



Stolen By the Vampire

Author: *Vasilisa Drake*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: She needs to kill him. He'll cross any line to keep her.

Only a fool would try and hunt the beast. A fool, or a witch all out of options.

Esmae's days are numbered. With her ex-lover's curse hanging around her neck, she has two options: succumb to the curse as her body turns to the same ice her heart is supposedly encased in (as her ex would prefer), or spill the blood of the beast that haunts the Condemned Cliffs and set herself free.

Since the last thing she plans to do is meet her end on her ex's terms, hunting down the dangerous beast it is.

Unfortunately, despite her best efforts, her attempt to kill the beast fails.

Worse, the beast isn't some great, scaled creature.

No, he's a vampire with red eyes and fangs... fangs he plans to sink into her neck in retribution for her attempt on his life.

Because the vampire isn't going to simply kill Esmae for her hubris... He's going to claim her as his mate.

Now, she's matched in a game against time and fate: stay with the vampire and let her heart turn to ice, or kill him—and break it.

Stolen by the Vampire is a standalone fantasy romance Beauty and the Beast retelling, perfect for readers who love their love interests obsessed and fanged and their heroines who know how to fight back and bring the beast to his knees.

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Chapter One

Spilling the blood of the monster that haunts the Condemned Cliffs will save you from your cursed fate.

Oracles were hated for many reasons. They were heretics; they did not revere the three-faced goddess.

But worst of all, they were never wrong.

Esmae lifted one of the last three cards her mother enchanted before dying.

It cast a magic over her eyes, highlighting the path in front of her. She slid it back into her deck, hiding the illegal card between her more benign ones and continued her climb. It was more habit than necessity at this point. She'd be sentenced to death if she was caught with oracle cards... but she was already well on her way to dying from the curse.

Not that anyone would find her here. No one went to the cliffs. In a country surrounded by vampires on three sides, people should've been eager for any way out, but whatever creature lived in the fourth was so terrible, no one dared.

Except for a witch with no other option. A witch who had been cursed by her ex-lover.

The thought of Jared soured her mood, so she pushed it aside and continued on. The curse was already taking its toll, the journey fatiguing her. The mountain offered a

beautiful view of her village in the distance. Even the rock itself was lovely. More than simple browns and grays, there were sleek peaks of shiny black rock forming a patchwork along the trail. They would be striking in sunlight, but even with the overcast sky they were lovely.

In her youth, she had loved climbing, but as she grew older, her father discouraged it, saying it wasn't ladylike and that she should spend her time weaving for their business.

Esmæ hated weaving, but she hated seeing her father go hungry from failing to earn enough at the market even more.

So weaving it was. Until the curse.

She could've told him about the curse, but there was no cure to be found in their small village. Her only hope was to follow her mother's forbidden magic, and hope her fate included a cure to the curse.

She continued forward, the ground uneven under her feet. She would make it. Nothing would stop her.

Then came the rain.

It started as a drizzle. Easy enough to ignore, even if it made the fall chill all the more potent. But the storm grew wilder, water falling in fat drops, soaking her through. There wasn't so much as an overhang to duck into, at least not that she'd seen in the past half hour. Surely, there would be something soon. She cursed herself for not having bartered magic from a pyromancer to keep her warm, but the only pyromancer in the village was a prick and he charged a prince's fortune for his cards.

So, no, she didn't have any warm magic to comfort her as she continued on her quest.

But so what? Her whole life, the odds had been stacked against her. It wouldn't stop her from finding her fate.

Another step forward.

Another.

She might have made it to the top of the mountain on sheer determination alone.

But then her weakened foot slipped on the slick stone, her body suddenly and frantically falling.

Tumbling down, down, down.

The last she heard was a terrifying roar before everything went black.

Esmae woke with a start. To her surprise, she wasn't bleeding out at the bottom of a ravine, though by the pounding of her head she had definitely fallen. She was on something soft, in fact. Some kind of makeshift bed. Confusion muddled her thoughts, her head still aching. She forced her eyes open. Above her, in low lighting, was a cave ceiling. She had made it inside the Condemned Cliffs somehow.

She shifted her head to the side, trying to take in more of her surroundings.

Immediately, her gaze met two twin glowing red points.

Eyes that could belong to only one creature.

The mortal enemy of witches: a vampire.

The urge to scream hit her. She bit down on it. She wasn't particularly powerful for a

witch, but she was a quick thinker.

“Where am I?” she groaned. She drew out the sound, putting a hand against her head to draw the creature’s attention while her other hand searched her pockets for a weapon under the cover of the blanket.

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Why was she covered in blankets? That was the real question.

“You’re in my mountain,” the vampire replied.

For a moment, she was surprised he’d bothered to reply, but she hid it, eyeing him. His voice was lightly accented in a way that was all too intriguing to a girl who had never ventured more than a day’s journey from her village.

“Yours?” she asked.

“Mine,” he confirmed.

The monster of the Condemned Cliffs is a vampire.

A monster she hadn’t been sure she could face. A vampire—well, she might still be in real trouble. But a vampire could bleed, if you had the right tools. As Esmae did. She forced herself to keep her gaze trained on the vampire while she cobbled together a plan through her pounding headache.

“Why?” she asked.

The vampire drew a step closer. “Why what?”

“Why did you save me?”

A long moment passed between them. Then— “Because it pleased me.”

Probably because if she bled out on the mountain, he couldn't drink all her blood. She fought to keep her expression guileless. The vampire didn't seem to regard her as a threat at the moment. His posture was relaxed, even as he seemed to take up most of the small cavern. Because she was an injured female? Or because she was mortal, nothing more than a plaything for the immortal creature?

She wished her magic was more useful. A wish she'd had a hundred times throughout her life. But no, she couldn't count on her magic to save her. She rubbed fingertips to her temple again, then swung her legs out to stand. The vampire was three paces away. Her legs were water filled, so she didn't fight the stumble that occurred, even if she'd meant for it to be more of an act.

The vampire, who had been leaning against the wall so casually, lunged. His hands gripped her arms to catch her before she fell.

Esmae struck.

The copper blade was old and flimsy, but it was sharp. It was a weaver's hands that held it, nimble and quick as she drew it right above his heart and plunged the blade in.

There.

Let the beast bleed and set her free of her curse.

Chapter Two

Silas knew two things were true about the female in front of him.

One: she had just tried to kill him, a feat no other had been brave—or foolish—enough to try in at least three centuries.

Two: he was never, ever going to let her go.

Disarming her was a simple matter. His hand snapped to the wrist that held the blade. He wrenched it from his chest with ease. The vampire was bigger and stronger than her, even if she was tall for a female. Her fragile blade fell to the cave floor with a clattering sound that punctuated the air around them.

Her gaze flickered over him, running from his face to his hands, which pinned hers against the stone behind them, to his chest and back to his eyes.

It was an effort not to smirk.

Blood pearled at the open slice above his heart. The stinging sensation was unfamiliar—the fact she'd been able to wound him at all told him this wasn't just any female.

No, she was something special.

But even the novelty of pain couldn't distract him from his focus on her.

Her eyes were a vibrant color not found in the gray walls he inhabited. Her hair looked soft and silky, two words that couldn't describe any of his surroundings. The warm, earthy brown was streaked with magically turned red highlights. He wanted to feel the strands beneath his fingers, to grasp it and pull her head back so he could see her throat.

Unused to denying himself, he did just that, threading his fingers on one hand while the other hand held her against the wall.

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She flinched—just slightly, as though she caught herself in the act.

So she had enough sense to be afraid.

Good.

“You attacked me.”

“I did.”

Afraid though she may be, she was no coward. Her eyes promised she would do it again, given half a chance.

That just wouldn't do.

“You won't attempt to stab me again.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but he hadn't simply made the declaration to hear himself speak. No, his vampire powers stirred, enthralling her with his gaze. No witch could resist the compulsion.

“Just kill me then, if that's what you're going to do,” she snarled.

How quickly she asked for death.

But that would never come. Not from his hand. Not from anyone's.

If anyone ever tries to take her from me, they'll die bloody.

"I have no plans to kill you," he rasped.

She frowned, and for a moment, stopped struggling against him.

"Then you'll let me go after all?"

He chuckled. The idea was ludicrous.

"Not a chance, you violent witch. I plan to keep you."

How her eyes flashed with anger! Her scent thickened around him, like juniper and mayberries. Delectable. He wanted to taste her—by every meaning of the word. As a man. As a vampire.

"Absolutely not," she said.

That drew out a low chuckle from Silas's throat. As if she had a choice. "For every drop of blood you've made me spill, I'll draw blood from your neck."

Her pulse point flickered, beckoning him. But he held his female's gaze, drinking in her reaction to his words.

"I refuse," she snapped.

He smirked. "You don't make the rules here, witch." He glanced down at his chest. "Three drops of blood. Three times, I'll take from your vein." A pause. "Or more, if you ask very nicely."

Her jaw fell open at his arrogance. But it wasn't really arrogance, not when Silas was

confident he would make her crave his bite in time. He'd make her crave every single part of him.

Before she could argue, his restraint snapped. He couldn't resist the siren call of her neck anymore. He bent her head aside, gently, without releasing her hands.

And then he bit her.

Chapter Three

Esmæ didn't have time to react before the vampire attacked her.

Only... it didn't feel like any attack she'd ever faced before.

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The vampire's lips were on her neck, his fangs piercing her skin. His scent surrounded her, smoke and sin wrapped in one. Her hands were pinned above her head, and it was a good thing, because if not, she may have fallen to her knees.

And then... sensation. Unlike anything she'd ever known.

Esmae was no maiden. She'd had her fair share of experience with Jared and before him. She wasn't a passive lover; she'd looked after her own pleasure.

The feelings the vampire unleashed on her were unlike anything she'd ever known. Heat exploded inside her, spindling from the source of contact into her chest where her heart pounded, then lower at her core, as though someone was set between her thighs about to feast.

Oh, fates. A gasp spilled from her against her will. It was all she could do to not purr against him like a cat in heat, begging for more. Her breaths grew ragged in a heartbeat. The vampire's grip shifted, the hold on her wrists tight but not painful, while his other hand cupped the back of her neck.

She could lose herself in the sensation.

It was to her shame that, when the vampire pulled away, it was because he'd had his fill—while she hadn't yet had hers. That same shame snuffed out her brewing desire, a chill skittering on her spine as the heat of the vampire's bite faded.

“You taste divine.” His voice was low, guttural. Like how a male might sound after a rough roll in the hay. His tongue slowly rolled over the puncture in her neck, her

pulse pounding beneath it.

The voice did as much damage to her as the bite had. Cheeks on fire, she snarled, “How dare you!”

If possible, the creature’s eyes glowed even brighter. They weren’t like normal eyes either, but rather a lizard’s thin black slits cutting through the burning red. Because he’d just fed? Vampires didn’t venture to her little town, one of the reasons her father discouraged her from ever leaving. All she knew was they had red eyes, drank blood, and despised witches.

But the vampire in front of her didn’t look like he despised her at all.

No, he looked ravenous for seconds.

Which was, objectively, worse.

This close, she couldn’t help but take in his features. The crimson eyes were unnatural, especially with the reptilian shape, yet they fit his face perfectly. Dark hair curled around his ears, reaching down to the nape of his neck. It would’ve looked boyish on anyone else; on the vampire, it made him roguish. As though he was a threat, not because he’d bite a woman—but because he’d lick her. The distracting thought was compounded by his lips, which were full and smirking. To add to the effect, there was nothing “boyish” about his body. The planes of muscle that had pressed against her proved he was a fit predator. Normally, Esmae was as tall as any man she came across, even when she wasn’t in boots. The vampire was tall enough she had to tilt her chin back, exposing her throat, to meet his gaze.

And meet it she did. He could bite her, he could overpower her, but he damn certain wouldn’t break her.

“I dare,” the vampire murmured, “because you came onto my mountain. You practically gift-wrapped yourself to me, little witch. I can’t be blamed for taking from what’s mine.”

Good sense would’ve had her cowering in the corner, begging for her life. Since her life was forfeit and good sense had never been counted among Esmae’s other (limited) virtues, what came out of her mouth was, “You must be joking.”

The vampire cocked his head, red eyes flaring just the slightest amount, as if he hadn’t expected her to reply again.

But did he really just expect her to nod along with his insane proclamation?

“I am not,” the vampire replied levelly. “Your blood is mine to take. You are mine.”

It was drafty in the cave. That’s why she shivered. Surely.

Three times, he’d said. Two more of those experiences. The way her body had felt under him... Could she survive it? Still, if he wasn’t killing her, that meant she had a chance. She hadn’t expected to face a vampire, so she’d only taken the old copper knife as a precaution. Her other weapons had been lost, but the copper was the only one that could hurt them. There’d be time between his feedings when she could try again.

All these thoughts swirled in her mind while she stared up at the vampire. His unnatural eyes bored back into her, like she was the most precious thing he’d ever seen, something he’d never let go of.

No one had ever looked at Esmae that way. Why was it she’d finally found a male who looked at her like she might be worthwhile, and she had to kill him? Fate was cruel.

“What’s your name, my lovely witch?”

She’d tell him nothing. She tried to push past, but he held her easily against the stone, capturing her without actually hurting her.

The vampire sighed like she was being difficult.

“Tell me your name,” he commanded.

She tried to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from answering, but just as before, the compulsion rolled through her body. Vampires could enthrall witches who lacked magical defenses—like Esmae. Against her will, her lips parted and she said, “Esmae Mellodi.”

“Esmae,” he repeated, trying out the word.

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Does he like it?

The stupid thought came unbidden. She quashed it in an instant. Whether the vampire that captured her, drank her blood, and thwarted her attempt to end her curse liked her name was, quite literally, the least of her concerns.

“I am Silas Obsidian-Claw,” he replied, as if they were meeting in any other circumstances where an introduction might be warranted.

“Lovely,” she drawled, sarcasm thick on her tongue.

“I’m delighted you think so.”

Gods, the vampire actually managed to sound sincere!

“Now that we know each other’s names and you’ve assaulted me, perhaps you could let me go, vampire?” she snapped, deliberately avoiding his name.

The vampire stilled, a preternatural stillness. Then, as suddenly as he’d been on her, he let her go, stepping back.

“You will not leave these caves.”

Once again, the thrall overpowered her. Like with the first command not to stab him again, it wasn’t so much that it forced her to do something as much as her body wouldn’t act in a way that disobeyed him.

She couldn't leave? Couldn't stab him? Fine.

She took a step forward and kicked him squarely in the shin.

The vampire balked, slightly, as if more surprised than hurt. The same couldn't be said for Esmae, who was left clutching her foot, which hurt terribly even in the boot.

Once more, the vampire was on her. "Are you injured?" he demanded. "Why would you do such a thing?"

She glared up at him, ignoring the first question. "Because you deserve it for keeping me here!"

Something changed on the vampire's face. "Then attack me in another way, Esmae. I'd be a fool to let you go, and if this is the price for that, so be it. Your ire, I can bear. Your pain, I cannot."

She refused to ponder the intensity of his words. Rather, she was sorely tempted to take him up on that offer and ignore everything after that, but aside from the copper knife, nothing else could truly hurt a vampire.

"You really just plan to keep me captive and drink my blood?"

"Oh Esmae. I plan to do much more than that."

More started with showing her the rest of the vampire's dwellings in the Condemned Cliffs. When she'd tried to refuse, he'd compelled her again. It grated. Worse than being ordered around like some dog—at least a dog could refuse! But, she reasoned, seeing more of her prison could work in her favor. She had nothing to lose, anyway.

Plus, she was curious. Though she'd woken in a makeshift bed—perhaps he'd been

worried about moving her too much?—it was obvious the vampire had access to some finer resources. Blazing torches lined the pathway, and with their light, she could see the fine embellishment on the vampire’s clothing. It wasn’t like the styles she was used to seeing in the village, not even on the merchants at the nearby marketplace. A variety of gold jewelry accented his features: rings, an armband, even an ear ornament that didn’t pierce the skin.

Esmæ had always dreamed of traveling, seeing other cities and even continents beyond Eurobis. What she lacked in her own ability to travel, she’d tried to compensate by chasing down the rare traveler for details of the world beyond her small little village. It was one of the things that had attracted her to Jared—as the mayor’s son, he’d traveled a relatively large amount compared to their peers, and she loved hearing about it, even if for Jared, most recollections of travel boiled down to how pretty the women were and how short the skirts in fashion were.

She sighed, the memory weighing her down.

“You must be tired,” the vampire—she tried to avoid thinking of him as Silas—said, misunderstanding her thoughts. “I’ll carry you.”

Before she could get her protest out, he had scooped under her legs and lifted her from the ground so she was nestled against his chest. The silk of his shirt caressed her face, his body heat surprising her. She’d always heard vampires were cold-blooded, but her vampire’s chest was warm.

Her vampire. Gods, one pretty face, and she was laying claim to the beast that had captured her.

“I can walk.” It was hard to make a strong protest while he tenderly held her in his arms.

“You can walk slowly,” he agreed, her pride bristling from his condescending tone. “You’re still healing, however. I don’t want you to injure yourself.”

He said it so simply. He saved her because it pleased him. She could strike him, but not if it would hurt her. He didn’t want her to injure herself. For a vicious beast who killed any who entered the Condemned Cliffs he haunted, he was acting more concerned than the average nursemaid.

When she’d broken up with Jared, he’d accused her of having a heart of ice. How could she argue it? They’d been together six months, and she still enjoyed her time by herself more than her time with him, his pretty words always feeling too rehearsed to warrant a reaction. Yet when the vampire said this, mortal enemy to her species, her supposedly frozen heart beat a bit faster.

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“What is all this?” she said with a gasp before she could stop herself when Silas finally stopped at the threshold of a massive cavern.

The space was bathed in gold. Thick veins of glittering metal spindled across the cavern, with piles of gold covering the floor. Not just coins or lumps, but ornately carved furniture, jewelry, and even cutlery. The riches were more than that, the piles punctuated with precious stones that twinkled in the firelight. Rubies, sapphires, emeralds, opals.

“This,” Silas said with no small amount of pride, “is our home.”

He set her down, albeit reluctantly, and as if in a daze, Esmae wandered farther in. Her fingers grazed the different piles, the metal cold beneath the tips of her fingers. Any one of them would be more money than she could earn in a lifetime of half-hearted weaving.

Something in the distance caught her eye. Her steps sped up as her heart pounded. It wasn't just material wealth the vampire had hoarded. He had something that, to Esmae, was even more precious than all the jewels in the room.

Sprawled out on a large table was an open parchment the size of a pony.

“It's Eurobis,” she breathed.

On the scroll, the eastern border was familiar to her, the sharp, dark cliffs characteristic of the small papers Jared and other merchants used to guide them. This was something much grander, a sprawling depiction. More complete than she'd ever

seen, with hundreds of tiny towns dotted and labeled. And not just the Witch Kingdom, but the vampire ones, too. The map was a work of art, with ornaments in the corners, and sea monsters rising from rivers.

“You like the map?” Silas asked over her shoulder.

She didn’t even have it in herself to snap, too overcome. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

His voice took on a curious tone. “You grew up without mirrors?”

She snorted softly, still focused on the map. Something like this would be worth a fortune. To her, who had never even seen their country in full, who had never ventured any meaningful distance no matter how she’d wanted to—who would never get the chance if the curse defeated her—this was priceless.

She must have looked at it for at least ten minutes, resisting the urge to trace her fingers over the parchment lest she smudge any part of it.

“You enjoy cartography?”

“I always wanted to travel,” Esmæ confessed. “I wanted to see the entire continent. Something like this would never be found in my home village.”

“There are more,” he said mildly, gesturing to a bin beside the table that held a dozen scrolls of varying sizes.

She reached for one and frowned as she unrolled it.

“Where is this?”

The shape of the land was unfamiliar, narrow and tall, with flat plains and a ridge of mountains in the west.

“Wyrdova,” Silas explained. “It’s a continent some distance across the sea.”

Her gaze snapped from the map in her hands to Silas.

“How do you have this?” The Witch Kingdom was surrounded on four sides; travel beyond the borders was impossible.

“I inked it myself.”

She blinked in surprise. He hadn’t simply purchased the map, but drawn it? She looked back at the table—it wasn’t a place for displaying maps, but for creating them. Now that she looked away from the map, she saw the telltale tools—quills of various thicknesses, straightedges, a compass. If he’d made it, then that meant he’d been to these places. Not just places a few days’ journey into the Witch Kingdom, but far beyond, places she hadn’t even conceived of. And he said it so casually!

“Tell me about Wyrdova,” she demanded. Her cheeks flushed as she realized how rude she sounded, but still— “You drank my blood. It’s the least you can do.”

Silas grinned. “No need to barter, Esmae. I’d tell you anything you like if it pleases you. Come, sit with me.”

He led her over to a small table—gold, of course—and a small chaise.

There were no chairs in the immediate vicinity. Because the vampire didn’t need multiple chairs, or because he’d picked a spot where she’d be forced to sit by him?

With his propensity for touching her and staying close, she’d bet on the latter. But she

went along with it, because it was her chance to learn more about the world. She sat on the edge of the chaise and laid the map out for them to see.

Silas sat next to her, his legs sprawled so their knees touched. His arm laid on the back of the seat, behind her shoulders.

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Stubbornly, she leaned forward to avoid his touch. The vampire didn't press, making her think she had survived this round. Until she flicked her gaze up at him and saw he was staring down—where her blouse revealed the generous swell of her chest as she leaned over the map.

She narrowed her gaze at him. The vampire didn't even look chagrined to have been caught.

Fine. She leaned back, his fingers just grazing her shoulder. She could bear the contact if it meant he would tell her about more of the world. Rather, she could pretend it was a burden to bear. Silas smiled down at her, as if he could see the internal debate playing out on her face. When it was obvious she'd stay, he spoke.

“Tell me, little witch. What would you like to know?”

Chapter Four

Silas had picked up cartography as a hobby some centuries ago when he'd arrived in Eurobis. For creatures like him, traveling was a siren call. The maps had been a practical tool to keep him busy when certain... supernatural complications had hindered his ability to travel.

At the time, he'd cursed the lack of freedom, condemned to stay confined in the eastern part of the continent he'd once sought.

Now? He was grateful, because not only had it brought him to the same place as his little female captive, but also given him something he could bond over with her. He

might be able to overpower the witch physically, compelling her to stay and refrain from stabbing him long enough to court her, but her mind was her own.

Which meant it was all that much dearer a prize.

Silas wasn't prone to playing fair. Certainly not when there was something he'd wanted.

And he'd never wanted anyone like her before. The female had attacked him, a bigger, stronger opponent, while still wounded with unhesitating violence. The same female who stared at the maps he'd labored over with blatant admiration in a way that made him puff up his chest.

So, when he'd spotted her interest, he'd been unable to resist showing her more of his work. Wanted to see her ravenous gaze devour the parchment he'd spent weeks poring over. Wanted to have her beside him, her juniper-and-mayberry scent wrapping around him while she asked him questions instead of spewing threats at him. And if he shamelessly drew her onto a small chaise when he had far larger spaces to lounge in his caves, well, once more: Silas didn't play fair.

"Is Wyrdova where vampires come from?" was her first question.

He scoffed, imagining vampires in the sunny kingdom. "There are no vampires there."

She frowned, surprised. "Only witches and voids?"

"No. There's magic there, but it's not so codified the way it is in Eurobis with a hundred gods no one can keep track of and systematically trapped in cards."

His witch turned over his answer, trying to fit what he said into her understanding of

the world. Oh, the things he would show her, would teach her.

“What’s it like, then?”

He tried to think of the best way to explain it. Truthfully, the kingdom had been stifling to him. His brother had claimed the space and the neighboring kingdoms for himself, and although Alistair could share, their kind weren’t fond of doing so. Silas had been eager to travel away, to find his own path, and had mostly kept to the books he hoarded in his time there. That wouldn’t be a satisfactory answer, however. “It’s a peaceful place, with sprawling fields and a simple group of people. It’s a land that values art and music over commerce, I suppose. Some of the finest writers and poets I’ve known came from there.”

“Is that where you come from?” she asked, hesitantly. “Or where do you come from, if there’s no vampires in Wyrdova?”

It pleased him to no end that she wanted to know more about him. Because he had endless questions about her. “That kingdom was my birthplace. I wasn’t born a vampire, after all.”

“You were human?”

He grinned. “I didn’t say that either. Now, it’s only fair you share of yourself as well. Tell me about where you grew up.”

Esmae frowned. The confused expression did nothing to mar her beauty. “Why do you want to know about me?”

Because I want to know everything about you. “I’m a curious creature, and I’ve longed for companionship.” Not a lie, though in truth, Silas was solitary by choice. He had no need for incessant chatter; he only wanted the company of one single

female.

“So I’m to be your entertainment.”

“I’ll entertain you in turn,” he promised. “In any manner of your choosing,” he added, lowering his voice suggestively.

She flushed, a scarlet hue appearing on her cheeks as she caught his meaning. Her blood beckoned him, but he wouldn’t draw again from her so soon. He didn’t need much blood to live; he could exist on what he’d taken from her for weeks. Of course, one didn’t need to drink the finest wine in the lands. One simply wanted to.

“I don’t suppose letting me stab you would be an option?”

He grinned. He was learning, for his female, that violent threats were a way to flirt. Or at least, that was how he chose to interpret them.

“What’s your favorite part of your town?” he amended.

She seemed inclined to argue again before sighing. “There’s a small hill that crests just over the river. It’s too small for sailing, but still, I like to imagine what stops exist along the river. What I might see if I followed it down, what adventures I might have.” She turned away. “You think it’s silly, I’m sure.”

He frowned. “Not at all. What would make you say that?”

She fidgeted. “Jared—others did. After all, as a mediocre weaver, I’d never have the need to sell at larger markets, and never have the funds to explore in my own right. I need to care for my father, so I could hardly go off to seek my own fortune. My magic isn’t useful for anything more.”

Silas had several questions about that. Why she deemed herself a mediocre weaver, why she put others above herself, what the nature of her magic was, where she might like to go. But one burned above all others.

“Who is Jared?” Who was the male who dared make her seem like her desires were foolish?

She looked back at him, spine straight. “I’m not answering that.”

He could compel her to. He opened his mouth just to do so when she snapped, “If you force your will on me to answer another of your questions, I’ll bite my tongue so hard it bleeds.”

He could use his thrall to prevent her from doing that, but perhaps better not to force the female to give up all her secrets. He'd get them one way or the other, and wouldn't they be sweeter when she offered?

"Tell me what else you wish to know about Wyrdova, then. Or anywhere else."

"Anywhere?"

Silas shrugged. "There are few continents I've not visited." It had taken him time to settle down once he'd left Wyrdova. He'd been looking for something, even if he hadn't known what. Until fate led him to Eurobis.

He'd wondered why. Cursed the loss of his freedom. Yet now, he realized he'd been drawn to these cliffs for a reason.

Because this was where he would one day find Esmae Mellodi.

His fated mate.

Chapter Five

"I wouldn't even know where else to ask about."

Compared to the vampire, she was utterly ignorant. She expected him to lord it over her, just as he'd lorded his strength. Jared had never hesitated to remind her how little she knew of the outside world, which had eventually driven her to stop asking questions since she just felt stupid.

But Silas simply stood from the loveseat. He went back into the cavern, disappearing behind a pile of gold. Is he getting more maps?

When he returned, he carried an object unlike anything she'd seen before. It was a sphere, held up on a stand at an angle, so it spun slightly as he carried the base. He moved the map and set it down in front of them, returning to his spot on the loveseat—with his arm over her shoulders this time.

She didn't even mind, trailing her fingers around the sphere as it spun. The majority of it was smooth blue, with large splotches of it covered in raised greens and tans. Turning it, she found one that matched the shape of Eurobis. On the other side, one that matched Wyrdova.

"It's a globe," he explained. "Simply pick a spot on it, and I will describe the land."

His tone was patient. He didn't treat her like an idiot for not knowing about something she hadn't encountered before.

What an un-monstrous thing for a monster to do.

She picked a spot at random, and Silas began to explain the shape of the continent, the climate, the culture. She probed him on further questions, and he answered each one to the best of his ability. Questions relating to the specifics of people, he admitted to having less detail on. Because he'd held himself separate? Even vampires had kingdoms, though Silas didn't live in any of them. She forced herself to keep asking about different spots on the globe, even as the list of questions she had about the vampire mounted.

When they exhausted one spot, she picked another. Then another.

The strangest thing happened. Esmae knew she was cursed to die, doomed unless she could bleed the monster—the few drops not sufficing, it no doubt meant she needed to kill him, which was seemingly more and more impossible. She knew she'd never get to go to any of these places.

And yet... she was enjoying herself.

She'd been raised that vampires were the natural enemies of witches, but this vampire didn't seem so bad. The forced captivity was certainly a mark against Silas. However, since one of her own kind had cursed her for breaking up with him, it didn't exactly feel fair to judge the vampire for that. Especially since she had been the one to seek out the creature of the Condemned Cliffs.

Esmae prided herself on being rational. Could she hold a vampire to a higher standard than she held her fellow witches? Herself?

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The hours passed quickly. She couldn't track the time precisely, but she had been awake for several hours. Her stomach growled, putting an abrupt end to Silas's description of the desert sands some distance away.

"I don't suppose you have food for humans here?" she asked. "Otherwise, this will be a rather short abduction."

Of course, she had her own countdown she was working against.

Silas frowned. "I'll return directly with something suitable."

He disappeared down the caves he had led her through.

Esmae had no intentions of simply sitting around and waiting. She couldn't break his thrall and attempt to escape—even if she ever managed to find her way through the winding paths. But she could look for other weaknesses the vampire might have. Esmae was resourceful. Her copper knife was forgotten on the floor of the place she'd woken up, but there might yet be something else.

Though she might feel bad, just a little, if she killed Silas. He hadn't really harmed her. On the contrary, he'd saved her. But she couldn't die, not with her father counting on her.

She ventured deeper into the caverns. Upon closer examination, there were trinkets of all sorts around. Religious totems. Clothing of any number of styles in all manner of colors. Pottery, paintings, sculptures. Plates of obsidian that looked almost like scales, only they were far too large to belong to any creature she'd ever seen. No copper,

however.

She passed another row of treasures and stumbled, clutching her chest. A chill spasmed inside her.

Cold, so cold.

A moment passed. Another.

Eventually, she could move again, her heart once more beating. She cursed Jared aloud.

The curse. She didn't have much time. Perhaps a week, at best.

Desperate times...

The deck of cards was still at her side. She flicked through the cards quickly, finding the second to last card her mother had left her.

With her mother's stored oracle magic, she only had to think her question to draw forth the magic. How can I defeat Silas and make him let me go?

The magic spoke in her ears, ominous words ringing:

Find his fated mate.

"Lady, what are you looking for?"

Esmae startled and looked around. "Who said that?"

"You can understand me!" a voice squeaked.

She sighed, her magic swelling around her. She'd been so distracted after using the oracle card. Normally, the card would at least point her in the right direction, like when it showed her the path to the cliffs, but this time, nothing happened. Only the echo of an answer rattling through the cavern for her ears. It was puzzling. Or maybe there was no puzzle; maybe the card didn't have enough magic to guide her. In any case, she hadn't realized she had company.

"My magic allows me to understand animals," she explained.

"Oh wow!" was the excited reply.

She was used to it. Animals, so often ignored and overlooked, tended to get very excited when they realized she could understand them. It came from being so often overlooked, she supposed. Considering she, too, had leaped into the arms of the first man to overlook her poor social status and shower her with attention, it was hard not to empathize.

"Why don't you come out where I can see you?" she encouraged. She hated talking to disembodied voices. "If you do, we can talk more."

A beat of hesitation. "The creature doesn't like when others enter his hoard."

"He won't hurt you." Maybe she shouldn't have promised that, but she could hardly see Silas caring about a little mouse or whatever she was talking to.

Another moment of silence. Then, there was a flurry of scurrying, gold coins rattling in her periphery until a small, fuzzy lump emerged. A long pink snout protruded from the sightless skull, eyes squeezed shut. Not a mouse, but a mole.

"Do you have a name?" she asked.

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Some animals didn't understand the concept, but the mole answered confidently, "Dirt."

"Okay, uh, Dirt. It's nice to meet you. My name's Esmae. Have you lived here long?"

"All my life," Dirt squeaked proudly. "One and a half years."

Well, it was something. "So you know the vampire who lives here, it seems. Is that right?" Maybe the mole could offer her some insights. Doubtful, but with her mother's magic striking out, her only hope was her own might work in a roundabout way.

"I do. I know he hates other creatures entering his hoard." Dirt's gray body shook, as if he was afraid the vampire would come back at any moment.

She plucked the mole from the ground and cradled him to her chest. "You're being very brave, Dirt. Have you seen him"—err, could he see?—"or heard him with any other creature? Maybe one he called his fated mate?"

The little rodent shook its snout. "No. He's always alone."

Always alone. Why did that make her chest ache? Alone, unless he magically compelled a witch to keep him company against her wishes.

But then—if the vampire was lonely, he could've done that at any time. He'd only done it after she'd invaded his territory (and, well, tried to kill him).

She sighed, pushing the self-flagellating thoughts aside. What else could she ask that a mole might know? “Do you know the way out?” Not that she could leave.

Dirt chirped in the affirmative. Well, if she ever found a way around his thrall, that could be useful.

“Do you know anything else about the vampire?” Maybe that was the way to do it. Open-ended questions.

Dirt’s voice faded to a whimper. “I do. I know he’s back!”

Chapter Six

What would a human eat? Not a question Silas had asked himself since... well, ever. But he would learn, because his female needed sustenance. It was the middle of the day, which meant he would have to brave the sun’s rays in order to get Esmae proper food. He suppressed a grimace. No matter; seeing to her needs mattered more than his discomfort.

He hadn’t always had a vampire’s weakness to sunlight. It was worse than he remembered. Quick strides, unnaturally fast, let him cross the mountain to the forests below. To his shame, Silas’s other form had been lost to him when he’d turned into a vampire.

The forest provided a number of options. Rabbits, deer, plump birds that were too slow in flying away. Among his treasures was an enchanted cold box he could store the food in, so it wouldn’t go to waste. He wasn’t sure what his mate favored, but he’d provide options and learn her favorites. He looked forward to learning everything about her.

Even in just a day, she’d captivated him. The moment when he’d sensed her on his

mountain, he'd grown curious. When she slipped and hit her head, he felt something that he'd thought he'd long since evolved beyond: fear.

And after staying at her bedside for two days, waiting for her to awaken—when she finally had, she hadn't hesitated to attack him. Such things could be forgiven, since she didn't know she belonged to him. It heartened Silas at the time to see his female hale and hearty, hair wild with red strands as she tried to paint her knife the same color with his blood.

Being that she was his mate, his twin flame, that also meant she was the one creature that could harm him. Even if he'd lost his other form, the other traits of his species remained.

A need to provide for his female. To keep her safe. To win her affections.

Silas wasn't practiced in seduction, but for her, he'd learn. Eagerly.

He returned to the Cliffs, using his fine velvet cape as a tarp to haul several hundred pounds of animal meat. The kills had been quick and painless. The journey back, slowed down by the weight as he trudged through the sun, was not.

It would be worth it. Seeing her cared for would be worth it.

He returned directly, following the path he knew well on quiet feet. Esmae's voice echoed through the cavern, catching his attention. Who is she talking to?

“What else do you know about the vampire?” she asked.

Who dares talk to my mate?

His strides grew longer until he was nearly running there. But the only answer he

heard in response was a series of whimpers. More food for my female to eat.

Esmae jerked back from the spot in the cavern she'd wandered to when Silas returned. She held an animal of some kind in her hands. A creature that should've known better than to intrude on his territory.

On reflex, he bared his teeth at the animal.

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She clutched a wriggling gray lump to her chest.

“Don’t scare him!” she chastised.

Silas blinked, realizing what he’d been doing. I’m jealous of a rodent. The thought was too undignified to voice.

“I’m not scaring him.”

A whine. “You are,” she insisted, once more pressing the fuzzy thing to her chest protectively, as though it had earned enough of her loyalty for her to shield it. “For no reason. We get it, you’re bigger and stronger with fangs. He’s just a little mole.”

Though he was taller than her and more muscled, his little witch squared her shoulders and stared up as if she were the predator in the room. No, not a predator, he corrected himself. With her soulful brown eyes and pursed lips, stance wide as if unsure if she’d charge at him to run away with the creature, she was a protector.

“You’re irresistible like this,” he rasped.

She opened her lips to argue.

He took advantage of the opportunity. Moving faster than any mortal could, he cupped the back of her head, tilting it to him.

Mine.

The taste of mayberries threatened to overpower him. Her lips were soft, widening in a gasp as he licked her, barely resisting the urge to devour her. She moaned against him as he deepened the kiss, the sound spurring Silas onward. His other hand slid lower, clutching the curve of her behind as he pressed against her. The rodent had disappeared, and now it was he that pressed against her chest. Flames, he could feel the stiff peaks of her breasts, even through the fabric. His weariness was forgotten, electrified by the proof of his mate's desire. He wanted to put them in his mouth. Suck them until they ached, then pierce them with his fangs. He'd make her come just from that.

Her two delicate hands fisted his own shirt, gripping him. I'm yours, he thought. As you are mine, for eternity, I belong to only you.

But just as she pulled him in, she seemed to come to her senses. Far too quickly for Silas's hopes. Madness in her embrace was better than sanity alone. Her mouth stopped moving against his. Her very muscles stiffened within his grip, where they'd just melted.

She pushed him away.

He let her.

Her eyes were aflame with her ire.

Worth it. For the proof that her body knows what her mind does not yet.

"You brute!" she snapped.

The little mole next to her squeaked as if bolstering her argument. He resisted the urge to curl his lips and growl at the interloper.

“You enjoyed it. I can scent it.”

The darkened red of her cheeks was either from shame or fury. Likely a mix of both. It made her no less lovely. Silas saw two paths before him: he could argue the truth she knew deep down—but his female would never admit it, and forcing her to confront such feelings could push her away rather than coax her to cleave to him. Or he could let the subject drop—for now—and win her in other ways.

The latter path was wiser. Even though part of him wanted to take her again, to fill her with so much pleasure, she had no choice but to surrender.

Later. Proceed with caution, and I shall have her forever. Rush, and I risk my undoing.

“I brought food.” With all the grandness of a king unveiling a feast, he set his velvet cape down and displayed his haul. A deer, three rabbits, and two plump birds of various descriptions.

He waited for his mate to express her gratitude. Women liked a male who could provide, didn’t they? And none would do better by their mate than Silas. It would be the second step to winning her over. The first had been displaying his vast wealth and knowledge. She’d enjoyed looking at his maps. Surely, with some food and tender words, she’d see how right they were for each other.

“You... you brought meat.”

He cocked his head. “Of course. It would be most filling.” A skinny thing like her would benefit from some hearty meals. Perhaps no male had provided for her before? It pleased him to think he was the first, but the answer didn’t satisfy him. He considered, confusion marring the pride he’d felt at presenting his haul. Then, realization. “Worry not, I’ll of course skin and prepare the food. I simply didn’t have

a chance.”

But his mate’s expression turned from stunned to... disapproving? “I don’t eat meat.”

“You don’t eat meat,” he repeated, not comprehending. In fairness, Silas didn’t consume meat either, since he was a vampire. But he certainly had before! After how he’d spent ages in the sun, hunting and dragging back the food?

She shifted on her feet, uncomfortable. He should’ve checked. How would he win her over if he couldn’t even feed her? He heaved a frustrated sigh. The sound drew her attention from the pile of perfectly good food wasting on the floor to his body.

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“You don’t look well.” She frowned. “Did you go out in the sun... for me?”

Her concern was touching. Perhaps she could care for him? But again, he’d failed.

“I did,” he confirmed. He’d step into the sun over and over if it meant getting her what she needed. Which, since that wasn’t freshly hunted deer meat, he’d be doing again shortly. It wouldn’t kill him, but it was exhausting. He’d need to feed far sooner than he’d planned. “I leave again directly. You will not go without in my presence.”

He turned to go, but her delicate fingers snapped on his wrist.

He immediately stilled.

The first time his mate had chosen to touch him. Well, with something other than a blade.

“Wait.” Her voice was tentative. “I have another idea.”

Chapter Seven

Silas, in his massive hoard, had a collection of petrified exotic fruits. Of the non-forbidden cards in her deck, a healthy portion were from phytomancers. It was a matter of finding the right card to enchant the seeds of the fruit and turn them into new trees, right in the middle of the cave.

Soon after, the two sat across from each other while Esmae gorged herself on the most delicious fruit she’d ever had.

Perhaps she should've let him go back out. It would have given her more time to explore and press Dirt for information. But when he'd come back, he had been even paler than before. His cheeks were blistered, and though they'd since settled down, the vampire still looked slightly ill. Of course, ill on the vampire still managed to look infuriatingly gorgeous. Anyone else would've prayed to look half as bad at their healthiest. But she noted the difference, and guilt had clawed into her throat and refused to stop squeezing. He'd gotten hurt, for her.

He hadn't even given her a hard time about the meat, which he offered to later drop off where travelers would find it in the night. Even Jared had continued haranguing Esmae over her dietary habits well into their relationship. He just couldn't comprehend that being able to talk to animals while alive made eating them utterly off-putting.

Yet Silas didn't even know the nature of her magic and accepted her refusal.

So, she'd spared him a second journey in the sun and used one of her limited cards to harvest the seeds and magically grow the fruit. And accepted her place at the vampire's table.

Besides, she had a mission: learn more about the vampire. And in turn, his mate.

There was a flaw in her plan, however.

The vampire was... charming.

First had been the maps. Then his humor. He was direct without being crude, his attraction blatant. He flirted, but he wasn't overbearing. He made no snide comments about her eschewing meat for fruit—in fact, he seemed nearly entranced as he watched her eat.

“If you’ve traveled to so many places, why do you stay in the Condemned Cliffs?” she asked when an opportunity presented itself. He was obviously territorial, given how he’d scowled at Dirt (who took some fruit and scurried off, which she couldn’t blame him for).

Silas grimaced. “It was not exactly a plan. I contracted a curse upon coming to the land and lost my ability to go elsewhere.”

So she wasn’t the only one cursed? Esmae debated sharing her own plight, but quickly dismissed the idea. The only cure to her curse was killing the vampire, spilling his blood. He might flirt with her, but he wouldn’t give his life for her.

“That must have been hard. I never got to travel, but I’ve always longed to. I can’t imagine what it’s like to have had that freedom taken away. At least I don’t know what I’m missing. You must miss it.”

Silas sipped from his goblet, though she had no desire to know what was in it. “Tell me, Esmae. Why didn’t you travel when you clearly have the heart of an adventurer?”

She bit back a bitter laugh. Heart of an adventurer, or heart of ice? “I lacked the means. My father is old; my mother died years ago.” She was killed by the village when they realized her magic broke the accepted mold. “He needs me to care for him.”

“Then who cares for you?”

She ignored the question. “What about you? Do you have any family? Any... loved ones?” A dangerous dance, trying to ask about his fated mate.

“I have a brother, who I left in Wyrdova.”

She blinked. “He’s a vampire like you?”

Silas chuckled. “Not at all.”

Then how was his brother alive, when Silas had said he had lived here for hundreds of years?

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“We are something... else,” he answered, guessing her question. Esmae bit back her discomfort at being read so easily. “What the curse took from me, he still has. Another form that gives him long life. I didn’t realize becoming a vampire would take it from me.”

If he was another species... that explained how he could have a fated mate. “And anyone else?” She tried to keep her tone light. “A... lover? Mate?”

“I’ve never had a female like that,” Silas said immediately.

She blinked, covering her surprise. “So you don’t have a mate?”

He hesitated. Hiding something? Now she wanted to know that much more. As well as why he hadn’t ever been with a woman before. Was he simply not interested? Every scolding look belied that theory.

“You could say I’m unattached for the moment,” was what the vampire eventually settled on.

“Do you want to be?” she asked, trying to figure out the layers of the answer.

His face split into a grin. “Eager to claim me for yourself?”

She choked on the piece of fruit she’d mistimed, sputtering.

Silas was across the table in an instant, gently pounding her back while placing his goblet in her hand. Wine, not water, she was relieved to find while she cleared her

throat. He rubbed her back, and after a moment of not being able to breathe, she settled against it before her brain caught up.

She shifted her chair and after a beat, Silas took the hint and went back to his side of the table.

I'm just going to ignore that. "I was just wondering. I assumed any mate wouldn't be happy about you kidnapping some other woman."

"Mmm, let me worry about my mate." Not denying he had one? "I'd much rather learn about you, Esmæ. Tell me, do you have a lover?"

He asked the words in a bored, uncaring way. His eyes said he felt any way but that.

"I don't see why I should answer that."

"I could make you," Silas drawled.

She bit her cheek hard enough to sting. "I hate when you do that. Tell you what, I'll answer your questions if you answer mine." If his interest in her was her only leverage, she'd use it.

"A bargain?"

"What's good for the gander is good for the goose. You claimed my blood for spilling yours." His gaze immediately dropped to her neck, and she regretted bringing it up. Her pulse sped as she remembered exactly how his bite felt. "I'll give you answers if you do the same."

"Deal." Not a trace of hesitation. She'd half-expected him to refuse and use his thrall to drag the information from her. It was utterly violating. But perhaps he preferred if

she was willing. “Do you have a lover?”

“What do you plan to use that information for?”

Silas grinned, but it was cold. “Answer my question first.”

She forced her voice to stay steady. “I don’t have one. Why did you want to know?”

“Because if you did, I was going to kill him. Don’t look so surprised,” he chastised her, unruffled by her horrified look. “I’ve told you I’m territorial about what’s mine.”

“I’m not yours!”

“I say you are. But I’d agree, you’re not as much mine as you will be by the end of the night.”

“The end of the night?”

“When you’re in my bed.”

She jerked back and stood. “You’re unbelievable!”

He grinned. “We’ll see. Now, sit, and we can keep playing your game. Or we can play one of mine.”

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Remember the plan. “Tell me about—”

“Ah, ah,” Silas tutted. “You had your question. It’s my turn. Tell me about your past lovers.”

If looks could’ve burned the vampire, her glare would’ve reduced him to ashes. Instead, he smiled, pleased with her reaction. She would’ve been better acting like an emotionless ice princess. She’d always been so good at that. But around the vampire, it was impossible to keep her composure. “What makes you so sure I’ve had any?”

“Your initial reaction. If that was the case, you’d have denied it as easily as I did. Now, that’s two questions you owe me.”

She was losing at her own game. Fine. No more indignant outbursts. She’d answer and then get her own answers in turn. “I had one lover before, a boy two years older than me. We recently parted ways.”

“Why did you end it with him?”

“He saw me more as an object than a person.” A weak peasant witch who would never leave the village and would be impressed with everything he said. I’ve given you everything, and you spurn me? Your heart is ice, witch. Let your body turn as well when the walking moon is full again. Given her everything, he’d said. He’d bought her dinner twice with complaint, and given her a lay in the hills that had hardly been worth gloating about with other girls, if she’d had any friends to potentially gloat to. “He was the kind of man who, even if I spent hours making a picnic basket to enjoy with him, he’d cancel because he could get a better offer. If I

ever tried to make other plans, he'd accuse me of disloyalty. I realized my value to him was that I was an easily impressed audience, and I got tired of seeing the same play over and over again. But..." She trailed off before she could voice the question on her lips.

Silas read her hesitation perfectly. "I knew you were the one to end it because no sane male would ever let you go."

She forced a smile, but it was brittle. "He didn't want to let me go. He saw me as a belonging. You two would likely have gotten along."

Chapter Eight

Silas bit back a growl and opened his mouth to argue. How dare she compare her to some former lover who'd failed to make Esmae feel as cherished as she deserved?

No words came out denying it. His teeth clacked together as he shut it.

Was she right? Had he treated her like an object? He'd forced her to stay against her will—there were no two ways about that. Yet it wasn't the most unusual response, given she had tried to kill him after he'd saved her. He didn't think she was an object. A prize, yes, but not a possession. A woman with an adventurer's heart, a sharp wit, and bravery enough to rival the fiercest armies.

"I do not expect to keep you here against your will forever," was what he eventually said.

"So you do plan to let me go?"

How eager she sounded! What Silas truly hoped was to win her over, so that she would choose to stay with him. They could go beyond any land she wished to

explore, if only she would allow him to go with her. To guard her, keep her safe, and provide. And, of course, growl at any males who looked too closely at her. And perhaps to hold her...

But that wasn't seeing her as an object, was it?

"I will hold you to the terms set initially." It was the best he could do. "When that is done, you may do anything you wish."

She settled back in her seat as though she believed him. Yet it was all Silas could do not to cross the table and fall between her legs, begging him to let her court her properly.

"It's my turn," she eventually said.

It wasn't, but he'd allow it, after what they'd just said.

"Tell me about fated mates."

She hadn't asked about who his fated mate was again, so Silas was spared another attempt at dancing around the dragon in the room. "Fated mates are predestined pairs bound through unknown forces. They're perfectly matched, two halves of a whole. When they truly accept each other, it is said they can feel each other's emotions." For his kind, fated mates also represented the ultimate weakness—because only his fated mate could hurt him.

"My turn. Where did you hear about fated mates?" That wasn't a term common in Eurobis the way it was in Wyrdova.

Esmae looked away. "My mother. Do you know who your fated mate is?"

Why was she focused on this? If she asked who, he'd be honor bound to tell her, but no doubt she would run in fear. He needed time, flames damn him. "Yes." Was his tone even, bored? Nonchalance was hard to pretend, even for a master, when this was the subject. "I do not wish to speak more on the subject. The game is done."

Her brows furrowed, no doubt trying to decipher why he was so private on the subject. "So when you want to stop answering questions, that's fine, but the moment I refuse, you thrall me?"

"Yes." Her expression turned, what was for her, literally murderous. The knife he'd given her for the fruit was a dull steel, but all the same, he'd do well not to court her wrath. He could give an explanation—not the explanation, but one that was at least partly true. "The existence of my fated mate makes me vulnerable. I will treasure her above all else, and saying more could jeopardize her. I will not be moved to say more this eve."

The annoyance etched on her face dimmed, but there was still a curious tilt to her head. Trying to decipher him?

At least she was curious. A small victory for him. They finished their meal with relative peace, the conversation turning almost... normal. Esmae spoke little of herself, but she did tell him about her village, her favorite places to explore. Silas, in turn, listened eagerly, asking as many questions as he could without turning rude. It was outside their game, but she answered. At times, she seemed almost startled, as if unsure if she should stop speaking. As if no one had ever asked her so many questions about her opinions, her tastes, her wishes.

He wanted to know it all.

The hour grew late. As a vampire, he could sense it was well into the evening again. Esmae had been awake for a long time, longer than most mortals were used to by some measure. No doubt she was running on determination alone, but he wouldn't let his mate be harmed, even if it was by herself.

“Now, you've had a long day, and no doubt you need your rest.”

His mate would no doubt argue for the sake of it, but when she went to protest, she was ironically cut off by a yawn. He stifled a grin. She was adorable.

Seeming to sense protest was futile—he'd have thrall'd her if needed—she followed him. There was a small cavern, more a carved out space really, where he could give her some space. Of course, since he hadn't had time to make arrangements—and she wouldn't be sleeping there for long—it needed furnishings. He made quick work, settling her in one of the more extravagant beds he'd sourced over the years, with four ornately carved posters and silk sheets spread over a massive mattress. Pillows were stuffed with pegasus feathers. A gossamer canopy of dark fabric helped offer privacy to his female. Mates needed none, but humans tended to be sensitive from what he'd read. He dimmed the torches to near darkness and Esmae eased towards the bed, eyeing him.

He stayed at the edge of the makeshift room. When she got under the covers, he let the torches fully go to darkness. Minutes ticked by. Her breathing leveled a bit as she relaxed, sinking into the bed, which was second to none.

A gentleman might have left her alone.

But then he scented her.

Chapter Nine

The trouble with kissing the vampire was even though he was holding Esmae captive, her body failed to understand that. It failed to understand they were mortal enemies and that he likely cared more for her blood than her wit.

No, all her body knew was that his hands felt right around her, possessive and strong, without bruising. His mouth was demanding, and yet her body loved to cleave to him, had matched his enthusiasm as she tasted him. Her heart had pounded from that searing kiss, faster than it ever had with Jared, even after a lay.

It had taken her mind too long to remember who he was. To look past his charming comments, his blunt observations which were, against all odds, favorable towards her, and his peculiar focus on seeing her hale and hearty. Her initial plan to clear away the fog—focusing on the memory of the bite—failed. Instead, it conjured memories of how her blood had heated from the contact, how he'd sucked her neck and the way her body lit up with desire and need unmatched by any previous inkling of desire she'd felt.

It was only when she recalled the way he brutishly overpowered her will with his vampire thrall that she shoved him away.

And yet—despite what his thrall and supernatural strength—he'd let her.

He'd even given her a place to sleep and withdrawn to the shadows.

He had rescued her, fed her, and now found a place for her to sleep. A bed more

comfortable than the lumpy mattress she was forever patching, where she had to either curl her legs to her chest or let her knees fall off the space if she didn't want to cramp. In the vampire's lair, however, she was able to sprawl out, the gentle weight of the blankets keeping her warm and secure.

The only issue was sleep was not forthcoming.

No, because while she'd eventually overpowered her weak-willed body and broken the kiss, the effects lingered. Pressing her inner thighs together did nothing to abate her desire, and relaxing her legs only made the proposition of placing a hand there too inviting.

It's the bite, gods damn him. That must be why.

The supernatural pleasure had been overpowering. The kiss had just reignited her desire.

She bit the inside of her cheek, debating. For stubbornness alone, she should ignore the sensation and make herself sleep. It felt impossible, but Esmae had set off to kill the unkillable. She should be able to ignore this.

But he would bite her again and again, and if this desire was bottled up in her, it was liable to explode. She hoped it was her normal cold, rational thinking talking, and not the lust-addled part of her brain.

The only logical thing to do was to ease this brewing tension before it overwhelmed her. The vampire had left, likely going to his own quarters. It was dark inside the canopy of the bed, private. No one would ever know.

So, slowly, as if scared to so much as rustle the blankets, she slid a hand down, undoing the leather ties of her pants. She lifted her hips just barely, easing them

down, and set one finger at her center. It was immediately coated with her wetness.

Gods, she'd never been this needful.

She began to touch, to tend to herself the way she had so often in the past. Normally, when she did so, she didn't think of anything in particular. Positions, perhaps. Some scenarios inspired by gossip. But always with faceless specters. Even when she was with Jared, she'd never once imagined him when getting herself off. Yet this time, she did imagine someone with her. A male with a perfectly sculpted body, curled black hair, and red, slitted eyes. He had that same intensity as when they'd spoken before, but in her reverie, she wasn't unnerved by it. She was aroused by it.

She could almost imagine his scent wrapped around her, smoke and sin—

“Thinking of me, little witch?”

Esmae gasped and her eyes snapped open.

In the dim light left in the dark, she found his form. Silas loomed at the foot of the bed, inside the canopy, staring down at her.

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“What—”

He cut off her protest with a sudden movement. Where he'd once stood at the edge, now he was directly above her, his body leaned over hers.

Gods, she hadn't been imagining his scent. This close, just as she'd pictured, her neediness grew. She tried to crush her legs together, but his knee pressed between them through the blanket.

“When you have these needs, I will be the one to tend them,” he growled.

When. The gall! Though it was hard to deny that. “If that's my only option, I'd sooner go without.”

“Would you really deny yourself to spite me?” He sounded baffled. “A creature like you is made for pleasure.”

A creature like you. What did that mean? Confused, she chose another line of defense. “You have a mate. No doubt they wouldn't like you with another female.”

Silas's white fangs gleamed. “As I told you, leave all worries about my mate to me. You're my priority this eve, Esmæ.”

Just the sound of her name on his lips, somewhere between a growl and a purr, had her arching.

“I'm not having sex with you.”

She braced for the argument. If there was anything that annoyed the village boys, it was that line. Or worse, they took it as a challenge.

But Silas only nodded, as if it was a foregone conclusion. “I only wish to see to your satisfaction.”

A part of her couldn’t help but relax at that. Why was the monster so quick to acquiesce to her? In every matter except, well, letting her go or letting her kill him.

“Put your hands above your head, and keep them there,” he instructed. The thrall compelled her, and she was glad of it, because if he hadn’t—she would have still obeyed.

The movement pushed the blanket down. She was still dressed, but it made her feel exposed all the same. His hand came to her breast, feeling the mound of flesh through the fabric, his finger rolling the peak of her nipple with just enough pleasure to have her sucking in a breath.

“You’ll tell me if you dislike anything I do, immediately. You say you honestly wish for me to stop, and I will. You have my word, little witch. Do you understand?”

She nodded. She believed him. Even now, if she said she didn’t want this, he’d leave. But her body craved his touch. There was a reason her usual fantasies hadn’t sufficed. She’d had a taste of the vampire, and gods smite her, she wanted more.

“I need to hear your pretty voice,” he coaxed.

“I understand, Silas.”

He stared at her, his fingers stilling. “That’s the first time you’ve said my name, Esmae. I like it.”

She flushed. She'd been avoiding it, because saying his name made him seem too much like a person, but it had slipped out before she could stop it. "Delightful. Now, are you going to give me satisfaction, or was that all just talk?"

He grinned, the expression feral in the torchlight. "Fear not, little witch. I'll have you screaming my name before the night is through."

He descended upon her.

The blanket was ripped away, the cold air pricking at her senses. He pulled her untied trousers down her legs. She widened her legs on instinct, and Silas gave her an approving smirk as a reward. The expression should've turned her off, but no. Seeing the male so confident, so gleeful at her need for him—he could read her movements so godsdamn easily.

She was eager for his fingers, her body longing for even the slightest penetration. She'd said no sex, and she'd meant it. It was wrong to let the creature you planned to kill penetrate you, wasn't it? Surely there was a line. But she felt so empty, need clawing at her. She tested her wrists, straining above, but her hands wouldn't move as though they were tied to the headboard. The restraint made her feel freer to arch, to try to draw him in.

His hands slid slowly along her bare thighs, the touch surprisingly gentle, coaxing.

"Wider, Esmae. Show me all of you."

She obeyed.

"Touch me," she begged.

"I am," Silas said, his movements on her hips utterly unhurried. As if he hadn't a care

in the world. Yet his appearance belied his words. His muscles were taut, his eyes bright and hungry. His erection pressed against her leg as he leaned over, just the slightest contact making her jolt.

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“More. You know where.”

Now his expression turned wicked. “I do. And I’ll give you exactly what you need.”

At last. She shut her eyes and readied for the contact.

Lick.

Her eyes snapped open. He... he wasn’t using his fingers to ease her ache.

He’s using his mouth.

Since when had this been an option? She started to speak, but her words were cut off as he gave a long, sensual lick over the length of her slit, coating his tongue with her wetness.

“Delicious. You are perfection, Esmae.” His words were gruff, as if he was just as affected as she was. He kissed her there, teasing her entrance. His actions spurred a loud moan, which she tried to cut off, ashamed of how wanton she sounded.

He lifted his head. Gods, the sight of him was erotic, full lips parted, face complete masculine determination, as he peered up from between her legs. “Never stifle your moans, Esmae. Not with me.”

She flushed. “I... I can be loud. It’s distracting.” Something that Jared had found distracting.

His eyes narrowed to slits. “When I find who made you think your pleasure was something to be ashamed of, I’m doing to drain them dry and burn their corpse to cinders. Your moans aren’t distracting, love. They’re the entire point.”

Dark, dark words. Monstrous words that should have her telling him to get off of her.

Instead, she grew wetter. Silas, of course, noticed. “You like hearing the things I would do to avenge you, my violent witch. Fear not—it’s a topic I can speak to at length. But another time, because my mouth is needed elsewhere.”

A flutter beat in her chest, a living, uneven sensation. Of all things, why was he making her smile? True to his word, Silas returned to his post, taking her in his mouth. He sucked and flicked his tongue, making her gasp and groan. But habit had her still biting back the worst of her cries.

“I’m going”—lick—“to make”—suck—“it impossible for you”—flick—“to hold back.”

His grip on her thighs was firm, pinning her in place while he feasted. Desire welled inside her, building faster than she’d ever experienced. She felt like her body would detonate at any moment, like a single stroke could send her over the edge. Silas gave her no quarter. Soon, it was impossible to restrain herself, her moans and gasps blending with words, with pleas.

“Silas,” she whimpered. “I’m close.”

He didn’t pause to respond, continuing to worship her with his mouth. Esmae was tumbling towards the edge, close, so close, with release just out of reach. He shifted slightly, and she nearly cried from the loss of contact, except his mouth then found her most sensitive part. A bolt of electricity went through her at the contact. Need. So close.

He sucked and tugged at her clit. She strained, wanting to pin his head there with her hands, but the psychic restraints held true. Close, she was so close—

His fang pierced her.

She exploded.

Pain didn't touch her, only pleasure so overwhelming her vision went white.

“Silas!”

He sucked and sucked, feeding from her. If the bite on her neck had been the most sensual thing she'd ever experienced, this was a hundred times more potent. With each draw of her blood, he injected a new wave of pleasure. Her orgasm ripped through her, but it didn't stop there. Waves of bliss crashed over her, one after the next. Eventually, he took pity on her and drew away, licking flecks of blood from his lips while he stared down at her as her orgasms ricocheted through her, leaving her a quivering mess.

He pulled the blanket up over her, the move startlingly gentle while he remained on the bed.

The move wasn't that of a monster. She blinked back the thought, wrapping her arms around herself, since it seemed he'd also released the thrall. “Okay, you were right. I screamed your name.”

He could gloat. He'd earned it. She'd think less of him for it, but, well, he wouldn't be wrong.

Only Silas's expression wasn't teasing or arrogant. He was utterly serious when he said, “If you are pleased, then I won the dearest prize of all.”

Chapter Ten

To Esmae's surprise, the next day they didn't discuss what had transpired in bed. The witch woke more relaxed and sated than she'd felt in ages. Silas led her to a bathing pool and left her there to gather her thoughts. She used the time to chat with Dirt and see if he had any other insights. It had taken some coaxing, since the mole complained she now smelled like the "scary predator" but eventually she won over her disapproving companion. Dirt didn't have any helpful insights, but he did make her feel less alone. She was hard-pressed for friends at the best of times, and the curse had left her feeling even lonelier. It was her burden to solve, by herself. She hadn't even been able to tell her father, because what could he do?

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She didn't tell Dirt either, but still, his reassuring chirps were better than nothing. What was she to do? The only way out of her curse was to kill the vampire, which meant finding his fated mate. She should be focused on her mission, yet the more she thought about it, the more wrong it seemed. Killing the beast that haunted the Condemned Cliffs, who killed any trespassers indiscriminately, had been an easy decision. Killing the vampire, the natural enemy of witches, who held her captive and violently sucked her blood wasn't far off. Killing the male who had shown her more pleasure and consideration in a day than she'd experienced in a lifetime with her peers was more difficult.

Fine. She'd keep her ears open, but maybe she'd hold off on her plans for now.

No sooner did she settle on the decision than she collapsed to the floor, her heart pausing as the ice around it grew. Esmae shivered as she stood, her shaky breaths coming out with frost. Dirt came to the edge of the pool, concerned, but she waved him away.

When she dressed, the mole disappeared back into the network of caves, and she put on the clothing Silas had left her. The fabrics were far finer than anything she'd worn before, yet the colors suited her tastes perfectly. She rejoined the vampire who, in her absence, prepared a startling spread for breakfast. He looked good, much better than the pallor that had colored him yesterday. From drinking her blood?

The memory of where he'd drunk from had her flushing.

"This is more than I grew yesterday." Piles of fruit and vegetables lined the table, not just raw, but cooked with spices. A stack of fresh loaves of bread towered at the

center, the yeasty smell tantalizing. “This is enough food for an army!”

Silas gave a nonchalant shrug. “I won’t see you go hungry.”

“Where did you even get all of this?”

He smiled, flashing his fangs. “I have my ways.”

She frowned. “No doubt you enthralled a number of vendors and demanded your due.”

“That’s certainly a way I could do it,” Silas agreed. “But gold coins work just as well.”

Now the reason for her flush was completely different. “Oh. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed.”

Silas shrugged. “Why wouldn’t you? I haven’t hesitated to use my thrall on you.”

Well. That was also a fair point. She debated arguing once more about how it galled her, but that would get them nowhere. He’d thrallled her to keep her there and stop her from trying to stab him, which, as demonstrated by his superior senses and strength, were doubtless things he could’ve ensured with brute force. For once, she couldn’t really muster enough anger. Likely a lingering tenderness from last night, which she was working very hard not to think about lest the vampire decide she needed a repeat right here on the table.

She reached for the freshly seared sprouts and tore a chunk from a loaf. Silas watched her with utter fascination.

“What now?” she asked after taking a few bites.

“What now, indeed.”

Breakfast turned into an afternoon focused on the maps. With his encouragement, she took over the desk, laying a fresh piece of parchment out in front of her. The quill she used had the finest tip she’d seen, the ink neither too runny nor too thick. She gave some experimental strokes while Silas settled on the chaise across the cavern, as if to give her the space he intuitively knew she needed with a sketchbook of his own.

Hours whipped by as she attempted to recreate one of the smaller maps of Eurobis. Mapmaking was both a science and an art. A map had to be precise and accurate in order to be of any use, but maps weren’t stagnant tomes. They told a story, characterized a world with every chosen mark. As she sketched the high walls of the capital, Ulryne, she imagined what it would be like to visit. Was the city at the heart of the kingdom a welcoming one, embracing every witch as one of its own? Or was it, as the walls implied, a cold and defensive place where everyone was on guard?

She’d never know.

“This looks excellent.”

Her quill had stopped, and she’d been lost in her thoughts for long enough that Silas had come to sneak up beside her and see her progress. The back of her neck grew hot as he scrutinized the drawing.

“It’s not as good as yours,” she said quickly.

His gaze was riveted to the map, as piercing as when he looked at her. As if the drawing was part of her. She’d have felt less exposed if he’d been looking at her stark naked.

“I’ve had centuries to practice and hone my craft. It would be unfair to expect

yourself to be on that level when starting out. Yet your sense of proportion is good,” he praised. “In a matter of years, you could master this skill.”

I don’t have years. Still, the praise squeezed her heart, making it hard to string words together. She tried to see the map through Silas’s eyes. It wasn’t terrible, maybe. If she had more time, she could do a better job on the cliffs and rivers...

“Do you want to be a cartographer?” Silas asked.

Why lie? “I wanted to be an adventurer.”

Silas said nothing, but the silence was expectant, so I continued. “As a child, I used to imagine all the marvels of Eurobis and how incredible it would be to see them. To walk the halls of the Great Library, or explore the bazaar at Ulryne. More than that, to go to uncharted places, the marshes, the mountains. To sail down the river into the ocean.” She dropped her gaze to the map, following the half-drawn winding paths. “There’s so many things I’ll never see, creatures I’ve only seen in storybooks. I could never understand how the others were so... so content. Happy to wed and have children and spend their days repeating the same tasks over and over. The thousands of hours I spent weaving only left me infuriated that I had to spend my time on that instead of exploring the forest so we could eat. Which is ungrateful of me. How everyone else in the village is happy with their lives so neatly charted out and I am not, I’ve never understood. I suppose I was just made wrong.”

“There’s not a chance of that.”

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Her eyes stung. “But it’s true. If I was different, I would never have left...” The village. Jared. Never have been cursed and forced to kill the vampire who had, against all odds, been kind to her in his own way that was truer than anything she’d ever known.

“If you remained in the village, we would never have met. I cannot think of a fate more wrong than that.”

But they had met. And now she would kill him or let the curse kill her.

And she couldn’t even explain to Silas why her presence wasn’t the gift he thought it was.

“I... I’d like to be alone for a little.”

“As you wish.” He withdrew immediately, a chill replacing the space he’d once filled.

She didn’t really want to be alone. Not with her days so numbered. But at the same time, Esmæ couldn’t bear the guilt she felt around him. She returned to the map, trying to get lost in the possibilities as she had been before, but where she’d once felt hope in the sprawl of the paper, now she just saw all the things she’d never get to do.

Hours passed. The vampire didn’t return.

Unable to stare at the inked lines any longer, she pushed out of the desk and wandered over to the settee where Silas had been. Her fingers brushed the edges of

the cushion as if she could feel him there. Of course, it was foolish. He was gone.

His sketchbook was still there, however, discarded and forgotten. Perhaps it was presumptuous, but curiosity got to her. Had he been sketching maps of his own, perhaps of the caves?

But when she pushed back the cover and looked at the most recent page, it wasn't any landscape or chart. No, he'd drawn a figure with dark wisps of hair that held highlights shown in lighter brushes of charcoal, a soft profile of carefully shaded skin with a focused expression.

He had drawn her.

Chapter Eleven

Days passed, and still, Silas was no closer to winning over his mate.

He'd tried everything. While she slumbered, he went farther and farther, seeking out any food that might appeal to her or trinkets she might enjoy. He'd brought her a globe of her own (though, really, anything in his hoard was hers by right, as well). A golden compass inlaid with rubies that matched the red of her hair. Books, paintings, and even a harp that was enchanted to play the latest tunes.

It wasn't that he'd made no progress. She spoke to him readily. They spent much of their days together, until she grew conflicted and asked to be by herself, which he honored. However much he'd have preferred to argue and demand they talk it through, he sensed she was not a creature that could be forced. Before that point came, though, they would talk about everything and nothing. Silas hadn't exchanged so many words with an individual in hundreds of years, and yet, it came naturally. He liked to tell her about the places he'd been and debate with her on philosophical matters. And he adored it when he finally coaxed some details of her life from her

lips. Each one was more precious than all the gold in his possession.

Sometimes they argued. About the thrall. He'd made her a bet he could get her to agree she enjoyed it at times, and the victory had been... well, delightful was too mild a word. Never let it be said he wasn't competitive.

But still, something was missing. How could he overcome her resistance? Once she loved him, he could release her from all the compulsions. They could explore the world together. He'd lay all of Eurobis at her feet if she wished, and if that didn't suffice, then the rest of the world beyond. If he had his other form, then he could take her to some far-off land and show off his knowledge of some foreign culture while spoiling her with the finest the land had to offer. But flames damn him, he was limited to just two legs for the time being.

"Do you just watch me while I sleep?" Esmae yawned, stretching her arms above her head.

He'd taken to lying in bed with her, under the pretext of keeping her honest about their rules. In truth, it was because he would spend every waking moment drinking in her looks if he could. Her hair was disheveled from sleep, her eyes half closed as she slid her gaze to him, the nightgown he'd gifted her in disarray.

She'd never been more lovely.

"I watch you. I ponder things." As a vampire, he had little need for sleep. He could go days without, but even if he was lazy, a couple of hours each day was more than sufficient. Maybe a little more because he had limited his blood drinking. Now that he'd tasted Esmae, the thought of taking any other blood was repulsive. Yet if he drank too often, he'd have to let her go before she had cleaved to him.

"Mmm," she mumbled, nestling into the covers.

“You like the bed?”

“It’s the best one I’ve ever been in.”

He’d sensed as much, but he did like to hear when he was successful in pleasing her.

“And you like me in it?”

“Don’t push it.” But a smile played on her lips, which he took to mean Yes, Silas, I do.

He would win her. He couldn’t lose faith in that. And now he had an idea.

Chapter Twelve

“A map?”

Esmae was sprawled out on the covers of the bed, her hands pinning the opposing curling corners of parchment open. It didn't match any of the other maps she'd spent the past few days poring over in her spare time, but then, the ink on this one was scarcely dry. She'd come to be able to recognize the telltale signs of Silas's craft. Her eyes greedily devoured the winding curves and paths.

“Indeed. A map of the Cliffs.”

Her lips parted in surprise. A map of the Condemned Cliffs... no, the caves of the Condemned Cliffs. No other living creature would be able to step foot in them and live to tell, let alone mark down the paths. If she hadn't seen a similar map in his collection, then this was likely the only one in existence.

And he'd made it. For her.

“And what will I find if I follow this map?”

Because it wasn't just any map—it was a treasure map. Just the idea of it had her heart fluttering with the promise of adventure. A dotted line revealed a path carved from the maze of tunnels.

Silas grinned, his teeth gleaming. “You'll have to see for yourself.”

Her own lips turned up to mirror his expression. She hadn't felt this giddy since she was a child, unaware some things would be forever out of reach. “When can I start?”

“Once you dress.”

And with that, the vampire was gone.

Esmae tossed the blankets aside without a care and retrieved her trousers and tunic. The red-and-black locks of hair were quickly tamed into a braid. She had to try to tie her boots twice, because she was so excited she kept trying to get up early.

Frost clenched her heart, but she warded it off with a focused stare at the map. She traced the lines with shaky fingers, centering herself. This was just the distraction she needed.

A tentative chirp came from the corner and she answered with a whistle, calling Dirt over to her. What adventure wasn't made better with companionship? Dirt scurried up her leg and into a pouch she'd fashioned opposite her deck of enchanted cards. She'd secretly hoped Silas would stick around and let her lead them, even if he knew the path, but perhaps he had other plans. Maybe this was a diversion while he searched for his mate.

No. She wouldn't let anything sour this moment.

Orienting herself to the map took a moment. The cavern was so full, finding the right way out wasn't exactly intuitive. But she relished in the challenge. Once she found the right passageway, the hunt was on. Esmae plucked a torch from the main cavern as she moved into the first dark branch.

The caves were far more complex than she'd initially realized. Paths wound in circles at times and doubled back. Without the map, she'd have been utterly lost. Even with it was a slow journey. Perhaps she should have been scared she'd be lost, but... He'd find me. If I was truly lost, he would search for me and find me.

Where did that certainty come from? She hadn't even trusted her own father enough to confide in him about her relationship with Jared, yet in the vampire, she had complete faith. He wouldn't set her on a path she couldn't solve, and if she was in trouble, he'd get to her.

The thought gave her the confidence to continue. Dirt didn't mind the dark, happily chatting about his latest finds now that he'd been granted the privilege of exploring Silas's hoard without risking his life. He was as partial to the fruits as Esmee was. She slipped him dried slices of pears when she needed a moment to concentrate.

The trickle of water sounded at her periphery. Esmee grinned wildly. The stream. Silas had marked it on the map—if she could hear the water, then it was close. She was nearly there.

Sure enough, a moment later, she intersected with it. Her strides grew longer with renewed excitement. Her torch held steady, but the deeper she went, the less it was needed. Not because new fires lit the path, but something else. Could it be?

The cave was lit in blues and greens, cool tones bouncing on the water. She gasped. Luminescent moss appeared on the walls, lighting the entire space. She set her torch down with care and went further, twisting her head from side to side in awe. It was the most glorious thing she'd ever seen. A natural wonder, just like she'd always dreamed she'd discover. The cave walls widened as she followed the stream until she was in a sizable cavern, absolutely covered with moss from the ceiling to the ground.

And there, in the center, was her vampire.

He stood on a blanket at the midpoint of the cavern, right by the stream. A wicker basket was at his feet, which were cased in fine leather boots. He'd dressed with unusual care, a crimson velvet cape tied at his shoulders. The waves of his dark hair were combed back, revealing all the stark planes of his face, the bright red eyes fixed

on her in delight as he took in her presence. After a few hours of adventuring, she was no doubt untidy, and she'd spent the barest of moments dressing before starting on her quest. Yet from how he looked at her, she may as well have been wearing the finest silk in the latest styles.

“You're even faster than I imagined,” he greeted.

She lifted the parchment like it was a flag of victory. “I had a good map.”

The light rippled under each of her steps as her boot hit the moss on her way over to Silas. He hadn't abandoned her to her quest—he'd used the time to set up a picnic.

He'd remembered. All that time ago, when she'd accused him of being like Jared. For some reason, she'd brought up the time she'd made a picnic basket with his favorites after scrimping on her own dinners for weeks and saving up her coin, and he'd gone off with friends without so much as a word.

He was nothing like Jared.

“Why are you crying?” Silas asked with alarm.

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I'm crying? She pressed the back of her hands to her eyes, wiping away the tears. "I just... you don't even eat. And you set up a whole picnic down to the wicker basket."

Okay, a wicker basket with gilded reeds and a heavily embroidered cloth, but his extravagant tastes coming out for something so simple was all the more charming.

"But you do," he said, confused. "I've told you, I'd never see you go without. Not food, not anything."

She kissed him.

She hadn't even realized she was moving until she was on her tiptoes, grabbing the lapels of his cape and dragging him down to crush his lips against hers. For once, she'd taken the vampire off guard. But, oh, if she'd thought she had the upper hand. Silas turned the kiss sinful with a single flick of his tongue, and she savored every second of it.

By the time they parted, she was breathless, her chest heaving slightly. Silas, of course, not needing to breathe, didn't mirror the action, but his carefully combed back waves had returned to their natural wild state. She liked him like this—a little wild.

"You're pleased."

She laughed. "Aren't you observant?"

"I hope you don't kiss everyone who makes you smile like that. Or else I'll have to make sure I'm the only one."

He was already the only one who made her feel this carefree, but she didn't need to tell him that. "Just vampires who kidnap me." Incredible that they'd come so far, she could actually tease him about that.

But Silas didn't laugh with her. His expression turned more serious, brows furrowing. "You can use the map for more than a game, you know."

She frowned. He gently took the parchment from her, spreading it on the ground between them as they sank to their knees.

"It will lead you through the cliffs. Either back home, or to the lands beyond. You can use it any time you wish; I won't take it from you."

What was he saying? "Not with your thrall, I can't."

The vampire shook his head. He'd avoided her gaze for the moment, but now he met it head-on. His eyes glowed as he intoned, "Esmæ Mellodi, I release you from all compulsion. You are your own creature once more."

She blinked in shock, rocking back over her heels. She didn't feel any different, yet her magic tingled, sensing the release of the thrall. "But... our bargain."

"Be bound to me no longer, Esmæ. Not unless you wish it. How can I take from the one I wish to give everything to?" He sounded almost lost.

"Everything?" she echoed.

"Everything. Anything, even forever. I would deny you nothing, witch. If you wish to leave, I will give you a map. If you wish to stab me, I will hand you the blade." His expression turned rueful. "There could be nothing more monstrous than keeping an adventurer from the world. No matter my reasons, I will not keep you captive. Never

again.”

From the picnic basket, he drew a copper blade. The same she had attacked him with, honed and polished into a stronger weapon than it had been in her hands. All her supplies were gone; she had only that which she’d stashed in her trouser pockets before leaving.

For a moment, all she could do was stare. This was so much more than a little game or a bit of flirting. Silas had always been forthright in his words... could he really mean it? Forever for a vampire was an eternity. Anything, even his life? He’d let her kill him, not even knowing it was what was required to save her life.

She’d do nothing of the sort.

“You mean it all. You won’t take my blood against my will, won’t keep me here. You’d let me turn the river red with your blood... with this blade.”

“I’d be glad of it. Because it would hurt less than seeing you wilt under captivity.”

She swallowed. It was hard to breathe, let alone think straight. Her pulse raced, and even though Silas had so diligently focused on her face, his gaze dropped just slightly to the pulse point in her neck the way his vampire instincts demanded.

Well, gods blast it all. She liked the vampire. She liked his maps, she liked his wit, she liked his face, and she certainly liked his fangs. Maybe that made her a traitor to the rest of witchkind, but so be it. He’d been a truer friend than any of her brethren.

“You’re not owed my blood.”

He tore his gaze from her neck.

“But I want you to have it, anyway.”

Silas started, then froze. Supernatural stillness, his chest unmoving, his eyes unblinking. “Because you find it pleasurable?”

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Esmae nibbled on her lip. “It certainly is. But more than that, I feel... connected to you when you drink from me.”

“And you want this? A connection with me?”

She nodded. She did. Just once, she wanted to choose her fate. Even if Silas was fate bound to another, in this moment, he could be hers. When he took her blood, it was just the two of them in the universe, her lifeblood devoured by the undead beast while in its wake he left sensations that left her more alive than ever before, utterly enraptured by him.

At once, he was on her. He cradled her hands between his palms, the two lifted on their knees. He didn’t immediately bite her as Esmae had expected. Instead, he kissed her, this time a slow, savoring kiss. A claiming kiss.

The kiss ended and his lips trailed along her jawline, teasing until she was nearly begging for him to reach her neck. He licked her skin, setting her aflame. When at last he bit her, she sighed against his body. Pleasure bloomed in her chest and between her legs as Silas devoured her with slow pulls. But as she’d told him, it was more than the act itself. It was that he was the one drinking her. She was taking care of him, and the air between them sparked.

He pulled away from her neck, licking the last drops of blood with the tenderness of a caress. When she finally saw his eyes, the softness in them stole her breath.

He laid her on the ground, covering her body with his own. Luminescent waves rippled out from behind her back, catching the periphery of her vision. The glow from

the cavern ceiling cast Silas in an unnatural glow. It made him all the more alluring.

The picnic was forgotten as Silas's lips returned to hers. On silent agreement, clothes were disposed of. Her tunic, his cape. Trousers were next.

"Violent witch," he growled with approval as she gave a particularly rough tugging of his stubborn shirt.

Esmae didn't waste time responding. She bent her head and gave his nipple an experimental lick. Gods, she wanted to taste every part of him. She blew out a breath and tugged on it again.

The sound Silas made was nothing short of animalistic. "You keep doing that and I'll lose all control."

If he'd meant to caution her, he failed. She continued to suck on his chest, loving the vibrations of his chest. She tried to slip a hand to her center to tend to her wet heat, but he caught her wrist in a steely grip as soon as she reached her entrance.

"Mine."

The single word was utterly possessive. It should have been frightening. It was intoxicating.

He lifted her wrist to his lips and drew her slick index finger to his lips. He sucked on her wetness. A gasp ripped from her throat. He held her gaze the entire time, eyes burning with desire that mirrored the growing desperation inside her.

"You taste perfect," he rasped when he finally released her hand. "But I'm afraid that's only whetted my appetite."

In a flash, Silas used his supernatural speed to reposition them on the moss. He rolled onto his back on the moss and drew Esmae on top of him—directly over his mouth.

If she made the mistake of thinking the position would give her power, she was sorely mistaken.

His hands gripped her bare thighs, pinning her against him. He licked her from end to end, tasting her with obvious pleasure.

Gods.

“Silas!” she cried.

He licked again, this time flicking his tongue around her clit and sucking.

She grasped the dark hands of his hair, pulling them so tightly they had to be painful. But Silas didn’t react, only became more vigorous.

“It’s too much. I’m going to come!”

“You’ll take it all,” Silas rasped from under her, punctuating his words with another shallow tease. “But you’re not coming yet. I’m just getting you ready, love.”

Love. The word slammed into her through the haze of lust, but instead of dampening the effect, it did the opposite. Her chest tightened at the affection in the endearment.

“I’m ready,” she pleaded.

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

He returned to his task, and gods, the vampire was ruthless. He brought her to the

edge over and over, but each time managed to pull her back. She rocked her hips over him, trying to bring herself off, but she was powerless against him. She'd thought she knew what it was to need. She'd had no idea.

All she could do was moan and beg for him to give her the fullness her body craved and to let her come.

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When he finally rumbled, “You’re ready,” she nearly collapsed in relief.

“Please,” she whimpered.

“Don’t worry, love. I’ll give you what you need.” He rolled her off of him and onto the moss where he lined up at her entrance. She wrapped her hand around him, gasping at the size. She lifted her head. She’d felt him before, but she hadn’t gotten such a... direct look.

“You’re... large,” she managed.

Silas’s grin was gentle. “That’s why I needed to get you ready. Don’t be afraid, love. I’ll go slow. Even if it kills me.”

He pressed against her entrance and on impulse she squeezed her legs as if to stop the intrusion, even though her body wanted it. But Silas allowed no such thing, his hips wedged between hers.

“Relax, Esmee,” he ordered.

And even though he wasn’t thralling her, she did. She forced her muscles to ease and to focus on her vampire’s gaze. He stroked her cheek, even though his muscles were obviously strained. Then, slowly, he nudged forward slightly, filling her more.

“That’s it. That’s my good witch.”

She made herself relax again, and Silas pushed inside again. Then again. Each

intrusion threatened to stretch her to the max, but he continued to push in. Sweat beaded at her brow, but her body was adjusting. Finally, he slid to the hilt.

She'd survived it.

Then Silas began to move.

"You look so pretty on my cock, love."

Esmae could do little more than nod.

"You look like you belong there," he said with a groan, thrusting slow, shallow pulses to get her used to the motion before going larger. "Tell me you belong here," he demanded.

"I belong here," she repeated, the words coming out breathless. She'd have said anything to keep him moving.

"Not going to last long the first time," he warned.

But she didn't need long. Not when she was this close. He plunged in and out relentlessly. His touch seared her, bringing her over the edge. Her heart pounded in her chest, her breaths growing shorter and shorter until she couldn't take it anymore. She let out a sharp cry, her orgasm thundering through her body unlike any she'd ever known. He continued to push against her, his own need building.

"Esmae!" Silas came with a shout, her name on his lips.

He loosed his seed inside her, coating her, filling her, claiming her. He bent over her body and claimed her lips with a kiss. The connection between them... More potent than any bite. Beyond any words. She felt utterly tethered to Silas, safe under him and

more alive than she'd ever been before. For a moment, time stopped existing. There were no witches and vampires, no curses. Just him, his body hot against hers while she got drunk on his scent.

"That... that was incredible."

Silas's grin was nothing short of pure wickedness. "That was just the first time, witch. I wouldn't count on getting much sleep tonight."

Already, he was hardening once more inside her. And Esmae... she'd come, come hard, but she wasn't even close to sated.

"Good, because I still need more of you." Pleasure turned her tongue loose.

"Is that so? My greedy little witch." He caught her ear and tugged on it. "I'm eager to give you everything you can handle and more."

And so Silas did. He mastered her body, and he let her take her time learning his, too. The way he liked his back clawed while he was inside her, the way she loved to see his reflection in the stream behind her as he mounted her.

They spent an eternity in the cave, claiming each other. It was her choice, and Esmae didn't regret a single moment of it. They curled up in the moss, Silas dragging his discarded cloak over her shoulders when eventually both had been exhausted.

"Are you alright?" Silas asked as Esmae settled against him.

He tucked her into his body, a large forearm braced over her stomach. She realized she had never fit better in anyone's arms. Couldn't possibly feel like she belonged more than she did here, in Silas's arms. She wanted to savor the moment.

“That was better than I could have dreamed,” she said softly.

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He traced the curve of her hip with light fingers, soothing her. “I’m glad, love. And that was just the beginning. Tonight, I was impatient. Tomorrow, I’ll take my time.”

She tried not to laugh. “That was your impatient?”

She didn’t need to see him to know he was grinning. “I plan to keep you on the edge for a full day when you’re recovered. You’ll see what I mean then.”

A day? On the precipice of orgasm? She had melted in his arms after minutes. “That would be torture.”

“You’d like it,” he said confidently, his hand finally settling.

“I would,” she agreed.

They laid like that for hours, while Silas told her of what they would do next. The positions and predicaments he would put her in. And when the promise of it began to overwhelm her, he told her other things. How he’d teach her how to chart her own maps without a trace, and how she would show him how to cook to her specifications. Through it all, she listened and nodded along, wanting it desperately.

And then, when at last the vampire’s eyes shut, she left.

Chapter Thirteen

Esmae clutched the parchment in her hand, trying to unwind the path she’d taken as quickly as she could.

“Where are you going?”

Esmae started, but it wasn't Silas who asked the question. Dirt peeked out from a hole in the cavern, his long nose twitching as he sniffed in her direction.

“I need to get out of here. I'm trying to follow this map, but it's slow.”

Dirt frowned. “You want to leave?”

“I...” She swallowed. “I have to.”

It had happened while she'd laid cradled in Silas's arms. The ice hit her heart again, this time for longer than ever before. She'd thought she might never take another breath. When the warmth of Silas's embrace eventually melted it, she realized what she had to do.

There was no way she could fight this curse. The only cure was worse than the poison, so she would have to let herself succumb to the magic.

And she refused to die in front of Silas.

Gods, leaving hurt. But it was the right thing to do. He had a mate. He would move on, however sincere his words. He'd think she chose to leave and was living a life of adventure somewhere while he eventually grew old with whatever vampiress and forgot about her. Which was good, even as it was hard to breathe. It had to be good.

“You want to leave me?” Dirt's voice wobbled.

She tried to force a smile in the direction of the mole, but it was more of a grimace. “I don't want to, sweetie. But I need to go.”

She forced herself onward. Silas had told her vampires like him rarely slept more than a few hours at a time. This might be her only chance before it was too late.

The soft tap, tap of Dirt's paws on the ground followed her. She slowed long enough to scoop him in her arms.

"If you really want to leave, I can show you a faster way," Dirt said. He didn't sound happy about the proposition.

"You know one?"

He nestled into the crook of her arm. "No one knows this mountain better than me. Go left."

She obeyed, trusting her little friend. She moved to the opposite fork she'd planned and obeyed the little mole's directions. He led her through tiny narrow caverns, crawl spaces that were borderline too small for her at times. No wonder Silas hadn't included them on his map. He likely had no idea they existed. True to Dirt's word, she was back on top of the Condemned Cliffs within a couple of hours. The late afternoon sun was high in the sky, its rays coating her skin for the first time in days. She drank it up, while Dirt, a creature accustomed to the darkest of darks, moved back into the cave. He didn't disappear, though, instead lingering at the edges.

She started to say her goodbyes to her brave companion when the ice seized her again. It had never come so quickly, one after the other. She collapsed to the ground, clutching her chest. Dirt squeaked, his horror clear.

"Esmae?" he chirped. "Esmae!"

After what felt like an age, she dragged herself to her knees, cupping the mole in her hands to shelter him from the sunlight. "Hush, now. I'm okay."

“You’re not! What’s wrong?”

She debated. She didn’t want to burden anyone else, but it wouldn’t be right to lie. Not when he’d seen her like this. “I was cursed. As her heart is like ice, let it be so. Let it devour,” she intoned.

Jared was extremely dramatic about his curses. And literal.

“What does that mean?”

“It means sometimes when you refuse to sleep with a man again, he thinks you’re a cold-hearted bitch and should die,” she hissed. Dirt shrank away, and she felt bad for scaring him. Dammit, she was trying to accept her fate. But to let it be defined by Jared? He was no oracle. What right did he have? “There’s nothing to be done, dear one.”

“Can’t the vampire save you? He’s so powerful.”

He could. But it would cost him his life. “Even a vampire cannot defeat a curse through brute force.”

“But—”

“No more, Dirt. I’m glad I met you. You were a good friend to me.”

“And you, me,” he squeaked.

Even the tears in her eyes were ice cold. She lifted from her knees to resume her journey. Her movements were sluggish. The blood in her veins was freezing. She was nearly out of time.

Why had it come to this? Her breath was frosty in front of her. She clutched Silas's discarded cloak that she'd swiped from the glowing cavern before leaving. There would be no escaping the chill now.

It smelled like him. Like smoke and cinders and a male who made her feel as if she was her own person, destined for more than mediocre weaving.

A person everyone in the village had dismissed.

She wiped away the tears that threatened to fall. No. She wouldn't break down. Not in her last moments. She had to get away from the Condemned Cliffs where Silas might find her. She'd initially planned to roam as far into the forest as she could, but with every step, her emotions turned more volatile.

Sadness, yes. Grief. Resignation of a kind. But in their embers was something more, a burning anger that grew and grew. Her heart might be ice to Jared, but who was he to define her? Because she didn't want him—and they both knew he never really wanted her, because he didn't even know her and scoffed at the parts he'd seen—she was cold-hearted?

But the emotion that ruled above all: love.

Against her best efforts, she had fallen in love with Silas. And it was because of that love she had to get as far away as possible. He never left the cliffs, or at least, he hadn't in several hundred years by his own admission. Aside from when he'd gone to the nearby forest to forage for food on her behalf.

The memory of him that first day, presenting the bounty of food, tugged at her heart. A tear beaded at the corner of her eye, then fell, frozen to the ground. He'd been so proud of his haul, so desperate to please her. She could see that now. He liked taking care of her.

How would he feel if she had gone to him, and he'd realized there was nothing he could do?

Would he feel as she did now, angry and helpless?

Or would it be worse, because it was one thing to fail yourself, and another to fail someone you cared about?

Another frozen tear fell.

She pushed on.

She veered closer to the village. The surroundings had grown more familiar. This wasn't just any path, it was the one that led to the mayor's house. Her stomach twisted. Given more time, she'd double back around just to avoid it.

But then—

“Esmae? It can't be.”

She spun on her heel.

There he was. The source of all her misery. The mayor's son, a curse-caster who couldn't take no for an answer. Jared wore fine hunting garb with polished brass buttons. An empty quiver at his back, a bow in his hand. His uncalloused hands were clenched into fists at the sight of her.

Surprise. That's what it was: he was surprised to see her. And why shouldn't he be? For all he'd known, he'd cursed her, and she'd been a good little witch and wandered off to the woods to die. In his mind, his curse was unbeatable. How could a weak witch like Esmae fight such a thing?

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But she had. She'd dared to hunt the beast that haunted the Condemned Cliffs. She'd stared straight into the red eyes of a predator without flinching. Yet he'd been content to think she'd left with her tail tucked between her legs? Because she'd accepted any scrap of affection for so long, had rolled over every time someone stronger bid her to be one way. Accept your place as a weaver. Accept your place as Jared's pretty audience.

He assumed she would do him the courtesy of quietly dying away from home, freeing him of any guilt.

"Jared." It came out as a hiss. She stumbled forward, her steps uneven with the blood in her veins freezing.

His surprise was covered by a smirk so wide his cheeks nearly disappeared entirely.

"Aww, Esmae. I'm touched. You wanted to spend your last moments with me? Finally realized what a big mistake you made?"

She balled her own fists. No. The only thing worse than dying alone would be doing so with Jared leering at her.

He strode towards her. "Or did you come to beg me to lift the curse and take you back?" He chuckled. "You're too late."

Chapter Fourteen

Silas woke from the most peaceful sleep he'd had in centuries with a start. He'd gone

years without sleeping more than scant hours, yet now he sensed it was late in the day and he could still rest for longer.

But something had awoken him. A creature, nibbling on his tunic sleeve.

Squeaking.

He growled on half asleep instinct, but the little rodent didn't back down. He wouldn't really hurt it, even if he was a little groggy. Esmae was fond of the little thing, after all.

Then—all at once he realized where he was.

And the fact there was no lovely female beside him.

She had left him.

Left. Him.

Not even a day after he'd lifted the compulsion. Had she truly left the moment he'd shut his eyes? More satisfied than any other time in his life, his female in his arms, sated, exactly how she belonged.

Apparently, Esmae had disagreed.

He roared, a stabbing pain hitting him in the chest.

Is this heartbreak?

He'd read poems in hundreds of languages on the subject. Always it had been abstract. None had let him imagine the sensation as it was—ugly. Dark. Like he was

halfway toward vomiting.

Grief speared him. He'd lost her. Flames, he'd never truly had her. Despite all his efforts, he had not been enough. Food, clothes, treasures—there were none finer. If she had chosen to leave, it could only be because she found him lacking. If—the moss beside him, still indented with her lovely form, left little doubt.

The mole pawed him again. More insistently, as if annoyed Silas was moping. Now it tried to tug at Silas's sleeve with his little teeth. Damn it all. He'd managed to run off his mate, and now even the cave vermin weren't scared of him. Maybe he should burn his hoard to ashes and be done with it.

The gentle brush of her juniper and mayberry scent was embedded in the rodent's fur. He nearly reached out to stroke it, just to feel close to her. The little thing she'd kept as a pet. Two of a kind then, abandoned by Esmae.

But maybe it was more than that. She was a witch with magic, but Silas didn't know the nature. He hadn't pressed for details when she hadn't offered any. He could have forced her to tell him anything, but that's the last thing Silas wanted. He'd wanted to earn her confidence. Flames damn him, he'd thought he'd have more time!

But what if she was using the animal as a message? What if she had sent it to get help?

Maybe that was just what he wanted to believe, because it was preferable to confronting the fact he'd been abandoned. But he couldn't risk the alternative.

Besides, he'd told her she was free to leave. He'd meant it.

It didn't mean she could do so without him. If Esmae told him to go to the other end of the world and leave her be, so be it. But let that blow come from her lips, not the

cold floor beside him.

He stood. The mole chirped approvingly and urged him forward. The vampire followed the instructions.

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Silas would do far worse than follow a mole through his own caves to get to his mate.

Outside the caves, Silas picked up the trail of Esmae's scent. The darkness of dusk sheltered him from the worst of the sun, but even noonday rays wouldn't compare to the current pain in his chest.

"I'll find her from here," he promised the loyal little creature.

His hunt was swift. Silas covered the distance from the cliffs to just outside the village in under an hour, fast even for vampire standards. With every moment passing, he came closer to losing Esmae forever—if he hadn't already. The thought spurred him faster and faster.

His mate's scent grew more potent the farther he went. Yet something was off. Mayberries, juniper—but not the fresh bloom of spring. Instead, there was a layer of decay, as if frost snuffed out the herbs.

Something was wrong.

He crested a hill sheltered by the trees, when at last he caught sight of Esmae. Her back was turned to him, his cloak obscuring her form. She'd taken his cloak—did that mean something? But if it did, why leave? Strands of black and red hair billowed behind her. For a moment, his relief at seeing her was so acute he overlooked the rest of the scene.

Esmae was there, yes.

With another man.

His skin grew hot, bristling with anger. Had she chosen another over him? But the anger—it wasn't just his. Silas realized with a start what was happening. What happened between fated mates of his kind, between twin flames who bonded. Esmae's own anger burned inside his chest, fury and pain and... grief? Like his own, but different, mournful, without the jagged cuts of betrayal he felt in his own heart.

If he was feeling her emotions, that meant the bond had grown stronger. That last night had meant something to her.

But why the mourning? Who was this man to make her so angry? Why had she left?

Instinct urged him to charge forward and beat the man to a pulp. He was closer to shifting than he had been in centuries, but his vampire nature halted him. It cautioned him to stay hidden and listen. And had him baring his teeth when he heard the male speak.

"How are you still alive?" the stranger demanded. He was Esmae's age, but he lacked the natural refinement that colored all of Esmae's movements. He was tall, broad shouldered, with a chin that resembled a boulder, with blond hair that reminded Silas of mixed gold. For once, the color didn't impress him.

Esmae scoffed, the sound carrying over the wind. "Despite your best efforts, Jared, I've survived."

Jared snorted, the sound reminiscent of the pigs Silas used to eat. "No matter how you beg, I won't take you back. You made a mistake in leaving me, even if you're only realizing it now. Let your heart be ice and the village be rid of you."

"My heart isn't ice, I j-just didn't love you, you k-kobold's ass!" Utter contempt

flowed from her words. Silas had thought he knew the sound of his mate's annoyance, but it had nothing on the derision she answered with. Yet her voice wobbled, as if she was freezing. Silas didn't feel the elements like a mortal, but it was a rather temperate evening.

"Well, you see where that got you. I told you I'd make you regret ending us."

"There was never even an u-us! It was you and your n-need for an audience. I'm my own p-person, Jared. I have hopes and d-dreams. I exist to d-do more than just support y-yours!"

She reached for Jared, but her arm stopped abruptly. By magic? Was this witch using some spell against his mate? His skin grew hotter still, the beast inside aching to be free. It should be impossible. He'd let the vampire venom turn him, bound his natural self. He'd been cursed to lock his other form up until his vampire nature was overpowered.

"Seems you're nothing without me." Jared leered at Esmae, as if he won something. "Let the ice devour you. I can tell it's already stalled your heart. Knowing you, you tried to fight your fate in some futile way. And you failed."

Silas waited for Esmae's next cutting response, but none came. Her arm stayed, except ice slowly crawled up and down, coating her fingers first in frost and then encasing them in ice.

"My curses always work, Esmae."

Cursed?

This piece of magical detritus had dared curse his mate?

Silas exploded.

Chapter Fifteen

Jared's gloating smirk grew wider. "You're out of time."

Esmae wished she could have given that the response it deserved, but for once, Jared was right. Her tongue was frozen in her mouth, her lips stiff and unable to part. Ice encased her arms and legs, her heart fighting its hardest to beat beneath the ice and slowly losing the battle. She'd be dead in minutes. The last thing she would ever see would be Jared's victorious expression.

She'd wanted to tell him—what? That he was wrong about her? That he had no right to do this? It had seemed like the righteous thing to do. Yet now, with her death crawling around her, she wished she'd stayed in Silas's arms today. That she'd let him love her and be with her until her fate claimed her.

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Jared started to turn away, to leave her to die, when his eyes flared wide and he stumbled back. Esmae couldn't twist her neck to follow the movement, but she could at least shift her eyes enough to see a giant mass of darkness spring from nowhere.

In her periphery, she could make out just the shape. Large as a mountain, a black-scaled beast stood on the field. A creature she'd thought only existed in storybooks: a dragon.

"How dare you!" the beast roared. It was a pure, animalistic sound. Esmae wasn't sure if it was her magic that let her translate the roar or if it was actually speaking in the common tongue.

Jared scrambled back. With glistening armor that shone like obsidian and blood-red slitted eyes, the beast looked more like a demon than anything.

But the red eyes.

She knew those eyes.

Silas.

He found me. Her heart didn't have a beat left to skip, but some deep relief went through her. Yet it was chased away through the icy fog of her mind.

No, no, no. How could he see her like this? After how she'd tried to spare him? Her tears turned to beads of ice, plinking down her frozen cheeks. Her entire body was encased in ice. Gods, Esmae had never been so cold, only to be made worse by the

icy terror at the realization that despite everything she'd tried to do, she'd failed. She'd failed to save herself, and perhaps worse, failed to save Silas from losing her.

"G-get back," Jared stammered. "I'm a mighty witch! I'll curse y—"

Jared's threats turned to screams. The dragon—Silas—let forth a massive blast of fire. The flames engulfed Jared, turning him to ashes. For Esmæ, the flames didn't hurt. They melted the ice around her and left her unburned.

But it was too late. Her body had no strength left. Air blew past her as her body collapsed. Before she could hit the ground, Silas caught her, the dragon gone and the man she knew standing above her. He cradled her limp body so tenderly, his eyes glowing like embers.

"Y-you came." Her voice broke. Despite the heat of his flames, the ice still surrounded her heart.

"Of course. Esmæ, I would always come for you."

She tried to lift her hand to cup his cheek. Her body refused to move. Maybe his flame could have beaten the curse. But it was too late. Her body was so cold, even with his heat.

"It's t-too late. Curse."

"I'll fix it, little witch. I promise," Silas vowed.

She shook her head, trying to memorize his face in her last moments. "Impossible."

"I can't lose you. I won't," he snarled.

“You’ll... be okay. Your mate. Find her.” It was her only comfort.

Something seemed to stab right in her chest. “Esmæ, I did. You are my mate. I’ll love no other.”

She was? Then Silas would be alone. Again. Why was fate so cruel?

“There must be a way. Tell me.”

“Cost... too high. Just h-hold me. Please.”

Silas obeyed, pulling her close to his chest as he sat on the ground. “Tell me, witch. I won’t compel the answer from you, but please. If you care for me at all, tell me.”

Her heart tore in two. She wanted to spare Silas this, but perhaps she owed him an answer. ““Spilling the blood of the monster that haunts the C-Condemned Cliffs will save you from your c-cursed fate,”” she intoned.

She felt determination bloom in her chest. Which, while not her own, was comforting. Was this what happened to mates?

“That’s why you tried to kill me.” Silas gently lifted her chin with the crook of his finger. “I’ll save you, Esmæ. All my blood is yours, forever.”

“No—can’t kill you.”

Had any male ever looked at a woman with a more tender expression? “My love, if that was what was required, not even you could stop me. But there’s another answer.”

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He lifted his wrist to his fangs and tore open the flesh. “Drink my spilled blood, and stay by my side forever, Esmae.”

Turn into a vampire. Turn her back on everything she’d been taught as a witch.

And get to have a life with Silas.

It was no choice at all.

Chapter Sixteen

Silas waited for her nod, her consent, and then lowered his open wrist to her lips. She lacked the fangs of a vampire, but she drank deeply. His arm around her back steadied her and slowly, new strength flooded her veins.

Esmae blacked out.

When she awoke, the three moons glowed overhead. Esmae’s awareness came back slowly until all her attention was on the ache in her neck. A burning sensation in her throat. Fire engulfed her, painful, so painful—

“Drink, my love. You need more blood now that you’ve turned.”

Him. He was in front of her. Silas’s scent had taken on new layers, familiar yet so much more potent. It steadied her. He bent his neck to her and, on instinct, she dove for his carotid artery and plunged her fangs in.

Divine.

His blood flowed inside her mouth. Esmae swallowed with greedy gulps, her fingers digging into Silas's shoulders as if to keep him from moving away. The vampire made no such move. His hands gently held her in place, guiding her. She drank deeply. A primal part of her brain was in control, knowing only all-consuming sensations. Need. Want. Him. Mine.

She'd thought she'd felt connected when he drank from her before, but it didn't hold a candle to the soul-deep bond she felt as he fed her his life force. Eventually, she drank enough that the haze parted, and she regained control of herself. Reluctantly, she pulled back.

His neck was a bloody, ravaged mess. Esmae startled at the sight. She hadn't looked anything like that when Silas had taken her blood. Oh gods, had she done it wrong?

"Did I hurt you?" she asked, panicked, even as she eyed the lingering drops.

Silas smirked. "Only one part of my body aches right now."

He guided her palm to the ache. She gasped. He was thick and hard under her hand. It seems the bite affected vampires as well as humans.

Silas pulled her in for a kiss. It was every bit as claiming as the bite she'd just given him.

Mine, it said. My mate.

She nicked his tongue with her fangs, and the kiss deepened to a feral, bloody thing. Silas returned the favor, piercing her tongue with his fang. He rolled her onto her back, gently resting her on the grass even as the kiss remained bruising. Both their

bodies were bare, his clothes gone in the transformation, hers burnt to cinders.

Good. Because all at once, her body was filled with another need. Not for blood, but for something every bit as essential for survival. Silas.

“I need you,” she rasped against his lips.

“You’ll have me,” he promised. “Forever.”

Silas didn’t make her wait. He positioned himself at her entrance, and Esmae hooked her legs around his hips, guiding him in. She was so wet, so needful. He plunged inside her in a single thrust. The sudden fullness was delightful.

“That’s it, love. You take me so well,” Silas praised.

“More,” she gasped.

Silas obeyed, rocking his hips forward and back as the pleasure built in her core. Her body felt primed from the bite—it wasn’t just the person who was bit who was affected, apparently.

She came quickly, her orgasm washing over her all at once. Every part of her body was alight and more sensitive than it had ever been. But Silas didn’t stop. “Too much.” The words came out as a moan that belied their sincerity.

Silas chuckled darkly. “What kind of male would I be to only make my mate come once?”

He dipped his fingers lower, teasing her clit while his other palm roughly kneaded her breast. She arched against him.

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Eventually, they settled onto the grass, sated at last. They were no longer in the scorched field where she'd met Jared, but the setting was one Esmae innately recognized. The stars glittered overhead, though she no longer needed their light to see in the darkness, not with her vampire vision. The change was surprisingly comfortable. Sure, there would be a learning curve, but being here, next to Silas, felt like the most natural thing in the world. Like she'd always been meant to take this path.

"Why here?" she asked.

"I wanted you to wake in a place that was familiar. This is the hill you described, is it not?"

The one she'd told him she would go to when she wanted to daydream of a better life. "How did you know?"

Silas pointed to the river. "This seemed like the perfect spot for an adventurer to plan her maiden voyage."

She grinned, curling into the crook of his arm. Her body temperature had cooled—not to ice, but to a vampire's colder levels. Silas, however, was even warmer than a human. "A dragon, huh?"

"I thought that part of me was lost forever," Silas confessed. "For centuries, I was ruled by my vampire nature. But seeing you in danger awakened my protective instincts, breaking the restraints that turning had put on me."

“We saved each other,” she murmured.

“We always will, my love.”

They stayed like that for a long time, a tangle of limbs under the night sky. “I suppose this means we have forever, then.”

“We do. We’ll have enough adventures for many lifetimes,” Silas promised.

One side of her lips curled up into a smile. “Where do you suppose we should go first, then?”

Silas pressed his lips to her head. “Anywhere you wish, as long as I’m with you.”

Epilogue

The weather was perfect.

Okay, it was actually a little too hot even after the sun had set, and was so humid Esmae’s summer tunic clung to her sweat because apparently vampires could still do that, and mosquitoes were no less annoying when they could tell you how they ‘just want a little nibble.’ Perhaps fellow blood-drinkers shouldn’t throw stones, but whatever. There was only one creature entitled to her blood.

Yet with her bag packed and secured on her shoulders and the map Silas had helped her chart a course on tucked safely inside it, it could have hailed and she still would’ve thought the night was perfect.

“You’ll remember to take your potions,” Esmae repeated to her father for the third time that hour. “And for flame’s sake, just stay home when it rains and your bad knee is acting up.”

Silas grinned, like he didn't turn into just as much of a nanny when it came to her. But it was just as likely he smiled because he'd once told her he really enjoyed seeing her take up his turns of phrases.

"I can handle myself," her father assured her. "You've given up so much to care for me, Esmae. But it's time you start having your own adventures."

It was. She and Silas were departing that night. They'd enjoyed a bit of a honeymoon once their curses had lifted, losing days and weeks as Silas showed her all being a vampire had to offer. But Esmae couldn't wait to travel, and Silas was eager to show her the world.

"Besides, you've stocked me up with enough provisions for the next decade. You're only going for a few months, isn't it?"

Silas had given enough gold from his hoard—their hoard, as he insisted—to take care of her father and brought in the best potions to handle her father's myriad ailments, so she could relax, plus with his wings they could visit whenever if they wanted to come back early.

Dirt had ventured from the caves and found a permanent home with her father. She'd inherited her magic from her paternal side, so communicating wouldn't be a problem.

"You're right." A wave of calmness settled over her. "And you'll keep each other company. Now, there's one last thing I wanted to do."

She reached into the deck holder on her belt and drew out the last oracle card. Her fingers slowly traced the familiar edges, the echoes of her mother's magic still beating against her own.

The card was contraband, but so was harboring two vampires—well, one vampire and

a dragon-vampire hybrid—in a witch’s home. Anyone who could come after them would be ash before they so much as summoned their magic. Though she could feel the remnants of her mother’s magic and could use her own magic as a vampire, she couldn’t draw from the cards anymore.

“Would you do the honors?” she asked her father.

His eyes teared up. “You kept them after all these years?”

Oracles may have been scorned by witchkind, but her mother had rescued her. She nodded. “They saved my life.” They’d led her to Silas. Tears beaded in her eyes.

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Silas crossed the room, coming to stand behind her with one hand on her shoulder while the other gently wiped away her tears. The warmth of his palms steadied her.

“What do you want to ask her?” her father asked.

She considered. “What’s next?”

It was as open-ended a question as it could come, when normally with oracles, it was best to be specific. All Esmae wanted was to get closure from her mother. No longer would she be bound to the ties of fate. She’d find her own path with her mate. Her father repeated the question aloud and activated the magic.

She expected perhaps a preview of the next far-off land or a location.

Instead, the air around them stilled. Magic rose from the card, billowing around them.

The necromancer rises.

The single sentence echoed in their ears. She looked up at Silas, who wore an expression of confusion.

“What does that mean?” she wondered.

Her mate shook his head. “In all my years, I’ve not heard of such a creature.”

She frowned. “Maybe we’ll find them on our travels.”

Her father gave her a concerned look. “Maybe you’ll steer clear of this necromancer. That sounded ominous, even for an oracle’s magic.”

Esmae thought it rather sounded like an adventure.

They said their goodbyes, her father giving her the strongest hug he had in years. Now that she’s stopped fretting over caring for him, she not only felt freer but also closer to him.

Silas shifted into his dragon form and lowered a wing so Esmae could climb aboard. His black scales gleamed in the moonlight. He launched them into the sky with his powerful hind legs. The cool night air was blissful as they drew higher and higher up. From the distance below, her father was just a speck, waving at them.

Esmae had a map and any number of plans for what they might do.

But the truth was, she didn’t care. As long as Silas was by her side, every day would be an adventure.

She wouldn’t have it any other way.