of here, anyway.” I lifted my head and took his hand. Another growl. “He can’t help it, you know. It’s wired into his making. He may not like you, but he will protect you, and that might just be why fates made this pairing.”

Pairing, I would hardly call it a pairing. I was no shifter. I was no actual vampire. At this point, I was barely a human. I was lost, stuck in this world that kept rapidly throwing things at me and expecting me to deal with it. “Why do I need so much protection? Sterling, I was just an artist last week. I lived in an apartment. I fed my neighbor’s cat.”

He made a disgusted face as he remembered the paste we made out of cat food to feed the critter. “Don’t remind me.” With a sigh, he continued. “Look, I can’t lie and tell you I understand this.”

“Me, either,” Ellis proclaimed from my other side before he took my hand and squeezed. “But what I can tell you is, I would die protecting you.”

“I don’t want anyone to die protecting me. I don’t want any of this at all.” My voice was a whine.

Sterling wagged an eyebrow. “Any of it?”

I laughed. “Okay. Some of it I could do with.”

“Good.” His voice went lower as he leaned closer to my ear. “Because when we get back to the cottage, I plan to show you all the ways I could heal you.”

I shoved his shoulders and laughed. “What if I don’t need healing?”

“You say that, but your emotions say otherwise,” Ellis smirked.

“And what about you?” I teased.

“What about me?” Ellis asked.

“What do you plan to show me?”

I watched as he bit his lower lip, pondering his words before his face turned to me, his dark eyes mesmerizing as they held my gaze. “Me? I plan to show you all the ways to love you, Liberty.”

We arrived back at the cottage right before the sun crested the horizon. We were all covered in dirt, grime, and blood. But that didn’t stop Sterling from making true on his promise of cookies with coffee. The moment we sat, we released the tension we were holding.

I looked between my crew, intentionally not sparing Justice a glance. Each of my men looked weary. As my gaze fell on each of them, a slow smile pulled at my lips until I couldn’t hold back the amusement. A giggle escaped me before an all-consuming laugh took over. I was manic, I knew, but I couldn’t stop the laughter if I tried. The rich sounds of my boys’ amusement joined me until almost all of us were in a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

“Let’s not do that again,” I said around laughter as I wiped tears from my eyes.

“You could count me out next time. That is for sure,” Ramsey added.

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“Don’t worry,” Ellis said as he reached over and put me onto his lap. “I would follow you to death if it meant you were protected.”

Our laughter died slowly, and I sighed as I rubbed my chest, forgetting about the mark embedded into my skin until the yellow eyes off to the corner caught my own. His stare was impenetrable. His eyes locked solely on me, and I couldn’t tell if it was hate and loathing that held them there or more.

Ellis’ nose nuzzled against my skin before he whispered, “Don’t worry, we won’t let him hurt you.”

Even the whisper caused a growl to emit from the man. I squeezed Ellis’ hand, thankful that he could feel what I was feeling without voicing my fears. “What are we doing next? Where do we go from here?”

“First, we need to head back home. We will rest, eat, check on our charter. But I want to be out of here at nightfall,” Oak ordered. “From there, we go home and figure it out.”

“Everything is on track with the plane home,” Sterling informed us before he tossed his phone on the table, lifting his chin in Justice’s direction. “What do you want to do with that?”

That. I knew what he meant. Monster? Man? Shifter? We had seen so many faces of the scolding man in front of us; I didn’t know which to be cautious of. Ellis’ hand drifted to my thigh, bunching my skirt as he kissed my neck, before saying, “Doesn’t matter. He’s not our problem.”

“I agree,” Sterling announced. “So we leave him.”

“You will leave my mate with me, then.” The yellow eyes pierced into me.

“Our mate,” Oak added.

“Mine,” Justice growled.

Ellis picked me up as he stood. “As far as I’m concerned, he can come with. But, the moment he threatens our girl, I’ll push him out of the plane myself.”

“I don’t want to go with you. I want to go to my people.”

“What people? No one has seen any of you in years,” Sterling spat.

“We – we have places. I’ll take the girl there. For – for protection.” Oak laughed at this.

“The girl you threatened to carve up hours ago? Yeah, I don’t think so. We will go to your lands or wherever you think they might be to drop you off, but she stays with us.”

“I couldn’t hurt her, even if I wanted to. The mark prevents it.” His eyes fell to my mark again.

“Do you want to?” Ellis asked.

“What?” Justice tore his eyes away from my skin.

“Do you want to hurt her if you could?” Ellis clarified.

“My mate is a vampire. She controls me. I should shun her.” His brows pulled together, “But even then. I do not wish her harm right now.”

Oak stood, then Sterling, leaving Ramsey and Justice sitting at the table. “Regardless, you aren’t to be left alone with her.”

The boys turned to the bedroom with me in tow, and I swore I heard Ramsey say, You should probably go outside, mate. Rest and replenishment seem to mean something a whole fucking lot different to those four.

Chapter 11

OAK

I should be sleeping. But I couldn’t. The only thing I could manage was to sit here and watch Liberty, protect her just in case. A mate? I shouldn’t be shocked. Stranger things than that have happened this week. But still, I thought she was meant to be ours. Just ours.

My palm rubbed against the leather-bound book. The feeling almost warm to the touch, like it was alive in my hands. I guess technically, it was alive. It was writing itself, fueled by magic this very second. My hands itched to creak open the cover and see what we had to do, what was in store for us, but I was also fearful. One wrong move, and we could lose her. She’s human. She’s a vampire. Now she’s a mate, and I had to know where it would stop, but I didn’t think I could stomach the wrong answer.

“Just open it,” Ellis mumbled from where he lay sprawled across the bed, his body intertwined with a sleeping Liberty, his leg against Sterling’s, neither of them caring.

“I will.”

“Do it now. I can feel your anxiety from here, and it's disturbing my sleep.” His voice was raspy.

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“You can no -” I started to argue but paused because he could. He could feel us, read us, and our feelings. It was a fact that would take getting used to. “Okay.”

I took a deep breath, skirted my fingers softly over the cover before pulling it open. The pages felt stiff under my fingers as I turned to the middle of the book, where the pages were once blank and unoccupied. The writing on the once empty pages was scrolled intricately on the pages with flawless form, though no one had opened the book to write it. The slight indent of the quill where it left ink as it flowed onto the parchment could be felt under my touch.

My eyes drank the words, an expertly written tale of three men and their woman, fighting monsters and creatures, to retrieve a precious magical artifact. Along the way, they rescued a long-lost King who was destined to love the woman in her journey of salvation.

Well, fuck. There went our plan of dropping off the fleabag and running. Naturally, it couldn't be that simple. I might never sleep again with Justice around, always wondering if his suspicious ass will strike at her.

“Well?”

“Well, what?” I had forgotten that Ellis was awake.

He sighed, his voice groggy as he spoke, “What does it say?”

“It's there. The account of the journey underground.” I shut the book, probably harder than I should have, considering it was practically ancient. “We have to keep the

mutt.”

From the thin line of light coming in through the curtains, I saw his brows scrunch together. “What, why?”

“He’s supposed to love her. I guess at some point.”

“Maybe you misread,” he groaned.

“Doubt it. If he were unimportant, he wouldn’t have made it into the writings. There is no mention of Ramsey at all,” I explained. “Thank the fates for that small favor because I did not want to add him permanently to our mix.”

Ellis snorted. “I’m not sharing a bed with him.”

“Ramsey?”

“No!” He rolled onto his back and flung an arm over his eyes. “The beast out there.”

I knew how he felt. That guy tried to chew my face off less than five hours ago. I think I should be allowed to hold a grudge toward him for a little longer. I could still smell his rancid breath each time I inhaled. I wondered if Ramsey got him a toothbrush. And pants. Definitely needed pants because I was not comfortable staring at his dick for the next leg of the journey.

I stood, putting the book on the bedside table next to Ellis before finding a spot on the end of the bed, the only place available, and stretched out. If I was going to guard her, I was at least going to protect her in comfort from my bed. On the chance that the beast came into this room, he would have to get through me before he even thought of touching Liberty. I wouldn’t make it easy, either.

I closed my eyes with that thought, and in mere moments, I was out.

When I woke, Liberty was standing a few feet away, arguing with Sterling. Nothing too heated, just enough to wake me and put me on alert just in case it escalated, and I needed to step in as her protector. Internally, I sensed no threat, though, not even the slightest ping of worry, so I let my eyes flutter closed as their voices whispered over me.

“Just give him a pair of your pants, please,” Liberty hissed.

“Seriously, king or not, my wardrobe is custom made. These pants cost more than -”

She cut him off. “My apartment’s rent?”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” He groaned. “But yeah, probably.”

“Give. Him. Pants,” she gritted out. “And a shirt.”

“Babe.” The poor sap tried to reason, but honestly, I think we all knew he wouldn’t win. “Why can’t Ellis or Oak do it?”

“Babe.” Eek, the tone was scary. Good luck, Sterling. “Ellis’ pants would be too short, and Oaks would be too wide.”

“But -” Was he whining? He was actually whining.

“Look, give him your damn pants, Sterling. I’ll take one of Ellis’ shirts.” Beside me, Ellis raised a single arm from where he was lying on his stomach, head buried in the pillow, and waved it in approval. “See! He doesn’t care!”

“Because he still wears clothing from forty years ago.” Sterling had a point. Actually,

I didn't know if he had much clothing from this time, except for the typical jeans and tees.

“Confession, he wore a pair of suspenders two days ago that taunted me all damn day. If he wants to mix up his decades as he pleases, I'm all for it. Give me the 1930s any day. I don't care what the hell you wear or how old it is.”

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“Do you realize how expensive these are, though? Really? Custom made. Tailored to my measurements. The finest materials.” He went on, and I should’ve jumped in to help, but he sounded like such a douche I decided not to, for my entertainment.

“And I bet they would look amazing on - shit. I forgot his name. I remembered it like two minutes ago too.”

“Justice.” I offered, not even opening my eyes, but needed to get in on this.

“Yes! They would look amazing on him,” she finished lamely. I guess it’s hard to win a fight when you couldn’t remember the focal point’s name.

“I’m appalled you would say that. Did you miss the –”

“Custom-tailored part? Yeah, I got it.” She lowered her voice. “Look, I’ve seen a lot of penis these last few days. Like a lot. He’s just out there letting it blow around, and mentally, I cannot. Let me repeat that so you understand, I cannot – handle any more.”

There was a long pause before Sterling growled and material rustled, “If he ruins these . . .”

“He’s a king; I’m sure he could afford more,” I mumbled.

A door slammed a little more aggressively than needed before the bed dipped. “You had to take her side.”

“I don’t want to be staring at anyone’s dong all fucking day. It’s bad enough I’ve seen more of you two than I wanted to ever see in this lifetime.”

“Jealous?” Sterling asked cockily.

“Hardly.”

“You should be.”

I couldn’t even hold back the laugh at that. I was willing to compare right now because I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that I was bigger. Instead, I got up and stretched, not willing to partake in his childish antics. If I showed him any sort of weakness, any hint that I was falling into his trap, it would be downhill from there. Like when we were children. And he thought it would be a good idea to walk to the middle of the frozen lake. I didn’t want to do it; I knew with absolute certainty it was a bad idea, but as I thought about it, Sterling saw a weakness and pounced on it.

Ellis spent the rest of the winter in bed, almost dying from hyperthermia.

I nudged Ellis with my knee. “Hey. We need to get going.”

“I doubt I could move.” Yeah, I knew the feeling. After last night’s fights, then the unforgettable day of healing Liberty and exchanging blood between the four of us, I was feeling on the exhausted side as well.

“We have a plane to catch.”

He flung his arm over his eyes. “It’s a charter; it will wait for us. I’m sure Sterling is paying them well.”

That wasn’t the point. I wanted to get back to familiar territory. I felt the need to go,

the pull to return home, and I only hoped that appeal had nothing to do with lurking danger and everything to do with the little slice of heaven we managed to make of the manor in such a short time. Ours. It was ours, even though we never officially discussed it. She no longer seemed set on selling it. I hadn't heard her mention it once since we agreed to help pay for it. Plus, this could be my emotions talking, but it's James. I couldn't see it go.

"See you out front in fifteen." He groaned at that but made no further argument, which was good because if I had to, I would have dragged him out and dressed him myself if it meant getting some space between us and this area.

When I entered the room, Liberty was sitting on a chair, Justice was on the opposite side of the room – clothed, and Ramsey, bless his heart, sat in a spot right between them both ready to intervene if someone went rogue. Honestly, my bets were on the girl. Vampire or not, she seemed to be in a mood this morning, and everyone knew how quickly a girl's attitude could go south. She's already halfway there after Sterling.

"Pants are a good look on you," I mumbled as I sat next to Liberty before lifting her up on my lap and wrapping an arm around her waist. I heard the growl and ignored it. I even ignored the nearly painful glare that was threatening to behead me.

"I've taken the liberty –" Ramsey paused as he smirked at his choice of words, "of gathering a few things for you on your trip home. You three have done your best to stay out of the world, and I think mostly, that has been okay for you. But now you need to be informed. Especially if the pup over there is involved in this situation."

"I'm involved in nothing."

Ramsey laughed at that. "You would think so except it was your neck that magical string of jewels was on, and you just so happened to be mated to the epicenter."

“I’m not his mate.” Liberty rolled her eyes at that. “We will work out that mistake later.”

“I love how you didn’t even dispute being the epicenter of a disaster, love.”

“I’ve resigned to the fact that I drank a three vampire cocktail last night, and I would do it again right now if they would let me.” She sighed.

Her words had my cock hardening under her ass, and instead of ignoring the fact that talk of exchanging blood had my body ready for her, she only encouraged it by wiggling her sweet bottom against my dick. I groaned as I leaned into her back, trying to muffle the sound against her body.

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“Children. Focus. Here’s a tablet with all the channels you need to access the paranormal databases. You might be able to figure out what to do with hairy over there on here while also seeking out the witch. If someone knows something out there on this planet, you can access them here.”

“We can’t get rid of him.”

All eyes turned to me as everyone’s voices overlapped, “What?”

“He’s a part of this.”

“I certainly am not.” He growled.

“The book says so, so you stay,” I informed him.

“What book?” He looked angry at this fact, like I was holding him captive and mistreating him. Hardly.

“Wait,” Liberty interjected. “Why is the question. Does the book say?”

“It didn’t clarify past the point at hinting he was with us to the end and that you -” God, to even say the words hurt. Does her loving him mean there wasn’t room that she could one day love us – me? I forced my unease down, “you love him.”

“I don’t care what this book says,” Justice interjected. Did he know how regal and stuffy he sounded? “I’m finding my people. I don’t want to take her with me, but I will if I have to. It’s what the fates wish.”

Ramsey laughed at that. “Do you always sound like you have a stick wedged up your ass? Can you drop your regal act for five fucking minutes and be serious here? You were just stuck as a fucking animal for sixty years. Don’t you wish to get revenge?”

A slow smile curled Justice's lips. “I could drop the act, but I’m much more likeable with it.”

“You’re not likable either way,” Sterling added as he entered the room. Liberty’s arms tightened around me, and I knew she didn’t like the vibes in the room.

Justice shrugged. “Okay. Informal it is. Do I want revenge? I’ve never tasted anything so pungent than my desire to personally sink my teeth into the neck of the witch that stole my heart and used it to trap me. Every day for the last sixty years, I was trapped, unable to shift. Do you know how painful that was? Do you have any fucking idea of the mental damage that causes? When I look at the abomination of a leech my fates pushed on me, I don’t feel the joy it once would have made me feel. She makes me feel sour, disgusted, disgruntled. Add in the fact that she forced my will when she commanded my wolf, and it listened, and well, I’m fucking hostile too. Will I offer up my artery to save her life? I absolutely would watch her die. But I wouldn’t personally harm her. So, go ahead and drop my mate and me off on my land, as per fates’ orders and go about your way, for I am appreciative that you took the time to break the curse and free my body, but I will need no further assistance getting my revenge.”

By the time he was done speaking, my arms were like iron on Liberty, ready to pounce and protect her. Sterling and Ellis must have felt the same because they were standing in front of us, shielding her from that jackass. This wouldn’t do. I wouldn’t allow it. My body radiated with anger and one look at my arm told me my skin was glowing, threatening to attack. The only thing keeping me grounded was Liberty’s fingers softly stroking my forearm.

Ramsey cleared his throat and stood, taking slow steps toward the door. “So, hey, this seems a little too domesticated for me, so I’ll see all of you on the next trip? Snacks and emergency numbers are with the tablet, Oak. Give any of us a ring if you need it. We may not all be close, but family is family, am I right?”

The cottage door slammed behind him, and the room was silent. As far as I was concerned, the only family I had was snugly placed on my lap. Liberty cleared her throat, “Okay, then, we have a flight to catch, now don’t we?” She pretended like none of the words affected her as she stood, grabbed her bag, and walked out the door.

Chapter 12

JUSTICE

It was disgusting, really. The fact that I could watch this girl, know that it was a fucking female who trapped me for sixty years and still have the tiniest desire to want her. It should be impossible. The fury I felt toward her, toward anyone of the female gender, should ensure I didn’t find her any bit attractive.

But yet, as I watched her with the other men, I felt jealous. I wanted to be the one with her feet in my lap, or the one she’s leaning over, teaching to use that portable screen. I knew nothing about her, and yet, I wanted it to be me. I had the fates to blame. The fates cursed me with this desire, this need, and all I could do was fight it. Resist against wanting this girl. I meant every word I said earlier, though the hurt in her eyes when she looked at me only ensured my honesty was smothered by guilt.

I thought it would feel good to hurt her. Knowing I couldn’t do it physically, I went for the emotional jab. But I felt like shit. Turns out, I didn’t want her in particular hurt. I just wanted to hurt someone. Anyone. I knew the fact that she controlled me wasn’t her fault, and honestly, forcing me to stop from harming one of her other

males wasn't even that outrageous. But somehow, it felt like smearing salt into an open, gaping, wound.

Outside the plane, the sky shifted from light to dark, and with it, the surrounding mood. Lights started to turn off, books got put away, and except for Oak and Liberty staring at the portable screen, everyone grabbed their blanket and drifted off. I crossed my arms over my chest and stretched out my legs before crossing them at my ankles. I closed my eyes, sure that though the tension against me was high, no one would slit my neck in my sleep. I hadn't slept much the night before because I trusted none of these bastards, and Ramsey talked nonstop, eliminating any efforts. I hadn't realized how tired I was until the hum of the plane and the slight rocking lulled me into sleep.

I awoke with a startle as the feel of cotton brushed against me. My eyes shot open, and my body jumped as I sat up, my movements jerky and uncoordinated. "Shh. It's okay; I was just covering you."

Her voice was a whisper, and though she was alone, one look over her shoulder proved that her bodyguard was watching our interaction through one eye he left partially open. "I'm fine."

"Well, yeah. But it was getting chilly in here, and I thought maybe you might –"

"I said I was fine," I cut her off, not missing the hurt on her face. I sighed. "Do you want to sit?"

She worried her lip between her teeth. "I should be getting back to them."

"We are in a can size plane. You can sneeze, and they would hear it. I think you're fine." Her excuse was pointless. They were two rows away from me. "I didn't lie; I can't physically hurt you."

“I wouldn’t be scared of you even if you could,” she admitted. “But, I respect your need for space.” When I didn’t answer her admission, she picked the chair across from mine and sat slowly.

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She was the opposite of any girl I would have gone for before being cursed. She was pale, deathly so. Tiny. Her dark hair made her blue eyes almost electric against her skin. And the dress, why did I like it so much? Images of her in black silk and floral crossed my mind, and I had to blink the thought away. I cleared my throat. “What’s it like?”

“What?” She tilted her head to the side as she watched me, confused.

“To be one of . . . them?” Disgusting creatures from what I know, living their life by stealing from others, draining life forces.

“Ask me in a week.” She sighed before offering a little laugh. “I might be able to tell you more then. Truthfully, I’ve only been this way for like three days.”

“Three days?” That would mean – “Which one of them turned you?”

I felt furious for her, but I suspected that had to do with the mate bond. Anger surged in me, and I fought the urge to shift right then and tear at all three of their throats. But she just shook her head as if she felt my fury, her hand hovering over my blanket-clad knee but not touching it. She pulled her fingers away, flexing a few times.

“None. It’s my genetic curse. They only woke it. But, I suspect it would have woken regardless.” She pushed some of the raven hair behind her ear. “They’ve saved me. A lot. And- and I would have never believed this was possible, any of this really, but they – they are my destiny.”

I was jealous that she felt she needed them, those other men, other beings, but not me.

She didn't feel like I was her destiny, though she wore my mark on her fair skin like a bold declaration of ownership. Wasn't that purposeful enough? Didn't that scream to the fates that she belonged to me? What did they have to show for their ownership? Where was their mark?

"Your destiny," I began slowly, "You believe this?"

"I don't know what to believe," she admitted. "But I can't deny the power our blood has on each other. I can't deny Ellis' feelings. Or the fact that Sterling has healed me. I can't pretend that Oak isn't dragged to my rescue countless times." She looked down for a moment before dragging her eyes slowly to meet mine. "And I can't deny and pretend that the mark of your people isn't seared into my skin. A week ago, I was human. And now, now I don't know what I am."

"Vampires shouldn't be able to drink from each other." I mused; it was a fact that it was human blood that kept them going.

"I'm human, remember?"

"Sentimentally, but your heart doesn't beat as a human's should." It was fact, and though I know the look in her eye said the statement was painful, it didn't alter the truth.

"That may be so, but it is only their blood I can take. And when they drink from me, magical things happen."

I growled. I couldn't help it. There was no secret that a vampire's bite caused euphoric pleasures, and I heard them last night, locked inside the tiny room at the cottage. It took all the inner power I possessed not to break down the door on principle that she was my mate. Mine. And they were pleasuring her. Even though I didn't want to do the job, it didn't mean I approved of them doing so.

“I meant they glow, heal, feel stronger than average blood,” she clarified.

“Blood is sacred in our traditions.” I offered, and fuck, but I didn’t even know why I brought it up; it didn’t matter. I wasn’t planning on mating with her anytime soon—correction, ever.

She yawned before she brought her legs up to the seat, curling them under her body. She reminded me of a kitten, compacted tightly in a ball, ready to sleep. “How so?”

Her head fell against the seat as she watched me, her skirt billowing around her so that only her tiny, bare feet peeked out from under the material. She was a distraction. Having her near made me forget, caused my thoughts and fury to leave me, and I cursed the fates once more. I Forced my eyes away from her pink-colored toes. “Blood is intimate.”

“That goes without saying. What’s more intimate than taking something from someone’s body into ones own for sustainability?”

“We don’t use blood for sustainability,” I corrected. “It connects us. Links our minds to our mates.” I felt my skin heat up, and I was thankful that my tone and the cabin's shadows hid my blush. “When our mates are in heat, their blood gives us renewed strength. It’s a charge to our senses. Our abilities.”

Her eyes fluttered closed. “This whole world, I have a lot to learn.”

I felt like at this point so did I because all these vampires and curses and being trapped for six decades, well it was exhausting my mind. “Humans aren’t supposed to be part of this world.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” her voice was faint.

“Unfortunately, this world gives no choices.”

I learned that the hard way, long before now. Long before I became trapped. But I guess I had forgotten. Years of leading my people, years of not letting them stray on the wrong path, and loneliness got to me, loneliness jilted me of my actual future. Now? Now I had a half-human half-vampire as a mate, and I wanted to scream that I didn't want her. That I didn't want this. That she already had too much power over me even when I was fighting it. But what good would that do? Nothing short of a miracle would remove my mark from her skin. The only defense I could think of was to push her away, any way I could.

Her breathing leveled out as sleep claimed her and my eyes roamed around the plane's cabin, noting that they all were asleep now. Trusting bastards. I scratched my neck as I sat up, watching her sleep peacefully. She reminded me of a porcelain doll, so damn delicate. I doubt she could survive in this world long. I took the blanket off my lap and spread it over her, feeling warmth spread over me as she pulled it close to her chest in her sleep.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow I would work on pushing Liberty away. Tonight, I preferred to watch her sleep and take in the beauty of my family seal on the perfect backdrop of her skin.

Chapter 13

ELLIS

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I woke to the thinnest sliver of sun streaming in through the plane's window. Everyone was asleep, except Liberty, who gave me a soft smile from the other side of the plane before rising and quietly walking toward me. As if there was some invisible strand pulling us together, I felt the pull of our bodies yearning to be close. It was impossible. The longer I remained close to her, the harder it was to stay away, the less space I wanted between us.

Was this how not being lonely felt? I'd spent nearly two hundred years praying for death because of the feeling of solitude that clawed at me from inside. I wasn't sure what to do with this feeling, but I knew that she would be mine as long as I lived. I couldn't, wouldn't, refused to let her go now that I'd felt more alive than ever before.

My body could feel the thrum that pulsed through her. The electrical spark of her nerves as she watched me sent pleasure through me before she even touched my skin. Her finger grazed against my cheek as she lowered herself onto my lap, her legs straddling my thigh. My chest ignited; fire and want twisted around each other as it spiraled through my body. Was this what it was like? Was this how it felt to be completely whole?

"Everyone is sleeping," she whispered like I didn't already know that for this moment in time, she was one hundred percent mine.

My fingers slid up her thigh under her dress, her bare flesh warm. "But, you're not."

"No. I'm not." She leaned in and kissed my neck before laying her head on my shoulder, "Do you think this will work out? Oak refuses to accept anything but success. Sterling can't look past the inconvenience and Justice, well, hell if I know

what the hell is planned there. But I worry. I worry we won't all make it through. Whatever that means."

The more that came at us, the more I worried about the same thing. But that wasn't something I would admit to her. She was seeking my reassurance, not my doubt. My fingers softly stroked her skin. "I think we were destined to make it to the end of this, Lib. Regardless of how hard, why would the fates throw us together only to tear us apart?"

"The paranormal put a lot of faith in these fates, it seems," she mused.

"Everything in this world is decided for us; haven't you realized that by now? To have a curse that happened to your family member two and a half centuries ago follow you to now? That can only be chalked up to fate, don't you think? Does the human's God have enough foresight for such actions?"

I inhaled the scent of her hair. The scent calming me in ways nothing ever could. "I don't imagine so."

"Promise me this will all be okay. That we all will be okay," Liberty begged against my skin, and I didn't know how she could make me promise such a thing when I knew nothing of the workings of the fates. I knew nothing about how to keep everyone safe. I knew nothing of how this would end. So I gave her the only promise I could, the only thing I knew was true.

"I would never live a day without you in it." Because if she were to die in this, I would die before her, protecting and shielding her with my whole being.

The plane dipped slightly as it began its descent, and I loathed that soon I would have to take my hands off her thighs and remove her from where she fit so perfectly in the crook of my neck. As if sensing the shift, Oak's eyes opened, instantly searching for

her. A calm came over him when his eyes fell on her. He then let his eyes drift closed again before inhaling a deep calming breath. He must have sensed it and knew, just like I did, that the moment we stepped off this plane, life wasn't going to be the same. A new level of complications was about to be added, and I just couldn't say for sure if I was ready for them.

“When this is over, will you show me your workshop?”

I blinked, torn from my thoughts by her unexpected question. I hadn't thought about my work in days. What once consumed me so thoroughly had been replaced, and I no longer cared about building perfection, only maintaining the perfect right in front of me. “You want to see my work?”

“Why wouldn't I?” She pulled back. “I have a confession. I might have googled you, and your pieces are, well, extraordinary. To carve like that must have taken you years.”

Decades, actually. “If you wish, I'll take you anywhere.”

“Your table and chairs are amazing, and your coffee tables are magnificent. But my favorite are the cradles and tiny kid-size chairs,” she admitted, and they were my favorite too. They reminded me of my sister and her love for this one doll my mother had made for her. My mother made it out of an old flour bag and my father's worn-out clothes.

“I have a few acres of land. It's peaceful there.” More than peaceful, it was my little slice of heaven—the one place in so long where I've felt at home, alone in my element.

“I want to go,” she said with more force before adding, “I mean if you want to.”

I forced myself to remove my hands so I could wrap them around her waist, pulling her close to me as the plane lowered. “Of course, I want you to go. I’d have you stay if you wanted.”

I would never return her. Sharing be damned, but she was mine. Every sweet inch of her had my name invisibly etched into her skin, and I couldn’t wait to see her naked body sprawled across a bed carved by me. Hands, teeth, and tongue all going to use. Minutes, hours, days.

A snapping sound ripped my mind from the hypnotic haze, and my eyes tore away from the beauty in my hands to Sterling. He cleared his throat. “We’re about to land.” I knew this. “This means it’s time to buckle up.”

Oh yeah, that. I pried my fingers from her skin, hating that I had to part. Safety first? We were fucking vampires. Odds of dying in a plane crash were slim. Only, we didn’t know how fully she was a vampire, and the thought of her life being taken too soon due to my lack of common sense made me nauseous. “Where are we headed?”

“Justice’s family land,” Oak interjected, the book open on his lap. “Though it will be empty.”

“You can’t possibly know that.” Justice stood, hovering over everyone with a scowl plastered on his face.

“It’s in the book,” Oak stated.

“Fuck the book!” He reached down, and Liberty’s hand shot out, stopping Justice before he could get it.

“That book is important. Don’t touch if you have intent on harming it.”

Like the rest of us, she made him soft. Even when he tried to hide it. Just looking at her made the yellow in his eyes pale and his posture loosen. “I have questions.”

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“Don’t we all,” Sterling interjected, “That book barely brushes the surface of them.”

“Then what’s the use?” His voice was more animal than man as he growled out the words. “Why am I destined to be saddled to you all when you’re all a group of failures?”

Harsh. I would hardly say we were failures. But I didn’t get a chance to defend our actions, Liberty beat us to it. “Failures that rescued you and broke the curse.” Her fingers rubbed at the jeweled necklace she wore around her neck, the gems glowing under her touch. “We aren’t keeping you saddled to us, you know. You’re free to go, if you please.”

Though I suspected it was more than just that. Like the rest of us, once you’re near her, the desire to tear your body away from her became impossible. He could leave, but I doubted it would be for long, and he probably knew that. “I just want answers.”

Though his voice was rough, he wasn’t filling us with his aggression. “You can read.” Liberty shrugged. “But there are no answers about your curse in it.”

“My family?”

“No. It doesn’t say anything about that either.”

At the insistent blinking of the seatbelt light, he plopped down in the nearest seat and buckled up. “I need answers.”

Again. So did we. “We will figure them out. We are landing on your land soon,

maybe something there will help.”

Though from what I spotted from the window and the feelings I was pulling off Liberty, we both knew that he wasn’t going to find his answers below. A lot had changed in sixty years, the land below was one of them. I doubted any of his pack was left, and even if they were, what good would they be to him now? Lost stragglers from a once-massive pack wouldn’t know shit about the information he sought. Still, Liberty’s suggestion pacified him enough that his nerves seemed to calm.

When we landed, Justice was the last off the plane, and I didn’t know if it was out of fear for what he would find, or because he needed to gather his thoughts before facing his people again. But, the moment he appeared through the door of the plane, his face dropped in disappointment. Even from a distance, I felt the sadness he tried to hide from us.

Slowly he stepped down the steps. “They aren’t here. Our homes are . . . gone.”

He almost choked on the last word; he swallowed hard to work through the emotion. Liberty, sensing his struggle, didn’t try to offer unwanted physical comfort but tried for emotional, “What if we walk around for a bit. Maybe see if we can find something?”

He nodded and lead the way in front of us, not even bothering to see if we followed. We did, of course, not because we particularly cared, but Liberty followed, and we would go with her anywhere to keep her safe. The land in front of us was pretty sparse. Where the houses and huts of his people once were now was just a clearing on the side of a highway. In the distance, through the trees, there was a building, though I couldn’t see what type it was.

As if Justice and I shared thoughts, his head turned in the direction, his eyes locking onto the dwelling before he stomped with purpose toward it. Liberty trailed behind.

“What are you doing?”

“Asking questions.” He growled a little too rough for my liking.

“Wait.” Her hand touched his arm, and he whirled around.

“Don’t. Touch. Me.”

She pulled her hand back as if his skin burned her, and Oak, always the protector, was at her side in an instant, using his body to partially shield her from the man. “I just wanted to tell you to be careful. So many things have changed in sixty years, and it’s a bit shocking to someone not used to it.”

“Things couldn’t have changed that much.” He turned, ignoring her warning as he made his way through the waist-high grass.

He was in for a shock; we all knew it. Things had been altered in the years since technology advanced, and the world became dependent on it. Life wasn’t as simple as it once was. In fact, it was a hell of a lot more complicated than it had been years ago, and I, for one, couldn’t wait to watch from the sideline as the bastard figured it out.

We reached the front of the building, a run-down gas station that had seen better days before he stopped. His eyes looked around like he was taking in all the details before locking onto the double glass doors. He marched in their direction, determination in every step he took. When he reached the doors, his fingers wrapped around the metal bar of the handle, and he pulled, flinging it open wide before stomping in.

Well, he definitely had the dramatic entrance down.

His eyes widened as he took in the convenient store in front of him. The selection vast compared to so many years ago. Even run-down, the inside was covered with

flashing advertisement screens and blinking neon signs. His eyes flinted around, taking everything in. Liberty stepped up to him again, probably trying to distract him from whatever emotion he was feeling. The reaction was strong, strong enough to make me gasp, and I could only imagine what Justice felt.

“Do you want to grab some food while you’re here?” she asked.

He ignored her, turning his back to her, efficiently shutting her out as he took a step further into the store. Then another. Until he was standing at the nearest aisle gazing around. It took him a few moments to move further down, and we all waited. This was his journey inside of ours, and though we could have rushed him, at this moment, nothing seemed pressing.

He took slow steps, gazing at each item on the shelf as he gathered a few of them. I doubted he had thought how to pay for his purchases, if he planned to at all. Not like it mattered; between the four of us surrounding him, one of us would cover it. When he reached the last aisle, he stopped, his eyes watching the mesmerizing display of slowly turning hot dogs, cooking on rotating heated bars.

“Do you want one?” Liberty tried again, and in response, he just walked away.

That action alone made Oak growl behind us, anger sparked in his emotions. I got it, and I understood it. But I also knew that Justice spoke the truth, that he couldn’t physically hurt our girl, and well, she was stronger than a little silent treatment. In fact, when whatever this shit was that was happening was over, I suspected she would repay him tenfold with her own attitude and petty displays that she’s proven capable of in the time we’ve spent together. Hell, she could make him spend a night in that pink monstrosity of an apartment, and that would be payback enough.

Justice approached the middle-aged man at the counter, plopping his armful of food down on the Formica surface before allowing himself to eye the man in front of him.

His gaze drank the man in through long hard pulls. It drew out through time until the clerk was squirming in place, beads of sweat lining his forehead. His throat cleared, “Can – can I help you?”

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Liberty reached to the side of her, grabbing a few candy bars off the display and a bag of chips before tossing them into Justice's pile. "I'd like to buy these."

The clerk's head dipped slightly in acknowledgment, but he didn't take his eyes off Justice. Even as a human, he could sense the looming threat within the man. The authority that radiated off Justice was nearly stifling at times, not that it worked on us. The clerk grabbed the nearest product and scanned it, the red laser catching Justice's attention as he watched intently with each scan.

"That will be thirty twenty-one," the clerk announced.

"You can't possibly know that. You didn't type in any of the prices or even attempt to add them."

Liberty's credit card appeared. "Here you go."

"What are you doing?" He hissed, and I suspected he genuinely didn't know. The man had never seen a credit card in his life.

"I'm paying," she whispered back.

"With that? Surely not. Even so, I will not let you pay for me. A man pays." His sharp voice had us all blinking a few times. The quickest way to anger a female was by mumbling about something a man should do. As far as I was concerned, the only thing a man should do is provide his girl with many orgasms and kill the spiders. Everything else falls into the she's an independent woman category, and I'd learned not to try to test that.

He raised an eyebrow as he patted at his pockets, searching for cash that every single one of us knew he didn't have, every single one of us but him. "My money is gone."

He made an announcement like we should be shocked that after spending sixty years trapped within a beast, he happened to lose his wallet. "It's fine, I've got it."

Liberty tried again, but his pride wouldn't have it. He brushed her off as he searched some more. Finally, I stepped up, tossing my card onto the counter. Though the furrow of his brows told me he didn't want me to pay, he didn't object as the clerk reached for my card.

When the bag filled with our purchase was held out, Justice eyed it like it was poison. Liberty reached forward. "It's just a bag, Justice."

Just not a type of bag he had seen before. I got his weariness. If I hadn't grown through the progression of the centuries and decades, I would doubt my own eyes too. I reached out and took the bag from Liberty, not because a gentleman always carried the bag, because god, if I voiced that she would shoot me dead, but because I knew she had her hands full with the confused man in front of us.

Justice let his confusion go for the moment, though I knew later he would have a lot of questions about how the world worked. "How long have you lived in the area?"

The clerk rubbed his hands on his thigh nervously. "My whole life."

Justice nodded. "The people who lived on the land out back, what happened to them?"

The man looked confused for a moment before clarity came to him. "There has never been anyone there in my lifetime, sir. But I heard a rumor once that a few years before I was born, there was a giant community of outcasts." Justice scoffed at that

assessment. “They were there one day. The next, all the shacks were burned to the ground, and every one of them disappeared. Everyone thought they would find bodies but nothing. Just gone, I guess.”

“Burned how?”

“The ground was dug up and destroyed, the houses complete ash. It took years before anything grew on that land again.”

“What year about was that?”

“I was born in sixty-five, so my guess, maybe about fifty-eight?”

Justice nodded, his eyes glazed like he was in a trance. “Thank you.”

“Thank you; you’ve been a lot of help,” Liberty offered before taking Justice’s shirt sleeve and pulling him away. This time, he didn’t fight her touch, and if my eyes were correct, he almost, almost leaned into her touch.

She led him outside and around the building before stopping. He blinked a few times, “They weren’t shacks.”

“I know,” she responded.

“No, you don’t know. You know nothing about my people. The shacks were a front for the underground system we lived in. Our dens were all underground. We weren’t poor dwellers.”

“I never thought you were. And even so, I live paycheck to paycheck, so who am I to judge?” she offered.

He ignored her attempt. “If they dug up the homes below, they didn’t intend on coming back here.”

“So, we will find them,” she encouraged.

His creepy eyes focused on her, and Oak was instantly at her side, ready to protect her. “If they lived, I know where they are. I have no choice but to go.”

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He had a choice, but I suspect the leader in him refused to accept it. “So then, what do you want to do? We go to them?”

He looked at her with disgust. “We aren’t going anywhere. I am going to them.”

She smirked. “With what money?” The realization hit him hard that she was right. The King Was Broke. “Maybe you could call them and have them wire you funds. But wait, do you have their numbers? Should we look them up in the phone book? I wonder if they could even work the internet to wire it to you. By the way, can you work the internet to receive it?”

“Enough,” he boomed. “I’ve got your point. I’m dependent on you all.” He most definitely was not thrilled about this fact. He cleared his throat. “Would it be possible to hitch a ride to Arizona? Please.”

Liberty ignored the sound of his teeth grinding together as she smiled broadly. “A ride to Arizona, you say?” She looked to Sterling who gave her the nod of approval that his plane could go to that destination. “Well, it’s a good thing we just bought all these snacks. We’re about to have a nice little ride ahead of us.”

She skipped away, and Justice followed, grumbling under his breath, “I’m fucking thrilled.”

Chapter 14

JUSTICE

The fact was, I wasn't thrilled about depending on a bunch of vampires to find my pack. I wasn't thrilled about being moneyless in a strange world. I wasn't thrilled about taking anyone back to the bunker I had bought on a whim what seemed like forever ago, and I most definitely wasn't fucking thrilled to have my mate look at me like a pitiful, broken puppy she found on the side of the road.

I wasn't broken. Not yet. Not ever. Just a bit scarred and slightly damaged.

But I wished the mate would stop looking at me like she feared I would snap. I hadn't cracked yet. Not completely. And if I did snap, it most definitely wouldn't be in front of her. She already saw me as weak, already had a predetermined notion about me and the stability of my mental wellbeing. I absolutely couldn't fuel her judgment further.

"We're almost there," she announced as if I hadn't seen the preppy one – Sterling – whisper it in her ear as she giggled like a fucking liquored-up preteen just moments before.

"Thanks for the update, mate." I glared at the man whose hand was resting on her thigh, creeping further up her leg than I liked. I wasn't delusional. I had no doubt that my mate fucked around with every single one of them, a disgusting but actual fact. That didn't mean I wanted to witness it firsthand.

"It's Liberty, not mate."

I sneered. "One and the same."

Her posture straightened, her eyes locked on to mine. Whereas most would recoil at the mere glance from me, my mate's back stiffened with challenge. "Actually. It's not."

“In our society –” I began to explain that mate is often used instead of a name. It’s a symbolic connection. It’s ownership. It’s- not anything I want to display when my crest was already seared into her skin for all to see.

Luckily, she saved me from explaining further. “I’m not part of your society, and I would prefer my name.”

Yet. I wanted to tack on the word to her declaration, but it froze in my throat because I wasn’t sure I actually wanted her there. It was the mate bond I knew, forced upon us by the fates. “I cannot and absolutely will not call you Liberty. Our names together sound, so –”

“You guys sound like a cheesy superhero team,” Sterling pipped in, and she reached her fingers over to his leg and pinched him. He made a show of acting like it hurt, but he was immortal; I doubt he felt a simple pinch.

“What he said.” I sighed because I actually didn’t understand what he meant, but I knew for a fact that if she pinched him for it, then it went with my reluctance.

“You both are children,” she spat.

Sterling didn’t look a bit put off by her animosity. In fact, he only grinned further before curling his body around her and kissing her neck. A growl rumbled in my chest, and it only made Sterling’s grin grow in the most taunting of fashions. If he weren’t fronting the cost of this journey, I would have torn my teeth into his jugular already, and it would have had nothing to do with my mate and everything to do with his cocky grin.

“I haven’t been a child in many years, Mate.” I raised an eye in challenge.

Her eyes fell on each of us. “I sometimes forget how old you guys are. I’m

surrounded by a bunch of old men.”

“My performance isn’t old,” Sterling added.

She laughed at that, and I had never been more jealous in my life than I was right now at that arrogant bastard. Her hand patted his cheek lovingly, and he melted – literally melted- into her touch. “That most definitely is full of youth.”

I growled again, and her eyes turned to me. Such mesmerizing orbs of blue, like looking at the spot where the blue sky meets the ocean. I cleared my throat. “If I cannot call you mate, I don’t know-”

She cut me off. Silencing the king without a fucking thought. Lesser of a being could have, no, would have been punished. “Libby.”

“What?”

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“If you insist on not using my full name, you can call me Libby. A name is a thing of respect, and I think we’ve all earned your respect by freeing you, wouldn’t you say?”

Her eyes waited, assessing me, and I didn’t want to argue that the term mate was higher respect than a name because not a vampire nor human would truly understand the value. “I have stated my gratitude.”

“Then show it to me,” she snapped back, and I didn’t know if I should be impressed that my mate had such strength behind her words or disappointed that she dared speak to me in such a manner.

I sighed, the resignation coursing through my bones. “If you wish I don’t call you mate, then I will not.” Then for good effect, I added her placebo name, “Libby.”

“Thank you.” She paused, then that look took over again. The soft tender worried look, “Justice, I want you to prepare for the worst, just in case.”

“There is no just in case.” I refused to entertain that option.

“I know. I know. But you have to understand; no one has heard from your people since you left. They just vanished. What that means isn’t clear, but I want you to prepare for all options.”

I didn’t know what she was trying to prepare me for. Another round of disappointment? The truth that they may not have made it to the bunker, they may not have made it at all? But she didn’t know Horo, she didn’t know my family, she didn’t realize that perseverance was written in the coding of our blood, down to the very

fiber that molds us and if there were a way for us to prosper, my people would do it. I didn't question if they were alive; I felt it in my marrow; it was where they were surviving at the moment that I needed to find out.

But then again, she wouldn't understand. She was only human, after all. With vampire blood running through her veins. She's already disrespected me and my people by using her mate bond to control me, a power so sacred it should never be used except in dire circumstances. Did I really want to take the time to explain that my people would not fail me? If they failed me, it's because they were dead. All of them. They would fight if need be until the very last survivor's heart had stopped beating.

"They are alive."

She leaned forward, her hand hovering over my knee for a moment before she pulled it back, and for a moment, the loss caused sorrow. The thought of her touch disgusted me, but a part deeper than I could control felt the longing to have her hands on my skin. I watched as her tongue poke out for a second, wetting her lips before she continued, "It's been sixty years."

"And how long do you think a shifter lives?"

Her hands found each other, knotting together in fluster. Her back straightened, and this time when her eyes met mine, I felt the nervousness. I nearly scoffed, my fated mate, nervous around me? The ridiculousness was unimaginable. "I – I don't really know to be honest. I'm just learning about this world and the creatures in it."

"Creatures? Do you think of me as a creature?"

"I -" she began but never finished, her arrogant vampire mate cut in.

“I prefer the word beast.”

An inhuman sound poured from my mouth, and within the blink of an eye, my hand was around his throat, my claws digging into his skin just enough to pierce the layers, causing small droplets of blood to trickle down. “I am Royalty. Do you not get the magnitude of what that means? The naturally born will always trump the made in this world, yet you dare to test me?”

His words were strained as they left his mouth. “Yet, for being so powerful, you got yourself trapped.”

The fur of my animal sprouted from my arms. “One lapse in judgment does not define my power.”

“Maybe so, but it defines your weakness.”

My claw squeezed, and the vampire wheezed under my grip. The blood trickled down the column of his neck, and Libby’s eyes followed. She blinked a few times before her fingers pried at my own. She had no strength to her, her fingers not forcing my own to budge at all, but still, I loosened my grip, letting her remove my hand from the abomination’s throat. She held it in her palms, the size engulfing hers.

“He is not an abomination.” Her eyes fell to the blood that still coated my paw before meeting my eyes again. “And you are not a powerless beast.”

Her eyes went to the blood again before she brought my paw to her mouth, her tongue darting out and lapping at the blood that coated it. A shiver racked my body. One that only intensified when her lips wrapped around my skin as she sucked the blood from it. I didn’t want to react; I hated that my body did so unwillingly, but I couldn’t deny that I liked it. I couldn’t deny that under other circumstances, I may have broken traditions and gone after a human girl if the fates deemed it necessary.

But these weren't under the ideal circumstances. And she wasn't just human; she was a vampire. Parasitic to her core, whether she admitted it or not.

I pulled my hand away, more aggressively than I intended, before leaning back and glaring. I had nothing to say, not to them, and that fact didn't seem to phase her one bit, not when the moment my skin left her lips, she had already turned to the vile vampire, lapping at his tiny wounds in sympathy. Disgusting. Fowl. Repulsive. That's what this whole situation I had gotten myself into was, and I was expected to . . .

Mate?

Mate with that? Mate with a vampire? Create an heir to my legacy with a hybrid?

My stomach souring had nothing to do with the plane's sudden descent and everything to do with the present company and the unrealistic plans that fate had bestowed upon me. A pair was never matched unless an offspring was in fate's works, a fact I utterly forgot until now. A fact I might've let my mind intentionally block out. But regardless, the fact remained true. The rarity of a shifter child was an act only done by fates. A treasure. A fucking blessing. My fucking curse.

It was another thirty minutes before the plane landed. The longest thirty minutes of my fucking life, and I couldn't figure out why that was. The reasons were vast. My mate? The vampires? The chance that I wouldn't find my people? Maybe it was all those packaged foods I'd tried mixed with the plane's movement, but I suddenly felt queasy.

What if I didn't find my people? I'd spent more time on a plane than not since I'd been turned back to my human form, and yet, not once did that option ever solidly cross my mind. But now, as I stepped my feet off the tiny carrier and onto the desert sand of Arizona, I couldn't help but wonder what I would do next. What would happen without my people?

“There’s nothing out here,” Ellis pointed out.

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“You wouldn’t see it.” A close-minded vampire would never find it out here. That was the point. Our location was designed to hide from those seeking to find us unless you knew the exact location already. If they were here, I knew eyes would already be on us, waiting and watching to see what our move would be. We were trained to act first, and ask questions last, especially in situations that involved our home, and I only hoped they recognized me before their teeth attempted to tear into my flesh.

“Nothing is here,” Sterling echoed.

Libby took Oak’s hand as she walked, and his body visibly relaxed. She was a balm, her touch having magical properties on the menacing man. “If Justice says they are here, then I believe him.”

They continued their chatter, and I tuned them out, inhaling deeply with my eyes closed, trying to catch a familiar scent. It had been years, decades, since I had smelt the familiarity of my people, and a part of me feared that I wouldn’t recognize the scent. That maybe with time, my senses had dulled, and my ability weakened. But on my second inhale, I caught it. It was faint, barely recognizable, but it was there.

My body jolted in the direction, my legs moving without instruction, carrying me toward my people. Taking me home. The further I walked, the stronger the scent got, the more the anticipation inside of me sprung to life and danced with glee. I felt more alive than I’d felt in years. My body itched and burned to shift, to howl with delight, and pounce with joy.

They hadn’t questioned me as they followed, and I appreciated that although we may not have mutual trust, they respected me enough to do what I needed to to find my

people. I was getting close; of that I was sure. The familiar scent was growing stronger, the urge to quicken my pace hard to fight.

My foot lifted, finding a cement platform. The moment my shoe touched down, a ferocious snarl broke the silence before four wolves appeared, their jaws snapping, spit flying, as they locked eyes on the group of people behind me. My body tensed; my jaw locked with the tension. When they lunged, my body sprung into action, shifting before I could think. I pushed my way forward, pushing Libby back until I stood between her and the wolf who skidded to a stop in front of me.

He snapped his teeth, a low growl filling the air, and for a second, he thought he could leap over me. He learned too late the repercussions, his blood flinging in droplets through the air and landing in nearly black puddles against the sand. My jaw released his throat, and his body fell limply to my feet.

The roar that left me was unearthly. The sound cracking the cement under my paws like a spider web, spreading its fractures under the two remaining wolves as they jumped to get to stable ground. The shaking under our feet intensified as another rumble left me, the power behind it forcing the wolves onto their stomachs as my bones and joints shifted to human.

I stared down at them, my eyes hard from anger. The nerve, the bold ass audacity they had to go after my mate. My. Mate. I growled again just for good measure, taking pleasure in the whines that escaped their lips, savoring the look of fear radiating in their eyes. I was their king. Their fucking king, and they dared treat me this way. To my left, a slow clap broke the silence, but I dared not turn toward it for fear that the wolves at my feet would retaliate their friend's death.

“They are still young, my King.”

My head snapped toward the voice, and suddenly, my legs were nearly too weak to

hold up my weight. The sorrow I had buried for all the lost years surfaced, and my voice cracked as I let out in a whisper, “Horo.”

Fates be damned. Please don’t let me collapse right here. “It’s been a while, brother.”

He stepped forward reluctantly, and I didn’t know if I should cower away or stand straighter. But this was Horo. My beta. My best friend. My brother by choice. “I -”

I didn’t know what to fucking say. But I didn’t have to. Horo stood in front of me, eyeing me up and down silently, judging me for what I had become, maybe for where I had been longer than necessary, before he clapped me on the back and pulled me in toward his body, embracing me in a way that told me that even after all these years, he needed me as much as I still needed him.

“They all thought you were dead.” His voice sounded choked, but I knew Horo never cried. “They all thought we lost you, but I knew you were alive.” He pulled back from my body, and I ignored the distinct glistening of his eyes. His chin went toward the vampires behind me, “Care to explain?”

“They saved my life.” Which honestly, was true, but not the full extent of it.

“Did they? Want to tell me about the family crest on that one’s chest then?” He used his chin to gesture toward Libby, and fuck, he never missed a damn thing.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I don’t understand what’s happening.”

“I see.” He nodded, his eyes never leaving my mate, a fact that made me slightly anxious. “But, you protected her.”

I did. I did it without thinking. I did it selflessly. And I suspected if the opportunity arose again, I would repeat the action. Despite what I claimed, I couldn’t let her get

hurt. I could not neglect my duties in protecting her. “She’s my mate.”

He didn’t try to talk me out of that logic, or bring up that she was in fact not a shifter because Horo was always more level-headed than I was, always more faith in what the fates dealt than I ever could. “Okay then, so are you going to order them to shift or leave them there all afternoon.”

The thought of leaving them in the desert heat after they tried to kill my mate held it’s appeal, but I didn’t want my first act back to be one of malice and revenge. I peered down at the wolves at my feet and gathered all the strength I could before pushing it behind my voice. “Shift.”

Seconds later, two teenage boys were bowing at my feet, quivering with fear as my power washed over them.

Chapter 15

LIBERTY

We followed behind Justice and his friend, keeping a couple feet distance. It wasn’t that I questioned Justice’s judgment, but his friends were trying to kill us mere minutes ago. That was an act I didn’t easily forget. His friend, Horo, peered at me over his shoulder, assessing me in such a way that I felt raw and vulnerable. I was conflicted. A part of me wanted his friend to like me, to give his approval, and another part said it didn’t matter. But it did. Horo was a part of Justice’s life, his beta, in other words, his best friend. He knew Justice better than I could ever dream to at this point, and even if I hadn’t wanted this whole mate thing, I felt like I needed his approval.

“The entrance is down here.” Horo pointed to a door that was pulled open in the cement, leading down a few steps to a round cut out.

Oak walked over and peered inside, the blankness a sharp contrast to the spark of light at the bottom. Ellis joined him, looking down into the hole for a moment before bringing his hands to his hips. Without taking his eyes off the hole he said, “Well, that looks like a nope from me.”

“You scared?” Justice taunted.

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“Hardly. Did you not remember the hole we dragged you out of? I’m just not sure I’m ready for another ambush quite yet. Or ever, really.”

“We won’t ambush you,” Horo defended. “It’s our home down there.”

“We’ve already been ambushed above ground, what makes you so sure we should believe you?” Sterling chimmed in.

“They were young. They didn’t know the king.” Horo gave a stern look to the teen boys, who nearly melted with shame under his gaze.

Volunteering to go down there wasn’t my best choice, but it still needed to be done. “I’ll go first.”

I stepped forward, and Justice’s arm shot out, blocking my movement. “I will. After you, Horo.”

He gestured to his friend who nodded before climbing over the edge and grabbing hold of the iron ladder. He began his descent downward, and when there was enough space, Justice swung his long legs over the edge and took the wrings in his hand. He moved down a few bars before pausing and holding his hand out to me. I stared at his fingers a moment, unsure if I should take his hand or not. It hadn’t gone unnoticed his extreme aversion to me or my touch.

His eyes fell to my chest and I felt the mark on my skin heat. His Adam’s apple bobbed, and he licked his lips before bringing his yellow gaze to mine. “I know what I’ve said, but I won’t hurt you. Just let me help.”

I still hesitated. I wished it was Oak or Sterling or Ellis going down before me instead of the man in front of me. I wished that I wore pants for once in my life instead of a damn sundress, and I wished I was trusting enough to believe that it was safe at the bottom of this ladder. I wanted to believe that Justice wouldn't throw me down to the bottom of the abbyss and make it look like an accident, but truthfully, I hadn't known him long. Hell, I hadn't known any of them long.

"It will be okay," Oak whispered behind me before kissing the top of my hair. "You need to show him trust so he can learn to show you his."

God, I hated that he was always so right. And wise. Why was Oak always smart? I reached out as I stepped over the ledge, praying that my feet would make it to the ladder before I missed the step entirely and fell to my death. But naturally, as I've already learned, the god I prayed to had a unique sense of humor, and the moment my foot touched the bar and my weight left the support of Oak, my foot slipped down, and I lost my balance.

A strong arm wrapped around my leg as a heavy body pushed me forward into the metal. "There you go, getting on was the hard part. From here, you just need to try not to fall and drag me down you with you."

Below, from the depth of the tunnel we were about to enter, I heard Justice's friend, Horo, snort, the sound echoing up and out into the surroundings. My fingers tightened on the metal, my grip so tight my knuckles turned white. Falling was not an option. Taking him down with me if I did fall wasn't going to happen.

"I'm going to let go now, take it a step at a time." Justice's grip on my leg loosened, and he trailed his hand up to my thigh and back down to my calf before he released it completely. It was meant to comfort, to remind me that he was solidly there at my back as I traveled a hundred plus feet below, but the touch was anything but comforting. It was fire and kindle, making my core tighten and my breath hitch.

He inhaled sharply, letting a rough curse fall from his lips before he took the next step down. As he moved, I moved with him. One step then the next. His body efficiently caging me as we moved, his chest a solid fixture of comfort at my back. The further down we got, the closer he got to me, the less he tried to keep himself away.

When his feet touched the ground, he froze in place, not removing his hands from where they sat next to mine while he leaned in, inhaling the scent of my hair. His voice was close to a growl when he spoke, “I told you that you would be safe.”

Like there was a tether pulling us together, I couldn’t fight the urge to lean into him. “I appreciate the gift of life.”

His right hand fell from the bar and wrapped around my stomach, traveling to just below my belly button. “That doesn’t change the fact that I don’t like you.”

I shook my head no before tilting my head to the side, offering my neck as I would to any of my men, and his nose trailed over my skin. Behind us, a throat cleared before Horo’s voice broke the silence. “If you could hold off the lust for a little longer, it’s been a long time since you’ve been home, my King.”

His body tensed before he pushed away. His voice surlier as he demanded Horo lead the way through the bunker. He didn’t spare us a glance to see if we followed; he already knew we had no choice. He led us down into the ground with no way out, and our options were limited.

I waited for my men before following Justice down the dark, sparsely lit hall that both he and Horo disappeared through. I could see the shadows of their back ahead of us to know we hadn’t been completely abandoned; still, I walked faster to catch up. If they attacked us above ground with the king, I would hate to see what happened if we were discovered below ground without him.

“Are you hungry?” Haro asked Justice just as we got close. “It’s almost dinner. I thought what better surprise during a meal than the entrance of the king.”

“You think highly of me. I suspect most won’t even pause their meal.” Justice laughed.

“You think little of how you’ve been missed. Everyone ached for you, sorrowed, longed for your return. Your mother has been ruling in your place, but she ages, and she’s tired. Can you blame her? To lose a son and gain a kingdom all in one day?”

“She’s always been strong for her age,” Justice mused. “But sixty years is a long time. You’ve done well with this place.”

I looked around and thought the lighting needed work, but it wasn’t awful. It wasn’t homely either, but it kept their people alive. “It took a hell of a lot of work to get this piece of shit cleaned up. And to think, I mocked you all those years ago for buying a missile bunker.”

“You mocked me for a fuck lot more than that.”

Justice laughed, and though the joy wasn’t directed at me, I still felt it through every fiber of my being. Justice wasn’t an unattractive man; in fact, some might say at a glance he was gorgeous. With his muscular build and nutmeg skin, his yellow eyes nearly radiated with his life force. But when he laughed, I forgot to breathe. It froze my lungs from the inside and made my heart speed. I tried to swallow, but my throat refused the request, and I was stuck, a statue of lust and want, a victim to idolism and yearning.

As if he knew what his single laugh had done to me, his head turned, and he glanced at me over his shoulder before his fingers touched the handle on the door in front of him. He pushed it open, using such force that the door held open unassisted as he

walked through.

All the chatter inside ceased. The clinking of silverware against bowls and plates silenced as Justice stood at the entrance, staring down the old and new faces of his people, greeting the past and welcoming the future. It took almost a full minute before someone had gathered enough wits to rise and bow slightly.

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“Uncle.” Justice bowed back, giving the elder equal respect.

I watched in awe as a whole new person took over Justice. No longer was he entitled and arrogant, but caring and respectful. His people flocked to him with equal parts shock and love. The excitement overwhelmed the room. It had been nearly ten minutes before the crowd parted, making room for a woman who was almost a replica of the man standing before me.

The woman stood in front of Justice, tears pooling in the crest of her eyes but not yet falling. “I thought I lost you, son.”

“I – I,” Justice’s words stuck in his throat, an explanation of the hows and whys of what happened to him, not something he was willing to offer just yet, and I felt that fact through the bond. I could see it in his body language, nearly hear it in his tone as he stumbled over the right words.

“But, he is here now. And safe,” I offered because that fact was all that mattered.

The woman’s eyes found me for the first time; they roamed over me with unspoken questions before finally stopping to meet my gaze. “My son has found a mate.”

“More like she found him,” Sterling mumbled behind me before he made a pained sound as if someone elbowed him.

“We aren’t really –” I started to explain that there was a mistake, that though I somehow had his mark sealed into my skin, we had no relationship at all, but Justice cut me off.

“I have. The fates have blessed our family once again.” His voice was stronger than I ever heard it as he spoke to his mother.

She tilted her head as she looked at me. “She is a – a –”

“She’s a vampire. I’m aware. With some human qualities,” he clarified.

“She’s not a shifter.” His mother observed some more as the woman slowly began to walk around me. I was still as a statue, my whole being on display, afraid to talk or even breathe while I met my judgment.

“No. She isn’t. But the fates have blessed our people, none the less.” His shoulders were back as he praised the fates when hours ago he was cursing them for my very existence.

“And the others?”

“Also, her mates.” Justice seemed less than thrilled to admit it, the words coming out as nearly a spat.

“Is this a true blessing, son?” She questioned, her face still not giving away her feelings.

“It’s – It comes with complications. I’ll admit.” He sighed, for the first time showing a sliver of weakness regarding me.

“She has good hips. She would bear strong children,” his mother mused, and Justice groaned.

“I’ve noticed. Thanks for that.”

His mother smirked. “The coupling, how is it. Does she take it well?”

This time, every male in my company made a sound. Some in amusement while others disbelief. But Justice, his was more horror than anything. “We’ve just met. We haven’t exactly worked out the details of fates yet.”

“But you bit her. I can see the scar remains. You and the fates both marked her as yours.”

I saw Justice’s eyes close as he searched for his patience. “I wasn’t myself when that happened.”

Her eyes gave me one last sweep before she leaned into my ear and whispered, “Our men are not the easiest when it comes to accepting their fate, but it will come.” She pulled back and offered her hand to shake. “She will do. I’m Mona, and this is my pack.”

Chapter 16

STERLING

It’s a fuckingmystery to me how someone can stand that proud in a room full of people, while wearing someone else’s fucking pants. But there he stood, surrounded by every person within twenty miles, being lapped at like a puppy. I guess the assessment wasn’t that far off, he was a shifter after all. A mutt with intelligence, what a fucking combination.

“Are you still pouting?” Ellis asked as he bumped me with his shoulder.

“I loved those pants.”

“You’re ridiculous; I hope you know that. Isn’t losing pants worth Liberty’s happiness?” I followed his gaze from where we stood along the wall of the room. Liberty was leaning over, laughing with a woman we had not yet met, and I had to admit, he wasn’t wrong. Seeing her smile did something to my insides. It was like splitting my body in two and forcing the pieces together again. The pain that knowing that smile wasn’t mine was soothed by knowing I owned a part of her.

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“Point made.” I took a sip of the drink in my hand, not even caring that it was some odd mix of liquids I’d never heard of before. The shit was good. “So where to from here?”

Oak shrugged. “I guess we will consult the book tonight, maybe see what Liberty thinks would be best as a whole?”

“I don’t want to stay here long,” I admitted. “I feel like a sitting duck. There are no wards here, like at home.” Home. Since when did I consider James’ mansion home?

“I agree,” Ellis chimed in.

“I could set some. I know enough magic for it,” Oak mumbled, but honestly, he missed the point. I didn’t want to be here that long. This wasn’t a comfort zone. These were Justice’s people, not mine. Not my own space. Not a single blood supply besides Liberty within two hundred miles. If we needed blood, we would have to find someone to offer it, and shifter blood wasn’t the same as humans. It didn’t hit as calmly. It was violent and turbulent. It burned as it went down, tearing through your insides in protest.

“We don’t have a blood supply here.”

“I thought of that, too,” Oak admitted, his fingers combing through his long hair. His voice lowered to a whisper. “I don’t want to fucking depend on shifter blood either. It’s like drinking shards of glass.”

“That’s generous.”

I groaned, letting my head fall back and hit the metal behind me, feeling the vibration travel up the metal. Only, the vibration didn't stop as the ground below us began to shake subtly at first before an all-out rumble filled the air, and it rolled under our feet.

"Fuck," we all said at once, seconds before I searched the crowd with growing panic, seeking out Liberty.

It was too late. Liberty had pushed past the group and was out of the cafeteria. She went into the hall, Justice and Haro close on her heels. I went against the group of people, frantically trying to find steady ground. I knew it wouldn't come. This wasn't just the earth quivering; this was a specific attack. Greta wanted Liberty; she'd made that clear time and time again, and she would stop at nothing to get what she wanted.

By the time I made it into the hallway, Liberty was already climbing the steps of the ladder, Justice right behind her. My body was jolted forward by Ellis and Oak as they tried to get to Liberty, the need to protect her surpassing all else.

When the hatch above was lifted, the sound of howling filled the bunker as wind and sand tunneled downward, spiraling into the dwelling. Everyone shielded their eyes from the sand and wind, and though I heard Justice tell her not to do it, Liberty still pushed forward until she disappeared from view. He followed, then Haro until the ladder was left empty.

There weren't enough curse words in my vocabulary to describe what I was feeling because fuck. Not again. I hadn't fully recovered from all the problems we had been continuously tossed in the middle of, and now? Now we were in for another fucking fun night, and I was mentally hoping we had a day or two, or maybe a lifetime before another metaphorical shit hit the fan.

I hadn't even blinked before Oak was already scaling his way up, his body moving faster than I thought possible, even with speeds like ours. I was right behind him with

Ellis in the rear, all of us eager to get up there, protect our girl, and live another fucking day. But, the closer we got to the top, the harder it was becoming to breathe, the more sand filtered through the opening, and the stronger the wind became, trying unsuccessfully to push us back down.

When we broke the surface, we were nearly crawling from the wind pounding against us, but still we managed to stand. We lifted our feet slowly as we trudged to be closer to Liberty. The sight in front of us was unreal. A mix of wind and sand with sheets of rain in the distance, pelting downward toward earth, rushing in our direction at rapid speeds. We worked our way to Liberty's side, realizing that standing in front of her would do nothing to protect her.

"I don't know what's happening," she admitted. This time, instead of seeking out Oak for comfort, she latched onto my fingers, and despite the sight of doomsday before us, my insides warmed.

"It's a monsoon, I think," Horo offered. "Though it's like nothing I've seen before."

"It's because it is nothing you've seen before," Oak mumbled. "It's unnatural."

Within seconds of hearing that, Justice was put into gear, bellowing orders to his people. Ordering the strong to remain above ground, the women and children below. Though he knew nothing about the protection of the underground bunker they now called home, he didn't hesitate to decide what was best based on what he did know. It was respectable; I'd give him that. He did care, and I could only hope that if need be, he put that much care into protecting Liberty as he did protecting the people he hadn't seen in over sixty years.

The ground gave one more solid pitch under our feet, knocking us all off balance before everything around us suddenly calmed. Ellis looked from side to side, his eyes big as he assessed. "Shit, this isn't good."

No, sir. It most definitely was not. The calm brought my anxiety to a whole new level. Without a doubt, we knew shit was about to get real, and I know I couldn't be the only one who was tired of it. Like could I have a vacation after this? Preferably one with just Liberty and I, on a nude beach with endless drinks and imported cookies. Unfortunately, with the claps of thunder that roared overhead, I knew with certainty that the chance of a nude vacation was well out of my reach.

Chapter 17

OAK

In most people's lives, they crave the calm, savor it. In ours, a calm could only mean one thing. The worst was about to come, and as I stood close to the girl who somehow owned me, I wasn't prepared for it. Each time I felt this calm, it meant there was a possibility that I might lose her, and I wasn't ready yet. I would never be prepared to lose her.

Above me, the calm broke with sudden claps of thunder, ferociously booming in rapid concession, and though I would never admit it out loud, I feared what was coming. I felt powerless. Powerless to fully protect Liberty. Powerless to sweep her off her feet and take her to the safety she so desperately deserved. She never asked for this. She never wanted to be part of this world she was so unfairly dragged into.

Lightning flashed in front of us, each flash getting closer and closer until it broke the ground feet away, causing us to scatter. Smoke rose from where the thunder touched down, and I knew if I got close enough, I would find fulgurites where the lightning melted the sand. It was coming, there was no doubt about it, and it was coming for Liberty.

I opened my mouth, determined to speak the warnings that ran through my head, but I never got the word out. The wind picked up to fierce speeds, taking up sand and

forcing a cloud that soared at least fifty feet into the air, bellowing in our direction. As the cloud of dust moved, it shifted and molded to form a giant monster of dirt and clay, held together by the wind and the rain that began to rapidly pelt down onto the beast, gluing it into its form.

His leg lifted and pounded down, causing the earth to rock, and the closer he got to us, the more afraid I became. Not of dying, I wasn't scared of death, but there was no way I could think of to defeat a monster of such magnitude and get everyone out alive. If no one died today, that in itself would be a miracle from the fates. But, despite my will, I suspected I had no way to prevent the injuries about to be caused.

About one hundred yards away, Justice ordered his men out, and they all charged in wolf form toward the monster. I wasn't sure they could cause any damage. Not when the closer they got, the stronger the wind blew. The weakest of the group got pushed back from the wind, skidding across the sand. The stronger of the wolves that forced their way past the wind and toward the monster showed little success. Each time one would jump up, their jaw open and poised to bite, their teeth would snap down on nothingness. The sand dispersed throughout the monster's body when the jaw closed, leaving the wolf to bite on air. Then, before the wolf could realize what happened, the monster's thick arm would reach down, batting the animal so hard, it flew through the air before landing with a hard thud on the sand.

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The wolves' attack did nothing to stop the monster's advancement, and beside me, I felt everyone tense. We all knew we needed a plan, but what that could be was something outside my grasp. Fuck, but the task seemed impossible. I wasn't the only one who thought so, of that I was sure.

We couldn't even really fight it; our weapons were left in England. Not like I thought it would do much good being that the wolves' bites didn't phase it. "Do you have any weapons?"

Horo rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "Not much, we hadn't needed to have much. We're wolves . . . we attack with our teeth."

Fuck. "Get me what you have."

I watched for a brief moment as Horo disappeared down the hatch, and I wondered if he would return with weapons or pussy out and leave everyone above to fight for themselves. It was evident that we were currently on the losing side of this affair, and if I could swoop Liberty up and drag her away, I would do so. Unfortunately, I doubted any of the scowling men beside me would let me take her away to the unknown.

The monster moved close enough that the sand blowing from its body pebbled into my skin, the sting like a thousand miniature knives running through my flesh. The wind around us howled and screamed, the sound painfully piercing my eardrums. The monster opened its mouth and roared, causing us all to cower down and cover our ears as blood began to seep through our fingers. It fucking hurt; it was excruciating, but nothing nearly as painful as the embers that burned in my stomach as the monster

reached for Liberty.

Behind me, the clink of weapons let me know Horo hadn't abandoned us, at least not yet. I didn't waste time seeing what he brought. I reached and grabbed the first weapon I could before stepping in front of liberty, ready to defend her. Not like she wanted me or would even let me do this alone. Instead, she stepped around me, saddling herself to my side, where she was sandwiched between Justice and me.

The events that had recently compiled against us had made her braver and stronger somehow. The Hag stone around her neck was still nestled tightly against her breasts, and the necklace, the fucking necklace made her look like the royalty she was destined to become. She was a force, standing tall, and at the moment, I may have had no fucking clue how we would pull it off, but I knew by the determined look on her face, that we would not only survive this, but fucking conquer.

She was ready to slay, and I'd never been so turned on in my entire life.

Above us, layers of clouds molded together, forming dark skies overhead before sheets of rain began to pour down. Our clothes got soaked in an instant, hindering our movement as we tried to go toward the monster. His screams of protest shook our surroundings as he batted at wolves and let streams of mud fly from his palm toward us.

The mud was hot, and had we not jumped to the side as quickly as we had, our flesh would have surely burned down to the bone. The mud hit the ground behind us, the sand hissing as the heat hit the cold ground. With the monster distracted, Sterling charged first, his sword aimed at the monster's calf. He swung it, the blade disappearing through the sand before surfacing on the other side. The parted sand stretched, fusing back together as quickly as it separated.

He swung again, this time with Ellis joining him by swiping at the other calf. It did

nothing to slow the monster down; the separation of his limbs had no effect as he reached toward us, his eyes set on one thing and one thing only. Liberty.

From the other side of Liberty, a compact, green ball left Justice's hands and landed right in the center of the monster's chest. One second ticked by, then the next, before an explosion of light burst outward, sending sand and mud blasting out before it boomeranged back in, structuring the monster's body again.

"Well, fuck," Justice mumbled. Yeah. I agreed.

I took in a deep breath, trying to avoid the sand and water as I inhaled, then let the magic I had tuned and tweaked for so long flow through me and into my palm. The sword's handle began to glow before the power traveled lower, taking over the whole blade. I swung it upward before charging forward, aiming for any part my blade could touch, swinging and digging wildly into the mass structure of living sand, looking for a weakness, a sign, anything that would help me defeat it.

Beside me, everyone did the same. Each time my blade hit, the magic would leave a dent, a scar, a tiny chunk out of the beast, but it wasn't enough. One ding at a time wasn't going to break him. One chip wasn't going to stop him. One scar didn't mean he was broke. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Liberty, solidly holding her own as she dodged the grabs the monster attempted and sunk her blade wherever she could. It did nothing, of course. Not even a dent without the magic backing it up.

From the right, the sound of liquid caught my attention, and I turned in time to see a wave of water heading violently toward us. I opened my mouth to shout a warning, but it was too late; the water had already reached us, lifting our bodies from the ground and carrying us away from the monster. It was a fight to function in water that was riddled with sand, but each one of us put up the effort, knowing that if we stopped moving, the weight of the sand would pull us under.

I swam toward Liberty as Horo passed me, heading toward the monster with an odd weapon attached to his back. I didn't stop him; my main focus was her as she frantically looked around. "My sword. I lost my sword, Oak!"

The sword was doing shit anyway. "Then we find another way!" I had to shout, even though we were a few feet away from each other, the noise nearly canceling out my voice. "There is another way."

I had to believe that because the situation we were in right now was shit. Killing a monster that self-heals seemed to be nearly impossible. Finding the weakness to take him down was something unobtainable when we were fighting even to get close, when we were blinded by sand and half drowning in watery sludge. My fingers grazed against Liberty's as the other men made it to her side, and I couldn't help but grab onto her fingers, closing my hand tightly around hers.

"What's he doing?" Justice asked, and we turned to his beta, who was struggling to swim in place as he aimed at our opponent. From his weapon, streams of fire erupted and hit the monster, causing tiny glass shards to fall away.

Fulgurites.

"I know what to do!" I screamed over the noise, then gathered what strength I could and pushed bolts of lightning out of my palms. The bolts hit in rapid succession, each one that hit chipping off a chunk of him. But, I was a vampire before a witch, and all the strength and skill I learned wasn't enough to sustain for long. We needed more.

I turned toward the group and opened my mouth to tell them when a spark of light from Liberty's necklace caught my eye. An idea caught, and as much as I thought to discount it, I couldn't. "Liberty, use your necklace!"

"What?" She looked confused.

“Your necklace. It’s magic, right? If it can hold Justice for sixty years as a wolf, it could take down this little monster.”

Technically, I didn’t know if that was true, and visually, this monster was not little. But for the sake of pep talks, it was all I had to offer. “I don’t know how.”

“Mo chuisle, you will find a way.” I sent another bolt toward the looming form, my strength pulling from my body with it.

Beside me, Justice, Ellis, and Sterling crowded our girl, and I wasn’t sure if it was their comfort or strength they were lending, or maybe their bit of power sent to her to borrow, but the necklace went from a sparkle of light to a full-fledged glow. She looked down at the necklace in awe; the glow illuminating her face.

“Tell me what to do.”

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She was nearly begging now, the sludge rising higher around us, the wind getting stronger, the sand grittier. “I don’t know how. I just do it. I pull from my center and push outward.”

Her brows scrunched together for a moment, and as much as I wanted to concentrate on helping her, I knew I couldn’t. Finding out how to work her magic had to be something she did herself. Add to the fact that the elements were getting more aggressive and my bolts of lightning weaker, less effective, and well, I couldn’t help her. I could only concentrate on trying to delay the monster, trying to save her, trying to buy her enough time to meet her destiny.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a few sparks leave her, sputtering out before they even made it to their destination, and I held my breath, knowing she had more in her, knowing she was the secret to our survival. It didn’t take long for her sparks to grow in strength. Soon a single spark began a streamer of energy. The streamer became a bolt. And just when I felt I could pull no more magic from my core, a blinding light grew next to me before leaving Liberty’s hand and crashing into the monster.

In an instant, shards of glass were showering down upon us. The wind stopped. The sand in the air dropped down, and the sludgy water that was holding us down seeped away into the sand below our feet until it disappeared completely. The clouds evaporated like they were never there, and in their wake, they left a stream of sun that reflected off the enormous glass structure in front of us.

“Shit,” Sterling mumbled, “Do we break it?”

Did we? I know I fucking wanted to. I wanted to destroy the remains of the monster

that put us at risk, that tried to take Liberty from me. But, a look at her now jolted me from the thought. She looked weak, tired, and her whole body swayed.

“Are you –” The words never finished leaving my mouth before her whole body crumbled, and I caught her moments before she hit the ground.

Chapter 18

LIBERTY

One moment, I was following Oak’s instructions and pushing power out from my core; the next, I opened my eyes into a bedroom I’d never seen before. I blinked again, sure I was seeing things, trying to decipher this strange area. Did it work? Are we alive? Where was everybody?

I leaned forward and started to sit, only to be pushed down. “Not so fast; you’ve been out for two days, you’re weak.”

Two days? It had been two days since the sand grew a monster in front of us that tried to wipe us out. Two days? “Did we win?”

Oak laughed. “Mo chuisle, one blast from you turned him instantly to glass. They will be cleaning up glass and shards for weeks out there.”

Relief filled my stomach, the knot in the center slowly releasing at that. “Everyone is okay?”

“A few pups are injured, but everyone lived,” Sterling answered.

I snorted. Justice must not be here if Sterling said that. Ellis cleared his throat. “Sterling healed what he could, but I suspect you will be sore for a few days. Are you

hungry?”

Hungry? Ravenous. The thought of blood had me salivating, which was definitely new. “Who is on the menu?”

All wrists came at me at once, hovering over my lips, their faint pulses giving the occasional strong thump making me nearly drool. I didn’t look to see whose wrist I grabbed, only reached for one, taking it into my mouth and letting my incisors do the rest as it pierced the skin and blood flowed into me. Ellis. Home.

I groaned around the mouthful of blood. Unknowingly my hands reached out and grabbed Ellis’ shirt, pulling his body close to mine as I savored the taste. His whole body shivered as I pulled at his life force. Maybe I shouldn’t accept this so quickly, accept that I drink blood, but the thrill I got when I had them weak for me, offering themselves as a whole on a platter before me, was an excitement I never wanted to lose.

They accepted me.

They wanted me.

They would do anything for me.

And what was a greater turn-on than that? The strongest, bravest men I’d ever met thought I was worthy enough of their desire. And maybe I hadn’t earned it yet, perhaps I never would. Perhaps I would never be good enough for these immortal beauties, but no one told them this fact, and I sure as hell wouldn’t break it to them.

Fingers gripped my hair and yanked my head back seconds before lips crashed into mine. Teeth nipped my lips before a tongue swooped in, dueling against my own. Oak broke the kiss. “You fucking did it, mo chuisse.”

Sterling grabbed my jaw and tilted it in his direction. “Yeah, she did.” When he leaned in for a kiss, he was gentler, slower than Oak, but each showed ownership. He pulled back. “You need real food, though.”

I wanted to argue because, damn it, plans with them seemed way more appealing, but my stomach picked that exact moment to growl, reminding me that I may be vampire, but I also had a strong human side. I flung my legs over the side of the bed before standing slowly, appreciating that they were hovering around me to help if needed, but also wondering if they realized that I wasn’t as fucking fragile as they thought I was. Of course, I guess it would be hard to argue my fragility when I just woke from being passed out for two days.

I walked a few feet to the nearby bathroom because fuck, I had to pee. Then they helped me into a nearby chair that sat next to a little table with an array of food. It wasn’t an elegant or elaborate spread, but it was perfect for me and my needs. I grabbed a grape and popped it in my mouth, slowly chewing. “So, what next?”

“Can you just oh, I don’t know, be for five fucking minutes without planning the next leg of our journey?” Ellis asked.

“In other words, you don’t know. Am I right?”

“Correct,” Oak sighed. “The book doesn’t give us any hints, though the new attack does appear on its page.”

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“So then, our plans are what? Find out about the book, the source, and go from there?” I slowly chewed on a cracker as I thought of other avenues we could take.

“It appears so, though I don’t know where to begin to find out.” Then again, we never knew; it seems like the information found us in one way or another. I suspect it is the fates’ way.

“What did Justice think?” I reached for a cube of cheese and popped it in my mouth.

“Justice? You mean the prick who barely spares us a glance?” Sterling jumped in. “He’s said nothing, but I assume the sooner we are gone, the better. Just being here put his people in a shit ton of danger.”

The thought of separating from him stung. I don’t know why I thought he would want to join us, be a part of this, not when he had already missed sixty years of living. But I thought maybe . . . maybe he would learn to like me. I was branded to be his, after all. That part alone should bug me. I should hate to see the shifter’s mark permanently sealed onto my skin, but even though I knew I should despise it when I looked at it, I only got a thrill.

“So he wants us gone?” I tried to hide the disappointment in my voice, but a thread of it still seeped through.

“Yeah, babe,” Ellis sighed. “He may not have voiced it, but his actions say as much.”

I tried to hide how I felt about it. “Then we leave tomorrow night.”

I never wanted to be in a place where I wasn't wanted, and if Justice didn't want me, I wouldn't force the issue. I had three men who did. And we had a house that was ours, one that was warded and perfect to be our operation center while we figured out our next move. Assuming we could figure it out.

Oak nodded once. "Tomorrow it is."

"The Ipad that Ramsey gave you, did you start the search for the book there?"

Oak scratched the back of his neck while looking away. "I -ah, still haven't figured out how to work it. I'm not the best with technology."

"Old people usually aren't." I giggled. "Did you try giving it to Sterling? He's a bit more savvy."

Oak glared at his friend. "No, but I'll do that."

"It might be a perfect place to start in regards to the book, maybe find out the maker and talk to him."

There was a knock on the door before the knob twisted and the heavy sound of scrapping metal filled the air as it opened. Justice stepped into the room and looked around, his eyes falling on me and locking. "I felt you wake."

Well, if that wasn't creepy. Oak stepped in front of me. "She's fine."

"I would like a moment," Justice spat, his voice more regal than the last time I heard it.

"No." Oak's large arms crossed in front of him, his stance stiffing.

I leaned forward, grabbing the back of Oak's shirt. "It's fine. He can't hurt me, remember?"

"Physically, yes. But it's clear that he isn't above emotional abuse."

"Oh, for fate's sake, I'm not going to hurt her," Justice shot back. "I just wanted to talk to her. Alone."

"I don't think –" Oak tried again.

"It will be fine. Promise. You all would know if it wasn't." It was true, between Oak's sensing my danger and Ellis sensing emotion, they had a front-row seat to my life for the next – forever. Maybe. If I lived that long.

Oak turned and leaned down, bracing both his hands on the arm of the chair. "If he does anything," he kissed my nose, "anything at all that's offensive," he kissed my cheek, "call me, and I'll be here."

He leaned down and captured my lips, giving me a slow and leisurely kiss that I knew was more than just a kiss. It was a showing of ownership. A declaration that I was under his protection. If at any time Justice fucked up, Oak would have my back to rectify the situation. He pulled back, and both Sterling and Ellis kissed my cheek before they all strolled toward the door, making sure to give Justice a solid glare before the steel swung shut behind them.

Justice cleared his throat. "So, you're awake."

I sighed. "It's clear that I am."

"I mean, you're well."

“Again. It’s clear that I’m okay.” I rubbed my foot repeatedly on the rug, trying to get out nervous energy. “We are leaving tomorrow night. I thought you should know. I know keeping company of three –” I paused, “four vampires is a lot. And I’m sorry that we put your people in danger.”

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“Is that what you think? That I’m angry you put my people in danger?” He took a step closer, then another.

“Isn’t it, though? I wouldn’t blame you for it.” He stepped so close I could smell his aftershave, almost taste the citrus of his soap that hung in the air.

He crouched down, so he was eye level with me. “No one blames you. Fuck. If anything, they all thank you. You not only saved me – twice, but you saved them too.”

“But, you’re angry.” That I could sense, I could feel the undercurrent of it humming through our bond.

“You better fucking believe I’m angry,” he roared before he inhaled deep and let it out slowly. “You were in danger, real fucking danger, and I couldn’t save you. I unleashed the best of my people, swung blades with the rest of them, but it wasn’t enough to save you. But you. . .” His eyes closed, his long dark lashes fanned his cheek as he spoke the rest of his words, “You saved me again. You saved me twice. You risked yourself to save us all.”

“I -” I tried to speak, but he shook his head no, silencing my words.

“Then, you just collapsed and – and I almost lost you.” His eyes opened, the yellow so intense I tried not to squirm.

“I was fine,” I offered.

“But how the fuck was I to know that when you lay limp right in front of me, collapsing to the sand then nothing? Nothing for two fucking days.” He swallowed, the movement drawing my eyes to his mouth. “I was so fucking scared. I was so fucking scared, and I know I had no right to be. That I don’t own you. That I’ve treated you awful, and I’m spiteful. I’m so fucking spiteful all the time, but I don’t want you dead. I don’t want to see you injured or hurt. I just -”

I leaned forward, plastering my lips to his, cutting off his words. At first, he froze, his body stiffened under the assault of my lips, and for a second, I thought I misjudged the situation, misjudged his caring for something more, and I panicked. I began to lean back when his hands fell to my thighs and squeezed, his lips chasing forward, capturing mine.

His lips on mine were rough, desperate, wild – just like the man himself, and if I did nothing else in my life, this kiss would be my greatest accomplishment. I felt the power down to my soul, felt the vibration of our invisible bond thrum with its approval, and it was freeing. The tight hold on my body suddenly felt relaxed for the first time in days, and all it took was his touch.

His lips left my mouth, frantically searching for skin, running across my cheeks, my neck, my collarbones as his hands traveled up my thighs. He was kneeling between my legs, his warm body radiating heat, making me squirm against his touch. His fingers danced up my dress. Each time his fingertip touched my skin, fire pulsed in its wake. He nuzzled the strap of my dress before he took it in his teeth, pulling it down until my breast popped free. A growl broke free from his throat before his teeth sought my skin, biting and nipping at my breasts.

Hot fingers danced along my panties, the material a frustrating barrier between us. I wanted to feel him against my skin, feel the fire of his touch ignited inside me. I wanted to burn, scorched from the inside out. I wanted to breathe him in, live him, send my pleasures along our bond until all he could think of was me.

Was this normal? Was wanting your mate so bad you could hardly breathe common? God, I hoped so. Because even if I wanted to, at this moment, I doubt I could turn away from his touch.

He released my skin from his teeth and leaned down, his tongue finding the inside of my knee and running the length of it. “In our culture, it’s customary to cover your body’s scent with that of your mate.” His voice was hoarse as he spoke, “It shows ownership, belonging. It’s a sign of respect.”

I swallowed hard. “Do you want to be covered in my scent, Justice?”

He growled against my thigh before a sharp lick of pain hit me. His teeth sharp as he teased against my skin, the sting doing nothing to ebb how turned on I was. “I didn’t pick you, Libby. You were not the one I would have picked for myself, but the fates gave me no choice.”

My heart ached at his confession. “Oh.”

“But, I still would wear your scent with honor.” His mouth came down on my panties, his tongue running the line of my slit through the material before he latched onto my clit and sucked. My hips arched off the chair, and I struggled to breathe, the unexpected jolt of pleasure nearly more than I could handle. I brought my hand to the soft fuzz of his hair, cut short against his scalp, and he froze before slowly pulling back.

“You’ve already proven you can control me. In this, I don’t need your control.” He hesitated. His yellow eyes looked contemplative as he found his words. “Keep your fingers on the chair; I’ll do the touching.”

“But that’s so -” I tried to argue, but he cut me off.

“Impersonal? I’ve spent sixty years being controlled by a female, Libby. Sixty years. I need time. Right now, though, I just want to explore you. Smell you.”

He had a point, and if he needed time, I would give it to him. I had three other mates who would let me touch them all I wanted, and I knew if he stuck around, eventually, he would let me too. I lowered my hands to the chair, curling my fingers around the wooden edge of the seat, and he hummed his approval at my obedience. His eyes never left mine as he reached under my dress and tore my panties away before bringing them to his nose and inhaling.

I should’ve been mortified at such a bold act on his part, but the way his eyes glowed with the action, the lustful sound he made as his fist tightened around the palmful of material snuffed my mortification before it could fully form. With a rough growl, he was at my core, his tongue sliding between my lips as he lapped at my juices. Each stroke hit me like electricity. Nerves I never knew existed came alive under his touch.

My body jolted and shook; my breath came fast, and I wanted to keep control of myself; I honestly did, but the more he did with his tongue, the greater the challenge became. I was panting. Withering. Begging. So close to the edge of ecstasy, but he refused to let me cross it.

“Tell me, Mate. Do your vampires make your body sing like this?” Yes. No. Fuck, I couldn’t tell you. My mind was past the point of coherency. “Do they make you scream their names? Have you begging to come?”

I doubted he wanted a real answer, and I couldn’t give him one. Not when his tongue found my clit again, and he began to swirl circles slowly around it before his lips latched on and sucked gently. A low whine left my lips, a sound that was definitely more animal than human, and he only hummed his approval, the vibration shooting sparks through all my nerves.

My fingers gripped into the wood, my hands so tight I was sure my knuckles would be white. His fingers worked their way up my body under my dress; one warm palm teasing my curves while the other held tightly to my leg, keeping my thighs open to accommodate his assault. What started out as gentle and alluring turned rough and enthralling. His attention was all-encompassing. His movements a calculated dance.

And though I'd fallen apart in my other mates' hands multiple times, this time was different. Justice's touch was made for me. We were one. His skin was meant to glide against mine; his hands were meant to explore. He knew my body like his own, and though we had never been together, it was clear that the fates knew best, especially when his palm slid down between my breasts, over my stomach and pelvic bone, before gliding over my thigh.

"Don't get the wrong idea about this, Libby," he spoke against my clit, and I swear my vision started to grow spotty. "I want to wear your scent like it's a part of my skin, but I don't fully trust you. I don't trust anyone right now."

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All I could do was nod my head and agree because using words was impossible. I got that this whole situation wasn't ideal, but fuck, it felt so right. He felt right. We, together, just felt right.

His finger entered me roughly, the intrusion a sweet victory, the fullness what my body craved. He added another finger, his mouth not leaving my sensitive skin, his shoulders forcing my legs to hold wide while he pumped his fingers into my body, curling them in such a way that drove me wild. I was a panting mess, dizzy with the lust and euphoria his assault on my body caused, and though I felt like I couldn't take anymore, wanton begging still fell from my lips.

He didn't give me a warning before his teeth bit down on my clit. My body jumped at the pain before he bent his finger upward, pressing into my body at just the right angle and igniting a growing fire of pleasure. Two passes of his tongue over his bite to soothe the pain did me in; the flames inside of me exploded outward as ecstasy consumed my body. My lungs were paralyzed as I gasped for breath. My body shook as he continued his onslaught, and I had nothing left to give, nothing left to offer as a reward for his efforts, and my orgasm began to fade, leaving me a panting and disheveled mess in front of him.

He lay there a moment, motionless, his head between my thighs, the silence surrounding us. He pulled back slightly, laying gentle kisses on my inner thigh before nuzzling his cheek against my skin, and I fought not to touch him. I wanted more than anything to remove my fingers from the chair and place them against his skin. Restraining myself was torture when all I wanted to do was touch him, show him comfort, solidarity.

All too soon, he pulled back, sitting on his haunches for a moment as he regarded me before standing tall and looming over me. “If you leave tomorrow night, I will follow. It is the fates’ wish that I remain with you, so I’ll do so. But that doesn’t change how I feel.”

The scrape of the metal door was loud as it echoed in the space. It was a screaming announcement of my bare minimum acceptance, and when it slammed shut, I felt the jarring vibration settle inside of me. Justice accepted me for what I was, his fate, but there was a chance that he may never agree with it.

Chapter 19

ELLIS

It was crazy to think this girl wasn’t in my life less than two weeks ago. Now? Now I couldn’t picture my life without Liberty. I could breathe her in if she let me. Let her consume me and be my air. I waited all my life to find her, and I didn’t want a second to go by without her in it.

“Stop looking at me.” Liberty giggled. “I can feel your eyes burning into me.”

“I can’t help it.”

“Do you know how cheesy that sounds?” She turned and raised an eyebrow at me.

I stepped forward, wrapping my arms around her waist. “Cheesy or not, it’s the truth.”

An inaudible sound caught in her throat before she said, “You guys are too good for me.”

Or she was too good for us. It took years of us being grumpy, old bastards to find her and get a flicker of her light. “You should relax some; we leave in a few hours.”

She bit her lower lip as I rested my chin on her shoulder., “We do. But I still have no idea where we are headed.”

“Any luck getting any information on the book?” I knew that Oak and she had spent hours and hours pouring over the iPad Ramsey gave them, both coming out looking equally frustrated.

“None. Nothing useful. A few people on the forum told us to find truth, like that meant anything to us.” She sighed. “One document we found mentioned the magical books that are marked by the fates. Rare. Obviously. But how they come to be is a complete mystery.”

“Want me to look?” I offered, though I knew with absolute certainty, I wouldn’t find anything. I still kept my receipts to do taxes the old fashion way; there was no way I would figure out how to navigate the technology needed to get information.

“I doubt you will find anything. If the information is there, it’s buried deep.” She unknowingly reached for her necklace, twirling the gems in her fingers.

The necklace on its own was magnificent. But the sight of Liberty with the necklace left me speechless. The gems sparkled brightly against her pale skin like it was always meant to be its backdrop. Not even the dark markings of Justice’s family mark took away or stole from its beauty. Dare I say the markings could possibly enhance the look? And when the gems glowed, when they pulsed with the hidden power that saved us all, Liberty looked like a queen.

“It’s strange, right?” Her voice startled me, tearing me out of my trance.

“Huh?”

“The necklace. So unassuming, yet somehow powerful enough to take down a whole monsoon monster.”

I quirked my lips. “Is that even a thing?”

“It seemed fitting.” She shrugged. “Don’t you think?”

“Very much so. I’m hoping you’re not planning to use that magic again any time soon.”

“Ideally, no. I didn’t even know I had it, to be honest.” She played with her hand, nervously. “I would always use it to save you all, though. I won’t regret that.”

I hated that even with our speed, our strength, our hearing, we weren’t enough to save this girl. Our poor, innocent girl who had done nothing and hadn’t asked for anything from us, just accepted this life as she got tossed into it, without complaints.

“Sterling said the plane would be here soon,” I pointed out.

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“And we still don’t have a destination,” she said with a sigh.

“We’ll figure it out. Sterling had the plane stocked with everything we could possibly need, so wherever we go, we will be prepared.”

“I wonder what it’s like,” she mused as she turned in my arms. “Not living paycheck to paycheck.”

“We’ve all got you now.” I leaned down and kissed her nose. “But to be fair, he spent quite a bit of time building his fortune. We all have money tucked away, but he, well he just has a lot more of it.”

“So, he’s made known.” Her giggle after that was so damn adorable, I couldn’t help but lean down and capture her lips. Perfection. Each kiss I stole from her was pure perfection. I never wanted a day without it. Never wanted to go back to life before her.

“Do you want to get some sleep?” I asked as I pulled back from her kiss and tried to pry my arms from around her, but it was nearly impossible, so I settled for resting my chin on her head.

“I can always sleep on the plane.” Her voice was a purr as her hand untucked my shirt then traveled up my bare abdomen. My muscles contracted, her touch feeling so good against my skin. I couldn’t help letting a soft sound of approval escape my lips. “Plus, I’ve been dying to get you alone.”

I pulled back to look at her, quirked one brow. “Dying, huh?”

“Yes, dying.” She bit her lip. “I love having you all as a group, but there is something about one on one time that can’t be matched. It’s so –”

She shook her head slightly as she searched for the word. “Intimate?”

“Yes! That!”

“Um, well, I could definitely give you some one on one time.” I bent a little, snagging her lips in my teeth as the scrape of the metal door opening broke the silence around us. I pulled back from her with a sigh but refused to detach her from my arms.

“The matriarch requests your presence at dinner.” Sterling couldn’t hide his amusement. The bastard knew what was about to happen before he interrupted us.

“Can we pass?” My voice came out almost like a whine but fuck if I cared. I was close to having Liberty alone and to myself for the first time in days.

“No can do. I mean, that is Liberty’s new mother-in-law.” He paused. “Or should I call you Libby now?” She reached over and punched him in the arm, serving only to cause him additional amusement instead of actual harm. He humored her, rubbing his arm as if she actually caused him pain. “Don’t harm me, or you won’t get the gift I brought you.”

Her ears perked up. “You brought me a gift?”

“Freshly delivered,” he confirmed.

She looked in his hands and then around him, searching for the present before finally asking. “Where is it?”

He stepped out the door for a moment before returning with a garment bag, “I figured

you could wear it tonight. Plus, no offense, the dress you have on, though clean, has gotten pretty much ruined in the rain and sandstorm.”

He wasn’t wrong. The light blue dress had been stained with dirt and mud, dulling the vibrancy of the color. Darker splatter marred the top of the dress though she pretended not to notice; we all spotted the sporadically placed holes. Even so, she refused to borrow any of Justice’s people’s clothing, afraid she might burden them.

He laid the garment bag and another smaller bag on the bed. “I have more clothes and stuff coming on the plane tonight, so you should be set. I hadn’t counted on all our stuff being destroyed in water and sand, but I did splurge for waterproof luggage this time around.”

She tried to hide the excitement in her eyes, but it was apparent she couldn’t wait to tear open the bags. I gave Liberty one last kiss on her forehead before parting. “I’ll head out and let you get dressed. See you at dinner.”

Leaving her was nearly impossible, but I knew she needed her space too. She had a lot to process and had such little time to do so. It couldn’t be easy processing when men were always surrounding you, begging for attention, and stealing your time. Plus, it would be a lie if I said I wasn’t anxious to see her in that dress. Despite all his faults, Sterling had impeccable taste, and I knew he wouldn’t let us down.

We pulled the door closed behind us, cringing as the metal ground against metal as it slid past. This bunker was old, that was for sure, and though they tried to hide its age with paint, there were spots where paint had chipped, and rust shone through. But it served its purpose, it was well hidden and nearly impossible to spot unless you were specifically looking for it.

“You ready?”

I blinked a few times, forgetting I was walking with Sterling. Damn, if only he weren't such a prick, because he was growing on me. "For?"

"What I got you."

My eyebrows shot up in shock, and he looked so fucking smug about it. "You got me something?"

"Yeah. You couldn't go to dinner with the shifter Queen wearing that."

He gestured to my clothes, and he had a point. My jeans were torn and mud-stained, and my once white t-shirt was now a murky brown. Sitting down to dinner in this would be an embarrassment, if not to myself, surely to Liberty and Justice. I smirked to myself as their names came up in the same sentence.

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“Thanks. You’re right; I’m pretty shabby.” I ran my hands through my hair. “So, I hear the shifter is leaving with us.”

He pulled open the door to our room. “Did you doubt it?”

I mean, yeah. I sort of did. “I had questions. Their relationship or lack thereof, didn’t seem to thrill him.”

The truth was, they may have had no relationship, but everyone around them could clearly see they were building one. Did that make me jealous? Fuck yeah, it did. But, who was I to go against fated mates? Besides, despite all his grumbling about letting her die if he could, I knew it was a lie the minute he killed to protect her from the other shifters. Plus, I think it was clear to all vampires, and ah, probably shifters knew just how much relationship building they had done last night.

“He’s one of us now, man, you gotta deal.” Sterling patted me on the back and went inside, and honestly, he was right. I just didn’t want to accept it. I groaned and followed him inside, anxious to get this dinner over with so we could be out of here.

It was nearly two hours before Justice knocked and told us they were all meeting for dinner in the cafeteria. We acknowledged him and then left to meet him a few minutes later. I wouldn’t lie; Sterling didn’t disappoint in his choice of attire. Each of us sporting a time era where we thought the world had peaked. We were wrong, but regardless, the clothing and styles were flawless.

The cafeteria was set up with rows of shifters, and right in the center was a table, where Mona sat with Justice and Horo. A small smile toyed Mona’s lips as we

neared, and when we got close enough, she gestured to the surrounding chairs.”Please, sit. It’s nice to get to know my son’s mate’s friends.”

The way she emphasized friends, I wanted to scream we’d had her first. She was mine.Ours. But, I bit my tongue and nodded, trying not to disrespect the hostess and these people's royalty. Beside me, Oak and Sterling both sat down, each looking nearly as uncomfortably as I was.

The wait for Liberty seemed like forever, and just when I was about to get up and seek her out, make sure she was okay, the steel door opened, and she nearly floated in. Everyone froze, the room went silent, and all eyes focused on Liberty, mesmerized by the beauty. I was silently choking, the air in my lungs refusing to budge, and beside me, I knew the others were doing the same.

Sterling had chosen a nineteen fifties halter dress replica, paired with stilettos that matched the color of the gems sparkling against her throat. Her hair was done to perfection and those red lips. Fuck, I knew for a fact that I couldn’t be the only man in the room picturing those plump red lips around his cock. I had to fight the urge to go to her, wishing to cover her up entirely because I was a selfish bastard, and I didn’t want to share her. Not with Oak. Not with Sterling. And sure as hell not with that fucking shifter, Justice.

Next to me, the chair scraped against the cement as Oak stood, breaking the spell she had over me. I followed, standing as we waited for her approach, and before she even made it to our table, the whole room had stood.

It was the power she radiated. The whole room felt it. It was impossible not to. She was poised to rule people, breed, and molded to wield power, even if she hadn’t known it at the time. When she approached the table, the queen stood, her eyes roaming over Liberty. “You’re late.”

Liberty's eyes fell to Justice with a scowl on her face. "I am. I apologize." Her eyes flinted to him again. "I wasn't fully ready."

A spark of jealousy clawed through my limbs. What were they doing that caused her delay? I stifled a growl, pushed back the immaturity inside that wanted to pull his chair out from under him when he went to sit. Had I always been this possessive? No, I don't think there was ever anyone that I ever desired to possess as much as Liberty.

Mona's eyes looked her over. "It appears the wait was worth it."

I wholeheartedly agreed. Liberty took the seat that Justice offered. "Thank you."

Liberty's eyes flashed to Sterling as she said the words, letting him know that she appreciated his gift. Hell, I appreciated his gift; she looked amazing. Like a dream I wouldn't mind having every day until the stake pierced my heart, however long that may be. She turned, her ebony hair bouncing perfectly with the movement, and I knew the world was going on around me, but now? Now, I was frozen. Frozen in the grasp of her perfection, unable to look away. Never wanting to.

Chapter 20

LIBERTY

Mona kept watching me, satisfaction clearly written on her face when she looked between her son and me. It wasn't clear to me what she was seeing. Justice and I were complicated, and that was a putting it mildly. I'd only known him a few days, and in those few days, I'd gotten death threats, accusations, comfort, stolen kisses, and a mind-blowing orgasm. Mind-blowing might even be an understatement because my muscles still quaked at the thought.

"Have you worked on children yet?" I nearly choked on my salmon.

“Excuse me?” I rubbed my chest as I took a sip of water.

“I am just wondering when to expect pups.”

Such a bold old lady. “Not any time soon; we’ve just met.”

She bit into a roll and mumbled, That’s what you think before clearing her throat.

“Well, I would like you to consider the options. Justice isn’t getting any younger.”

Justice was old enough to be my great grandpa, she just won a trophy for understatement of the year. “Yes, well, he has time.”

Justice jumped in, bless his soul. “We’ll be leaving tonight, mother.”

She looked shocked and a little heartbroken. “What? Why? You just got returned to us.”

He wiped his mouth before putting down his napkin. “They were heading out; we still need to find –” He swallowed hard, his words nearly getting stuck in his throat from the feeling of betrayal that threatened to consume him. “Greta. As much as I would like to stay, I must support my mate and her companions. It’s for the greater good, the – the bigger picture.”

She leaned back in her chair, eying us all suspiciously. “And what is the bigger picture?”

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Fuck if we knew. But Justice only dipped his head slightly in acknowledgment before his eyes turned to me. “To unite all the supernatural. Peacefully.”

His mom scoffed at that. “It can’t be done.”

“It will be,” he said confidently. “I haven’t got to read up as much as I would like since being back in my human form, but even so, before I left, the world was a mess. Crumbling slowly into destruction. Is it so awful to think that there could be a bridge that unites all the divisions? Look at us here. We have a vampire at our table. Four. Did you ever think that would happen? I don’t want to harm them.” I read between the lines on his words and heard mostly. “Who’s to say others can’t unite together if the fates so demand?”

“But do the fates demand?”

“Libby has my mark on her, doesn’t she? A vampire. Does that not look like fates at work?”

“She’s also human; it’s not unheard of for our people to mate with humans. In fact, the dragons seem to prefer it.”

“But I’m not a dragon, and regardless of her human aspects, she’s a vampire. Have you ever seen a hybrid? I haven’t.” I was beginning to feel like an exhibit, and the chatter in the room started to dwindle, and everyone turned to watch me. “Just because something wasn’t done before doesn’t make it impossible.”

Ha. I wanted to be the biggest advocate for the statement. A few weeks ago, I never

thought vampires existed. Then BAM! Then I thought witches weren't a thing. POOF! Okay, that had me believing – somewhat. But suddenly, I was the mate to a shifter, and I could contest that just because we think something hasn't been done or doesn't exist doesn't mean it's an impossibility.

Mona sighed dramatically. “Your generation was always so rebellious.” I snorted, and they both looked at me. I was dying to find out which generation that was because I could promise it was nothing like today's generation. “Something to add, dear?”

I bit my lip, an action not missed by Justice, and he smirked. “Yes, something to add, Libby?”

Shit. I didn't know what to say. “No, ma'am. I um –”

“I've noticed that sometimes when Libby breathes, she makes a swine noise. When this is over, maybe we will get that checked out.”

Yeah. That. Bastard.

“Very well. And please, I've told you already, call me Mona, not ma'am.” She forked a piece of meat in her mouth and chewed slowly. When she swallowed, she spoke again, “So, about the location. Where are you five running off to?”

“We don't know yet,” I confessed.

“But you are leaving.” Her eyes narrowed.

“We are. We need to check on our home and hopefully find a clue in the old library of what we need to do next. I've got the necklace and uh, the guys.” I felt a blush rise as I admitted that. “I apparently have a mate, too. I don't know what's next or the

purpose of all this if I'm honest, but that's what I've been trying to find out."

"And when you do find out, what are you going to do with this information?"

Yeah. Well, isn't that the real question here? "We go for it."

"What's theitthat you are referring to?"

God, why did she look so smug? I shot Justice a look of annoyance, and he only smiled before knitting his fingers together and leaning back in the chair. Amazing orgasm be damned, I had internal hate for that damn wolf.

"Whatever it is we discover. We can't just sit around and wait for the next attack because, honestly, they keep coming. We need to stop Greta while we can before more harm comes to people." I tried not to fidget as I spoke, but the weight of her stare was heavy.

"And you think putting my son in danger is worth this adventure? You realize now that he is back, well, and alive, I've been demoted, right? Now you wish to take the King of the shifters away from his reunited people, all to chase adventure?"

Okay, when she put it that way, it didn't sound right. "I didn't ask him to come."

"But you are his mate; he needs to be near you. It's ingrained in him. If you were to separate for long, the longing and need would become physically painful." Well, shit, he failed to mention that. Naturally.

"I- I was unaware."

"I'm not shocked; you are a vampire after all," she replied, her voice oozing with disdain.

Justice leaned forward. “And a human, mother. She’s also human. And I’m going.”

Mona didn’t look happy, but she was resigned. “Fine. Have you consulted the paranormal network?”

Oak chimed in, “We have. We still need to look further, but so far, I’ve only found people telling us to seek truth. We have this book, and we are trying to find the maker.”

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“Interesting starting point I suppose,” Mona mumbled.

Horo tilted his head to the side as he watched us. “Can I see it? The book?”

I could tell Oak did not want to share it, and I didn’t blame him. After all, the book itself held our past and was a key to our future. But still, if we were going to get anywhere at all, we had to trust those willing to help us, trust our allies. Oak reached to the small of his back and pulled out the book. His eyes met mine, and I gave a slight nod before he handed it to Horo, his grip tight as he struggled to part from it.

Horo grabbed the book, his fingers running gently over the cover. “This- this is astonishing.”

“Do you know it?” Justice questioned his Beta.

“This one, in particular, no. But I know what it is.” He opened up the cover before running a finger over the first page. “It’s a book of fates. Very few volumes exist but never in the outside world. They are made and protected by seers, so how this one ended up outside a collection, I have no idea.”

“Seers are rare,” Sterling chimed in.

“They are, which is why this is even more precious.” Horo read a few lines. “Has the book been kind?”

I just shook my head. “I don’t even know how to answer that.”

“Who makes it?” Oak interrupted; his face was hard, his body coiled, anticipation pouring out of him.

“Well, they weren’t wrong when they told you to seek Truth.” He smiled, and I knew he was about to drop a bomb on us we weren’t prepared for.

“Horo, out with it!” Justice’s voice boomed.

“Truth isn’t information or a state of mind. He’s a seer. The best of them, which is why he earned that nickname. He’s never wrong. But he’s a hermit too. Hard to find, last seen in the Sierra Nevadas decades ago.”

I held my breath, almost afraid to breathe. “So you’re saying . . .”