



The Baritone's Rival

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: Two rival opera singers. One vampire, one human. Both running from the past.

Oscar Acosta's abusive ex-boyfriend is dead, and his old vampire coven is gone. Now all he cares about is winning a coveted spot with the prestigious local opera company. His stiffest competition is Trent, an adorable fellow grad student with a linebacker's build who he is definitely not crushing on.

When Oscar's ex turns out to be not-so-deceased, sending several vampires to kidnap him, Oscar is forced to reveal his own vampire identity to his classmate. Can he trust Trent or should he keep him at a safe distance?

Trent Erickson is on his own with no safety net. He doesn't have time for partying, especially not with a privileged trust fund nepo baby like Oscar. Trent's not going to let some rich flake steal his star spot onstage, even if the guy stirs up feelings in him that he doesn't understand.

But when he witnesses three savage vamps attacking Oscar, Trent's own hidden history rears its ugly head. After all, he knows more about fighting vampires than any human should.

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Chapter 1

Trent

The opera gods were not smiling on Trent today.

Bella siccome un angelo

in terra pellegrino.

Fresca siccome il giglio

che s'apre in sul mattino.

Trent's throat tightened as he sang, his vocal cords constricting as his frustration built. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy that was practically a cliché: the more he worried, the tenser he got, and the tenser he got, the more he worried.

“Let's stop there.” Mr. Bianchi held up his hand to the accompanist, a slender young woman wearing her thick brown hair in a high ponytail. She lifted her fingers off the keys and rolled her eyes. Trent loved working with Julie. She was one of his few friends in New York City, but she couldn't keep her opinions to herself. Her face was far too expressive for that.

“Sorry, Mr. Bianchi.” Trent flushed with self-judgement, his eyes flitting away to avoid the disapproval he imagined was coming his way.

Mr. Bianchi had managed to make his utilitarian voice studio somehow cozy. Given a room that was essentially a cold white box by the university, he'd added several upholstered chairs and a throw rug. The subtle scent of a vanilla candle wafted through the air. The walls were plastered with colorful posters of the operas he'd been in, framed in dark stained wood. Trent stared at a particularly busy one for *La Fille Du Régiment* as he avoided eye contact with his teacher.

"I told you, Trent. Call me Anthony. I'm far too young for 'Mr. Bianchi.'"

There was a smile in Anthony's voice. Trent forced his gaze back.

Anthony was a good-looking man with olive skin and Italian features. He had an outsize presence that filled every room he entered. He was well on his way to becoming an international superstar tenor, and Trent knew he was lucky to be his voice student. That didn't stop him from being jealous of Anthony's career, especially considering that he was all of twenty-nine.

"I don't know why I'm struggling today."

"You know this aria," Anthony said, kindness in his eyes. "It's not even close to the top of your range."

Trent squeezed his lips together. He had been stalled out for months. Hell, sometimes it felt like he was going backwards.

Anthony walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Trent, I'm sure you don't want to hear this, but you need an outlet that isn't music. The whole laid-back corn-fed midwestern football player thing may fool some folks, but I know you, and I know how hard you are on yourself. To be an artist, you need input and you need to experience life. If you spend all your time in a practice room

punishing yourself, it's going to take you three times as long to push past this plateau."

Trent let out a ragged breath. Anthony was right about one thing. With his linebacker's build and his shaggy blonde mop, everyone assumed he was chill. The trace of a Wisconsin accent didn't help, either.

He liked that, though. It made him anxious when people worried about him. If they did, they'd offer to help, and that was always uncomfortable. Like it was right now.

"I do experience life?—"

Julie coughed from the piano. Trent shot her a look. She shrugged.

"What? I try to get you to come out with my friends, but you turn me down every time."

"That's not?—"

"It so is," Julie interrupted. "I asked you out for drinks last Monday."

"I—"

"And to a movie last Thursday."

"But—"

"And to drink at the movies on Saturday."

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“Julie!”

“What? What’s better than getting high and watching witches fly?”

“Trent.” Shit. Anthony was about to give a lecture. That wasn’t good.

“You’re a good student,” Anthony continued, resting his hands on his hips. “And you’re an excellent singer. You wouldn’t be at the Brooklyn Institute of Music if that weren’t true. But I see how hard you push yourself. If you don’t find a way to loosen up, your journey will be so much harder than it needs to be.”

Trent shook his head and gripped the black metal music stand in front of him. He’d heard this before, from his teachers, from his parents. What good had that donethem?

“It took a lot to get me here,” Trent rebutted. “I can’t waste my chance.”

Anthony tapped at Trent’s musical score with his pencil eraser. “Go out for a drink. Go to the movies. This will still be here when you get back.”

Trent sighed. Anthony didn’t understand. No one did. Most of the students in his master’s program had rich families. They’d been in voice lessons since they were kids. They couldn’t relate to a poor kid who’d muscled his way into one of the country’s best vocal performance programs.

Trent’s throat tightened again, this time with unshed tears. There wasn’t a backup plan. Singing was what he knew how to do. With his mother gone?—

Nope. Not going to let that old monster back in. He pushed aside memories of warm gardenia-perfumed hugs and forced himself to return to the present.

“This is all I have.” Trent fought through the flash of grief. “If I don’t succeed...”

Anthony put his elbow on the smooth, shiny piano top and rested the side of his head against his hand. “You’ve already succeeded, Trent. You’re here.”

Trent’s jaw clenched. “I have to do better. The auditions for the Manhattan Lyric Young Artists Program are in a month. They’re only taking one guy, and we both know that means they probably want a tenor. If I’m going to get in as a baritone, my audition has to be perfect.”

“There are other programs.”

“It’s the best one.” Trent’s hands formed into fists as he spoke. “The best chance to have the career I want. To be singing lead roles for major houses in the next ten years.”

Anthony crossed his arms. “You can’t?—”

“I have to.” Trent was speaking louder now, but he couldn’t help himself. “Maybe you’ve forgotten how much this business sucks, but most of us don’t get lucky and blow up in their twenties like you did. But the one thing that I can do, the one thing that I’m good at, is outworking everyone else!”

No one spoke for a long moment. Anthony stared at Trent as if he were evaluating him. Julie sat at the piano with her head down, picking at her fingernails.

“You are good at many things,” Anthony said, breaking the silence with his quiet words. “And your fellow students are your colleagues, not your competition.” He

sighed. “I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t. No one should be.” Trent glanced up at the clock and gathered up his sheet music. “I’ve gone over time.”

“Just by a couple of minutes.”

Trent stuffed his score into his already overfilled backpack, slipped an arm through, and swung it over his right shoulder. It hit the middle of his back with a painful smack. He ignored it. If he hurried, he could get in two hours of practice before the building closed for the day. He started for the door.

“Trent.” He reluctantly turned back to Anthony. “You have a whole studio of classmates that share your ambitions. They could be a support system.”

“I don’t know?—”

“I bet you and Oscar would get along like gangbusters. Why not talk to him?”

Trent froze. God, that’s what Anthony thought of him? That he should spend his few free hours with Oscar Acosta, the biggest partier in the program? Every day, Oscar walked into class, clearly hungover, and somehow managed to sing. He was a brat, and everything about him was annoying. His long brown hair. His tallness. His pretty eyelashes. The last thing Trent wanted to do was waste time on that chaos cauldron.

He reminded Trent a little of a vampire he’d known in his teens...nope. Why did the past keep popping into his head today? He wasn’t part of that world anymore. Humans only, now.

“I’ll think about it.” He forced a smile and got out as quickly as he could. Julie rolled her eyes once more as he slid out the door.

Trent hurried down the hall, hoping that Anthony wouldn't follow him to continue the conversation. He was over-involved in his students' lives. Most voice teachers were, but Trent didn't need the advice.

He could get a sandwich at the bodega and then grab a rehearsal room. He was sure that with a couple hours of practice, he could move past the block that had been plaguing him.

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“Trent!”

Trent’s shoulders tensed. Julie. He couldn’t escape. She was a brilliant pianist, but she’d heard everything Anthony had said. She always had opinions.

He turned to see her walking down the long gray hallway, looking chic in a black pencil skirt and silk pussybow blouse. Her heels clicked on the olive-green linoleum floor. In a school full of music nerds, she was a style icon.

“Thanks for playing,” Trent said, wracking his brain for a possible distraction. “How’s the recital coming along?”

Julie flapped her hands, waving away his question. “Who cares? Listen, a couple folks are heading over to Manhattan to hit up a jazz club. Why don’t you go with us? It’ll be a nice change from all the bel canto.”

Trent shook his head. “I’ve got to get a few more hours of practice in.”

“Trent.” Julie reached out, squeezing his forearm. “You heard what Anthony said. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“I really shouldn’t...”

“I know your first class tomorrow isn’t until one. Live a little.”

Maybe she was right. He had been pushing himself hard. That was the way he liked it, but everyone needed a reprieve. He was in rough shape. His shoulders were sore

from tension, and the knot in his stomach hadn't unraveled in days.

"Who else is coming?" Trent asked.

"Well, it's me, and Farah, and..." Julie trailed off, her eyes moving distractedly to a large student event bulletin board on the wall of the hallway.

"And?" Trent squinted at Julie with suspicion.

"...Oscar."

"I'm good." Trent walked away. "Like I said, I have to practice."

Julia's heels clicked behind him as she moved to keep up with him.

"He's a great guy." Her voice was tinged with frustration. "You'd like him if you gave him a chance. Just because the two of you are like polar opposites..."

Trent slipped his left arm through the empty strap of his backpack and continued on, like a soldier hiking into enemy territory.

"How is he great?"

"Oh." Julie kept up his pace, biting her lip. "Well, he's kind, and he's an intelligent singer. And he's fun."

"So we're polar opposites, huh?"

"If the shoe fits," Julie said, not bothering to hold back her sarcasm, "might as well walk the damn runway. You could be more fun."

Trent stopped cold and turned to her. “You know why he’s fun? Because he doesn’t have to worry about buying food or paying back student loans. That’s what happens when you’re a spoiled trust fund kid.”

Julie stepped back with a confused squint. “How do you know he’s a trust fund kid?”

“Please. He doesn’t work. He lives on the Upper West Side. His clothes are absolutely ridiculous.”

An undergrad in pajama pants turned his head and stared as he walked past. Trent must have been getting louder. Why was it so hard to keep his cool today?

Julie grabbed him by his upper arms. “Don’t judge people like that. You can’t make a bunch of assumptions about someone’s background and then use that as a justification.”

“My assumptions aren’t why I don’t like him. I don’t like him because he never has anything intelligent to say in class. I don’t like him because he’s a classic egotistical tenor. All he has to do is sing a high C and everyone forgets how vapid and obnoxious he is.”

“You’re jealous!” Julie pulled her hands away, her eyes wide in shock. “Did he call you out on your back rolls or something?”

The blood rushed to Trent’s face. It was ridiculous to get angry. Oscar Acosta didn’t matter. He shouldn’t be getting this worked up.

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“I’m not jealous. Just because I’m not six foot two with a runner’s build like Oscar doesn’t mean I have back rolls,” he rebutted. “We’re not in the samefach. We don’t even have the same voice type. We’re not competing for the same roles. I have nothing to be jealous of.”

Julie smirked at him. “But you will be competing for that spot in the Manhattan Lyric program, right? And they’re only taking one dude.”

Trent didn’t reply. She wasn’t wrong. Oscar was yet another obstacle in his path.

Julie cocked her head. “And you’re mad because you think it’s easier being a tenor, that he doesn’t have to work as hard.”

“He doesn’t work as hard!”

Trent’s voice echoed off the concrete block walls. Trent took in a deep, calming breath. Julie opened her mouth to say something, but he cut her off.

“I’ll see you in class tomorrow.”

Trent stalked away, and this time Julie didn’t follow, thank god. The last thing he needed was to spend a night out with Oscar Acosta, with his easy charm and his stupid smirk. Nothing would be more enraging. It was for the best, anyway. No matter what Anthony had said, the most important thing was to practice. He could get a life once his career was further along. Unlike Oscar, he didn’t have anything to fall back on.

Chapter 2

Oscar

The deep bass of the music vibrated Oscar's insides. His soul wanted him out on the dance floor. The club was filled with beautiful men of all shapes and sizes: tiny pocket gays, muscular twunks, handsome daddies, boys next door, thin or built or curvy. The lasers and party lights reflected off the sheen of their bare skin, turning the place into a rainbow of hot guys. The collective musk pouring off their sweaty bodies simply enhanced the eroticism. It was a male smorgasbord.

Don't get distracted, Oscar.

Oscar glanced around to see where his coven master was hiding. Hearing Freddie's gruff British accent in his mind was always unsettling. He couldn't help but picture Freddie's square jaw and imposing, muscular figure. He was an intimidating man.

Freddie had only been his master for a year and Oscar was still adapting to the change. Despite his rough exterior, Freddie Grosvenor had shown him more kindness than the old coven master had ever bothered with. Charles Azarian had been an absolute dick, and that was putting it mildly. Oscar was glad he was dead.

I'm paying attention, Oscar responded in his mind.

Paying attention to the men, you mean?

Oscar's cheeks warmed as he blushed. Hopefully Freddie and the other vamps couldn't see it through the dark lighting. He had always considered his shamelessness one of his best qualities, but he was still finding his footing in the new coven. Some of the other vampires saw him as irresponsible, as some hedonistic club kid, but it wasn't true. He was appreciative of everything Freddie and Anthony had done. He

just got bored.

They're on the move.

Oscar tore his eyes away from the feast of guys on display before him and scanned the perimeter. There. Two figures dashing through the door to the emergency stairwell, one of them carrying an unconscious, shirtless man in their arms. They moved faster than any human could perceive.

Oscar wasn't any human. He wasn't human at all.

He threaded his way through the crowd, the smells of sweat and sex filling his senses. He arrived at the same time as Freddie and Lillian, Freddie's First. Lillian always managed to look glamorous somehow, a touch of shimmery highlighter kissing her brown skin. Her long, layered hair and flawless makeup masked a killer instinct.

"Let's go," Lillian barked and burst through the door. Oscar followed, with Freddie bringing up the rear. They raced down the uneven concrete stairs. The building was old and the stairwell was in rough shape, crumbling in places, with graffiti-covered walls that flew by as they descended.

They burst out onto an empty side street in the industrial district, where they were greeted by their quarry. Two vampires stood across from them. One was distressingly muscular and had a classic crew cut, as if he'd spent time in the military. The other was tiny, blonde, and lithe. The muscular vamp leaned against a large eighteen-wheeler that was parked by a nearby warehouse, the unconscious human nonchalantly slung over his shoulder. In contrast, the twink stood frozen with his eyes wide and a nervous look on his face.

Oscar knew him. The vamp's clothes were ragged, and he was gaunt and weak-looking, as if he hadn't been feeding regularly, but it was definitely him. Justin. He'd

clearly been through the mill.

They'd been friends back in the old days of the Azarian Coven. Justin had been turned maybe five years before the two of them met. He was so innocent at the time, but their coven had quickly beaten that out of him. He'd disappeared right before it got really bad. Oscar had been worried about him, but then Charles Azarian was killed. After that, Oscar had focused on staying alive as the coven disintegrated.

Lillian stepped forward, and Freddie fell in behind her. Oscar didn't move, still lost in his memories.

Oscar.Freddie's voice sounded inside his mind, dripping with annoyance.

Damn. He rushed to catch up as the Coven Master and his First confronted the two vampires.

"There's no hunting in New York City," Lillian said, her fangs peeking out of her mouth as she spoke. "If you need blood, you come to us."

The small blonde trembled as he spoke. "We didn't mean?—"

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“Shut up, Justin,” the big one growled. His eyes flashed as he spit out his answer to Lillian’s accusation. “Who are you? Does this coven even have a name? Or are you just squatting on Azarian property?”

“We are Coven Grosvenor.” Lillian’s voice was flat and cold. “We are the only coven of New York City.”

“Grosvenor, huh?” The muscular vampire sprayed saliva as he spoke. “Figures a couple of Brits would kill off Charles and try to take over a red-blooded American coven. Listen up. I had an arrangement with the Azarians. I get to hunt the city in exchange for providing extra security.”

“We don’t need extra security.” This time it was Freddie who spoke, his voice low and commanding. “And no one hunts in New York. We have bagged blood enough for any who need it.”

“What kind of sissy wants blood from a bag?”

“If you feed in New York, you feed from a bag.” Freddie’s tone grew deadly. “Otherwise you can leave. Now release the human.”

“Please, Rick?—”

With a growl, the big one picked up Justin by the neck and threw him against a nearby car, smashing the passenger side window. Oscar winced at the sight of Justin’s head, now hanging at an unnatural angle. Rick, if that was his name, had done real damage.

“Justin!” Oscar ran over to the slight man crumpled by the car. The muscular vampire took off, still holding on to his shirtless human, and Lillian pursued him. Freddie turned to Oscar.

“Take him to the covenhouse if you think he can be trusted. I’m going to back up Lillian.”

Oscar nodded, turning to Justin, who was drifting in and out of consciousness.

“Oscar! You’re...you’re alive. I’m so glad!” The small blonde vampire blinked quickly, trying to get his eyes to focus. “Where’s Rick?”

“If you’re talking about the brute, he ran. The coven master went after him.”

“Maybe I’ll be...lucky. Maybe he’ll kill him.”

Oscar reached down, feeling for where Justin’s neck had bent so grotesquely. “I’d say the chances are quite good. Freddie doesn’t cotton to anyone hunting humans in his adopted city.”

“Freddie? You call your coven master Freddie?”

“Well, Coven Master Grosvenor is a mouthful. He prefers Freddie.” Oscar bent down, making hard eye contact with Justin. “I’ll need to straighten the vertebrae in your neck so that your vampire healing can kick in. I’m afraid it’s going to be painful.”

Justin let out a shaky breath, then nodded. “Do it quick.”

Oscar grasped Justin’s head between his hands. This would be awful. It’s not that Oscar was squeamish, but he’d seen enough bloodshed and violence in his last coven

to tide him over for the next hundred years.

Setting himself, Oscar breathed in and pulled. There was a loud crack, and Justin let out a strangled scream. Oscar's stomach clenched at the sound. He grabbed Justin's hand.

"Come on, deep breaths."

Justin looked up at him, tears in his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, and promptly passed out, slumping forward against Oscar's chest.

Oscar sighed and lifted Justin into his arms. He'd always been a sweet kid. It hurt Oscar's heart to see him like this. He would feel better with some rest and a couple of bags of blood.

When Freddie and Lillian returned, Oscar was spread out on a chaise lounge in the large shared space that took up the entire second floor of the covenhouse. Freddie had knocked down the walls that separated the apartments on that level, forming an enormous, long hall. Coven members would meet up there, relaxing together, playing games or watching bad television.

Style-wise, the place was a mass of contradictions. Freddie's taste in home decor ran to the Victorian, which clashed with the modern architecture of the Upper West Side apartment complex. The lush fabrics and wooden furniture were a strange contrast with the steel and concrete, and Oscar wasn't certain it worked. That being said, the velvet chaise was incredibly comfortable and almost long enough to contain Oscar's full height.

If he'd been stretched out, his toes would have dangled off the end, but they were folded up under him as he sipped from a large goblet of dark red wine. He flipped through a men's fashion magazine.

“You can’t get drunk.” Freddie’s gruff voice held a hint of a tease. “I don’t know why you insist on such an expensive vintage.”

Oscar turned to see Freddie unbuttoning his shirt. It was covered in blood.

“I take it you dealt with Rick?” Oscar sipped his drink.

“He threw the human at us and managed to escape. Lillian took the poor fellow to the ER.”

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“Mmm.” Oscar glanced back down at his magazine. The male model was wearing a black tulle top that hung perfectly off his toned frame. Oscar added it to his mental shopping list.

“Nice work tonight.” Freddie pulled on a white tank and sat down next to Oscar. “Your help is appreciated.”

“My pleasure.”

Oscar continued to read, but it was awkward with the coven master sitting there silently next to him. He supposed he should engage. Oscar didn’t care much for hierarchy, and didn’t really think being coven master was all that special, but Freddie had been good enough to allow him to stay in the wake of his old master’s death.

Not only that, but the redheaded Brit was intimidating. Oscar looked up from the magazine.

Freddie smirked. “Fair warning. Anthony is planning to grill you about your love life.”

Oscar scowled. “Tell your mate I’m fine. More than fine. I date hundreds of men a year.”

Freddie shrugged. “Ever since we got married, he’s had his heart set on getting everyone in the coven to settle down.”

Oscar sighed and put down his wine, standing up. “If that’s the case, I’m going back to that club. The guys were hot, and if I leave now, I’ll miss Anthony coming home. It’s bad enough that he’s the coven master’s mate and my voice teacher. I don’t need him playing matchmaker.”

Freddie chuckled. “I don’t think he’ll be that easy to avoid, but go ahead. Have fun. Don’t annoy Lillian when you get back later tonight.”

Yes. Lillian. Oscar may have stumbled in a time or two, smelling like sex and high off the endorphins, and it was always Lillian catching his walk of shame. She sat watch every evening. There were no other vampires to spare for the job. The Grosvenor coven wasn’t even a year old, and Oscar was the only one left from the days when Charles Azarian ran it. They were still building up their security force.

Lillian was meticulous and strict. She didn’t like him. Possibly because of his late night indiscretions. Or more probably because of his tendency to run his mouth.

“I’ll do my best.” Oscar walked to the front door, reaching for the handle when the door opened.

It was Anthony. Oscar held his face still, masking his annoyance. Anthony was a good person and a good teacher, but he always had his fingers in everything. Oscar preferred superficial, less messy personal relationships. Trusting people had not gone well for him in the past.

“Oscar! I was hoping you’d be home.” Anthony smiled widely.

“I was just heading?—”

“Come, sit down with me.” Anthony grabbed Oscar by the arm, pulling him to the small dining room table.

“Anthony, I?—”

“Sit, sit.” Anthony sat as well, studying him with the intensity of a scientific researcher. “Do you want anything to drink? Coffee, tea, blood?”

“I just finished up some wine.”

“Good, good.” Anthony clutched both of his hands. “Now listen, I’ve known you for a year now. You are smart and talented, and obviously very charming, considering the number of guys you hook up with, but you need something in your life to ground you.”

“I’m grounded.” Oscar’s frustration bubbled up inside. He hated being told about himself, as if anyone else would know. None of them had been there when it had gotten bad, none of them had seen. Besides, once people thought they knew you, they started to make assumptions. And demands. “Everyone says so. That I’m grounded. People love to be around me.”

“Oh, no doubt. But you’re as flighty as a horny virgin in a sex dungeon, flitting from harness to cross to spanking bench, unable to decide what he’s going to try first.”

“Really?” Anthony had a tendency to be blunt, but this was ridiculous.

Anthony gestured at the house around them. “We’re building a home. We’d love for you to stay here for the next hundred years. Meanwhile, you should be finding your mate and committing yourself to your singing career.”

“I don’t want a mate.” Oscar frowned. “And I am committed. Just because I don’t spend every second self-flagellating in the practice rooms like Trent Erickson doesn’t mean that I’m not ambitious and determined.”

“The auditions for the Manhattan Lyric Young Artist Program are in a month, and?—”

“I know that. I’ll be prepared. And I’ll get it.” Oscar crossed his arms, stifling the instinct to stomp his foot. “You might not have noticed, but I’m very, very good.”

Anthony sighed. “You need to put down roots. Have an actual relationship, not just one night stands.”

“That is not my way.” Oscar pressed his lips together. Anthony meant well, but Oscar knew his own mind. “Relationships don’t interest me.”

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“Whatdoesinterest you, Oscar?”

Oscar smirked. “Sex and being an opera star. Now if you’ll excuse me, a dance floor full of sweaty daddies awaits me.”

As Oscar stood, the door to the elevator rang. Everyone turned their heads in the direction of the sound. The doors opened to reveal Justin, dazed but looking a bit more like the plucky vamp Oscar remembered.

“Umm, hi.” He gave a little wave.

Freddie, who’d been watching the conversation from the armchair with an amused look, stood. “Justin, how are you feeling?”

“I’m pretty good. The blood bags helped.” An uncertain smile appeared on his face. “I knew Rick was an asshole, but I didn’t expect him to break my neck. Thank goodness I’m a vampire. I’m fine now.”

“Glad to hear it.” Freddie gestured to Anthony. “This is my mate, Anthony. And you know Oscar.”

“Someone broke your neck?!” Anthony sprang up and hurried to Justin’s side. “We need to make sure you’re okay. Come, sit down.”

Oscar watched as Anthony did what he did best: making people feel welcome and cared for. Justin had a natural optimism that would benefit the coven, and Anthony was the perfect person to draw that out.

Oscar knew he should be grateful for Anthony's caretaking impulse, but he chafed under it when it was directed at him. He valued his privacy, and if he was being honest, his ability to pack up and run at the drop of a hat. He'd learned his lesson. Strong personal ties just exposed him to more manipulation and betrayal.

Justin glowed at Anthony's attention, and Oscar slipped out the door before anyone could notice. Anthony might want to find Oscar a long-term boyfriend, but he had other plans, which hopefully included several short-term arrangements that very evening.

Chapter 3

Trent

Something was off from the moment Trent entered the classroom for his Vocal Literature class. Usually, Anthony breezed in at five past the hour, pontificating about Rossini or Mozart or Britten like a nerdy operatic whirlwind. Not today.

Today, Anthony was there when Trent walked in, scribbling away on the whiteboard. The few students that had beaten Trent there were staring in silence. Mischievous energy poured off his teacher. Anthony practically wiggled as he wrote his list.

It was a lineup of names, some in pairs, some in trios. This wasn't good.

Previously, Anthony had always let them choose the music they would sing. He'd decide on the parameters. German lieder. Contemporary art song. Baroque. Classical. Romantic. Most people worked by themselves, although occasionally a couple of folks presented a duet. Once a trio sang the finale of Gounod's Faust.

Trent had only ever performed solo. Until today.

He predicted what it would say before the words appeared. Anthony just couldn't leave anything alone. Once Trent's teacher got something in his head, he was worse than a dog with a bone. Anthony was convinced that Trent needed to be brought out of his shell. The man didn't understand that Trent liked his shell, that his shell had formed around him for a reason.

But that didn't matter. Right there on the board, in bright purple marker: Trent and Oscar. Dammit.

He knew at some point he'd have to sing with someone else, but he figured he'd get a choice. He thought he'd be able to avoid working with someone who was...well, who was Oscar.

"Alright, friends," Anthony began, "we're starting today with assigned groups."

The whole class stared at Anthony, but the smile never left his face. The tense silence in the room proved that Trent wasn't the only control freak among the students. Everyone was trepidatious about putting their grade at the mercy of another person's whims. He certainly was.

To be fair, Trent didn't know Oscar, and to be unfair, he didn't like him. He'd dealt with his share of poor little rich boys in undergrad. Everything was a game to them. His college girlfriend had been a trust fund kid, and it's probably why they broke up. She could never understand his drive, his constant need to do better, to achieve more.

Although, if he was being honest with himself, it might have had more to do with the uninspired sex.

But there were no stakes in this for someone like Oscar. If his career fizzled, hell, if he dropped out of the master's program, he'd always have the cushion of his privilege. Trent didn't know much about Oscar's background, but he knew that he

didn't take anything seriously and threw money around like it was confetti.

Trent couldn't do that. This career was all he had. His parents couldn't help him. They were?—

“Trent?”

Anthony's voice cut through his ruminations. Shit. How had he gotten so distracted?

“Sorry. Yeah?”

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“I was saying that you and Oscar will be going first, next week, so you’ll need to learn the piece fairly quickly. Is that okay?”

Trent nodded, fighting to keep the annoyance off his face. “Sure.”

“Great. The two of you will have your private lesson with me together on Friday. We’ll start work on it then.” Anthony winked at him.

Trent shook his head, confused. He’d obviously missed something. “Wait, what are we singing?”

“Dio, che nell’alma infonderefromDon Carlo.”Anthony smiled. “And no, you can’t do it in French, even though it was written in the language. You’re far more likely to be asked to perform it in Italian in the states. Regardless, you two are both ready to push into heavier rep. This will be a good step in that direction.”

Oh god. Trent swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. It was a beautiful duet, one of Verdi’s best, but it was also a declaration of love between two lifelong friends. It was almost romantic. It was bad enough he had to sing with Oscar. Now he had to pretend to like him? To love him? Couldn’t Anthony have chosen something more antagonistic?

Trent caught a glimpse of Oscar out of the corner of his eye. He turned to Trent with a big smirk on his face and winked.

Oscar was a shameless flirt. Not that it had any effect on Trent, despite the little flip his stomach had just done. Which was nothing. Probably the food truck bacon, egg,

and cheese he'd had for breakfast settling. Trent was straight. But Oscar loved to troll the straight guys in class. He was probably delighted at the chance to torture Trent.

Trent understood that he was being ridiculous. He was ascribing all sorts of motives to a man he barely knew. But was it too much to ask to be able to work alone? Group projects were the worst, and Oscar was absolutely the kind of person who would do none of the work and take all the credit. Maybe singing a duet wasn't exactly like making a grade-school diorama together, but Trent hated the thought of someone else's blasé attitude tanking his GPA.

And Oscar was one of his main competitors for the Manhattan Lyric program. Maybe the main competitor, although Trent couldn't understand why everyone liked his singing so much. His voice was fine. Probably just because he was a tenor. Everybody loved a tenor.

Trent forced his attention back to his teacher as Anthony dove into a lecture about the stylistic concerns of the songs. He tried to put the impending musical disaster out of his mind.

Five days later, Trent stood in Anthony's studio, his score resting on the music stand in front of him. Julie sat at the piano, scrolling on her phone. Anthony tapped on an ornate wooden side table with the cap end of his pen.

Trent couldn't contain himself anymore. "Do you think?—"

"He'll be here." Anthony's tone made it clear any further argument would be useless.

Trent shrugged. If Anthony said so. He'd had very low expectations of Oscar's behavior going into today, and he had yet to even meet those. Maybe if he simply didn't show, Trent could get out of this altogether.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Trent squinted at Anthony. “Huh?”

“I can tell you are scheming, hoping to find a way to work alone. Not going to happen.”

“I wasn’t?—”

Anthony cut him off with an eyebrow raise.

“Fine,” Trent capitulated. Escape wasn’t an option.

He was about to ask Julie to run through his part a fourth time when the door sprang open. Oscar rushed in, babbling as he did.

“Sorry I’m late everyone, the M was running behind, so I tried to take the 1, and that was a disaster, there’s construction down at Sixth Avenue again?—”

Trent bristled at the stream of excuses, annoyed that Oscar was wasting yet more time with all his justifications. Maybe if the man didn’t spend so many hours getting ready. He wore a plaid Vineyard Vines blazer and a white button-down shirt, and his long brown hair rested on his shoulders as if it had been placed there by a stylist. Even rushing from the subway, Oscar looked handsome and put together, like he’d just stepped out of a photoshoot. It was so annoying.

“—so I ended up giving the homeless guy my sandwich, and then I had to grab a snack because I’ve got a class right after this.”

There was silence as Trent, Anthony, and Julie all stared at him.

“What?”

“Can we start?” Julie said from the piano, her voice flat.

“Of course!” Oscar opened his giant leather tote. “Let me just locate my score. One moment.”

Trent doodled in his music to prevent himself from starting a fight as Oscar rummaged through his bag. Oscar began taking things out and putting them on top of the piano. An unopened pack of pens. A small leather-bound book. A travel-sized bottle of lube.

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Trent tried not to react, but his disdain must have shown on his face, because Oscar smirked at him.

“What? You never know when you’ll find yourself in a three-way in a remote, lube-less location.”

Oscar finally pulled out his copy of the duet. It was banged up and much worse for wear. He dragged a music stand over from the wall, setting up next to Trent. Trent’s blood pressure rose as Oscar took yet more time to smooth out his score.

After he was done, Oscar looked over at him.

“Wow. You are big.”

“What?” Trent blushed and was immediately frustrated with himself for the unconscious response. It’s not like people hadn’t been saying things like that to him for his whole life.

“Did you play football? You are very broad-shouldered. And blonde.”

Trent was broader than Oscar. He’d been a big sports guy in high school, and although he didn’t play anymore, he had kept up the linebacker physique.

“I...I’m not sure what my hair color has to do with playing football.”

“It’s the final piece in the Midwestern corn-fed puzzle.” Oscar winked at him.

Trent was not having this. Absolutely not. No amount of flirting would make up for the fact that he'd kept them waiting, was still keeping them waiting.

"Can we sing?" Trent locked eyes with his teacher, sending psychic vibes for him to move this along, but Anthony just sat there with an amused look on his face.

"Oh, of course, doll. Let's jump in." Oscar reached out and patted Trent on the arm. Trent pulled away.

"I'm not your?—"

Trent's sullen response was cut off by Julie's loud attack on the introduction. If she was trying to shut everyone up, it worked. Trent took a deep breath. He wanted the same, after all.

He started the recitative, the speech-like portion that preceded the aria proper. He was Rodrigo, reuniting with his best friend Don Carlo after a long separation. Despite the passion baked into the words, the melody dribbled limply from Trent's lips. He couldn't find the pulse of it. He couldn't express the fire that he knew should be there.

Oscar wasn't doing any better. His brows were furrowed with concentration in a way that Trent would have found cute in a less annoying person. He kept his eyes glued to the page, and when he wasn't singing, he unconsciously chewed his bottom lip. This was the first time Trent had been near Oscar for an extended period, and it was definitely the first time he'd seen Oscar try to be serious.

As they neared the end of the section, both Trent and Oscar turned to Anthony, the unspoken frustration thick in the room. Anthony, though, just smiled and gestured for them to keep going.

Then something changed. They hit the meat of the song. The accompaniment rhythm shifted, became more energetic, and the two of them leaned into the harmony, pledging themselves to the cause of liberty and friendship, and to each other.

Dio che nell'alma infondere

Amor volesti e speme,

Desio nel core accendere

Tu déi di libertà.

God, who instills

love and hope in our souls,

kindle within our hearts

a desire for liberty.

Trent and Oscar were no longer singing at each other, no longer struggling to connect. They were in exact matching rhythm, their tones blended, their tuning perfect. But more than the musicianship, electricity flowed between them. It was the connection the music needed.

Their voices soared as the song built, pouring out sound and emotion into the tiny room as they reached the climax.

Insieme vivremo, e moriremo insieme!

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Together we will live, and we will die together.

Julie finished the accompaniment with a grand flourish. Trent's eyes were locked on Oscar's. Neither had moved since they'd ended their final notes. Trent couldn't deny that this duet brought out something magical in both of their voices, Trent's agile baritone blending with Oscar's big but lyrical tenor.

No one in the room spoke, as if they didn't want to break the spell the music had cast. Ultimately, though, Anthony's voice cut through.

"This is going to be quite something."

Trent wrenched his gaze away from Oscar, and his common sense reengaged. He remembered where he was. And that Oscar was an annoying jackass.

"That being said, you've got your work cut out for you," Anthony continued. "There are some phrasing issues, and we need to work the whole recitative. Verdi was drifting into verismo here. There's a lot to talk about stylistically."

Trent nodded, not saying anything. Anthony's eyes went to the clock on the wall, a cheap standard-issue black-and-white plastic timepiece.

"I'm going to wrap up early and give you two a few minutes to figure out some things. Discuss the song. The character relationship. Find some times to meet and sing through it together."

Oscar nodded tentatively. He looked confused. Hell, Trent was confused too. It

wasn't usual for Anthony to end a lesson early.

Anthony slipped out the door, leaving Trent and Oscar standing in Anthony's studio. This was weird. Trent didn't look at Oscar. Instead, he scanned the sheet music of the aria they'd just sung, scribbling notes in the margins. Anything to avoid having some kind of conversation with the trust fund baby.

"Okay, you two, that's enough."

Shit. Trent had forgotten that Julie was still there. And she was pissed.

"What?" Trent widened his eyes naively. He hoped it was convincing.

"Stop that." Julie crossed her arms and leaned over the keyboard of the grand piano.

"You have to work together, so start talking."

Oscar sighed, pulling out a red notebook with gold lettering on the front. It was a planner. Who the hell uses a paper planner? No wonder he was so late.

"What time this week are you able to rehearse?" Oscar asked.

Trent grabbed his phone out of his pocket, scrolling through his calendar. "Friday afternoon is free right now."

"Fine. Let's do Friday at one."

"That'll work," Trent said, putting the event in his calendar and popping the phone back in his pocket. "Assuming you can get there on time."

"Trent—" Julie started from the piano, but Oscar cut her off.

“No, no, let the man speak. He clearly has something to say.” Oscar’s eyes narrowed as he glared at Trent.

“Some of us care about being rude.”

“Are you kidding?” Oscar turned to Julie. “Is he kidding? I’m supposed to account for my tardiness to Mr. GoFundMe over there?”

“What the hell does that mean?” Trent’s jaw clenched in anger, but more than that, he was confused.

“You want to tell him?” Oscar smirked, leaning against the side of the piano.

Julie froze.

“Jules.” Trent’s voice dropped down into a low, even tone. “Tell me what he meant.”

“It’s just...” Julie paused for a moment, then launched in. “It’s something that some of the guys called you. They’re assholes, you know, the two other straight guys, Seth and Garrett. It’s just that once they said it, it kind of, well, stuck.”

“Tell me.” Trent gripped his pencil in his hand like a vise.

“They, um, they call you GoFundMe because they said that you would need to start crowdfunding to pay for your surgery.”

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Trent's eyebrows furrowed. "What surgery?"

"The one to have the stick removed from your ass," Oscar answered, his tone all snark and condescension.

Trent stuffed his music into his bag and headed for the door. He needed to get out of this room. He needed to get away from Oscar.

"Trent, wait." Julie stood, imploring, but Trent was having none of it.

Trent put up his hand to her. "No, Julie." He turned to Oscar.

"You know, I come to class on time, I work hard, I'm dependable. What the hell else could anyone want? But for some reason, they all think you're wonderful, and I'm the stuck-up jerk. You're a flake, and if you weren't an Upper West Side nepo baby, you would never even have gotten into this school. No one's going to hire someone who can't get to work on time, no matter how good their voice is."

Trent's hand found the cold metal of the door handle, and he stepped halfway into the hall before turning back.

"And yours, by the way, sucks."

He slammed the door and strode away, trying and failing to leave his hurt, his embarrassment, and his shame behind in the studio.

Chapter 4

Oscar

“Hand over your wallet and your phone, and I won’t have to hurt ya.”

The sound of the gruff, raspy voice drifted up from the empty street corner. Oscar stood high above on the roof of an apartment complex, the wind whipping through his long hair.

He had been staring out over the city, doing his damndest to stop ruminating over Trent’s injured words. He hadn’t regretted what he said—Trent had been acting like a twit—but the look on his face had made Oscar feel...something. Guilt? Trent was always so anal and annoying, but the naked hurt was unexpected. In that moment, he had turned into someone sad and scared, someone that Oscar wanted to take care of.

Then Trent had insulted his voice, so he shouldn’t feel any guilt at all. And yet...

“Now, lady!”

The urgent threat brought Oscar’s attention back to the real world. He peered down onto the moonlit streets below. Beside him, Justin tensed, his feet scuffing against the flat roof. Unnecessary. The kid was skittish, and maybe he had goodreason, but there was no way some ordinary mugger could take on one vamp, never mind two.

“They’re both human,” Justin said in a shaky whisper. “It’s not really our business. We should just leave them alone.”

Oscar shook his head. “New York is Grosvenor territory, and we’re only blocks from the covenhouse. We can’t have humans getting attacked in our neighborhood. It would be gauche.”

Below, the target of the threat, a stylish-looking Latina woman in a tan suede trench

coat, took a step back from the mugger who loomed over her. He was dressed in all black. Oscar didn't have a good angle on his face.

"Please," the woman begged, "my life is on this phone. I'll give you all the cash I have..."

"You'll give me your phone, and that necklace, too." The mugger stepped towards her.

"It was my grandmother's!"

The mugger raised his hand. There was a sleek, black handgun in it. "No more arguing, lady."

Oscar locked eyes with Justin, nodded, and without waiting for a response, he jumped. He landed behind the mugger, his feet barely making a sound as they hit the concrete. Justin dropped down a moment later.

The woman's eyes went wide as she saw the two of them. She let out a yelp but immediately squelched it.

"What the hell, lady? Get moving!"

"Even a thief should have manners." Oscar loved to play with his prey. There were some advantages to being a vampire, after all. "And no one looks good in all black, no matter what the Manhattan socialites say."

The man spun around, the gun trained on Oscar. He was a stocky white guy with a scraggly beard. His face sported a haggard look.

"You shoulda walked away, fucker."

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The impact of the bullet and the boom of the weapon were near-simultaneous. There was a quick pinch in Oscar's chest as the projectile broke his skin, followed by a shot of severe pain. But Oscar didn't let that stop him.

The mugger didn't know he was dealing with a supernatural death machine with preternatural speed. His hand was around the man's throat before he could pull the trigger a second time.

"This could have gone so much better for you, darling." The man tried to speak, but Oscar's hand was like a vise around his windpipe. "Once you try to kill me, all bets are off."

"What the fuckareyou?" the man managed to squeak out. Before he could say more, Oscar snapped his neck. The sick crack of the bones breaking echoed on the empty street. Oscar lifted the now-dead body by the throat and threw the corpse to Justin, who caught it awkwardly in both arms.

"We'll bring him back and drain him."

"Please don't kill me. Please..." The woman's voice trembled with terror.

"You're in no danger, dear." Oscar raised two fingers, locking eyes with the woman. "And that is a beautiful necklace. Your grandmother must have been very fashionable."

She nodded mutely. Oscar found his core, that spark in his chest that was his demon waiting to burst forth, and stoked the fire a little. "Nothing strange happened tonight.

You had a calming walk in the moonlight.”

“I...” The woman looked around, confused. Oscar lowered his hand. “Sorry, were we speaking? I got mixed up all of a sudden.”

“No, no, I was just complimenting your necklace.” Oscar smiled casually. “Have a lovely night.”

“Oh, you too.” She glanced at her watch. “Ten thirty! My husband will be worried. Have a good night.” She strode off past them, not registering at all the now lifeless body that Justin cradled in his arms.

“How did you do that?” Justin asked in a fierce whisper. “You’re not that old! Only ancient vampires can Compel like that.”

“I don’t know about ancient. But yes, you usually have to be a hundred or more to have the aptitude.” Oscar shrugged. “I’ve always had a gift for the mental powers. It developed after about ten years.”

“But we were friends...” Justin’s brows drew together in confusion. “I don’t ever remember you being able to do that.”

“My ex wanted me to keep it a secret.”

Justin stared at Oscar, shaking his head. Oscar felt strangely self-conscious, and he wasn’t sure why. It was a useful skill, and rare enough, but Justin was looking at him like he was a freak.

“Come on,” Oscar said, shoving his feelings aside. “We need to get him back before the blood gets too cold.”

It was only a few blocks to the covenhouse, and they moved swiftly through the streets, unseen by humans, the warm city air massaging their faces as they passed. Once they reached home, they lugged the body into the kitchen. The room was more of a blood bank than anything, since the vampires that lived there didn't have to eat solid food. Oscar had a few sweet treats hidden away in a cupboard, but he didn't need them for sustenance.

Justin plopped the body down on the kitchen island while Oscar grabbed a needle and some empty bags from the supply under the sink. The first few times he'd done this were uncomfortable. When he fed from a live human, there was a sensual rightness to it, his body and his inner demon in sync in their hunger. Draining someone like this, though, was more clinical. Without the cloud of blood lust, there was no ignoring the facts of what you were doing.

"Insert it into his arm," Oscar said, tossing a syringe and a bag to Justin. Justin looked up at him with uncertain eyes.

"I don't know if I..."

"If you're to dwell here with us, you'll need to get used to it. Much of our blood is sourced from medical supply, but a portion comes from defensive kills. It would be criminal to waste it. You never know when our contacts at the blood bank will dry up." Oscar gestured to the guy's neck. "Go for the carotid."

Justin squeamishly massaged the cadaver's throat as he searched for the artery. When he located it, his eyes went to Oscar as if he might grant a reprieve. No such luck. Justin punctured the skin with the needle, pushing it through with his shaking hands. Immediately, the bag began to fill.

They stood as the blood flowed slowly into the container. Justin's discomfort was palpable, and Oscar was confused. The man was a vampire. He'd been part of the

Azarian Coven. There had been no concern with morality there. Justin had drunk from his share of unwilling victims.

“No need to stare.”

Justin startled at Oscar’s voice. Oscar shook his head. How was the kid so squeamish?

“What’s wrong?” Oscar asked. “You’ve seen plenty of blood in your lifetime. Especially hanging out with that asshole, Rick.” Oscar tucked in the extra medical supplies back under the sink, trying to sound casual as he pushed a little. “How did you end up with him, anyway?”

Justin tore his eyes from the body. His hands were clasped together tightly. “I don’t...I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Suit yourself.” Oscar shifted his weight from foot to foot as he decided if he should pry further.

Fuck it. “It’s just that you used to be so fun. Occasionally annoying in your relentlessness, but fun. What happened to the little ball of sunshine?”

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Justin chewed on his lip as he stared at Oscar. After a long moment, he let out a breath and jumped in.

“I guess it’s okay to talk about. I...remember when I left the Azarian coven?”

Oscar leaned, being careful not to jostle the body. “Of course. We all wondered where you’d gone. I think most of us were jealous that you had managed to escape without anyone going after you. I always hoped you had found some quiet nook in the woods somewhere.”

“I did, sort of.” Justin blinked his eyes a few times, as if he were trying to remember. “I went to stay with my aunt. She lives upstate. And it was really great for a while.”

Oscar raised an eyebrow. “And then?”

“And then a bunch of shit went down that I don’t really want to go into. I couldn’t live with her anymore. I didn’t have anywhere to go, so I ended up traveling with Rick. It wasn’t so bad at first, but ultimately...well, you saw what he did. I haven’t had much reason to be peppy recently.”

“I guess.” Oscar flashed Justin a smile. “I’m sorry you’ve had a rough go of it. I missed having you around. You always made the place a little more festive. Which, with the Azarians, was quite a feat.”

Justin didn’t answer. After a long, awkward silence, he looked back down at the cadaver. “Do you think he had, like, a wife or something? Anyone we should tell?”

“I’d imagine anyone married to a man who’d shoot someone in a mugging wouldn’t be a particularly good person themselves. I wouldn’t worry about them.” Oscar chuckled. “Besides, how do you know it wasn’t a husband? Or a nonbinary spouse?”

“Oh...” Justin stammered. “I just assumed a guy robbing people at gunpoint would be straight.”

“Queer people can be just as monstrous as...” Oscar’s eyes fell on the man’s unkempt hair and stained black clothes. “He was probably straight.”

Oscar sauntered over to the cupboard and took out two stemmed wine glasses. Some of the vampires in the coven would drink out of tumblers, but a wine glass full of blood created such a perfect image, like something out of an old Hammer horror movie. He reached into the refrigerator, pulling out a bag of blood and filling the glasses.

“Why not quaff your thirst while you wait?”

Justin giggled. “You talk so funny sometimes. It’s...”

“Pretentious?”

“No!” Justin’s brows furrowed in concern. “I didn’t mean?—”

“Oh, I don’t mind. It is pretentious. I was leaning that way before I was turned, and becoming a vampire gave me the permission to embrace it, *mon cher*.” Oscar winked and held out a wine glass.

Justin reached out and gingerly took the glass in his hand, gulping down a couple of swallows of the deep red liquid. His cheeks flushed pink as the vital essence chased the squeamishness from him. Oscar sipped from his own drink, cool and delicious as

it hit his tongue. Most vamps preferred blood to be warm, as close to body temperature as possible, but Oscar found the chill refreshing.

“You were really brave back there.” Justin’s glanced at the dead man on the kitchen island. “He was scary. He shot you!”

“This one? Please.” Oscar rolled his eyes. His hand went to his chest, unbuttoning his shirt and running his fingers over the restored skin. “See? Good as new. It’s not as if a bullet could hurt us, and he didn’t have any wooden stakes on him. Or grenades.”

“I guess.” Justin blushed. “I just thought you handled it really well. Although it’s too bad for his imaginary wife or husband that he shot you.”

“Indeed. He might have survived and returned home to his imaginary family.” Oscar drained his glass and set it down. It clinked against the dark granite countertop.

“I don’t...it’s hard to think that the people we kill have loved ones who will miss them.”

“Well, he was a bastard, so if he hypothetically had anyone who loved him, I hypothetically doubt they are right in the head.”

Justin looked up at Oscar, pausing as if he was gathering the courage to speak his mind. “Everyone deserves to have someone that loves them.”

Oscar rolled his eyes. “Some of us don’t require that. Definitely not assholes who would shoot unarmed civilians. Alright, let’s change the bag and tilt him down to encourage the flow of blood.”

The cadaver wasn’t heavy for either of them, considering their enhanced strength, but it was awkward. Justin connected an empty bag to the line and they held the man’s

legs up, hanging his torso off the island and angling it toward the floor. They stood there motionless as the bag began to fill.

“What are you talking about? Everyone needs love.”

“No, thank you.” Oscar chuckled at Justin’s shocked, wide eyes. “I’ve had enough romance for multiple lifetimes. Let’s check in about this conversation again in two hundred years.”

“But, but you’re so...” Justin looked away as he trailed off.

“What?”

“You know, handsome and strong and all that!” A blush crawled up Justin’s neck and reached his cheeks, turning his face a light pink. “It would be so easy for you to find a lover.”

Did Justin have a crush on him? It was flattering, but he would prefer not to deal with that. He’d been hoping Justin might be a friend, and maybe a wingman for him at the club.

“It is, darling. For an evening. That’s all I require.” Oscar gave the cadaver a shake to encourage the blood in the extremities to flow down toward the head.

“Don’t you want to find your mate?” The words burst out of Justin with unexpected force.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Oscar’s voice dropped low. He understood this, the desperation to be loved in that way, especially as a young, impressionable...wait. Was Justin a virgin?

Never mind. Oscar continued. “I thought I had, once. I was deluding myself.”

“But that’s not possible!” Romantic notions were obviously important to Justin. He couldn’t seem to control the anxiety radiating out of him. “When vampire mates drink each other’s blood...the reaction proves it. The bond clicks into place.”

“That is the theory, yes...” Oscar frowned at the rush of memory that filled him. He

hated thinking of the old Azarian coven, of the hurt and shame he'd felt during his time there. "But if one of the fated pair doesn't allow the other to feed from him, then there's no way to know. Not for certain."

"Why would that happen?" Tears sprang to Justin's eyes. Oscar sighed. This kid was a sap.

"Youth. The blindness of first love. That's what it was for me, at least. You remember my ex. He wasn't very nice, was he?"

Justin shook his head, his face darkening at the mention. "No."

"And now he's dead." Oscar smiled. "One vamp claiming to be my fated mate was enough. Especially when he was such an asshole."

"I guess."

"Besides," Oscar said, standing up straight and crossing his arms, "who would want all that? Someone always knowing what you're feeling? Never desiring another person? And then there's the whole crimson surge issue."

"What?" Justin's tone was almost indignant. He frowned as he put his hands on his hips. "It's romantic."

"Going into a frenzy when your mate is in danger? No thank you. I'd prefer to maintain control over my own body."

Justin looked Oscar up and down, his eyes shifting from confusion to determination. Oscar was witnessing a war within the vampire, and the insistent romantic kept winning.

“Even so, just because you’ve been burnt once doesn’t mean you shouldn’t love again,” Justin said. “You deserve it.”

He reached out and rested his hand on Oscar’s bare forearm. Oscar flinched at the affectionate touch. Did he deserve love? He wasn’t sure. But he certainly didn’t want it.

“Sometimes you’re hurt too deeply.” Oscar stepped away, letting Justin’s hand fall, and leaned with his palms against the top of the kitchen island. The cool stone grounded him. “My ex...sometimes there is no coming back.”

“But—”

“No.” Oscar smiled, small and sad. “I won’t put myself in that position again.”

Justin sighed, but said nothing. The silence gave space for all of Oscar’s past feelings to come roaring back. He had been in love, even if his ex wasn’t his true mate, and the man had abused that over and over again. He’d trapped him in a life of violence and terror, the memories of which could still make his palms sweat, still give him nightmares.

Oscar pushed away the old pain. He picked up the mugger’s body and gave it a final shake.

“I think we’ve got it all. Let’s dispose of him.”

Oscar was dreading this rehearsal. Julie had managed to broker some kind of uneasy peace with Trent so the three of them could work on the duet. Oscar didn’t want to know how she’d done it. In class on Wednesday, Trent had sat as far away as humanly possible from Oscar, hunkering down in the shadows of the back corner of the classroom. He hadn’t spoken a word to anyone. He hadn’t spoken up during the

discussion.

But now it was Friday, and Julie had convinced him to come.

Oscar didn't want to apologize. He shouldn't have to apologize. Trent had been acting like a dick, and Oscar didn't regret what he'd said. If Trent came in and demanded an apology with that stupid face of his, Oscar...well, he wasn't sure what he would do.

Honestly, he was tempted to Compel both Julie and Trent to forget about the whole thing. He knew it was unethical. He should only use his power when a person was in danger, but it was so tempting. Everyone would be happier. They'd never know their minds had been cleansed.

Of course, he wouldn't do that. But he could fantasize about it.

He walked down the tree-lined Park Slope street, and the sun danced on his skin as it filtered through the oak leaves. It was very bright out. Vampires didn't burst into flames in daylight, regardless of what the old tales said, but it was draining, and he'd always been particularly susceptible to it. Maybe it was a balance for his aptitude with mental powers. A wave of nausea hit him.

He swallowed it down and continued his way up the incline of the empty sidewalk and through the wealthy neighborhood, the well-preserved brownstones looking down on him from both sides of the street as he went. The Brooklyn Institute of Music was there at the top of the hill. The sooner he was inside the practice room and out of the sun, the better.

"If it isn't the fancy one."

Oscar looked up to see Rick, the asshole vampire with the crew cut who'd been bullying Justin. He stood a few feet in front of him. He was grizzled, with four or five days of scruff on his face, wearing a beat-up jean jacket. A large vein bulged in the center of his forehead.

Rick was flanked on either side by a couple of baby vamps. The crisp ash smell of the recently turned poured off them. The change had happened young, as well—neither of them could have been more than twenty when they'd been sired. They were dressed in stained, baggy clothes. They were gaunt, their desperate appearance hiding any gender markers.

“This is quite a greeting.” Oscar squared his stance. There wasn’t a chance in hell this confrontation was well-intentioned. “But I should really get to class.”

“You’re wanted elsewhere, Oscar.” Rick’s voice dripped with disdain. “A friend of yours sent me to fetch you.”

“I doubt that you know any friends of mine.” Oscar was stalling. He wracked his brain for possible options. Individually, he could take on either of the younger vamps. Hell, he could probably take them both at the same time. Rick was a different question. He was older, maybe older than Oscar. One-on-one, it would be close, but Oscar was pretty certain he’d come out on top. Add in the other two, though, and he was in trouble.

As if reading his thoughts, the disheveled young vamps growled, their fangs dropping. Oscar held up two fingers in front of him, tapping into the burning core of the demon inside.

“You will leave here. You will not follow me again.” The magic stirred within Oscar as he spoke, the ancient power flowing from his lips.

The vamps stopped growling, staring at Oscar with wide eyes, their pupils dilating. For a moment, Oscar thought it had worked.

Then Rick laughed. It was harsh and ugly, and it broke Oscar’s hold on the other vampires. They shook off Oscar’s effort to Compel them, their faces scrunching in anger, their fangs glistening in the sunlight.

“Aren’t you cute?” Rick’s eyes gleamed with malicious glee. “You may be the youngest in a generation to have the old power, but you’re still young. I’ve got fifty years on you at least. Your parlor tricks won’t work on me. Elliott warned me what to expect.”

If Oscar's heart had been capable of beating, it would have stopped. He froze, suddenly aware of the cold clamminess of his skin and the tightness in his chest.

"Elliott...my Elliott?" Oscar's knees wobbled as he said the name. "I don't believe you. He's dead."

"If he were, he couldn't have sent me to bring you back to him."

Oscar's head swam. Elliott had died in the implosion that had followed Charles Azarian's death. This wasn't possible. He couldn't...he couldn't go back to that. Back to the desperate, gnawing need to be noticed, to be loved; back to being manipulated and controlled. Back to starving, his body weakening and his vision blurring from the lack of nutrients.

He thought he had escaped. His chest clenched at the barrage of old, destructive thoughts, and his throat closed, cutting off his air.

The loud growling broke through the panic as the vampires were on him. He extended his claws as he spun, lashing out to keep the two barely controlled monsters at a distance.

The name of his ex-boyfriend had thrown him at a crucial moment, and now he was trapped between the young vamps. They caught hold of him, their fangs out, their claws piercing his arms and back. He struggled, but it was no use. Rick strode toward him with a smirk on his face.

"This was easier than I thought. Guess you must really want to see yourmate."

Oscar spat at him, the liquid hitting Rick's cheek with a splat. He wouldn't return to Elliott willingly. They might overpower him, but he wouldn't play the docile lamb. Not ever again.

Rick's hand was around his throat, tightening as Oscar scratched at the muscular vampire's thick forearms. Rick lifted him off the pavement with one arm.

'This can be painful if you'd like,' Rick's voice rasped with anger. 'Elliott may want you in one piece, but I don't think he'd mind too much if you were missing a few fingers. Or a limb.'

'I...can't...' Oscar couldn't force his voice through Rick's grip around his neck.

'You've said enough. You don't get to?—'

A sick thud, the sound of punctured flesh, and Rick's eyes went wide. His grip loosened as he crumpled to the ground. The remaining vamps spun to face their attacker.

It was Trent, standing in a casual t-shirt and jeans, a wooden stake in his hands. A stake that was dripping with Rick's blood.

How? Trent was human! How could he?—?

There wasn't time to think as the two remaining vampires attacked.

Chapter 5

Trent

Trent hadn't intended to eavesdrop on the attack. He'd been trapped in his own head as he turned the corner, brainstorming ways to get out of singing with Oscar. He knew it was useless, but he couldn't stop coming up with new plans. The latest involved transferring schools.

At first, Trent thought it was a mugging, but listening in, it was clearly more than that. When the fangs and claws came out, he put the pieces together.

Of course, Oscar was a vampire. Of course he was. The blasé attitude? The total lack of concern for others? That comes when you don't have to worry if you'll be able to eat. Or if you'll grow old and die.

Vampires were inherently selfish beings, even the ones who weren't killers. Trent should know. That's why there was a moment, the tiniest second, where he considered walking away. But then they attacked Oscar.

When he saw the muscular vamp's fat fingers wrapped around Oscar's neck, something inside him snapped. It was as though a feral animal caged within him had broken through its bars, howling. This disgusting monster wasn't allowed to touch his Oscar.

His Oscar? Where the hell did that come from?

Thankfully, Trent's training kicked in and his mind went blank. He pulled out a wooden stake from the front pocket of his backpack—he always had one on him—and ran toward the big vampire's exposed back. Trent drove the weapon through the skin and flesh, between two ribs, and pierced his heart.

Trent hadn't lost all of his conditioning. The sound of wood cutting through meat was very satisfying. The musclebound vampire went down fast, his now-lifeless head smacking hard against the rough pavement.

Oscar's eyes widened when he saw Trent, but he had no time to deal with Oscar's surprise. The two other vamps lunged for him, their claws still dripping red with his classmate's blood. The fear and rage on their faces telegraphed their inexperience. They had little control. The one he'd killed had been holding them together.

And god were they poorly dressed.

Trent pulled out the knife he had hidden in his waistband, spinning and slashing at the air in front of him to keep the two away. They growled at him, and when the one on the right reached out to claw at him, he sliced across the underside of their forearm.

The vamp hissed and snatched their arm back. Trent made eye contact with Oscar, who was standing stock-still. What the hell was wrong with him?

“Want to help me out?” Trent shouted. Oscar was as useless at fighting as he was at everything else.

The other vamp swiped at Trent. He jumped to the side, almost avoiding its claw, the tips of the vampire's fingernails slicing open stripes on his torso. It hurt like a motherfucker, but thank god it hadn't gone any deeper.

Trent couldn't stop the grunt of pain that burst from his lips. Even as sun-weakened and blood-starved as the vampires clearly were, Trent was human and breakable. At Trent's outburst, Oscar was shaken from his paralysis. Faster than Trent's eyes could track, he slid between Trent and the two vamps, both of whom recoiled at his sudden presence.

"Stay." Oscar's voice vibrated with the strength of his Compel, and the two attackers went as still as statues. Trent was impressed. Few vampires wielded that kind of power.

"You will answer my questions." The two struggled to break the command, but despite their muscles straining against the hold, their bodies betrayed them. A drop of sweat trickled down the temple of the vamp on the left.

"Is Elliott really alive?" Oscar's voice was tinged with fear as he asked the question. Trent had never heard him sound like that. He wasn't a fan.

"Yes," the one on the left said, the word forcing its way through their clenched teeth.

"Is he in charge of your coven? Group? Whatever it is that you are?" Oscar kept his hand raised, two fingers up, as he interrogated them.

"He is coven master..."

Oscar's eyes narrowed. "Where is your covenhouse?"

The vampires struggled harder now, their faces twitching as they fought the compulsion. They didn't want to reveal that. The two began to shake, falling to the concrete and flopping around like fish out of water.

"Where is your covenhouse?"

One of the vamps, finally giving in, whispered a single word.

“It’s—”

With that, the other vamp, the one who’d managed to keep quiet, broke free and extended their claws. With a swift, razor-sharp swipe, they cut clean through the other one’s neck. The head of the gaunt betrayer tumbled down, hitting the path with a dull thud.

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Oscar moved to attack, but before he reached them, the final vampire was gone, sprinting away, scaling the side of a nearby brownstone like a spider and disappearing.

“What the hell?” Oscar yelled. Trent spun around, searching the adjacent rooftops. There was no one in sight, just the two bloody corpses there on the ground.

“We need to leave!” Trent’s words came out in a harsh whisper. “Someone will call the cops.”

Trent stepped toward Oscar, and his pain burst into a bonfire. His hand went to his side, the hurt there growing as the adrenaline started to dip. His t-shirt was shredded, and blood was weeping from his cuts.

“We have to get you help.” Oscar whipped out his phone and texted furiously. Trent stood there, his left hand pressing against the wound.

After a moment, Oscar looked up at Trent. “Can you walk?”

Trent took a few more steps. It hurt like hell, but he could do it. He nodded. Oscar flew to his side with inhuman speed, faster than the wings of a hummingbird.

“You need medical care.” Oscar’s eyes ran over Trent’s injuries. Concern shone in his eyes. He held out his arms in front of him. “Let me carry you.”

“Absolutely not.”

“But—”

“You are not carrying me. I’m a human, not a toddler. I can walk.” Trent moved a few steps away from the pile of dead bodies and stopped. “What about them?”

Oscar’s face tensed as he surveyed the corpses of his attackers. “My coven will deal with the offal. They’re sending a car. But you’re right, we should clear out, in case anyone arrives to investigate.”

Trent hobbled a few more steps, stumbling from the pain. Oscar was instantly at his side.

“No way. I’m fine on my own.”

“You’re clearly not.” Oscar bent down and placed Trent’s arm around his shoulder. “I won’t carry you, but you can lean on me as we go.”

Trent snorted, but didn’t pull his arm away. He had never been this close to Oscar. The vampire was a physical contradiction. Tall and slender, his slight frame hid his supernatural strength.

Neither of them said anything as they walked, but it wasn’t awkward. Trent concentrated on keeping his movements smooth so as to avoid more pain. It was strangely natural, leaning on Oscar, his linebacker’s build fully supported by the vampire’s confident gait. Trent found it surprisingly soothing where their bodies touched, Oscar’s unnaturally low body temperature a cool balm.

And Oscar smelled good. A sweet, crisp scent emanated from him, like an apple on a fall day. As Trent breathed it in, butterflies burst in his stomach. What was that about?

A long black town car pulled up next to them. Without checking the driver, Oscar

opened the door, gesturing for Trent to get in. Trent slid in, his hands gripping the roof to steady himself. He managed to avoid any major jolts of pain.

The artificial pine scent of one of those little tree-shaped air fresheners filled his nose. It wasn't pleasant, but it was certainly strong. The seats were covered in luxuriously soft brown leather. Trent stretched his legs all the way out. There was so much room. This was no cheap ride.

Oscar slipped in from the other side, and they were on the road before Trent realized that in all the commotion, he had neglected to get some vital information.

"Are you taking me to the hospital?"

Oscar winced. "Going to the ER wouldn't be smart. You look like you've been attacked by a jungle cat. They'll ask questions, and we can't provide the answers."

"Where then?"

Oscar didn't respond. Trent waited in frustrated silence. He hated when people were like this. Just be honest and deal with the consequences.

"Where are we going, Oscar?"

Oscar sighed and closed his eyes. "To the covenhouse."

Trent recoiled, sending a burst of pain up and down his side, but he ignored it.

"Absolutely not."

"It's the safest location. We have the supplies to stitch you up." Oscar shrugged, defeated. "You obviously have deep knowledge of us. Nothing there will be a

surprise.”

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“I’m not going to a house full of bloodsuckers.” Trent’s voice shook as he spoke. He wasn’t doing this. He’d spent the last ten years trying to get as far away from vampires as possible.

Oscar turned and locked eyes with him. There was real worry in his face, and something else. Pity? Trent hated that.

“I understand that we don’t really get along?—”

“I don’t know you.” Trent couldn’t help his brusque tone.

“Other than the fact that you’ve decided you hate me and that I’m your biggest competition.”

“You’re not my competition.”

“No.” Oscar’s expression turned sly. “Of course I’m not. You aren’t on my level.”

“Fuck you.” Trent’s side hurt. He was in no mood for witty comebacks.

Oscar sighed. “I know you’re mad because I’m gonna get the Manhattan Lyric gig?—”

“—you’re not?—”

“—but must you know that neither I nor Anthony would ever hurt you.”

“Anthony?!” Trent’s voice squeaked in a very unpowerful way. Dammit, he’d been trying to play it cool. “He’s a vampire?”

Oscar nodded. “He’s the coven master’s mate.”

Trent slumped back onto the dark brown leather of the car seat. That explained so much. No wonder Anthony was so infuriatingly meddlesome. Meddling was the literal job of the coven master’s mate. Anthony had just expanded his range of influence to include his voice studio.

The silence overtook them as they slogged through the New York traffic, slowly making their way from Brooklyn to the Upper West side. Oscar’s discomfort and curiosity poured off him. He shifted in his seat, twiddling his fingers obsessively.

It was driving Trent crazy.

“What?”

Oscar startled and looked over. “Um...nothing.”

Trent rolled his eyes. “You can run home to the covenhouse in like ten minutes. You’re a vampire. You don’t have to wait for me. I’m just a human.”

“What does that mean?” Oscar’s words came out in an indignant rasp.

“I know how impatient vampires get when we can’t keep up with you. I won’t stop you.”

Trent leaned back, his head sinking into the plush cushioned headrest behind him. He closed his eyes. Maybe it was harsh, but he’d killed a vamp today, and he still had a wound that needed to be treated. He wasn’t in the mood to be polite.

“I’m not leaving you. You’re injured.”

Trent shrugged. “The cuts are shallow. Not the worst I’ve had. You don’t owe me anything.”

“You saved my life!” Oscar’s insistent tone forced Trent’s eyes open. What was going on with him? Maybe he didn’t know him very well, but Trent couldn’t recall Oscar giving a shit about anyone, well, ever.

Trent didn’t have a response, so he sat there. One thing that unnerved people about Trent was that he wasn’t willing to fill silence with small talk. If there wasn’t anything for him to say, he wouldn’t say anything.

Finally, in a low, tentative voice, Oscar asked the question Trent had been expecting.

“How do you know about us?”

Trent sighed. He wasn’t about to pour out his heart and soul to Oscar Acosta, a man who couldn’t hold a serious conversation if his life depended on it. Besides, Trent didn’t like to think about his past for good reason.

If he started talking about his history, then the memories would flood in. Memories of the vampires in his stepfather’s coven who’d tormented him, memories of the slow unraveling of his mother, of her eventual —

No. Not tonight.

“I had cousins who were turned.” A little white lie, close enough to the truth.

“Oh.” Oscar tapped his fingertips against his thigh. “And you carry around a stake?”

“More than one.” Oscar’s eyes widened at Trent’s answer. “My introduction to vamps wasn’t...pleasant. I spent a long time increasing my odds of survival for when the time came.”

“You trained to kill vampires?”

“Not exactly.” Trent looked out the window. They were crossing the Williamsburg bridge into Manhattan, and the sun sparked gold on the water of the East River. There was a faint rumble as the train ran over the top of them on the next level up. On a different day, Trent might have thought the moment was poetic.

“Then what?”

“If I had to be around them, I had to learn how to protect myself.”

“We’re not all like?—”

Trent stopped Oscar’s words with a sharp look. He was not in the mood for a “not all vampires” speech. He’d been through too much.

“Many of you are,” Trent said, keeping his voice tightly controlled. “Most of you. I

know it firsthand. My high school girlfriend was attacked by vampires. Vampires Iknew. Just to get to me. They treated it like a game. So you'll forgive me if I'm not inclined to sympathy."

Oscar turned his head away, staring off into the rows of passing buildings. Trent was being harsh, maybe, but it wasn't his job to protect Oscar's feelings.

After a few minutes of silence, Trent's side began to pulse and throb. The adrenaline of had completely worn off. He took a few deep breaths to calm his nervous system. This was always the worst part of a fight, when the ache of the injuries hit in the aftermath.

"Who were they?" Trent asked, distracting himself from the pain shooting through his torso. "The vamps. Why did they attack you? Your ex sent them?"

Oscar cleared his throat, and when he turned back, his jaw was set. His fingers continued to fidget, his hand tapping at the leather-covered door. He squeezed his eyelids together as if trying to banish an upsetting vision.

"He was supposed to be dead."

Trent took in Oscar's words. There was a deep hurt there, no matter how Oscar tried to cover it.

"Why did you think he was dead?" Trent resisted the urge to reach out with a comforting touch. They didn't know each other that way. Or like each other. But Oscar was being so...unlike himself.

Oscar opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. Maybe he, like Trent, couldn't bring himself to confide in his rival. But the pain was tangible.

“My old coven, the Azarian coven...”

Trent breathed in sharply. “Azarian? You were part of that?”

“Yes? What do you know about my old coven?”

“That it was bad, bad enough that other vamps steered clear of Manhattan.” Trent rolled his eyes at the confusion written on Oscar’s face. “I still have friends back home. They keep me informed. When I decided to go to school in New York, they warned me to stay away from the Azarians.”

“Smart friends,” Oscar said under his breath, staring down at his shoes. “After my old coven master died, there was chaos. The strongest vampires were battling to take over the position. They were ruthless. They sacrificed the weaker vamps, feeding off us...”

Oscar swallowed, his hands curling into fists.

“Never mind that. I caught a glimpse of Elliott. He’d been badly injured. I assumed that the others would finish him off.”

“So, your ex might be alive. Why would he send three vampires to kill you?”

“Not kill me,” Oscar said, his voice barely a whisper. “To take me back. To force me...”

“Force you to what?”

Oscar shook his head, dissipating the cloud of fear and grief that had gathered around him. “I don’t want to talk about it. The short version is, he may believe that I’m his mate.”

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“Vampire mates. What a scam. If I found out I was some bloodsucker’s destiny-boyfriend, I’d fucking run.”

The harsh words were out before Trent could stop them. Oscar stared at him. Trent wished he hadn’t blurted that out. It revealed more than he’d intended.

“Where did that come from?” Oscar asked. He had a gleam in his eye that Trent needed to shut down. He didn’t want Oscar asking questions about his family and his past.

“I’ve never known any mates that worked out well,” Trent answered. “The opposite, in fact. Most of them are dead now.”

Oscar cocked his head, not saying anything. Trent should have kept that can of worms closed. Oscar’s eyes still held a glint of suspicion, but he didn’t ask any more questions.

“Besides,” Trent continued, “I thought once you drank your mate’s blood, there was no question. That you would instantly know.”

Before Oscar could respond, the car slowed, pulling up in front of a large apartment building. Not a skyscraper, but enormous still, an imposing structure of concrete, glass, and steel. It was plain, with no ornamentation or embellishment, and the individual units were all dark. Had they tinted the windows? No light escaped from inside.

If this was the covenhouse, it wasn’t a comforting sight.

Oscar cleared his throat, and his hand went to the car door handle.

“We’re here.”

Chapter 6

Oscar

The plan was to sneak Trent into the covenhouse, patch him up, and leave with no one the wiser. Oscar had texted Justin on the ride there, letting him know what had happened. He wanted to avoid a tedious explanation to either Freddie or Anthony about the fight. In and out, fast as lightning.

He was quickly disabused of that notion.

Trent’s pain must have gotten worse, because he allowed Oscar to assist him in getting out of the car. They made their way slowly and silently into the building and through the abandoned lobby. It had been an office space once, open and filled with desks and computers. It was all a front for his old coven, a ruse to make the humans think the place was a bustling Fortune 500 company. Freddie had ordered everything cleared but had yet to decide what to replace it with, which left behind something of a concrete cavern, a dark, echoey atrium that turned a little creepy at night.

They reached the elevator and took it up to the third floor, which served as the coven’s large common area. When the doors slid open, Anthony was waiting for them. The diminutive voice teacher immediately rushed to Trent’s side.

“Are you okay? Justin said you were wounded.”

Trent winced at Anthony’s touch. Oscar guided him out of the coven master’s mate’s reach.

“It’s just a flesh wound,” Oscar said, ushering Trent down the hall, deftly navigating around the various Victorian end tables and armoires. Freddie couldn’t bear to leave an inch of a room empty. Instead he took a maximalist approach, which meant that the walls were covered with colorful woven tapestries and period knick-knacks perched on the credenzas and sideboards.

“I’ll tend to him in the kitchen and we’ll get out of your hair.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Anthony trailed behind them, gesticulating as he always did when he got worked up. “If you think I’m letting the two of you leave without getting to the bottom of this, you’re insane.”

As they turned into the kitchen, Oscar guided Trent to the wall opposite the seldom-used stove and eased him down into the small wooden chair that stood there. Trent hadn’t said a word since they’d walked through the door. Oscar wasn’t sure if it was because of the pain, or if he was uncomfortable being there.

He bent down and opened a drawer in the rectangular kitchen island. Inside was a collection of simple medical supplies: gauze, tape, bandages, suturing needles, a bottle of alcohol. For the most part, the items were unnecessary for vampires, but the coven members had human friends and family that visited often.

Turning back, Oscar winced at the sight of Trent’s blood-soaked t-shirt. Trent’s eyes were closed. Oscar leaned down and whispered gently into his ear.

“I need to take off your shirt.”

Trent nodded mutely, and gingerly lifted his arms without opening his eyes, like a sleepy child.

Oscar grasped the black tee by the bottom edge and pulled it over Trent’s head. Trent

grunted as the fabric came unstuck from his wound. As Oscar wriggled the neck past his ears, his blonde hair flopped adorably. Oscar tossed the garment to the side and glanced back at Trent.

He shouldn't have done that. Trent's torso was exposed, and he was solid. He had the big biceps and muscular chest of a football player, and his rock hard abs were covered with a thin layer of fat. He was mostly smooth, except for the fine hair on his forearms, and the cutest sparse blonde treasure trail.

Oscar's appreciative thoughts were quickly squashed by the sight of Trent's injury. Four clear parallel cuts, red and raw and exposed, dripping blood once more now that there was nothing to staunch the bleeding.

"Fucking god," a voice from behind him said. Oscar glanced over his shoulder to see Anthony staring from the doorway.

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“It’s better than it looks,” Trent mumbled, bringing his hand to his face and rubbing his eyes.

“It would have to be,” Anthony replied. “You’re alive.”

Oscar retrieved a plastic bottle of alcohol and gauze pads from the island. He crouched down next to Trent. His cheek was right by the man’s broad chest.

“I don’t think you need stitches, but this is going to hurt a little.”

Trent nodded, although Oscar thought he might be drifting off. He poured a few drops of alcohol on a pad and touched it to the topmost cut.

Trent breathed in sharply, his hands gripping at the sides of the chair and his eyes snapping open.

“Fuck.”

Well, he was awake now. Oscar worked as fast as he could, but he wouldn’t risk infection. His fingers made their way across the damaged skin tenderly. Tenderness was not something Oscar had known much of, or something he trafficked in, but seeing Trent there brought it out in him.

He just wanted his classmate to be okay, for his smooth, tan skin to be unmarred by scars and injury. He had to reverse the wound, to make it as if it had never been. He didn’t know why it was so important. Trent had said he’d been in vampire fights before. Still, something about touching him like this made Oscar’s chest open up. It

felt raw, unprotected, to be caring for Trent in this way.

When he hit one particularly tender area, Trent yelped in pain, and Oscar's heart leapt into his throat. Why was he having this reaction? He wasn't squeamish. He'd killed vampire and human alike. Was it just that he was responsible because Trent had saved his life? Every sigh and moan caused another crack to run down Oscar's cool facade.

When the cuts were clean, he covered the area with a large piece of cotton gauze, holding it in place with medical tape. Oscar stepped back to admire his handiwork. Trent looked almost rugged with the bandage. It was a contrast to his innocent, midwestern face and sun-kissed skin. And it was sexy as hell.

Oscar forced away the thought. This man despised him and clearly had a thing against vampires in general. He was straight! Yet Oscar couldn't help drinking in the sight of Trent as he relaxed against the wooden chair with his eyes closed.

"How are you feeling, Trent?" Anthony asked, startling Oscar. He hoped he hadn't been staring for too long.

Trent's eyes fluttered open. "Okay. The sting is duller."

Anthony stepped toward him, reaching out to help him up.

"Good. Let's go sit you down in the common area. I can get some ibuprofen for the pain."

Trent grabbed Anthony's hand and heaved himself up. As they moved to the door, Trent looked over at Oscar with a strange look on his face. A question. Did he not want to leave Oscar?

“I’ll be right there,” Oscar said. A smile sprang up unbidden at Trent’s expression. “I just need to wash your blood off my hands.”

“That is a weird thing to hear,” Trent said, chuckling low. A spark of electricity ran up Oscar’s spine at the deep, rich sound.

What was wrong with him?

As Trent and Anthony left, Oscar went over to the porcelain farmhouse sink, tossing the scraps of gauze and medical tape in the trash as he passed it. He turned on the water and held out his hands.

There wasn’t too much to wash off. The wound had dried, other than a few drips when the t-shirt was removed. A quick rinse and he was clean.

Except for a single droplet of Trent’s blood that sat on the side of the knuckle of Oscar’s right pointer finger.

He didn’t know why he did it. It was an impulse, a sudden desire with no logic or reason. After staring at the burgundy bead for a long moment, he brought his hand to his face and licked it off.

His vision blew out in a bright rainbow of color. The taste of it exploded his senses, and a thrilling tingle ran from his tongue, down his throat, and spread to every inch of his body. He was overwhelmed with the sensation.

Never mind the sweet, perfect flavor of it. Honey and clove. It was all Oscar wanted to taste for the rest of his life. The intense, thrilling assault on his senses could only mean one thing.

No. He couldn’t be Trent’s mate. Would the universe do this to him? Would fate give

him a mate who despised the very idea of it? A man who wanted nothing to do with vampires? Who wanted nothing to do with him? Who probably hated him?

Oscar knew better. He'd already been convinced once that he had a fated mate by Elliott, who used him and manipulated him with the power of that belief. A bond like that, an unbreakable connection, was a dangerous weapon. It could be held over your head, deployed to force you to do things you never wanted to do. To have a fated mate was to be constantly open to emotional blackmail. After all, who could deny anything to their predestined match? And who wouldn't commit any evil act to save their fated one from harm?

Images of the past flashed in front of his eyes, shame and powerlessness flooding him as he relived the moments with his ex in his old coven. Elliott declaring his love and claiming Oscar as his mate. Elliott drinking from him over and over, yet denying Oscar a single drop. Oscar growing weaker and weaker as he was not even allowed to feed on the rats.

Seeing Elliott lying there, his life's blood pooling on the gray carpet, and feeling a horrible mix of grief and loss...and overwhelming relief.

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He knew better now. Having a mate would open himself to deep hurt. The kind of hurt he'd left behind in his more innocent past. The kind of hurt he'd vowed never to allow himself to feel again.

But...

Oscar's reaction had been unlike anything he'd ever experienced. He'd tasted human blood thousands of times in his undead life. Never had it made him feel like that. As much as he wanted to run from it, to insist that the idea of fated mates was a refuge for the weak and lonely, now he knew better. Because that one drop of Trent's blood? The flavor of that was life-changing.

He had to accept the truth. Trent was his mate.

He turned on the hot water, pumping hand soap on his palms and thoroughly scrubbing them clean. He stared down into the white basin of the sink, the liquid swirling a light shade of pink as the remains of Trent's wound on his hands swirled down the drain. A divot appeared in the liquid. Then another and another.

He was crying.

He wiped away his tears and swallowed down the lump in his throat.

None of this mattered. Oscar had made a promise to himself. He couldn't trust someone again like he had trusted Elliott. Certainly not yet another man that didn't value him, that thought he was nothing.

He had dealt with pain before. Denying himself his mate would be more of the same. He would never tell Trent the truth. He could weather the hunger, the need for connection that already roiled in his gut. He would build a life alone. Safe.

That would have to be enough.

Chapter 7

Trent

Oscar had been so gentle with him, caring for Trent as he bandaged his side. Even in his exhausted, probably-in-shock state, it took Trent by surprise. If he was honest with himself, it had felt good. More than good. Oscar's touch was soothing, calming him despite the throbbing ache.

He had closed his eyes and relaxed, drifted as Oscar cared for him. The few moments of sharp pain had passed quickly. He'd felt safe.

That wasn't normal for him.

The sense of security fled as he found himself in the one place he wanted to avoid. In a covenhouse. Surrounded by vampires.

Trent had only met Anthony's husband once before, at a school event, and even then, he'd been intimidating, his tall, hulking frame towering over most of the students and other faculty.

Up close, he wasn't any more welcoming.

Trent was perched gingerly on an upholstered antique sofa, the cream fabric embroidered with Victorian flower motifs. There was no way to relax while sitting on

furniture that was more than one hundred and fifty years old. Every time he shifted, the joints of the couch squeaked. He was terrified the whole thing would fall apart. Freddie sat across from him, somehow looking totally at ease in a dainty floral chair, like a giant in a birdbath.

Of course, he was relaxed. He was probably alive when the chair was made.

Anthony sat to Trent's right. His paternal instincts had been turbo boosted, and Trent bore the brunt of it.

"You'll stay here while you heal," he said, patting Trent's hand. "In case the dickwad that escaped comes back with reinforcements. You couldn't be safer."

"I'm not moving into your covenhouse." Trent kept his voice even. He didn't want them to see how freaked out he was by being around so many vampires. "And I don't need time to recover. Oscar bandaged me up. I heal quickly."

"You can't return to...where do you live?" Anthony frowned. "Are you in downtown Brooklyn?"

"Crown Heights. My apartment is perfectly safe."

"You're staying. It's decided."

Trent opened his mouth to argue when he heard a slight movement behind him. Although heard wasn't quite the right word. It was more that he sensed someone. A nexus of warmth.

"What's going on?"

Trent turned his head to see Oscar standing there, his arms crossed, leaning against

the slate gray wall. Next to him was a ridiculous portrait of some stuck-up-looking British noble on a palomino horse. Oscar was the source of that warm feeling. Trent really didn't understand what that meant.

"Trent's moving in here," Anthony said.

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Oscar's eyes went wide at Anthony's words, but he said nothing.

"Itissafer." Well, the coven master finally speaks. Freddie's accent-inflected bass was intimidating, but Trent wouldn't be bullied out of his home.

"Yes, exactly," Anthony piled on. "We don't know who these people were, if they're coming back, anything. You're human. A human against even one vampire is like an ant against a mountain lion. Or Anna Wintour. An ant against Anna Wintour."

"I've taken care of myself for a long time," Trent said. His muscles tensed at Anthony's insistence, and it made his injury throb.

Anthony shook his head. "Not against?—"

"Yes, against vampires." Trent pushed down against the arm of the sofa, bringing himself to his feet. Oscar was by his side at once, steadying him. His grasp was strong but careful.

"Thank you," Trent said under his breath, and Oscar nodded, worry in his eyes, but he didn't speak.

"You may have gotten lucky against those thugs," Anthony said, his voice tight with urgency, "but if they send more?—"

"It was not luck." Trent was getting louder now. He wouldn't let anyone deny his hard-won abilities. "That asshole wasn't the first vampire I've killed, and he won't be the last. But what I'mnotgoing to do is move into a house full of them."

“You know us.”

“I know you, because you’re my voice teacher, and I know Oscar, barely. I don’t know any of the other vampires that live here. How many?”

“Fourteen right now, but?—”

“Anthony, he said no.” Oscar interrupted their teacher with a quiet determination. Trent felt a flowering of warmth in his chest as Oscar backed him up, which was immediately followed by suspicion. Why was Oscar taking his side?

“Besides,” he continued, “they were after me. Why would they go after Trent?”

“Revenge. Leverage.” Freddie’s voice was gravel, his face an unreadable mask.

“Trent. Who are you?”

Trent’s jaw tensed. He didn’t owe this coven master anything, certainly not an account of his shitty teenage years, even if he was Anthony’s husband. He’d done his damndest to forget them. He glared back at the redheaded coven master. He wouldn’t be intimidated.

“Someone who knows what the hell he is doing.”

Freddie nodded, not pressing further. He was silent for a moment, then spoke in a tone that would brook no disagreement.

“We’ll run security around your apartment.”

“I don’t want?—”

“And if they do come for you,” Freddie continued, ignoring him, “we’ll need an

alternative. You'll have to go away, get out of the city."

"I have a cabin in Maine if necessary." Everyone turned to Anthony on the sofa. Trent groaned inwardly at the possibility of some other scheme. They should just let him alone to defend himself, like he always did.

"My nonna's old place," Anthony continued. "It's secure. Nothing around for miles other than a pack of wolf shifters, and they're friends."

"What?" Trent blinked, thrown off balance by this new piece of information. "Werewolves? Those are a thing?"

"Not exactly werewolves, no," Freddie answered. "They can control the change. And yes, they are real. Vampires aren't the only supernatural beings. Wolves tend to stay rural and isolated."

"Regardless, it's safe," Anthony said. "The two of you could head up there until Freddie and Lillian have taken care of the last dregs of the old coven."

Trent sighed in frustration. He hated dealing with coven masters, and even more with their mates. They were always certain they were right, and they had the power to enforce their notions.

"We both have class," Oscar spoke up from beside him. At least there was someone who got it.

"I'm not missing audition season." Trent would not back down from that.

"Of course not," Anthony replied, as if this was an opening. "The audition for the Lyric program is the earliest, and that's in four weeks. Plenty of time. I wouldn't let you miss it. We all know one of you two will get it."

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Oscar took in a breath and moved a few inches away from Trent. Trent didn't blame him. With the gravity of the situation, it had been easy to forget the big day hanging over their heads.

"This is stupid," Trent said. "Only three vampires saw me, and two of them are dead. They have no reason to come after me. I'm going home to my apartment."

Anthony looked back and forth between Freddie and Trent. He scratched absentmindedly at his forearm.

"I don't like it. We might have killed Charles Azarian, but who knows the damage his escaped sycophants could do. And his sire Gabriela is still out there somewhere. It would be safer?—"

"It's his choice," Oscar said. He flashed Trent a tentative smile. "Trent's decision is final."

There was something about that smile. It called to Trent in an unsettling way. Oscar should have more cause to smile, bigger smiles, wider smiles. Oscar should lean back and shake out his long brown hair as he laughed. He could picture it. He imagined being the reason for it, and the image stirred up an odd sense of longing.

What was wrong with him? He needed to get home to his apartment and study his music.

His teacher sat there in unhappy silence. Freddie nodded. "The car will take you home."

The ride was blissfully quiet. It was unsettling to be driven by a stranger that he couldn't see, his face obscured by the dark glass of the partition, but it was also a long way home from the Upper West Side. He was grateful to not have to ride three separate trains to get there.

When he arrived in Crown Heights, he stepped out onto the tree-lined sidewalk in front of his old brick apartment building. It was a behemoth, taking up two street numbers. For the most part, the neighborhood was quiet.

He shouldn't complain. It could be a lot worse. Housing in New York was notoriously expensive. He was able to live alone, due to the money his mother had left him when she?—

He really needed to stop letting his mind drift in that direction. Images of her had been popping up recently, and worse, memories of his stepfather and his old life. Seeing so many vampires in one day...

He slipped his key into the lock. The door was a huge wooden monstrosity sporting what must be hundreds of coats of white enamel. He was sure that there were even a couple layers of lead paint from the '50s in there somewhere.

He stepped inside, and the ancient parquet floor of the entryway creaked under his footfalls. The apartment had been listed as a one-bedroom, but that was charitable. There was barely a quarter of a wall between the tiny kitchen and the tiny bedroom, and the "living room" consisted of a four-foot square area to the left of the stove.

He didn't mind. It was his, his sanctuary from the world outside. After the tumult of his teenage years, and the anxious searching of his undergrad, he needed an oasis. A place to shut out all the demands, all the ambitions, all the competitiveness, and just be.

He also didn't want anyone to see him when things got bad. Like now.

Trent double-checked the door. He felt the old beasts of desperation and loss stir inside him. And terror, that was a big one.

As he always did when haunted by his memories, he set his single, beat-up upholstered chair in the center of the tiny living room, facing the only two windows. He surrounded himself with what weapons he had.

Several wooden stakes, lighter fluid, a blowtorch, and a machete. A strange collection of items to the uninformed, maybe.

Trent breathed in and out slowly, calming his quickening heart rate. The first tendrils of panic reached out from the center of his chest. Not an assault just yet, but an incursion.

Trent knew it was ridiculous. He was safe. He had killed a vampire earlier in the day and fought off two others. But logic didn't help his brain. Here, alone in his apartment, with the night creeping in and the memories of his childhood scratching at the door of his mind, the terror was a living thing, a writhing, tortured beast.

The old hurt was always there, waiting to overwhelm him. At moments like this, he found it hard to hold on to himself, onto the successful up-and-coming opera singer in his mid-twenties. He was once again a teenager, watching his father die of a heart attack. Seeing his mother fall in love, so soon, with a man who turned out to be a monster. One of the undead.

Being thrust into a world of vampires that would eventually take the person he loved the most from him. Could anyone blame him for becoming an expert at killing them?

His breath quickened, and he surveyed the room, attempting to ground himself. The

thin, ratty carpet under his feet. The faint smell of fish wafting through the vents from the apartment down the hall. The moonlight shining in through the windows, casting shadows on the floor. A flicker of movement in the dense leaves of the oak tree outside.

Wait.

Was it just a trick of his mind, or was it something more? Something, or someone, dangerous?

Taking a stake in one hand and the machete in the other, he gripped his weapons and waited for a siege. He hoped it was nothing, a bird or an errant eddy of air molding the leaves into unexpected shapes.

His anxiety, the specter of his past, screamed that this was a potential threat. But as the minutes went by, there was no other sign of a watcher. His shoulders relaxed, and terror, his old monstrous friend, died down, leaving only boredom.

He was too wound up to sleep. If he turned on the light to study, he wouldn't be able to see out into the thick night. Instead, he let his mind wander.

For some reason, it kept coming back to one thing. Oscar.

Chapter 8

Oscar

Not in the tree, but rather tucked away on the roof of a nearby three-flat, Oscar and Justin peered down into Trent's second-floor apartment, which was illuminated only by the artificial glow of a red digital clock on his oven.

"What is he doing?" Justin asked.

Oscar shook his head. He didn't know. Trent had barricaded himself in his home, and he was sitting alone with the lights out, his weapons laid out on the surrounding rug. His eyes were closed and his fists were clenched as they rested on the arms of a ratty chair. A determined protectiveness stirred in Oscar's chest.

Why was he alone in the dark? It made Oscar's heart hurt to watch.

He brushed off the sense that he should be the one taking care of Trent. Trent might be his mate, but neither of them wanted each other. That was obvious. Trent was disgusted by the idea of mates, and Oscar would never tie himself to someone again, especially a straight rival who could barely tolerate him.

Still, he couldn't help his instinct to protect the man.

"Pay attention." Justin craned his neck, peering down the street, scanning the shadows cast by the lamplight filtering through the evenly spaced trees. "You're the one that insisted we stake out Trent's apartment."

“Freddie agreed it was a good idea.” Oscar throttled the indignant tone that snuck through. He hated how worked up and out-of-control Trent made him feel.

“It didn’t have to be us.”

Oscar didn’t respond. Any reasonable person would have let another vampire take the first watch. Oscar had been attacked earlier in the day, after all. But he was restless, and he couldn’t tamp down his protective instincts when it came to Trent.

He didn’t know why Justin was so worked up, though.

“Why are you so annoyed?” Oscar asked. “If you weren’t here with me, you’d be out patrolling around the covenhouse.”

Oscar couldn’t read the expression that sprang to Justin’s face. Was it guilt? It was quickly gone.

“I hate Brooklyn. It’s so ten years ago,” Justin replied with fake hipster disdain.

“What are you talking about? You love everything. You can’t convince me you’ve suddenly turned into a snob.”

Justin giggled, shrugging impishly. “I was trying something new.”

Oscar brought his attention back to the window and Trent’s seated figure. With his enhanced hearing, the pulse of Trent’s low, even breaths reached his ears like the rumble of an encroaching storm. Oscar found it soothing.

Was Trent meditating?

Justin’s hand gripped his forearm, breaking his focus. As Oscar’s head snapped to

Justin, he raised a finger to his lips and gestured further down the street.

Oscar couldn't see anything. Except, was that a flicker of movement down at the postage stamp-sized city park at the end of the block? It could have been a shadow, or a piece of trash tossed by the breeze, but he wasn't certain.

"You stay here and keep an eye on him." Justin swung his legs over the side of the roof. "I'll check it out."

He was gone in a blur of movement. Oscar settled in with Trent at the center of his field of vision. The whole neighborhood was quiet. Most of the dog-owners had taken their last walk more than an hour ago. Oscar encouraged his eyes to go into soft focus as he monitored the area.

His sight was drawn to a flicker in Trent's apartment. The man was still sitting there, but he had yanked his shirt out of his pants and pulled it up past his...fuck, up to his neck. Trent was running one hand over his treasure trail, lightly scratching the sparse blonde hair, and the other was pinching his right nipple.

Trent's head was relaxed backward and his eyes were at half-mast. His mouth opened just a slit, enough to let out the moan that Oscar imagined he was making.

Damn. Even vampire hearing didn't detect sound from that far away, through glass and brick. Oscar was left to the noises that his mind conjured. They were sexy as hell.

The blood rushed to his face, and Oscar looked both directions down the empty street. All was still.

This was wrong. He shouldn't be watching. But he couldn't tear his eyes away from the now-shirtless Trent, with his floppy blonde hair and beautiful smooth skin, stretched over that linebacker build. So sturdy and strong.

Oscar knew he should look away. This was a private moment. Typical human sight wouldn't have been able to pierce the darkness. But Oscar couldn't stop looking.

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He wouldn't just abandon his post, after all. He had to make sure that Trent was protected. That was the important thing.

Trent unzipped his fly now, at first groping himself through his white-and-navy striped boxer briefs, and then ultimately taking out his cock and his balls, resting them over the stretched band of his underpants.

Oscar's mind ceased to function. His focus went to Trent's huge hands, one stroking his dick, the other cradling his balls, then pulling them down and away. Trent's expression was lost in the sensation.

And his cock was beautiful. It was of average length, but it wasthick, maybe one of the thickest Oscar had ever seen. It was pale and circumcised, with a large mushroom head that turned an angry red as Trent continued to pleasure himself.

Oscar couldn't help but imagine himself impaled on that monster, being stretched wide beyond capacity, Trent pushing that big head through the tight muscles of his entrance, slowly but relentlessly filling him. A shiver went up his spine at the thought.

He was only human! Or only vampire, rather. Of course, he'd be turned on by this sexy brick wall of a man pleasuring himself. It would be odd if hewasn'tturned on.

Trent's movement became less lazy and more determined. Oscar's heart rate increased at the sight of Trent biting his soft, puffy bottom lip as he chased his pleasure.

Oscar's own erection strained against his tight pants, painful and throbbing.

He glanced around him. His veins were on fire, the vision in front of him making his skin tingle and his blood rush. He didn't want Justin to catch him like this, but he also didn't want it to stop. He wanted to watch Trent forever.

So he watched. Trent was determined now, sliding up and down that thick length faster and faster. His eyes were clenched closed. He'd removed his shirt fully while Oscar wasn't looking, and he pinched hard at his nipple as he started rocking his pelvis against his descending fist.

Oscar couldn't help it. As he imagined himself there, kneeling before him, his jaw sore as Trent's thick cock stretched his throat, Oscar's hand went to his crotch. He was so close already. All he needed was just a little friction against the front of his denim. He rubbed his palm over the outline of his erection, his skin vibrating with electric sparks.

Then it happened. Trent's mouth opened with a cry, letting out a strangled sound that Oscar could only imagine. His body went stiff as a board. He leaned back in the chair as he reached his climax. Ropes of cum coated the sun-kissed skin of his stomach. Oscar didn't think he'd ever witnessed such an incredible sight.

His own orgasm hit him like a freight train, and for a moment his mind was gone, obliterated by the force of his body's reaction to what he'd seen. He floated in the pleasure.

The fog was pierced by the jarring sound of a breaking window. His eyes snapped open to see Trent fighting off a vampire in his apartment.

Fuck. The man was battling the creature shirtless, with his dick out, and he never looked more at home. Oscar knew, though, that he couldn't keep the vamp on its

heels forever. He had to get in there before Trent lost the upper hand. He leaped from the roof.

Oscar barely registered the pain of the shards ripping along his skin as he burst through the remains of the broken window. He landed on the hardwood floor of Trent's living room, bringing a rain of glass and debris with him. By now, the vamp had pushed Trent to the far wall, snarling at him with wordless aggression.

Oscar's vision tinted red, and the demon inside him wouldn't allow any mercy. He was on the ragged vampire in a second. This time, he didn't hold back. With the loud crack of bones breaking and a sick squelch of flesh rending, he cleaved the vampire's head from their body. The gaunt creature collapsed to the floor, the light gone from its eyes.

Oscar looked down at himself. He wasn't one for over-the-top violence, but he was covered in the guts of the poor vampire. He never acted that way, so ruthless and hungry for destruction.

He regretted nothing.

It was almost as if he'd had the smallest taste of the crimson surge. But that violent, instinctual frenzy was only triggered when a vampire's mate was in danger, and?—

No. Not the time to think about it. It would never be the time.

Trent was bent over at the waist, panting, the thick muscles of his neck and shoulders flexing as he caught his breath.

"That...was too damn close." Trent straightened up and stared at Oscar for a moment before realizing that his dick was still sticking out of his pants. He tucked himself away, keeping his face stoic, but Oscar caught a hint of bashfulness in his eyes.

“What are you doing here?”

“I, uh...I was assigned to security detail. Freddie said that the coven would provide protection.”

“He volunteered.” Justin’s light tenor voice drifted in from the open window. His youthful head peeked through, an expression of disapproval on his face.

“I can take care of myself.” Trent grabbed his shirt from the floor, pulling it on.

“Obviously not,” Justin snorted. Trent shot him a look full of daggers.

Oscar turned to Justin, who was gingerly squeezing through the jagged edges of the now-open window. “Where were you? What was going on at the end of the street?”

Justin sighed. “Some kind of distraction. When I got to where I’d seen the movement, there was no one there.”

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“I can take care of myself,” Trent reiterated, quieter this time, as if he were trying to convince himself.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed about,” Oscar said, wanting to soothe Trent’s frustration. Trent was stubborn, and that would be exacerbated by the adrenaline crash that accompanied the end of any fight. “You hold your own against vampires better than any human I’ve ever seen. But you can’t compete with supernatural abilities.”

“Sure I can,” Trent grunted. “The bloodlust and the boredom make vampires stupid. I would have figured out a way to get him off me.”

Trent looked at Oscar as if he were trying to project confidence, but Oscar could see the fear underneath.

“If they keep coming, eventually they’ll slip through your defenses,” Oscar said softly. “Especially if they send more than one. You have so many more ways to die than we do.”

Trent’s brow furrowed, but he said nothing.

“This is my fault?—”

“It is,” Trent interrupted.

“—so let me help make it right.” Oscar stepped toward Trent and dared to reach out and touch him on the bare arm. Trent looked down at it, but didn’t pull away or say anything. Oscar continued despite the energy that crackled where their skin met.

“Take Freddie up on his offer. Get out of town for a week or two. I’ll go with you. Now all three of the vampires that attacked me are dead, but this one had a whole day to report to its master. Anthony will smooth over your absence. You’ll be back in plenty of time for the Manhattan Lyric.”

Trent shook Oscar’s hand off his arm.

“You’d love that, wouldn’t you?” he said. “Get rid of your main competition for the audition.”

“I would go with you! I’m not worried about the audition.”

Trent’s face went dark. “And that’s why people like you are so frustrating. You can afford not to worry.”

“People like me?”

“Rich people. Vampires.” Trent waved at him dismissively. “Assholes that don’t have to work. You’ll always have your coven to take care of you. It’s not like you have a real job.”

The flame of righteous indignation sprang up in Oscar’s chest. “It’s called having a community! I work for the coven.”

“Exactly. I need my opera career to be successful. Otherwise, I don’t eat when the student loans come due.” Trent walked to the now-glassless window frame, gesturing downward as he surveyed the mess of shards and wood splinters on the floor. “This will be such a pain in the ass to clean up.”

Oscar fought the urge to snap back at him. Trent knew nothing about his past, nothing about where he came from, but it didn’t matter. Oscar had put him in danger. He

needed Trent to agree to go with him.

“You could have died!” He couldn’t stop himself from caring about his mate’s well-being, even if the two of them would never complete the mating bond.

For just a second, Oscar saw real fear flash across Trent’s face. Whatever his past with vampires might be, Trent understood that he was in a precarious position.

“Please.” Oscar wrestled his emotions under control. He kept his tone low and soft. “Just for a couple of weeks. Give Freddie time to locate the bastards.”

Trent stared out through the empty air into the cold night. Oscar and Justin said nothing. The silence was oppressive.

Finally, he turned his face toward them, frustrated resignation in his eyes.

“Fine. Two weeks. Anthony will make sure the absences don’t hurt my grades.”

Oscar nodded slowly.

“And,” Trent continued, “I have to be back for the audition. Even if there’s an army of vampires waiting for me, I’m going.”

Chapter 9

Trent

When Trent walked out the front door of his apartment complex, Oscar stood there with a rakish smile on his face, his long brown hair tossed by the breeze. The sun was peeking out from the roof of the building behind Trent, and its rays glinted in Oscar’s eyes, turning them a subtle orange-red.

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Trent's first instinct was to be annoyed. After all, it was Oscar's ex that had sicced the scraggly vamps on the two of them. But in the light of the morning, it was hard to stay angry. His vampire classmate leaned against a beat up gray sedan, looking dashing in a pair of tight black jeans and a baggy sweater. More than dashing. Almost sexy, with his tall, sinewy frame and his long eyelashes.

What was wrong with him? He didn't think of men this way. Hell, he didn't think of anyone this way. He'd been too focused on his own career to even consider finding a girlfriend. The occasional date with his right hand was enough to satisfy the physical.

That must be it. He was just starved for physical attention. He'd ignored that part of himself. That's the only explanation for this reaction. He wasn't developing some latent interest in men out of nowhere.

And even if he was interested, it wouldn't be in Oscar! The vampire was his competition. And annoying. He didn't begrudge Oscar his talent, but that didn't mean that they had to be close. Oscar was the other star male singer in Anthony's studio, and Trent wasn't going to let Oscar beat him.

"Good, uh, morning..." Oscar looked tentative, but maybe...maybe he was happy to see Trent? His characteristic smirk had turned strangely shy. Why was he being weird?

"Hi." Trent walked down the steps to the waiting vehicle, heading right for the trunk. "Open it?" he asked, gesturing to the green gym bag hanging over his shoulder. He'd thrown a few essentials into it, hopefully enough to get him through the week. They better not be away longer than that. He would run out of underwear.

“Oh!” Oscar scurried over, unlocking the trunk and pulling the lid up. He took the bag from Trent and placed it gingerly atop a large rolling suitcase. He gestured to the front passenger seat as he slammed the back closed.

Trent nodded without saying anything and slid into his seat. A moment later, Oscar was turning the key in the ignition. The engine sputtered a bit as it came to life.

“Car sounds like it’s on its last legs,” Trent said, already picturing them breaking down on the side of the highway.

“It’ll be fine, don’t worry,” a young-sounding voice called from the back seat. Trent turned his head to see Justin. His blonde hair was wild, as if he’d just gotten out of bed, and he was in pajama pants and a white t-shirt.

“It’s the coven’s,” Justin continued. “We take it whenever we have to go out of the city.”

“Which isn’t very often,” Oscar said. “No one will miss it.”

Oscar draped his arm across the back of Trent’s shoulders as he turned his head to reverse out of the parking spot. As Oscar’s cool skin came into contact with Trent’s neck, he shivered. It was like some kind of fundamental tremor, beyond his control.

He wasn’t usually so sensitive to temperature.

“Are you cold? I can put on the heat.” Oscar removed his arm, and Trent immediately missed the weight of it resting on him.

“No, no. I’m fine.”

Was he fine? He didn’t know why he was reacting this way to Oscar. Sure, he hadn’t

spent much time with him before, and the time they had spent together had been fairly contentious, but this was completely new. He felt an urge to reach out, reestablish the connection.

Trent didn't like having unexpected feelings, and he especially didn't like having them about someone he was about to spend ten hours with in a confined space.

A quiet settled over them as the car turned onto a busier thoroughfare. Trent stole a glance at Oscar. His eyes were glued to the vehicles in front of them. New York traffic was bad under the best circumstances. They wouldn't really get going until they reached the highway, which would take a while.

Ten hours. He could do this. Then they'd be in Maine, and he could spend his time practicing, prepping for his audition and ignoring whatever the hell these unwanted yearnings were.

"What made you decide to come to the city for school?"

"Huh?" Oscar's harmless question broke Trent out of his ruminations.

"Why New York?" Oscar turned his head slightly toward Trent and raised an eyebrow. "There are a lot of good opera programs in the country."

"Oh. Well, I wasn't willing to live in Indiana, and Philly and Pittsburgh both felt so tiny next to New York. Besides, this is where so many of the big companies--"

"It's the best city in the world!" Justin's excited voice chimed in from the back seat. "Why would you live anywhere else? It's the center of everything. That's why I came here. I mean, sure, it didn't go as well as it could have. I was hoping to be an actor or something, and instead I ended up a vampire in a shitty coven, but I managed to get out of that. And crappy things happen other places too, but at least when they happen

here, I'm in New York City.”

Oscar's face flashed with annoyance at Justin's rambling, but Trent welcomed it. He wasn't sure if he really wanted to talk more. He was struggling to understand his feelings for Oscar.

It had all been easier a few days ago when he just hated him.

“So, mainly because of the business?” Oscar asked, ignoring Justin. “You didn't always plan to live in New York?”

“No,” Trent replied. “I'm from Wisconsin. The biggest city near me growing up was Madison. That was about as big as I really wanted to get. But after...”

Trent shook his head, dismissing his old memories. He didn't want to think about the past.

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“After what?” Of course, Oscar would ask.

Trent sighed. “Well?—”

“I’m from Vermont,” Justin chimed in again, “which isn’t really like Wisconsin...”

“Not even a little,” Trent heard Oscar mutter under his breath.

“...but it’s pretty sparsely populated, too, and it was such a jolt of energy coming into the city for the first time. I loved it! I never want to go back to New England. I mean, Boston’s a big city, but it’s nothing like New York, it’s a totally different vibe, and?—”

“Yes.” Oscar’s voice was firm, clearly trying to get Justin to stop talking babbling. It didn’t work.

“Besides, if you’re going to stay in the Midwest, what, are you going to live in Chicago? Chicago’s got great food and all, but it doesn’t have the culture of New York, or the diversity, or the bagels and cream cheese, even as a vampire I can’t keep myself from the bagels, I just love an everything with veggie cream cheese?—”

“So. Trent.” Oscar was louder now. This time, Justin shut up. Trent chuckled inwardly at Oscar’s frustration with the excitable vamp.

“Mm?”

“Have you ever been to Maine?”

“Oh. No. Closest I’ve been is Boston, for an audition. My safety school was there.”

“Well, that’s not like Maine at all.” Justin was off to the races once more. “Where I grew up in Vermont is more like Maine, I think. I’ve been to Maine a few times. Although Maine has coastline so it has more lobstermen and seafood and stuff like that. But it also forests and lakes like Vermont. Although I think it’s flatter on the whole, growing up, my mom always wanted to go to Bar Harbor or York for vacations, she loved the ocean, and?—”

“Let’s not talk anymore.” Oscar gripped the wheel of the car tightly. He was doing a poor job of masking his frustration. Trent smiled at Oscar’s annoyance. For some reason, he liked it when they were both annoyed at someone together.

“Okay.” Justin’s tone was oblivious.

Oscar sighed as he turned onto 278, his foot pushing down on the accelerator as he finally had the freedom to go faster. Trent stared out the window, watching the buildings of Williamsburg fly by as they headed north. And there they were, out of Brooklyn.

“Will you turn on music?” Oscar asked, his voice almost a whisper, as if he was worried that any audible noise would get Justin started again.

“Sure,” Trent answered.

“My phone’s connected to the car stereo. Put on whatever you want.”

Trent reached down and picked up Oscar’s phone from the cup holder. The wallpaper was a picture of him with Freddie and Anthony posing in front of Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. The angel loomed over them, a strange celestial protector of the three demons standing in front of her.

It was like a photo from a family vacation. Oscar was at ease, comfortable and relaxed between the coven master and his mate.

“What’s the code?” Trent asked.

“Seven seven four nine.”

Trent opened up Oscar’s playlists, which were...eclectic. There was opera, of course, but also ‘80s rock, hip-hop, and a truly astonishing number of gay dance songs and drag queen bitch tracks.

Trent settled on an old Ella Fitzgerald jazz album. The singer’s warm, sweet tone always helped Trent relax.

He sighed, allowing himself to float away on her supple voice, losing track of time as the music washed over him, and before he knew it, they had left the city and were entering New Rochelle. From the back seat came the sound of gentle snoring. Justin had fallen asleep.

He must have looked confused, because Oscar answered the question before he asked it.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” he said, keeping his voice low, “but Justin can nap at the drop of a hat. Vampires are supposed to need way less sleep, so I don’t know what his deal is. But I’ve never known a vamp to sleep as much as he does.”

Trent hummed in response. “Are you and he...?”

Why the hell had he asked that? He didn’t need to know more about Oscar’s personal life.

“Oh, no, absolutely not.”

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Trent raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

"He's not my type," Oscar said. "When he came back to the covenhouse, he was quiet and skittish. I think he was more scarred by his time with Rick than he's willing to share. He's finally more relaxed now, more like his old self. But that self is very...perky."

"Ah."

They sat for a few more minutes in silence, letting the queen of jazz lull them into contentment. But even as they sat, Trent felt a pull to engage with Oscar. It annoyed the hell out of him. He'd cultivated an image of aloof ambition, and he didn't want the illusion broken. But he couldn't help himself.

"Why are you doing this for me?"

"What?" Oscar asked. "What do you mean?"

"We don't know each other. Hell, every interaction we've ever had has been unpleasant. It can't just be guilt at getting me involved. I said I could handle it on my own. But you weren't willing to let it be."

"I..it's my fault you're in danger."

"It's not your fault that your ex sent a bunch of asshole vampires to attack you, and it's not your fault I decided to step in. I could have left it alone. You probably would have figured it out." Oscar wouldn't have figured it out, but Trent didn't bring that up.

“Still...” Oscar scratched the back of his neck. Was he flustered?

“You could have holed up in the covenhouse,” Trent said. “You’re only doing this because I’m human and fragile and unwilling to sleep in a house full of unknown bloodsuckingvampires. I’m the reason you have to get out before your ex sends more people after us. Afterme, because if they catch me, I’m more likely to end up dead. Why do you give a shit?”

Oscar shrugged. Trent couldn’t shake the feeling that Oscar was hiding something. But also, it wasn’t his business. None of this was, not really. He didn’t deal with vampires anymore. He’d left that behind in Wisconsin. Now he had his career.

“If I’m being honest,” Trent continued, “I did have a moment that day. A quick one. The thought flashed through my head that if something happened to you, I wouldn’t have to worry about competing with you for the Lyric program.”

The car swerved as Oscar lost grip of the wheel for a second, drifting a few feet out of the lane and then back again as he regained control. “Are you serious?”

“It was just a moment. No time at all. And then I jumped in to fight.” Trent slapped his hand against his thigh. “I know that you don’t care that much about your career?—”

“That’s not true!” Oscar’s voice cracked a little as his volume increased. He glanced back at Justin, still fast asleep, and lowered his voice to an intense whisper. “I care very much about my career. Opera is my life. Just because I’m a vampire?—”

“Not just that. You’re also a trust fund kid, and?—”

“What are you talking about?” Oscar gave Trent an incredulous look.

Trent was confused. “You’re not? You dress like you’re a fashion model but also somehow from Victorian times. You speak like you’re in a Jane Austen novel. You fuck everything that moves. You’re every rich kid I grew up with. You’re either from a wealthy family, or you are a much older vampire than I thought you were, and you were actually alive during the early 1800s.”

“You know nothing about me.”

“I...” Trent stopped speaking for a moment, taking in Oscar’s words. He really didn’t have any information beyond his assumptions. But he’d thought they were safe ones, considering Oscar’s whole persona. Maybe he was wrong.

“Trent, I...” Oscar shook his head, keeping his eyes forward on the road. Trent could sense he had hit a nerve.

“Sorry, I just assumed?—”

“I was a foster kid,” Oscar said. “I never knew my parents, don’t have any memory of them. I bounced around the system for a long time, a few months with one family, maybe a year at the most.”

“Oh.” Guilt spiked in Trent’s chest. He hadn’t tried to get to know Oscar. After all, Trent hadn’t wanted to be known himself. He preferred the distance, especially from handsome party monsters like Oscar.

Handsome? He needed to have a serious conversation with his brain and figure out what was going on up there.

“First off, having a decent vocabulary doesn’t mean I’m the reincarnation of Elizabeth Bennett. And the reason that I speak like I do, my elocution, as it were, and the reason that I dress like it’s ‘the 1800s,’ as you said, is because when I was

fourteen a retired English professor became my foster parent. Alexander. He was older, in his early seventies, and gay. He was the only real role model I'd ever had. He made me feel comfortable in my skin for the first time in my life."

"Wow," Trent said softly. "He sounds amazing."

"He was." Oscar's voice cracked just a little, and his hands gripped the steering wheel tightly. "He was kind beyond measure. He broke down my walls after a lifetime of...well, regardless, he was a gay of a certain age, from a certain era and class, and I loved how he spoke and dressed. It was a monumental departure from the hand-me-down hoodies and jeans that made up my apparel to that point."

"So you..."

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“I idolized him. Of course I started to talk like him, to dress as fastidiously as he did. Later, when I was turned, I just sort of leaned into it. It’s not such a strange thing for a vampire to wear a cravat and speak in complete sentences.”

Trent breathed out, the air running over his lips like a gentle breeze. He’d been pushed toward Oscar for the last year and a half. Everyone had assumed that they’d be fast friends. But he couldn’t imagine hanging out with the hard-partying dandy. Now he understood what an asshole he had been.

Trent didn’t say anything as they drove. After a moment, Oscar spoke again.

“I was only allowed six years with him. He didn’t throw me out when I reached adulthood, but he...he passed just after my twentieth birthday. A stroke. I wish...if he’d still been alive when I was turned, I could have made him a vampire. But it happened too late.”

Trent glanced at Oscar. A tear ran down his cheek, falling and staining the beige fabric seat below.

“I’m sorry. I...for everything.”

“You weren’t the cause of his death. But he is the reason that I sing. He loved opera. We would listen to the live broadcast on Saturday afternoons together. He’s the one that recognized that I had talent and put me in voice lessons. He was generous and kind to me.” Oscar reached up to his face, wiping away the remains of his tears. “Apologies. I didn’t know I’d be talking about this today.”

“I...thank you,” Trent said. “Thanks for telling me.”

The car shook as the terrain changed. They made their way over a bridge that spanned the distance across a wide, brown-gray river. Trent craned his neck, catching sight of a single woman in an orange life vest drifting downstream in a kayak. She wasn't paddling, letting the current do all the work instead.

Trent wished he could do that, relax enough to let the current take him where it will. It wasn't in his nature.

“What about you?”

Oscar's voice pierced Trent's bubble of introspection. “What about me?”

“You're a damn enigma. You must hate rich people for a reason. And how do you know so much about vampires, just because of a couple of cousins? Also, are you gay?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Trent hadn't expected that last one, and it had thrown him.

“Not the most important question right now, maybe, but everyone at school wants to know.”

“No!” Trent's voice sounded tinny to him as he answered. “I'm not gay. I mean, I don't think. I've never done anything with a guy. I know that doesn't necessarily mean anything but, well, I don't know, I've never thought about a man that way, at least not until, I mean, my whole life I've dated women, so I don't think...”

Trent couldn't get his tongue under control. If Oscar were anyone else, it would have been the perfect opportunity to unpack some of these new feelings. But since Oscar

was thecauseof them, that was off the table.

“Hey. No worries. Forget I said anything.” Oscar smirked, which made Trent’s stomach do a somersault. God, what was happening to him? And how could Oscar manage to be so annoying and sexy at the same time?

“Okay.”

“But you’ve clearly been trained to fight vamps. Do you hunt the creatures of the night?”

Trent sighed. “I wish. Nothing so exciting. I, uh, might have lied...”

“About what?” Oscar’s brow furrowed even as he kept his eyes on the road.

“My cousins weren’t vampires. My father was. Well, stepfather. A few years after my father died, my mother remarried a guy that ended up being, you know...”

Trent made cute little fangs with his fingers and hissed. Oscar’s eyes widened in surprise and he burst out laughing. Justin shifted in the back, but his breaths evened out again quickly. He was still in a deep sleep. Oscar stifled his laughter, but couldn’t prevent a few stray giggles from sneaking through.

“What?” Trent asked.

“That was funny. It’s just, I never thought of you as having a sense of humor. At least not around me.”

Trent looked out the window at the trees that lined the edges of I-95. The rows of maples flew past, creating a strobe effect, almost as if he was watching a flipbook. Oscar wasn’t wrong. He hadn’t exactly been warm to him. Or to a lot of people.

“I’ve been focused on my singing. I don’t really have time...”

“To not be an asshole?” Oscar asked, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

“I guess...”

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“It’s fine. Let’s get back to the latest installment of ‘My Stepdad is a Vampire.’” Oscar grinned. “That would make a great gay porn.”

“Weird. Don’t say that.” Trent took a breath. He didn’t like to talk about that time in his life. He didn’t trust other people with knowledge about his past, but Oscar had already seen him kill a vampire.

“So yeah, my stepdad was a vamp,” Trent continued, “and when I was fifteen, we moved into the covenhouse in Madison, Wisconsin. It was...not good. I had to learn how to defend myself. There were some bullies among the younger vampires. I don’t think they would have killed me outright, but they sure didn’t care if I lived or died.”

Trent didn’t add that the move resulted in the end of his family, and of his mother’s sanity. Oscar didn’t need to know that.

“So you became the deadliest human since Van Helsing.”

“Was he a real person?” Trent asked.

“No. He was a figment of Bram Stoker’s imagination,” Oscar answered.

“Oh.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Trent worried that Oscar wanted to know more about his time at the Wisconsin covenhouse, but he didn’t push for it. After a few minutes of listening to the gentle rumble of the car running over the pockmarked pavement of the highway, Oscar spoke.

“So that’s why you despise the idea of vampire mates?”

“What?”

“Your stepdad and your mom were fated, and it fucked up your life.”

Trent squeezed his eyes closed. Oscar had already figured out more than Trent was comfortable with from the short explanation he had given.

“It didn’t just fuck up my life. It ruined theirs.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t believe in fate. At least, not in a fate that gives you love and then destroys your life.”

Silence overtook them once again. After a long moment, Trent felt Oscar’s hand rest on his thigh. His fingers were narrow and thin, and his touch cool and gentle. Trent froze, his muscles tensing, but after a few seconds, he relaxed into it.

Why did it have to feel so damn good? He didn’t want Oscar to move his hand away, but he also didn’t know what to do now.

He’d never thought about a man this way. He’d never thought about a vampire this way. Not only that, but he’d done his best to push vampires out of his life. He couldn’t go catching feelings for one. Especially not one that was the main obstacle standing between him and his perfect future career.

But he didn’t want it to stop.

Chapter 10

Oscar

Oscar shouldn't have done that. Trent had been unusually vulnerable. Or at least, vulnerable for someone who preferred to reveal absolutely nothing about themselves. He'd sounded so lost. It made Oscar wonder if underneath the aloof posture and career ambition, there was a man desperate for connection.

Except he had explicitly said that being a vampire's mate had destroyed his mother's life. He had doubled down on the fact that he thought the whole thing was a fallacy. So any move that Oscar made in that direction was foolish. It would only lead to getting his heart broken.

His heart had barely healed from Elliott. He had loved the vampire, no matter how misplaced that love had been. That's why it had taken him so long to realize how poorly he was being treated. The connection between Oscar and Trent had the underpinning of fate. It would be doubly hard to walk away if Oscar allowed himself to cultivate it.

When he'd first touched Trent's thigh, the thick muscles had tensed under his hand. Trent's legs were so strong. He loved that strength in a boyfriend. In a mate.

This trip was so ill-advised. Spending a week or more with this man, this human who would deny their bond and destroy his heart in the process. Oscar's decision not to pursue Trent had been the right choice.

For god's sake, in all likelihood Trent was heterosexual.

Did fate have the power to change someone's orientation? Or was it tapping into something deeper, activating and energizing a latent desire? Oscar hoped it was the latter. He hated the idea that fate would force someone to go against such a fundamental piece of who they were. When he was next to Trent, he could feel the

tension, both emotional and sexual. He had to believe fate had freed an attraction that was already there, already building.

Because the pull between them was powerful and magnetic. And Trent had relaxed under his touch, the warmth of Trent's skin through the leg of his pants leaching into Oscar's cold vampire hand.

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They sat that way for who knows how long, five minutes, more? Neither of them moved. They let the sweet sounds of the jazz music wash over them as they traveled north. The plaintive clarinet playing a yearning melody in the slow ballad. The texture of the piano and drums underneath. The low grounding of the double bass.

Oscar dared to turn his head to Trent, who was staring out, his eyes unfocused. Oscar breathed in to break the silence, to complete the bridge between them that the physical connection had begun, and?—

“How much longer?” Justin’s sleepy whine pierced the thick air of the old car, and Oscar snatched his hand away.

Trent let out a sound, so soft as to be almost imperceptible. Was it a whimper? Sadness that Oscar’s hand was gone? Trent blinked as if to clear a fog from his vision.

“Are we almost there?” Justin’s voice was still groggy from his nap.

“No,” Oscar replied. “Eight more hours.”

“Oh god.” Justin pressed his forehead to the window to his right, peering out at the passing houses. “I’m so bored.”

“Read a book. Go back to sleep. Don’t be a child.” Oscar glanced over at Trent, who was still staring straight ahead. Oscar cleared his throat. Trent turned to him, his face unreadable.

Oscar attempted a small smile. Perhaps Trent could not snipe at him all the time. Perhaps they could become friends. Oscar knew that his mate would never be interested in a relationship, but Oscar could already tell from the last few days that he liked Trent. He liked his solidity, his clear-mindedness. Maybe they would get along, now that Trent wasn't keeping himself so distant.

Trent's response to his smile was a strange one. His deep blue eyes went wide with an emotion that Oscar was pretty sure was fear.

Why would Trent be afraid of him?

Then, without warning, a blush came to Trent's pale cheeks, the red skin a contrast to his blonde hair. Trent quickly turned away.

If Oscar didn't know better, he'd say that was the reaction of a man who was fighting his attraction. Was Trent not straight? Oscar had really been teasing before, although Trent's sexuality had been a topic of discussion amongst the M.F.A. students. A hot-as-fuck man with floppy blonde hair who was aloof and kind of mean? That shit was catnip to the other the other gays.

Oscar squelched the shimmer of hope that had rekindled in his chest. Even if Trent ended up being bi or something, it didn't matter. He'd never want a vampire mate.

It had been dark for hours when they finally pulled into the driveway of the old cabin. They'd been driving through dense forest for some time, with only the faint light of the crescent moon illuminating the surrounding area. Oscar had never been this far outside of the city, and the dense night brought out an uncharacteristic melancholy in him.

They'd passed the last town an hour ago, and since then had been traveling through unincorporated Maine territory. The dirt drive on the property was long, winding

through the trees from the dilapidated road to their final destination. The car shook as it crawled over the bumpy terrain. Trent glanced around the area with trepidation in his eyes.

“It’s secluded, that’s for sure,” Trent said. “But there’s also nowhere to go for help if they come for us here.”

“Freddie personally vouched that we made it out of the city undetected,” Oscar replied. “I trust him with my life. If he said we weren’t followed, we weren’t followed. They won’t find us.”

Trent didn’t reply, but the silence was filled with his doubt.

The headlights of the car hit the side of the cabin like two setting suns against the wood siding. The place was modest, but not in disrepair. A simple structure with only one floor, the outside was painted a warm red, deepening the New England feel. The front door was a large wooden slab adorned with a carved inset design of a bird in flight. Oscar found it beautiful, just the right amount of rustic.

“It’s...nice,” Trent said, clearly not finding it as enchanting as Oscar did.

“There’s nothing to do here,” Justin retorted. “Is there even electricity?”

“Uh, no.” Oscar unclashed his seatbelt and opened the driver’s side door. “Anthony traveled here last summer and performed essential repairs, so it’s in decent shape. There’s a propane water heater and a wood stove, so he didn’t acquire a generator. The tree cover’s too thick for solar.”

Oscar stepped out of the car.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Justin called out as he opened his door.

Oscar shrugged, reaching into his pocket and digging out the key to the cabin. Trent's door squeaked as it opened.

"Justin, grab the cooler from the trunk," Oscar called as he walked away.

Justin grunted as he lifted the container. "I still don't know why we have to bring so much food."

"Because Trent has to eat. He can't survive for a week on a single blood bag like we can."

"Can't he just not for a few days?" Justin grumbled under his breath.

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Oscar slipped the key into the lock. Behind him, the aged wooden planks of the porch creaked with footsteps. It was Trent. An image flashed in Oscar's mind: a domestic one. He and Trent returning to their shared home together. Oscar unlocking the door for his mate. The two of them settling in for the night. It was a surprisingly comforting thought.

Oscar shoved away the impossible fantasy and pushed the door open. He turned back to Trent, gesturing inside. "It looks pretty good, right?"

"I have no idea," Trent replied. "I don't have vampire sight. I can't see a damn thing."

"Oh, right." Oscar stepped into the immaculate if spare main room of the cabin, reaching for a nearby lantern and matches. He struck one on a large wooden table and inserted it into the lamp, opening the propane valve. The glass came to life with a vibrant orange glow, casting deep shadows all around him.

Trent strode over the threshold. His eyes went to the large leather couch, then to the small wood stove with a blackened coffee pot sitting atop it, then finally to the open door of a tiny bathroom. It was only big enough to house a toilet and a postage stamp of a standing shower.

"It'll work," he grunted. "Where are the bedrooms?"

Oscar gestured to two doors in the far back corner, but before he could say anything, Justin swept past him.

“This one’s mine!” he called out with a grin, running into the smaller of the two. In the lamplight, a small twin bed was just visible, covered by a homey-looking quilt with blue and white flowers. Or it was visible, until Justin slammed the rustic wooden door shut with a thud.

“Great,” Oscar said, annoyance creeping into his tone. “Trent, you can have the other one. I’ll set up my accommodations on the couch. Unlike that one,” he said, pointing to Justin, “I don’t need much sleep.”

Trent cocked his head at Oscar, his face indecipherable. “Are you sure? I can stay out here.”

Oscar bent over and picked up the old red cooler that Justin had dragged in, taking it over to the nearby propane refrigerator, a nostalgic-looking turquoise model. “I’m certain of it.”

Trent opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, but ultimately just nodded. He carried his small bag over his shoulder into the remaining bedroom, shutting the door behind him. Oscar stood in silence, loading eggs and butter into the fridge.

This was already awkward and strange. He was certain it would only get worse.

Chapter 11

Trent

A sweet, smoky odor eased Trent out of his deep sleep. And it was deep. The exhaustion of the last couple of days had caught up to him. The sizzle of the cured meat was too tempting to resist, however. His eyes fluttered open, and he took in the sight of his temporary bedroom.

The darkness and lack of electricity had obscured much of it the night before. In the soft morning light, its welcoming coziness was more apparent. The nightstand was handmade, constructed from beautiful, knotted pine, as was the small dresser in the corner. The room was tight, but he didn't need a ton of space. He only needed somewhere to sleep, and the bed had been comfy enough to knock him out completely.

Trent slipped on a pair of running shorts and a t-shirt, the soft fabric grazing his nipples as he pulled it on. A little shiver of involuntary pleasure sparked across his chest, making him think of Oscar.

Which...why? Why would that make remind him of the vampire?

Trent was done with this ridiculous angst. It was time to come to terms with what he was feeling and move on. Regardless of what he thought of Oscar as a person, he was attracted to him.

The physical desire was the most intense he'd ever experienced.

It didn't make sense. Oscar was a man, a vampire, and a pain-in-the-ass. Or was he? Maybe Trent had been unfair to him. He'd certainly made a bunch of unfounded assumptions about him. He still found Oscar's attitude infuriating much of the time, but he had to admit that Oscar had been kind to him. He'd tried to do the right thing. Did that make up for his flaws?

Regardless, Trent's body wanted what it wanted. That didn't mean he had to do anything about it.

A faint humming drifted in from the other side of the door. He pulled on the knob to reveal Oscar bent over a pan, his tall frame a mismatch for the squat black wood stove. His brown hair was loose, laying gently across his neck and collarbones.

Oscar wore a white tank top and a pair of terry cloth shorts that hugged his ass in an absolutely obscene way. For someone of his height, Oscar had a lot going on in the rear. As he hummed a jaunty tune, he swayed, wiggling his hips back and forth.

Trent's cock filled. Damn. Trent always knew a vampire would kill him eventually, but he hadn't thought it would be death by blue balls.

"Like what you see?"

Trent's whole body froze. Of course, Oscar had heard him come in. He was a damned vampire.

"Don't worry about it, Trent," Oscar said, his voice low. "It's a compliment."

Trent forced himself to move. He was going to be in trouble if he was struck speechless every time he caught a glimpse of Oscar's fully covered ass. It would be a hell of a long week.

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“I’m surprised you’re up,” Trent said, crossing to the small kitchen table and resting his elbows on the deep red tablecloth. “You don’t seem like a morning sunshine person. You seem more like a two a.m. poppers person.”

Oscar sighed. “I can be both. Just because I like to have a good time doesn’t mean I don’t know how to get things done.”

Trent didn’t respond. He needed to stop making assumptions about this man. He was looking like a fool.

After a couple of moments, he couldn’t take the silence anymore. “Thanks for cooking breakfast. I know you don’t need it.”

“Maybe not, but I wanted it.” Oscar flipped the bacon onto a paper towel-lined plate and cracked two eggs into the hot grease.

“Sometimes getting what you want is just as important as getting what you need,” Oscar continued, his voice taking on a flirty lilt.

“Oh?”

Oscar turned, his face sporting a sly smile that was offset by a thin layer of scruff. He sauntered over to the table, leaning over so that his lips were a few inches from Trent’s. They looked plush and delicious, and Trent was struck by a desire to ravage them.

Oscar was so close, his hair falling around both of their heads, his brown eyes warm

and piercing. All it would take was a slight push upward, a slight crane of the neck, and Trent could feel those lips against his own.

He was moving slowly, almost imperceptibly, but it was happening. He was getting dragged toward Oscar, his body taking over for his short-circuited brain. Oscar waited there patiently.

The loud slam of the bedroom door closing broke the moment, and they separated. Oscar snapped back to the stovetop.

“Look at you two early birds!” Justin giggled and walked over to Oscar at the stove. He wore the same pajama pants and t-shirt that he’d arrived in the day before. “Good morning.”

Justin gave Oscar a tight hug. Trent stared as Justin’s slender arms stretched across Oscar’s back, just above where Trent imagined Oscar’s butt crack began. Trent’s hands grasped at the thin kitchen tablecloth, his heart beating in his ears.

Trent berated himself even as he had the reaction. Jealousy? Is that what was happening now? It was so basic.

As Oscar broke off the hug with a stiff smile, Justin winked at Trent.

The little brat.

“Do you want breakfast?” Oscar asked Justin, and the warmth in his voice caused Trent’s stomach to sputter with rage bubbles. Luckily, Justin shook his head. Good. Oscar had made breakfast just for him.

“I’m not into food. Don’t miss it.” Justin glided over to one of the windows facing out of the front of the house, moving aside the dainty lace curtains to gaze out into the

dense forest surrounding them.

“What are you looking at?” Trent asked, trying not to sound peeved.

“Nothing, really.” Justin turned back to Oscar and Trent. “But I think I should go out and patrol. We are technically on the run. And I need something to do!” Justin smiled widely and headed out the front door.

“Be back in a few hours!”

After he was gone, Trent grunted and rolled his eyes.

“What?” Oscar asked, a confused look on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t like him.”

“Justin?” Oscar grabbed a brown ceramic plate and slid the two crispy eggs onto it.

“He’s a good kid.”

“He’s too chipper, too cutesy. He’s hiding something.” Trent leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms.

“What are you talking about?” Oscar added a few slices of bacon and placed the plate in front of Trent. Trent breathed in the smoky smell, sucking the tendrils of flavor into his lungs. He loved breakfast.

“I don’t trust him. There’s something going on there.”

“He’s my friend.” Oscar sat down across from Trent. He picked up a slice of bacon and took a bite. “He’s been through a lot.”

“He wants to be more than your friend,” Trent said through a mouthful of crispy pork.

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“He does not!” Oscar’s nostrils flared as he spoke. “We just...we experienced the same shit. The old Azarian coven. It was bad. We have a connection because of it.”

“I don’t know...” Trent picked up the fork and knife lying in front of him and cut into the first fried egg.

“You can’t know how awful it was.” Oscar closed his eyes, and the morning sun cast an angelic yellow-gold glow over his pale face.

Trent said nothing. There was a melancholy underneath Oscar’s words that was unusual for the typically flippant vampire. Oscar’s eyes snapped open. He locked his gaze to Trent’s. The intensity made Trent’s breath catch.

“We were starved.” A flash of orange fire sparked in Oscar’s eyes as the words left his mouth. “They would withhold blood from the newer vampires, making us thirsty and desperate. We would do anything to be fed. The need clouded our minds, made it impossible to even understand some of the evil they forced us to enact.”

Trent’s gut stirred, filling with a protective rage. No one should treat Oscar that way. No one had the right.

“It didn’t improve when Charles Azarian died,” Oscar continued. His voice shook, and his hands were tight balls resting on the patterned tablecloth. “Not for a while. The fighting was horrific. Somewhere in the middle of all that, Justin disappeared. I think he managed to escape and live free, for a little while at least, but then something changed. He hasn’t told me about it yet.”

Oscar's hands flattened against the table, mindlessly smoothing out the tablecloth. "A few of the younger vampires and I hid in an isolated wing of the covenhouse. I didn't see him after that. We did our best to stay away from whichever of Azarian's cruel henchmen had control at any given moment."

Oscar took a deep breath, calming himself. "After a week, the noise of the fighting died down, but we didn't dare leave. We were starving. The newest vamps desperately needed blood. I was planning to venture out when Freddie found us. I was the only one still conscious."

"Why didn't you get out earlier?" Trent asked, his voice soft. His chest ached with compassion for Oscar. It must have been horrible.

"It was brutal. We couldn't chance it. The elders of the coven had always been cruel, and my ex was the cruelest of all of them, but after Charles was gone, they became ruthless. They had no regard for life, slaughtering anyone who got in the way of their mad quests for power. I hope...I can only hope they're all dead."

Trent's heart caught in his throat, hearing the rawness in Oscar's voice. There was a lot the man hadn't dealt with. Instinctively, Trent got to his feet, positioning himself behind Oscar and wrapping his arms around his chest.

Oscar's response was an intense, desperate grasping. He buried his face in Trent's bicep. Pain radiated off him.

"I'm sorry," Oscar whispered. Trent could feel his cool breath against the skin of his arm.

"For what?" Trent stayed still, strong and solid, allowing Oscar to anchor himself.

"For bringing you into this...for being so weak...I don't know..."

“There is nothing about you that is weak,” Trent said, his mouth near Oscar’s long, silky brown hair. “We are...we are given things in life that we shouldn’t be, that we don’t deserve, and we do what we must in order to make it through. We are survivors.”

Oscar nodded, and a trickle of liquid hit Trent’s skin. He was crying. The ache in Trent’s chest turned to a stabbing pain. There was a deep wound in Oscar that had only just started to heal, and it hurt to be near it. But Trent couldn’t leave, couldn’t remove himself from it. He tightened his embrace, trying to project stability and safety. Oscar needed him.

They stayed there for several minutes, Oscar sitting, Trent’s arms wrapped around his chest. Trent listened to Oscar breathe, his mind spinning. He was not someone with a lot of close friends, close connections. This was maybe the most intimate he’d felt with someone since...since his mother died eight years ago.

Slam. Crack.

The noise pierced the quiet moment and Trent spun around, grabbing a nearby kitchen knife. He scanned the room for the source of the sound, but it wasn’t immediately apparent.

“Look.” Trent turned toward Oscar’s voice. The vampire had his claws out. His fangs had dropped, and he was pointing to one of the big front windows. There was a large crack running down it.

“What the hell did that?” Trent asked. Oscar shook his head. Trent walked forward slowly, the wood floor creaking under his steps. He was hyper aware of every sound, every movement of the air, as adrenaline pumped through him. He reached up and ran his hand over the crack in the glass. He stared past it out into the trees.

“Come on,” Trent said, going for the door, but Oscar was there with his hand out, stopping him.

“It’s too dangerous,” Oscar said, his eyes hard and fierce. “You’re human. I’ll go out and look. Get your gear from your room.”

Trent sighed. Would Oscar be a smothering nanny this whole week? He’d kept himself safe for years before they met.

“Go.” Trent gestured out the window, then opened a nearby drawer. When they had arrived, he’d stashed a wooden stake there. With a knife in one hand and a stake in the other, he was as ready as he could be.

He walked back to the window to see Oscar bent over outside on the porch. Despite Oscar’s directive, Trent’s curiosity got the better of him. He stepped out into the cool morning air.

Oscar straightened as Trent came through the door. “I told you to stay inside,” he whispered, his voice almost a hiss.

“What is it?” Trent asked, ignoring the rebuke. Oscar sighed, then gestured downward.

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On the faded planks of the porch lay a bird. A crow, by the look of it, although Trent wasn't a bird person. It wasn't moving.

"Guess he ran into the window." Trent glanced around the front lawn. "No other signs of anyone?"

"No." Oscar peered into the surrounding forest. "But I don't like it."

"It's just a bird. You said Freddie made sure nobody followed us."

"He did." Oscar pressed his lips together into a thin line.

Trent shrugged. "It was startling, but there's a simple explanation. The crow didn't see the window and crashed into it."

Oscar's face didn't relax at Trent's reassertion of the obvious. He squinted, peering into the trees and sniffing the air. Trent couldn't smell anything, but maybe Oscar's vampire senses could detect what he could not.

"The ashy smoke of a young vampire." Oscar frowned and crossed his arms, the expression of displeasure at odds with his large, expressive eyes. "And something else. A sweet, musty smell."

"It's probably Justin."

"I know what Justin smells like."

“Or smoke from our wood stove, Oscar. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Trent walked back to the door, but Oscar headed down the steps onto the front lawn as he scanned the surrounding copse of trees. Trent followed his line of sight out into the dense woods, and at the edge the underbrush shook slightly.

Was it a rabbit? Some other animal?

A furry mass burst from the leaves, and god, it was massive. Night-black fur adorned with silver stripes covered an enormous beast. It must have been four feet tall, and its huge muscles shifted as it bounded toward them.

Trent gripped the knife in his hand. It was a wolf. A fucking wolf.

Without thinking, he was moving down the steps to Oscar. Could the vampire probably defend himself better than Trent could? Sure. Did that thought slow Trent’s powerful instinct to protect him? Absolutely not.

As he reached Oscar, the wolf stopped in its tracks. About ten feet from them, it cocked its head, observing the two. Trent opened his mouth to tell Oscar that they should back away.

The thingshifted.

Trent had never seen anything like it. With a series of pops and cracks, the bones and muscles of the wolf began to change and transform. It reared up on its hind legs as its whole body mutated, its fur thinning to reveal the face and form of a tall, muscular woman. She appeared to be in her thirties and had long, jet black hair with a single streak of silver.

She was also very naked.

“You two belong to Anthony’s coven?”

Trent found himself unable to say anything. He didn’t consider himself a prude, but somehow standing in front of this nude, intimidating wolf-person had really thrown him. Luckily, Oscar did not have that problem.

“We are,” he said. “You’re from the Scopan Lake pack?”

“Ayuh,” she said. “Sorry to surprise you on your dooryard. I’m the alpha, Rhonda. Stopped by because we’ve been picking up some unusual scents today in the surrounding woods. Wanted to let you know. We try to look out for Anthony and his people.”

“I’m Oscar.” Oscar gestured to Trent, who had relaxed slightly but was still having trouble forming words. “This is Trent. You probably picked up our third, Justin. He went out on patrol.”

Rhonda turned her head, peering back into the woods and squinting. “I’d be surprised if it was just him. I’d bet on two or three at least. There was an undercurrent of something in the scent that I didn’t like. Cruelty? I don’t know, but the animals and birds are skittish.”

“One of them flew into the bay window,” Trent said, finally finding his voice. “A crow. It scared the shit out of us.”

Rhonda grimaced and walked closer toward them. She seemed totally unperturbed by her own nakedness, and Trent did his best to respect that. If she didn’t find it strange, why should he?

“I don’t like it,” she said. “I’ll have one of my betas patrol around the cabin for the next few days.”

“That is incredibly kind,” Oscar replied. “We don’t have anything to offer in return?—”

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“Nonsense.” Rhonda dismissed the idea with a roll of her eyes. “Anthony’s grandmother was good to us, even though she didn’t know what we were. Anthony has been the same. I wouldn’t feel right not keeping a look out. You two are obviously in some kind of trouble?—”

Oscar opened his mouth to answer, but Rhonda waved him off.

“—but I don’t need to know what it is. Just don’t shoot at a wolf if you see one nosing around.”

Trent nodded mutely.

“Thank you for?—”

Before Oscar could finish the sentence, she was already moving, fur sprouting once again as her bones cracked and shifted. She disappeared into the brush with surprising grace, considering the unsettling transformation her body was undergoing.

“That was a first for me,” Trent said, lowering the knife that he realized he’d held in front of him for the whole conversation with Rhonda.

“I’ve noticed wolf shifters from afar, but they tend to be very isolationist. They avoid humans and other supernaturals. Anthony must have done a significant favor for her to approach us like that.”

Trent nodded, not knowing what else to say. He had thought that he’d seen everything, but the existence of wolf shifters niggled at his brain.

“I had assumed vampires were it,” he said to Oscar, turning back toward the cabin. “If wolf shifters are a thing, what other supernatural creatures are prowling the world?”

Oscar smiled, putting his arm around Trent’s shoulder as they walked across the uneven grass.

“Trust me, you don’t want to think about it. Regardless, I’m thankful for the extra protection. I doubt anyone was able to follow from the city, but that doesn’t mean there might not be other dangers up here. I’ll sleep better knowing a wolf is out there guarding us.”

Chapter 12

Oscar

Trent went back into the cabin to put away his weapons and eat his now-cold breakfast. Oscar, on the other hand, had lost his appetite. He stayed out on the porch, leaning forward with his hands against the rail, ruminating.

He hadn’t been lying when he had told Trent he didn’t think they’d been followed. To avoid detection by Freddie and Lillian, as well as by Oscar himself on the road, would be some feat. That’s quite the drive for someone to be tailing them and not reveal themselves.

But still he was uneasy.

“What’s going on?”

Oscar spun around at the question, his claws out and ready to attack...Justin. It was Justin. He relaxed his stance as Justin clopped up the stairs. Oscar took him in. He

knew he was a bit of a clothes snob, but surely his friend owned more than just plaid pajama pants. Not the ideal outfit to go walking through the woods in.

“Did something happen?” Justin asked.

Oscar rubbed his eyes with his hand. “Not really, but my senses are on high alert.”

“What?”

Oscar gestured to the lifeless body of the crow on the porch floor. “Bird crashed into the windowpane. It cracked the glass and scared the shit out of us.”

“Oh.” Justin stared at the crow for a moment. “Is that all?”

“We had a visit from the alpha of the Scopan Lake pack. She seemed to think we had visitors. Several of them.”

Justin furrowed his eyebrows. “She was probably just smelling me.”

“That’s what I said, but she wasn’t convinced.”

Justin shrugged. “Well, I’ve traipsed all over, and the only predators I’ve come across were squirrels. No sign of vampires. Or humans, either.”

“Good.” Oscar blew out a stream of air from his lungs, willing his muscles to relax.

“I’m being ridiculous.”

Justin stepped toward him. The slim blonde only came up to his chest. He reached out, touching Oscar’s arm.

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“It’s a lot. You’re worried about keeping a human safe. You’re a good person.”

Oscar let out a sardonic chuckle. “Thank you. There are quite a few people out there that would disagree with you, but that’s very sweet.”

Justin’s face was open and earnest. “I mean it! You always try to do the right thing. It’s admirable. And very sexy.”

Oscar stepped back. Was Justin flirting with him? That made no sense. Justin was like a little brother to him. He didn’t view the vampire twink like that.

And why didn’t he? He’d never normally let anything get in the way of a good fuck. Friends with benefits were his favorite kinds of friends. What was stopping him from having some fun? Justin was a little thin for Oscar’s taste—he liked them beefy and muscular—but he was still a hottie. What had changed?

Trent. That was the change. Trent was here. Trent was in his life.

No need to think about that now.

“I’m going back inside,” Oscar said, ignoring the flash of disappointment that crossed Justin’s face. “There’s nothing out here.”

“No. I guess not.”

The day passed in a lazy haze, with no more surprises. Oscar spent the time writing and thumbing through classic novels from the tiny bookshelf in the cabin. After a few

hours, Justin went back to his room to take a nap. The ability of that vamp to sleep the day away was astonishing.

Sometime in the early evening, Trent grabbed his bag and fished out a big plastic binder full of sheet music. He flipped open to a piece about halfway through, studying the page slowly, his mouth shaping silent words as he ran through the phrasing.

Something about the sight of him made Oscar's blood race. Trent was meant to sing. Even now, not making a sound, his musical intelligence and passion came through.

"What are you practicing?" Oscar asked.

"An aria from Faust," Trent said, his eyes still glued to his binder. "My French piece for the audition."

"If you want to sing out loud, you can."

Trent glanced over from his pages. "I don't have to..."

"I'd...I'd like to listen." Oscar pulled on his left pointer finger nervously. "If you don't mind. I know I'm your competition, so if you don't want to..."

Trent stared at him with an uneasy look, as if he were deciding whether to try an unfamiliar and unappetizing new food. Ultimately, he turned and picked his bag back up, fishing out a small silver pitch pipe. He put it to his lips and sounded his starting note.

Trent made eye contact once with Oscar once again. He looked vulnerable, like he was about to reveal something intensely personal. Oscar was confused. He'd heard Trent sing many times, in class and in concert. Hell, they were working on a damn

duet together. Maybe it was just that they were so close in the confines of the cabin, or maybe it was that it was for an audition that Oscar would also be attending.

Whatever the reason, Trent shook off the nervousness with a few quick blinks, stood up, and began to sing.

Avant de quitter ces lieux,

Sol natal de mes aïeux

A toi, seigneur et Roi des cieux

Ma sœur je confie,

Daigne de tout danger

Toujours, toujours la protéger

Cette sœur si chérie!

Oscar didn't know Faust very well, although he had a vague memory that the aria was a prayer of protection for the character's sister. French was not Oscar's strong suit. He found the vowels strange and difficult to place. He avoided singing in the language when he could.

For Trent, it was like a native tongue. His rich tone fit the music perfectly, and the sense of line and connection in the melody, the legato, it was gorgeous. As he continued to sing, Oscar leaned in, unwilling to miss a second of it.

Trent's voice was astonishing. For a man with such a large instrument, everything flowed effortlessly. He tossed off his high notes with an ease that Oscar envied.

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But it was more than that. There were few truly unique voices in the world. The true magic came from the marriage of superb musicianship with the singer's passion, the way they imbued the words with deep meaning. And that is where Trent was a revelation.

As he reached the end of the aria, Oscar's heart broke as Trent's plea for his sister's safety spun off into heaven. The room around them was alive with sound, the pine boards of the cabin themselves vibrating in sympathy with Trent's desperate prayer.

O Roi des cieux, jette les yeux,

Protège Marguerite, Roi des cieux!

Trent finished the final phrase and a quiet settled over everything. It was fragile and perfect, and Oscar was loath to break it. Trent eventually started to blush at the exposed silence.

"What do you think?" he asked tentatively.

"That was exquisite," Oscar whispered, not wanting to introduce normal speech into the hushed temple the cabin had become. "I've never...I've heard you sing before, but this was special."

"I don't know..." The lack of confidence in his singing was something Oscar had not seen in Trent before, and it broke his heart.

"I do," Oscar replied, stepping closer to Trent. "You can borrow my certainty. That

aria will show anyone who hears it the beautiful and sensitive artist you are.”

Trent stared into his eyes, and it was clear to Oscar that he was fighting his instinct to reject the praise. Oscar reached out, grabbing both of his arms above the elbows.

“Please believe me, Trent. You are special.”

A creak of a door opening came from off to the side of them, and they broke apart as Justin, now in a different pair of pajama pants, emerged from his bedroom.

“Anyone wanna play cards?”

Chapter 13

Oscar

Canasta. Alexander, Oscar’s foster dad, had taught him the game. Old-fashioned, maybe, but he didn’t mind that. Oscar wasn’t in the mood for anything more contentious. The three of them played a few light-hearted games, and the surprise of the night was that the most competitive person there was Justin. Evidently, Trent’s aggressive streak didn’t extend beyond his career ambition.

Eventually, sleepiness overtook Justin once again, who made his excuses and retreated to his room, leaving Trent and Oscar alone. They sat on the couch and talked, lit by the glow of the single propane lantern. Trent’s face was even more handsome in the dim light, his blue eyes sparkling in the warmth of the lamp.

This was going to kill Oscar. He was here for another week, and now that they were...well, what were they? Friends? They weren’t enemies anymore, distant and snarky. Oscar, for his part, couldn’t bring himself to care about Trent’s career competitiveness, but he doubted Trent felt the same. Trent had this idea that Oscar

was standing in the way of his dreams.

But Trent had hugged him. He'd given him a solid mooring when the memories of the past threatened to overwhelm him. He had acted like, well, a mate. And that was before Trent sang for him and turned him inside out.

Which is why this was going to kill him. Trent was beautiful, and sexy, and his mate, but he couldn't reveal that. Trent would be out the door in an instant. So instead, Oscar sat in the cabin's fading light with the man, fighting off his desperate need to touch him.

It would be fine. Or it wouldn't, and then Oscar would implode.

"Thanks for teaching me canasta," Trent said, his voice low and sweet, a soft contrast to his masculine physical presence.

"I know people think of it as an old lady's game, but I love it."

"It was really fun." Trent reached out a hand, and it landed heavy and even on Oscar's bare leg. The touch ignited a shower of sparks, like a city streetlight bulb exploding. Damn, the human really was trying to murder him.

"Thank you for singing for me." Oscar could barely get the words out. His right hand gripped the smooth, brown leather of the couch. He needed to kiss this man. He'd been so stupid thinking he could keep himself from pursuing Trent. Now that they were alone, now that his mate sat in front of him, his resolve was gone. He had to try.

"Oscar, I..." Trent turned away, his long eyelashes fluttering as he blinked. "I don't know how to do this. But I don't think I can stop myself. You, uh, you make me feel things, things I've never felt before. You're a man. And a vampire. I shouldn't be so attracted to you. But I am."

Oscar nodded, not trusting himself to say anything.

“So, I...I haven’t been with, you know...” Trent’s hand trembled against Oscar’s leg, and a burst of affection bloomed in Oscar’s chest. “But if you don’t let me kiss you right now, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Oscar grabbed Trent’s hand, clutching tightly. He had to speak. He had to. This had to happen.

“Please.” Oscar forced the word out, his gaze never moving from Trent’s eyes, those deep blue eyes shining out from his open face. Oscar hadn’t noticed until this trip how lonely Trent was, and how vulnerable. Did he always look like that? He wanted to take it all away, to make him feel cared for and safe.

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Then Trent was on him, his thick arms, one around his waist and one on his neck, pulling their heads together. Trent straddled him, and the weight of his muscular thighs pinned Oscar down. God, what would it be like to be under him, to have this strong, solid man fucking into him?

When their lips touched, it was almost too much. Oscar thought he might faint at the lightning strike that hit his spine. This was his mate, his person, and now that he'd had a taste, citrus and coffee, he couldn't ever go back. It was being lost in the softest clouds and feeling the intense rumble of growing thunder underneath them.

His own arms wrapped around Trent, and he ran his hands over the solid muscles of Trent's back as Trent continued to explore. Finally, Trent's tongue tapped at his lips, and he opened them, letting him in, moaning in spite of himself as their tongues met.

He was so hard already, and all they were doing was kissing. His cock strained against the tiny briefs that he wore under his shorts, and Trent's own bulge pressed against him.

Shit, the man was thick.

Trent pulled away, and Oscar whined at the absence, desperate for more.

"I need to feel you," Trent said in a low growl, pulling off his own shirt first and then reaching down and tugging Oscar's over his head. He sat there, his eyes hungry as he took Oscar in. Oscar felt suddenly shy as Trent's eyes feasted on him.

"Fuck. You're perfect." Trent ran his hands over Oscar's shoulders, down his arms,

over his chest, tracing the lines of his tattoos. “I love these so much. I didn’t know they were everywhere. You shouldn’t hide them away.”

“You think I should always stay shirtless?”

Trent nodded. His face was completely serious. He was grasping now, gripping his skin and muscles as if he was worried Oscar might evaporate. Oscar leaned forward and sucked one of Trent’s nipples hard.

“Ungh.” Trent blinked rapidly, as if he was confused.

Oscar pulled off for a moment. “Is that good?”

“Don’t stop,” he whispered.

Oscar hummed as he sucked again, gently placing his teeth around the little pebble treasure and pulling. Trent shook as if he were falling apart.

“I...no girl has ever done that.”

“Seriously?” Oscar asked, sitting back. Trent nodded.

“Then none of them were very good at sex,” Oscar said. “But I am. I’m excellent.”

Oscar slipped his hand into Trent’s loose gym shorts, wrapping his fingers around Trent’s thick cock and squeezing. Trent yelped, his pelvis raising up in response. Oscar chuckled, then rubbed his thumb over the head, coating it in slick pre-cum.

He pulled his hand out and licked the clear fluid from his finger.

“Mmm. You taste so incredible. I want more.”

He guided Trent to sit square on the couch and slipped down to his knees in front of the human. Trent was looking seriously overwhelmed. His floppy blonde hair and blue eyes were giving him an innocent, strained look. Oscar wasn't sure he liked it.

"We don't have to go further," Oscar said gently, "if it's too much. If you don't want it."

"No!" Trent answered, a little too loudly. "No, I do. It's just...nothing has ever felt this good, and we haven't even really done anything yet."

"Oh, baby, it's going to get better." Oscar reached for Trent's waistband. Trent lifted his pelvis up, and Oscar slid off his shorts and underwear in one fell swoop.

Trent's cock sprang to attention once it was released from its restraints. Oscar couldn't help but smile. It looked so delicious, thick and decently long, but not too long.

"Relax, Trent. Let me make you feel even more."

Trent's eyes flashed with nervousness and lust. Finally, he relaxed his neck, his head settling back and his eyelids closing. Oscar leaned forward, kissing the fine blonde hair of Trent's treasure trail, following it down to the promised land.

He wrapped his hand around Trent's thick member and flicked the head with his tongue. Trent shuddered and moaned.

Oscar took that as a signal to turn up the intensity. Inch by inch, he slid his lips down onto Trent's shaft until his nose rested against Oscar's pelvis. He felt the head of his cock nestle into the back of his mouth, and he rocked his head, teasing Trent in and out of his throat. Trent fit perfectly, stretching his jaw, filling him but still giving him a sliver of space to breathe.

He set an even pace, wanting to enjoy every second. Up and down, up and down, his tongue lapping up the sweet, salty pre-cum as he bobbed.

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He looked up at Trent and saw that his eyes were no longer closed. Instead, he was looking down in wonder at Oscar, his blue eyes still overwhelmed, but the nervousness was gone.

He felt Trent's hand go to the back of his head, and welcomed the strength of it, loving that Trent was taking control. Yes. His mouth was here for Trent's pleasure. All he wanted in return was to swallow every drop of his cum.

"I'm...I'm close, Oscar."

Oscar quickened his pace, the need in Trent's voice spurring him on. Trent's hand was no longer on his head. Now both of Trent's hands were pressing into the couch, balled into fists. He was moaning and writhing under Oscar's efforts, thrusting his dick into Oscar's mouth as he chased his orgasm.

His noises were beautiful. His body was more beautiful, his sun-kissed skin glistening with a thin layer of sweat. The muscles in his thighs and stomach tightened and released as he pursued his pleasure.

Oscar didn't let up, not for a moment. He wanted Trent to come apart. He wanted to be the first man to make him feel like this.

"Fuck, Oscar. Fuck. FUCK!"

Trent began to shake, and he let a yell that made Oscar's heart soar and his dick grow painfully hard. The hot liquid hit his tongue, and he gulped it down, swallowing every drop.

There was a lot.

As Trent collapsed back, Oscar continued lazily sucking on his now-softening cock. He hummed as he milked the final few drops down his throat.

Trent twitched and pushed Oscar off him.

“So...so intense. Fuck, Oscar, that was insane.”

Oscar pulled himself up, straddling Trent and kissing him long and slow, letting the man taste the salty remains of his own cum.

“I’m glad,” Oscar replied as he pulled away.

“I’m not joking. It was...I’ve never felt anything like it.”

“I think we can safely say that you aren’t totally straight.”

Chapter 14

Trent

Trent fought through the haze of afterglow that threatened to envelop him. This sexy man had made him feel incredible, and dammit, he was going to return the favor.

“My turn,” he said. Oscar’s eyebrows furrowed.

“You don’t have to,” Oscar said. “This is new for you.”

“I want to hear it. I want to feel it when you come. I want to taste it.”

Oscar's eyes went wide as he slid off of Trent, coming to his feet. Trent sat up, reaching up and grabbing his waistband.

This was it. This was the first dick he'd see in this way, the first one that he wouldn't be ignoring in the locker room or tolerating while he was watching porn. Would he like it? Would he be turned on by it?

He slid off Oscar's shorts, revealing a tight pair of white briefs and the unmistakably hard silhouette of his cock. He mouthed it through the fabric, loving the quick intake of breath that Oscar took in response.

He wriggled off the underwear slowly, unveiling Oscar's cock inch by inch, taking it all in as he ultimately let them fall to the floor. Oscar stepped out of them.

God, it was beautiful. Longer than his, but slimmer, with a pair of smooth balls that he was desperate to lick.

Okay, he definitely liked dick. Or at least, he liked this dick.

He bent forward and flicked his tongue against the tempting globes, and Oscar grabbed his shoulders hard, a tremor running through his body as Trent tasted him. A thrill ran through Trent as he saw how he could provoke a reaction, even as inexperienced as he was.

He licked a stripe up Oscar's cock, finally reaching the head. He swirled his tongue around it, wanting more of the salty sweetness. The taste was quintessentially Oscar, a crisp freshness with a hint of smoke.

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He gazed up at the tall, toned vampire standing over him. Oscar's expression was hungry, eager, animalistic, his long brown hair framing his features in a way that was almost feral.

"I want you to fuck my face."

Oscar blinked, the intensity of the moment dampened. "What?"

"I've never done this," Trent said. "Show me how you like it. Use me."

"I don't want to choke you or?—"

"I want you to choke me." The words came out of Trent's mouth without thought, even as he realized that they were one hundred percent true. "I want you to pleasure yourself and empty your balls down my throat."

Oscar ran his right hand through Trent's hair, gripping hard. Trent loved it. He was bigger than Oscar, but he wanted to be taken.

"You are so fucking hot like this," Oscar said, holding Trent's head in place and just touching the head of his cock to Trent's thick, pillowy lips.

"I want it. Do it."

With one swift motion, Oscar thrust his shaft into Trent's mouth. He gagged as the tip hit the back of his throat, but he didn't care. He loved it. He liked it more than any straight sex he'd had, which was both amazing and concerning. Was he gay? Was it

specifically Oscar?

Soon enough he could no longer think, the constant invasion of Oscar's cock burning away his questions. He reached up his hands, cupping Oscar's ass cheeks. He loved the feel of them, soft and muscular at the same time, flexing as Oscar thrust forward, then relaxing as he pulled out. Oscar's rhythm increased.

"I'm so close," Oscar said in a raspy whisper. "You're doing such a good job, baby. Your mouth is so wet, so tight...you'll swallow my load, won't you, my sweet hole?"

Trent moaned, choking a little as he did so, but he didn't care. This was fucking amazing. It turned off his brain in a way that nothing else ever had.

Oscar's grip on his hair tightened as the pace grew punishing. He could feel Oscar's long dick pulse and tighten.

"I'm coming. Fuck, Trent, take it. Take my cum."

As the hot liquid burst out of the cock in his mouth, Oscar pulled Trent's head in, shoving his shaft down Trent's throat. Trent couldn't breathe. Tears sprang to his eyes as he struggled to take in air through his nose, but he didn't fight it. He wanted it, wanted to be the one that got to swallow Oscar down.

Finally, Oscar loosened his grip and took his cock out of Trent's mouth. Trent collapsed backwards, relaxing onto the couch and forcing air into his lungs. Oscar pulled his shorts up and sat down next to Trent, but didn't touch him. Trent ached at the distance between them, even if it was only a few inches.

Oscar's face was cast with worry, and it took Trent a few moments to understand why.

Instead of saying anything, he reached up and grabbed Oscar by the neck, pulling him in for a deep, searing kiss. When he broke it off, the fear was gone.

“Idiot,” Trent said. “Of course I don’t regret it.”

“How did you?—”

“You have an expressive face.” Trent pulled Oscar into his side, the taller man shrinking down to fit himself in. Trent kissed the top of his head. “That was...that was the best sex I’ve ever had. By far. I don’t have any plans to go back. Not after that.”

Oscar sighed, burying himself in Trent’s strong chest. “I was just worried. I didn’t want you to feel?—”

“I know.”

They sat there in silence for what might have been a few minutes, or maybe an hour. By now, the sun had almost set, and the cabin was bathed in a warm amber. Trent soaked in the comfort of having someone next to him. Not just anyone. Who knows what this was, but Oscar kindled a fire and a rawness in him that was completely new. He wasn’t giving that up.

Eventually, he realized that Oscar’s breaths had slowed and evened out. He was asleep, tucked into Trent’s side like the final piece in a long-unfinished puzzle. For the first time in many years, Trent was able to relax. He floated off into sleep.

It was the loud crack of wood breaking apart that woke him up. Oscar sprang into action, claws and fangs out, but it took Trent a minute to understand what was happening.

The cabin was under attack.

The front door had split most of the way down, and a second later, another blow demolished it entirely, sending splinters raining down onto the hardwood floor. Trent couldn't see much beyond a pale, hulking figure standing in the doorway, the moonlight silhouetting them from behind, making it impossible to pick out their features.

Oscar, though, could see just fine, and he did the one thing Trent didn't expect. He stumbled backward in fear, retreating from whoever it was.

“Elliott.”

“My mate.” Trent still couldn’t make out a face, not really, but he could tell that the vampire was big. He filled the whole door frame, an intimidating mountain of muscle and presence. His voice was low and powerful and dripping with possessive contempt. There was something about it that felt familiar to him.

“I’m not your mate. I have never been your mate.” The terror in Oscar’s voice struck a deep chord in Trent’s chest. It frightened him, but more than that, it filled him with rage. No one should speak to Oscar like that. No one should get to scare him.

Elliott stepped into the room, revealing himself as the dim lamplight hit him. His broad, square face was an intimidating sight. With his jawline and his just-kinda-there haircut, he had the looks and demeanor of an overgrown frat boy. He might have been handsome if his expression wasn’t so nakedly greedy. Again, Trent felt a spark of memory. Did he know this man?

In his outstretched arms, Elliott carried a limp mass of black fur, marked with a few bloodstained streaks of white. It took Trent a moment to realize that it was Rhonda, the alpha of the nearby pack. He flinched as Elliott dumped the body unceremoniously onto the hardwood floor with a thud.

“Found her skulking in the woods around the cabin. You really shouldn’t trust wolves.”

Trent’s chest tightened with guilt at his words. She had only been trying to help them. She didn’t deserve death for that.

As Elliott stepped forward, two vampires filled in behind him. These two were not the ragged, desperate vamps that had attacked Oscar in Brooklyn. They were well-fed, their muscles flexing ridiculously as they took fighting stances, like American Gladiators getting ready to compete. A man and a woman, they looked surprisingly similar, as if they might be siblings. Both were short and solid, with narrow noses and small eyes.

“You’re coming with me now,” Elliott said, closing the distance to Oscar. Trent took a quick inventory around him. He was far from any stashed weapons, and there were no immediate substitutes nearby. Maybe the long, low cedar coffee table in front of him...he would have to move, but the eyes of the two henchvamps were trained on him. They weren’t fucking around.

“No...I’m not.” Oscar’s voice trembled as he defied his ex-boyfriend. “Justin?” he called out to his friend’s closed bedroom door. “We could use your help!”

Elliott sneered. “Oh, I don’t think he’ll be helping you. He’s busy.”

Trent tried to parse the meaning behind the man’s arrogant tone. Had they done something to Justin? Broken in through the bedroom window? He and Oscar really needed him. Three vampires against a vampire and a human weren’t good odds.

When it was clear that Justin wasn’t coming out to fight, Oscar turned back to his ex. He had recovered from the initial shock, and now there was fire in his voice.

“What are you doing here? Why aren’t you dead?”

Elliott laughed, the sound like gravel grinding in a cement mixer. “You think any of those weak-willed vampires in our old coven could killme?”

Elliott stepped in farther toward Oscar, who was now backed up against the turquoise

shellac of the propane refrigerator. Oscar's eyes darted back and forth, searching for some way out.

"And I'm here, my little mouse, because after you killed Rick, I knew you'd grown into a rat. One with a bite."

"I killed that motherfucker." The words were out before Trent could stop them. It was a terrible idea for him to draw attention to himself at that moment, but he couldn't keep quiet. Elliott shouldn't get to threaten Oscar. He wasn't even good enough to wash Oscar's boxer briefs.

"The human. How quaint." Elliott didn't bother to look at Trent as he spoke. "You'll be dead soon enough, and I'll have my mate back with me. You can't tear asunder what fate has joined."

With the flick of a hand, Elliott slashed across Oscar's chest with his claw, cutting through his shirt and opening an angry-looking cut that immediately started to bleed. Oscar clutched at it, but the pain of it broke him out of his decision paralysis. His eyes flashed in defiance as he stood up to his ex.

"I don't belong to you."

"You need me. I can give you a sense of purpose. Your precocious little powers will keep the humans and vampires under my control. Build the new coven with me. Our empire. You'd make such a pretty coven master's mate."

"I'm not your mate," Oscar said, pushing back against Elliott's chest. The man was immovable. "I found my mate."

Elliott's face transformed into a rageful mask. "Who is it?" he snarled.

Oscar shook his head. “He’s not for you. He only belongs to me. And I belong to him. You have no claim on me.”

Trent felt a pang of hurt at Oscar’s words. Why would Oscar have sex with him if he already had a mate? He hated the idea of predestination and vampire mates, but he hadn’t thought Oscar would be the type to toy with people. Maybe his initial impression of Oscar had been correct all along.

But fuck the pity party. He had to do something here. Oscar couldn’t take on his ex one-on-one, never mind when Elliott had backup.

Elliott lunged for Oscar, and Trent took his opportunity. He grabbed the coffee table and, in one fell swoop, broke the leg off from the rest of the wooden structure.

The vampires sprang into action, growling and hissing as their fangs dropped. Trent glanced down. It would take some strength, but the makeshift weapon looked sharp enough to pierce flesh. It was all he had, anyway.

The woman reached him first, swiping at him with her left claw. He managed to catch her wrist before she cut him, but only for a second. She was strong.

That was a terrible idea.

He knocked her hand to the side as the next one attacked, slashing him across the face. There was sharp pain and shock as the air met his exposed flesh.

He twisted away in reaction, which ran him right into the male vampire. He struggled, but the asshole had his claws clamped down around Trent's arms. Not good. The vampire flashed his fangs. The lamplight glinted off them.

"Stay back." Trent pulled his arms back as hard as he could, but he was stuck. He was strong, but he was still human.

Being trapped triggered a raging torrent of memories, running through Trent's head one after the other like an out-of-control film projector. The night he arrived at his stepfather's coven at fourteen. Being locked in the basement by one of the punk vampires. The two days he waited for his mother to realize he was missing. Waking in the middle of the night to the cold hand of that same asshole holding him down by the shoulder. Unable to move. Unable to move.

His breathing got heavy as the images flashed through his mind's eye. Only the growl of his captor broke the hold of the vise that squeezed in his chest.

"Maybe I'll bring you back to the covenhouse," the vampire said, his high cheekbones and hollow cheeks making him look more ghoul than anything else. "I've never had a thrall. I can put a cage in my bedroom for you."

"Fuck you." Trent spit in the vamp's face, wishing that his saliva was filled with

deadly venom.

“You’ll wish you didn’t.” The vampire pulled back like a cobra and struck, pain shooting through Trent’s neck as his fangs pierced the skin. Trent’s struggle melted away as the monster drank.

His vision was clouding when he heard a high-pitched screech, followed by a roar, loud and piercing, the sound of a lion defending its young. Without a warning, the vampire was thrown from him, crashing into the nearby wall, and warm blood was trickling down his collarbone. His blood.

Oscar was moving fast. His face was a mask of fury. Trent had never seen him like that, never even imagined it was possible. His claws were fully extended, like sets of razor-sharp knives, and his movement was smooth and deadly.

Trent had lost too much blood. Consciousness was slipping away, but before he was completely gone, a final image burned into his brain.

Oscar, covered in the blood of the vampire who had attacked him, a mindless figure of rage and death. His eyes were glowing red.

Chapter 15

Oscar

Oscar hadn’t known it would be like this. He’d heard the stories, understood the theory of the crimson surge. If his mate was in mortal danger, the demon inside of him would take over, giving him a burst of power to save them. Sounded simple enough. He had thought he would have some control, some hold over what was happening.

He was wrong.

Elliott had him pinned against the refrigerator, his ex-boyfriend's eyes bulging with exertion. Oscar could smell his breath; all smoke and rotting meat. He'd turned his head to escape the odor.

That's when he saw the vampire sink his fangs into Trent's perfect neck.

The room was bathed in red mist as the demon surged through his blood. His limbs moved of their own accord. He snatched one claw loose from Elliott's grip and plunged a sharp finger into his eye.

Elliott screamed, a piercing sound of terror and pain, as his eyeball popped. Oscar was dimly aware that his legs were moving. He kicked Elliott in the chest, sending the now half-blind man tumbling to the hardwood floor.

Everything was a whirlwind then, the demon beneath his skin pulling him into a frenzy as he ripped the vampire off Trent's neck. Oscar's claws plunged into the vamp's torso, cracking ribs, wrapping around the man's cold heart, and pulling. There was a sick sound of flesh and sinew as the still-beating organ emerged from his torso.

The guy dropped to the floor. He wouldn't recover from that.

He was on the woman now, even as she sped to her compatriot's side, shaking his lifeless corpse. One moment, Oscar was observing from a few feet away, and the next, he held the woman's severed head in his hands, her body lying crosswise over her partner's.

Oscar looked down. Shock and surprise stared back at him from the woman's face. His eyes went to Trent, who collapsed down to the couch in a full-on faint. Letting the vamp's head fall to the ground, he sped to his side, putting his ear to Trent's

chest.

His heartbeat was there, still strong. The vampire hadn't taken too much.

The red fog cleared from Oscar's eyes. He had control of his body once again. He took in the destruction he had caused. Blood pooled on the cabin floor, spilling out from the bodies of the two vamps and staining the oak planks a deep maroon.

Two. Only two bodies.

Elliott was gone. He must have fled after Oscar destroyed his eye. Yet again, he should have been dead, but he wasn't.

It didn't matter. Oscar turned his attention back to his unconscious mate. He picked up a pillow with a red and white flannel cover from the other end of the couch and set it behind his head. He deserved to be comfortable as he recovered.

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That was when he saw the long, thin wound in Trent's cheek.

He screamed in rage, springing up and kicking the bodies of the dead vamps. No one had the right to touch his Trent. He'd kill any who tried.

His Trent. He had tried to deny it, but the demon inside him knew the truth. The bond stretched out between them, and the more they spent time together, the more it started to solidify. Trent was his mate. Even if he'd been sure of that before, this proved it definitively. Oscar's demon had protected his fated one.

He shoved thoughts of destiny and their possible mate bond away. He had to dress Trent's face. He had to fix what he could.

Trent hadn't stirred while Oscar disinfected and bandaged his injury. It made Oscar nervous, but his heartbeat was still strong and even. He'd just lost a lot of blood. He needed sleep to recover.

After Oscar affixed the last piece of medical tape, he ran his fingers through Trent's blonde hair, treasuring the feel of the feather-soft strands against his skin. God, the man was beautiful. He was the spitting image of a college linebacker. Oscar wondered if he'd played. But his face wasn't aggressive or competitive now. In repose, it was sweet, almost needy.

Oscar shook his head and backed up, sinking down into the leather armchair across from his mate. He stared at Trent's unconscious form, his chest rising and falling in a slow, even rhythm. There was something perfect about Trent in this environment. Maybe it was because he was from Wisconsin, but he fit in perfectly with the rustic

furnishings. The cedar kitchen table. The black iron wood stove. The enormous basket filled with a towering pile of blankets. And Trent. He looked at home.

Oscar needed to think. What should happen next? The first thing was to tell his coven master.

Freddie?

The empty silence was deafening, but it would take some time for his thought to reach his master. Freddie was much older than him and could send his call quickly over miles. Oscar didn't have that kind of power, no matter how precocious Elliott claimed he was.

In the meantime, he waited, basking in the calm peace that being this close to his mate gave him.

Oscar. Report.

The rage spiked in Oscar's chest as he responded. We were attacked.

How? Freddie's thought was always even keeled, but Oscar could feel the tension under the question.

I don't know. My ex Elliott and two others. The two are dead. Elliott has fled.

Injuries?

One of the vamps drained Trent, but he'll recover. He's unconscious, but his heartbeat is strong. They slashed his face. Oscar couldn't stifle his anger. They deserved more of a punishment for hurting his mate. Death wasn't enough.

And Justin?

Oscar sat up straight. Where had Justin been? In the frenzy of blood, he'd forgotten about his friend's absence.

I...I don't know.He must have gone out in the night. I called for him during the fight, but he wasn't there.

The brooding radiated out from Freddie's presence in Oscar's mind. Oscar waited for him to speak.

Not good. Either he was taken out in advance of the attack, or...

Oscar couldn't sit still as hurt and worry and anger swirled inside him. He jumped to his feet; the floorboards creaking as he paced.

I don't believe that he'd betray us.Oscar fought to keep his thoughts calm.He is devoted to the coven.

He's devoted toyou, Oscar.

Oscar blinked.What does that mean?

Just what I said.Freddie's presence left for a moment, leaving Oscar to ponder Freddie's words. No matter. He'd found his mate. He no longer had any desire for anyone else.

Do you think Elliott will attack again?Freddie returned, his question ringing in Oscar's skull.

I...I don't know.Oscar moved to the kitchen sink, turning the faucet and washing his

hands vigorously, as if the act would cleanse him of his association with his ex. It would be difficult. I took out an eye, and it will take some time to regenerate a new one. Not that he couldn't attack with only one eye, but I can't imagine he's very happy.

You took an eye? Freddie's approval came through the bond loud and clear. Good.

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Yes. I...Oscar wasn't sure if he should tell Freddie what had happened. But Elliott had seen Oscar slaughter two vampires. It would be common knowledge soon enough, and his master deserved to know.

It was the crimson surge.Freddie beat him to it, amusement trickling through the connection.

How—

I'm your Coven Master, Oscar. You can't hide things from me mind-to-mind.

Oscar sighed, resigned and also a little embarrassed. He sheepishly dried his hands on an embroidered hand towel with a marigold design.

Trent is my mate.

I'm happy you finally said it.

Oscar shook his head. It didn't fix anything. In fact, it made everything worse.

He hates vampires. He hates the concept of mates. I can't tell him. How will he react? And obviously I have enough baggage to prevent a plane from taking off, considering I popped my ex-boyfriend's eyeball out all of three hours ago.

Waves of calming energy washed over Oscar. This was the gift of the bond between vampire and coven master. When Freddie spoke, his tone was filled with compassion.

Don't give up too easily, Oscar. Things change.

Oscar couldn't think of a response to that, so he said nothing.

Lillian and I are coming to get you. Tend to Trent and stay safe until we get there.

Yes, Coven Master.

With that, Freddie's presence was gone. Oscar did feel calmer. As much as Freddie could be broody and intimidating, he cared about his vampires. It was a big change from the old Azarian coven. Oscar still wasn't fully used to it.

"Wha' happened?"

Oscar's gaze snapped to Trent. His eyes were closed, but he was beginning to stir. After a few hours of being unconscious, Trent's blond mop stuck up wildly. Somehow, the bandage on his cheek didn't take away from how handsome he was. Oscar was sure that a scar would make him even sexier, although he would rather that Trent had never been hurt at all.

"We were attacked." Oscar stared at Trent warily. What would he remember?

"I know that!" Trent was fighting the grogginess, still recuperating from the fight.

"That asshole vampire bit me. Just...how did we...?"

"I managed to fight them off. Elliott escaped, unfortunately."

"Oh." Trent sat up, rubbing at his face with his palms. "I feel like I've been hit by a truck."

"You lost a lot of blood."

Trent hummed under his breath. “I guess. What happened to...” He craned his neck around, taking in the whole cabin. His eyes widened at the bodies of the two dead vamps.

“Justin?” Oscar asked. “I don’t know. He didn’t help during the fight.”

Trent’s jaw tightened “We saw him go into his room.”

Oscar nodded. “We did. I’m not sure...I worry he’s been kidnapped.” He didn’t want to give more credence to Freddie’s conjecture.

“Or he ratted us out.” Trent’s face was stone. “If they didn’t follow us from the city, they had to have gotten our location from someone.”

Oscar blanched at Trent’s words. “I don’t want to believe he would do this. You nearly died.”

“I did. I’m only alive because...” Trent’s voice caught in his throat. Oscar flinched inwardly. Did Trent remember? Oscar hoped not. He didn’t know if his heart could take Trent’s rejection, especially after tending to his wounds and caring for him.

“You slaughtered them,” Trent continued. “I was fading out, but I saw that much. Your...your eyes were glowing red. The crimson surge. That’s what it was, wasn’t it?”

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Oscar kept quiet. Maybe Trent didn't have full knowledge of it. He got up from the chair, crossing to stow the medical supplies in a kitchen cabinet.

"Don't walk away, Oscar." Trent's tone was commanding. "I lived with vampires. I know what that means. Your mate was in mortal danger. And we both know Elliott isn't your mate."

Oscar closed the cupboard and leaned against the counter. He couldn't say anything. He'd done his best to avoid this conversation, and his best hadn't been good enough.

"I'm your mate?" Trent's face was unreadable. Oscar nodded.

"You are."

Chapter 16

Trent

The room closed in around Trent. He wasn't sure if it was this new information, or the blood loss, or just general overwhelm, but the atmosphere pressed down on him. His chest tightened as he gripped his legs, his hands on his thighs.

"Oscar—"

"I would never force you to accept the bond, Trent. Never."

"I don't want this." Trent couldn't temper the harshness of his tone. This was the

thing that had destroyed his mother, that had haunted his teenage years.

“I wouldn’t have revealed it to you.” Oscar stayed plastered against the butcher block counter, far across the cabin. “I didn’t expect an attack or for your life to be in danger.”

“Wait.” Trent pushed down against the arm of the couch, fighting his exhaustion to come to standing. His core was shaky, and Oscar stepped toward him to help. Trent held out a hand to stop him.

“You...you knew? And you didn’t tell me?”

Oscar paled, his already fair complexion going sheet white. His hands gripped the wood of the countertop.

“I knew that you wouldn’t want it. That you couldn’t. And I didn’t want it either. You’ve seen Elliott. You know what I ran from?—”

“When? When did you know?” The adrenaline was banishing Trent’s grogginess, strengthening his uncertain legs. He needed details, and now.

Oscar took a deep breath. “The day of the attack. When I dressed your wounds. I was drawn to your...your blood. After we were done, I tasted a drop. I knew then that you were mine.”

“I am not your property!” Trent’s voice echoed off the wood of the cabin walls. He was trying so hard to keep control, but this was too much. “Why would you taste my blood? What an invasive, disgusting?—”

“I was pulled to it. Drawn to it. Because you are my mate. My demon pushed me to try that single drop, to know for sure.”

“You should have told me.” Trent’s jaw clenched. “You didn’t have any right to hide something like that from me.”

“I wasn’t?—”

“If I had known we were mates, I would have never come here with you!” Trent’s knees buckled at the exertion, and he collapsed down onto the couch. He hated not being one hundred percent. He hated having to rely on someone else.

Oscar walked over to Trent, sitting across from him, perched gingerly on the armchair, scooted to the front of the seat cushion.

“I’m sorry. I just didn’t?—”

“I want to go back to New York.” Trent fought against the panic and desperation threatening to stop his voice. “They know we’re here. It doesn’t make any sense to stay.”

Oscar flinched almost imperceptibly, then nodded. “Freddie and his First are on their way. Once they get here?—”

“No. I want to go now.” Trent knew he was being unreasonable, but he couldn’t help it. This was all too much. He just wanted to be home.

“Please,” Oscar said. “Elliott probably won’t return so soon after being injured. We should wait for Freddie and Lillian. They can take on anyone. And even if we were attacked again, the cabin is the best place to be. We don’t want to run into Elliott and more of his coven alone on an empty backwoods road.”

Trent sighed, almost whimpering. Anxiety churned in his stomach. He couldn’t purge the raw panic from his system. It was silly, all this inner turmoil in a ridiculous, rustic

cabin in the woods of Maine. Was he gonna shoot a bear and then cry about his childhood trauma?

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“Fine.” Trent closed his eyes. “Don’t tell anyone that we are mates.”

“I...I had to report to my coven master. I can’t hide things from Freddie when we speak mind-to-mind.”

“Dammit!” Trent kicked at the wooden coffee table, sending it flying off its three remaining legs with a crack. He sat up, glaring at Oscar.

“I won’t repeat the mistakes my mother made,” Trent continued. “I won’t give up my independence to find myself at the mercy of a coven full of vampires. It doesn’t matter if I’m attracted to you, it doesn’t matter how hot the sex is. I’ve seen what happens. I’ve seen what the manipulation and blood lust do to a person. My mother is dead because of it. And she lost her sanity long before that.”

Oscar didn’t respond. Trent was being vague, but he didn’t owe Oscar an explanation. He didn’t owe anyone an explanation. His life was his own.

When Oscar finally spoke, his voice was small and tentative. “I didn’t expect us to be together. I didn’t plan to make it happen. I knew how you felt.”

Fuck. Oscar was hurt, and Trent had lost the ability to be dispassionate. He cared about Oscar, and if they stayed in this moment for any longer, his resolve would soften.

“Let’s look in Justin’s room.”

Trent walked away without waiting for a response. He needed a distraction from the

conversation and from his thoughts. The power Oscar had over him, the pull he felt. Was it real, or due to some kind of bullshit destiny thing? Was he actually bisexual? Or was he being forced to feel that way by vampire magic?

Whatever it was, he couldn't be seduced by it. He couldn't afford to be tempted by an easy salve to his loneliness. He knew his mind, and he knew that what mattered was his career and his future, and not being caught in the trap his mother had found herself in.

He threw open the door to Justin's room, grabbing at the door frame for support for his slowly strengthening body. What he saw didn't make any sense.

"He didn't leave anything behind," Oscar whispered. He was right. It looked as if Justin had cleaned from top to bottom. Everything was spotless, the twin bed made, a colorful old-fashioned quilt spread over the sheets.

"There," Trent answered. He gestured to the small wooden desk in the far corner. On it sat a scrap of paper, torn from a notebook and lightly lined. He walked over and bent down to read what was written there.

Just one word.

"It says 'sorry.'" Trent forced the words out from behind his clenched teeth. "That's it."

Oscar collapsed down onto the bed, burying his head in his hands. He was distraught, but Justin's betrayal only strengthened Trent's determination. He couldn't go back to coven life.

"This is why I can't have a mate," Trent said. "Why I can't be around vampires. At the core, a vampire is a bloodthirsty, selfish being. Look at Justin. You thought he

was trustworthy.”

Oscar looked up at Trent, his eyes lined with exhaustion and worry.

“I don’t understand why he would betray us. He sold out his own coven.”

“Because that is what it means to be what you are.” Trent crossed to the dresser, opening drawers, searching for anything else left behind, but each was bare of Justin’s belongings. “A creature that drinks blood for a living cannot be trusted.”

“You think you can’t trust me?” Oscar asked. There was desperation in his voice, but Trent didn’t turn to look. He couldn’t stay strong in the face of Oscar’s sadness. He opened the door to the narrow closet, tugging on the wrought iron handle and peering into the dark. He knew he wouldn’t find anything, but he needed something to focus on so he wouldn’t give in.

“No. I don’t. I don’t trust vampires. And when we get back to New York, we should keep our distance.”

The bed squeaked as Oscar stood. His footsteps were gentle thumps as he left Justin’s bedroom. Trent was alone.

His gut churned with guilt. Maybe Oscar didn’t deserve that. Oscar hadn’t betrayed him. Perhaps he never would. But that’s not what history had shown him. Trent had learned the lessons of the past. Trust no one, but especially not vampires. Today’s events only reinforced what life had taught him.

A crash of wood broke Trent out of his reverie. What was going on? He strode into the main room of the cabin to see Oscar breaking one of the rustic kitchen chairs in two, adding it to a new pile of debris behind the door. Off to the side was Rhonda’s body. Oscar must have dragged her over and covered her with a quilt.

“What are you doing?” Trent crossed his arms as he stared out at the mess that Oscar was creating.

“It takes ten hours to travel here from Manhattan. I might have wounded Elliott, but there’s always a chance he’ll return before Freddie arrives. We have to make the cabin defensible.”

Trent surveyed the interior of the house. The bedrooms had windows, but the doors to those rooms could be shut and barricaded. On the other hand, the two large bay windows that looked out onto the porch from the main room would be hard to defend.

“What about the windows?” Trent asked.

“Tilt the couch on its side and cover one of them. We’ll need to be able to see out of the other. They won’t take us if they come.”

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It only took about halfan hour to finish the job, which left them another nine hours to spend in each other's company. Unsurprisingly, Oscar didn't say much. Trent had pushed the vampire away, so the silent treatment wasn't a surprise, although it didn't help his guilt.

Oscar had pulled out a large tome about the American Civil War from a dusty bookshelf and was sitting on the floor, leafing through it. He didn't have much choice. The rest of the furniture was piled up against the front doorway.

None of the books in the cabin appealed to Trent — they were mostly about war and woodworking, with a few classics thrown in — so he grabbed a puzzle from the pile of games and spread it out on the kitchen counter. One thousand pieces. That would kill a few hours.

The time passed in silence. Tense at first, they settled into an uneasy truce. Oscar stayed glued to his book. Trent stared at the stack of similarly colored puzzle pieces. It was supposed to be a painting of a snow-covered cabin, but all those white pieces looked exactly the same.

Their determined effort to ignore each other might be the reason why it took so long for Trent and Oscar to realize they were being watched.

It was the unsettling tickling of gooseflesh on the back of Trent's neck that tipped him off. He stepped away from the kitchen counter, glancing out the only remaining unobstructed window. It was dusk now, and the encroaching darkness lay thick around the outside of the cabin.

It took him a few seconds to understand what he was seeing: a figure, so still it was as if the shadows of the trees had molded around it. But the light shifted, and when it did, it revealed the slight blonde twink that had led the attackers to them.

He was staring right at Trent. His face was blank, his eyes unblinking.

“Justin,” Trent whispered in a ragged growl. Oscar was by his side in an instant, his attention focused on his former friend.

“What do you think he wants?” Trent asked.

“I...don’t know,” Oscar said. “He’s never been much of a fighter. But before today, I would have also said that he was a friend. I was wrong about that.”

Trent grunted. The two of them stared out at Justin, who continued to glare at them with his piercing brown eyes. Ultimately, Oscar broke the spell.

“I have to go talk to him.”

“Are you insane?” Trent stepped back from Oscar with his arms outstretched in front of him. “You don’t know who else is waiting out there in the trees. Maybe he has a whole coven out there.”

“I have to find out, Trent.” Oscar gave his head a rueful shake. “He was my friend.”

“It’s a trap. You have to know that.”

“I don’t know that!” Oscar snapped. He pursed his lips and blew out a lungful of air, then continued in a softer tone. “We’re covenmates. I saved him from that asshole. I need an explanation.”

Trent sighed, but finally nodded. He understood, but he didn't like it.

"Barricade the door behind me," Oscar said. "If something happens, don't try to help. If it's more than just Justin, you won't have a chance out in the open."

Trent said nothing. He wouldn't commit to that. His choices were his own, and he wouldn't cower in fear from a vampire, not even if it meant his death.

Chapter 17

Oscar

As Oscar walked down the front steps of the old porch, a shy smile broke out on Justin's face.

Oscar slowed his pace. Did Justin think he would simply forgive him? It didn't matter ultimately. What mattered was finding out the reason for his betrayal.

Justin's smile widened as Oscar approached. The wind had picked up, and there was a bite in the air as it flowed around his skin. He stopped ten feet short of the deceitful young vamp.

"Why are you here?" Oscar forced himself to adopt an even tone.

"I...I had to see you." Justin looked thrown by the fact that Oscar had kept his distance. He couldn't be that dumb. Like Oscar would get any closer after what he'd done.

"Tell me the reason." Oscar rooted his legs like tree trunks into the compact earth below. "Why would you lead them to us?"

“Oscar...” Justin looked away, pressing his lips together. Finally, he turned back.

“They have my aunt.”

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“What?” That was not the sentence he’d expected to hear. “Who? Who exactly are they?”

“Elliott. His coven.” Justin swallowed, and his eyes darted nervously to the surrounding trees. “They’ll kill her if they find out I told you.”

“Well, I’ll kill you if you don’t tell me everything. So either way, you’re dead.”

Justin sighed. “I guess I deserve that.” He took a step toward Oscar, who held out his hand to stop him. He wouldn’t be letting his guard down. Justin was no longer his friend.

“What coven, Justin? He acted like he was coven master.”

Justin reached up and scratched at the back of his neck. “The Azarians,” he said sheepishly.

Oscar scoffed at the name. “The Azarian coven is dead. New York City is Grosvenor territory.”

“The few elders that were left gathered in Canarsie, as far away from the Upper West Side and the old covenhouse as they could get. Elliott either convinced everyone he should be coven master or killed all other contenders, I’m not sure which.”

Rage spiked in Oscar’s chest. There was something wet on his lips. It tasted like bitter iron. In his anger, he’d pierced his own bottom lip with his fangs. It had been an instinctual response to the news that any of the cruel assholes from his old coven were

still in the city.

“How many vampires?”

“I...I don’t know.” Justin shrugged and shuffled his feet in the grass. “They never told me. The new covenhouse is a converted old church. I’ve never been inside. They didn’t want me. Elliott said it was better I was out, loose, under his control. That he would call on me when they needed me. They...they won’t let me see her. My Aunt Lavinia. They keep saying she has to pay off her debt. But I don’t even know what that is!”

Justin’s eyes were welling with tears, and his bottom lip trembled. Oscar couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

“Justin...”

“They’re keeping her for blood, I think.” Justin’s focus went far away, as if conjuring up an image of his aunt in his mind. Then he spoke in a soft, sad tone. “I don’t think they’ll ever let her go.”

Oscar stepped closer in, his self-admonition to keep his distance gone. He put both hands on Justin’s shoulders and locked eyes with the young vamp.

“Why didn’t you come to us? We would have helped.”

At the touch, Justin shook, the tremors wracking his body as the words spilled out in a ragged whisper.

“Elliott threatened to torture her. To kill her. I couldn’t risk it. I hid the fact that you were still alive for as long as I could, but once he found out you were at the old covenhouse, that you were part of the Grosvenor coven, he became obsessed. He

insisted that you were his mate, that you had to be returned to him. Then, after Rick didn't bring you to him, he made me tag along on your trip to Maine."

Oscar removed his hands from Justin's shoulders. His empathy was a warm ember in his heart, but it wasn't without conditions. Justin had ignored all the opportunities he'd had to find another way. He hadn't even tried.

"You'll have to come back to the Grosvenor covenhouse. Freddie and Lillian will want to speak to you. You have to tell them everything."

Justin shook his head, fear flashing in his eyes. "I can't. If they see that I've gone there after this, they'll kill her. And what do you need me for? You'll be safe with Freddie. Who cares what happens to Trent? He could be at the covenhouse with you, totally protected, but he won't go because he's a spoiled brat with some kind of childhood trauma. Who cares? We've all got trauma!"

With a growl, Oscar was on him, his right hand gripping the twink vamp's throat. Justin struggled in his grasp, uselessly pushing at Oscar's chest to free himself.

"I care what happens to him." Oscar's voice was flat and deadly.

"Please," Justin said, forcing the words out past Oscar's grip around his trachea. "The man's a human. He's not good enough for you. He's been a brat this whole time. Just because he sucked your dick?—"

Oscar tossed Justin to the side. The vamp managed to recover before hitting the ground, but he was off-balance, staring wildly at Oscar with his hands up in front of his face.

"You asshole," Oscar growled. "You heard us having sex. That's when you told Elliott where we were."

Justin's fangs dropped as he stood tall in defiance, puffing his chest out like a wooden soldier.

"You should be mine! I could give you so much more —"

"He is intelligent, and sexy, and underneath that protective outer shell, he cares about people. He could have kept walking that day in Brooklyn, but he stopped." A breeze picked up around them, whipping through the leaves and blowing Oscar's hair about. "He saved me. He wasn't afraid. He did it even when it made his life more difficult."

"He doesn't want you!" Justin was yelling now, gesturing to the cabin which housed the human he despised. "He hates vampires! You're deluding yourself if you think he'll stay with you."

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“I know that he won’t!” Oscar screamed. It wasn’t like him, being this out of control. He didn’t let people provoke him. But Trent kindled this protective flame in him, and it burned hot.

Oscar dug his fingernails into his palms, breaking the skin as he wrestled with his anger.

“I know that we can’t be together. But I won’t let him be harmed. I won’t let anyone touch him.”

Justin squinted at Oscar, his hands resting on his hips in a petulant posture. Then his eyes widened.

“Oh my god. You think that he’s your mate.”

Oscar glanced back at the cabin. He imagined Trent inside, doing something domestic. Making dinner or doing laundry or working on that dumb puzzle. He imagined the future they would never have together.

“He is my mate,” Oscar said, his voice now soft. “Even though we’ll never complete the bond, I will protect him. He deserves that much.”

Justin scoffed and rolled his eyes. “He’s a dick. An arrogant, self-obsessed asshole. He’ll never give you what you want. It would be better if you let Elliott kill him. Hell, I’ll kill him myself.”

With that, Oscar flew to Justin’s throat, strangling him, his claws locked into the flesh

of Justin's neck. Justin writhed, screaming, as he pounded his fists against Oscar's chest, but Oscar wouldn't let go. He couldn't.

This little twerp, he'd pretended to be Oscar's friend and then given them over to his abusive ex and the remnants of his evil old coven. It didn't matter now that he was trying to save his aunt, if that was even true. No one would threaten his mate. No one would put Trent in danger.

"Oscar." Trent's voice was low and kind. When had he come out of the cabin? He was so calm. "Oscar, let him go."

"No." Oscar's voice spilled out in a raspy roar. "I won't."

Then Trent's hand was on his shoulder, warm and soft against the tensed muscles that held Justin painfully in place. That touch contained so much in it, so much hope, and so much disappointment.

"Please," Trent whispered into his ear.

Something broke inside. Oscar let go, and Justin collapsed to the ground, gasping for air.

"Thank you," Trent said. His face was still, even as Oscar shook with spent exertion.

"You almost died last night. He doesn't deserve?—"

"I know." Trent's lips formed into a compassionate smile. "But he's your friend. You shouldn't carry the burden of killing him."

"I don't know..." Oscar's eyes went to the twink vampire, who was no longer gasping for air. He lay on his back in the grass and dried leaves as the rhythm of his

breathing returned to normal.

“I heard what you said.” Trent removed his hand from Oscar’s shoulder. Oscar immediately missed its absence.

“What...which part?” A wave of fear rolled over Oscar. He hadn’t been thinking at all, really. He’d just been reacting.

“That you would protect me. That it didn’t matter if we were together, that you wouldn’t allow anyone to hurt me.”

Oscar nodded. He didn’t have anything else to say. Trent would never accept him as his mate. But Oscar wouldn’t allow harm to come to him.

“I appreciate it, Oscar. I appreciate you. I wish I could...I wish it were possible?”

The sound of tires on gravel snatched Oscar’s attention. Two black luxury sedans rolled down the long path from the road.

“That’s Freddie and Lillian. They can deal with him,” Oscar said, gesturing to Justin. “I’ll drive the rental back. You go with them. We shouldn’t see each other. Not for a while.”

Trent opened his mouth as if he was about to refute Oscar, then closed it. He nodded slowly.

“That’s for the best.”

Chapter 18

Trent

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The road stretched out in front of him as Trent sank into the cushy leather seat. He glanced over at the muscular red headed coven master in the driver's seat. The vampire hadn't said a word since they got on the highway. Trent looked down at his phone. Hopefully, there would be service soon, so he wouldn't have to stare awkwardly out the window, thinking about how intimidating Freddie Grosvenor was.

Eventually, he couldn't stand the silence anymore.

"What will happen to Justin?" Trent asked.

The powerful vampire raised an eyebrow, but didn't take his eyes off the road. He replied in his deep, British-accented voice.

"He will be dealt with."

Trent shook his head. Vampires. Why did everything have to be dramatic? And end in death?

"What does that mean?" he asked, figuring that the coven master would tell him to shut up if he didn't want to talk.

"We'll speak with him. We'll determine the severity of the offense and follow our laws. Betraying a fellow vampire and his mate is no small misdemeanor." Freddie spoke matter-of-factly, as if this were a typical day of business. Maybe it was for him.

"His aunt was taken hostage," Trent said. "That has to be a mitigating circumstance."

Freddie glanced over at Trent. He felt naked under the gaze of Freddie's piercing green eyes. "Perhaps. Do you wish to advocate for Justin? His actions almost led to your death."

"I just know what it's like," Trent said, picking away at his pant leg with his fingers as he spoke. "To face an impossible choice."

"And...?"

"Justin and Oscar have a history. I'm already depriving Oscar of his mate. I wouldn't want him to lose his friend as well."

"Ah."

They sat in silence as Trent stared at the evergreen boughs flying by on the side of the highway. At one point, they passed a small family of turkeys waddling around in the ditch parallel to the freeway. Their clumsy, round bodies made him chuckle.

It had been many years since Trent lived anywhere but a city. He hadn't missed the countryside, but there was a part of him that yearned for the peace of nature.

"Has Oscar told you about his time in the old Azarian coven?"

The question jolted Trent into the present. He thought back to things Oscar had said.

"Some. I know that the younger vampires were starved. That he kept the sickest of them safe when the coven fell apart."

"When Anthony, Lillian, and I found Oscar, he had set traps for us."

"What?" Oscar was smart, but this seemed completely out of character for the flirty,

flighty singer. Even if he'd recently discovered there were more layers to Oscar than Trent had initially thought, that sounded like some spy movie shit.

"Well, not specifically for us, I suppose. He kept the other vampires safe by booby-trapping the entrance to the floor of the covenhouse they were holed up in. A homemade aerosol torch, spring-loaded knives...it was fairly impressive. When we went in, he set himself as a shield between us and the rest of them."

"Alone?" Trent asked.

"By then, they'd been so starved that Oscar was the only one conscious." A pained expression crossed the stoic coven master's face. "He had kept them alive by feeding them small amounts of his own blood. The others were all in comas. By force of will, somehow Oscar was still standing." Freddie's voice hummed with a low undercurrent of grief and anger. "It...it was horrific."

"Oh." Trent didn't know what to say. "Why...why are you telling me this?"

"Because I thought you should know who he is. The party boy facade is a new development. It's a reaction to the trauma of what happened, a way to hold the world at arm's length. When I first met him, he was starving and trying to keep his covenmates alive. He was intelligent and resourceful. And terrified. For the first six months after we found him, he woke up screaming every night. He cares a great deal."

Trent crossed his arms, squeezing them hard against himself. He hated how raw everything had felt recently. Before now, he'd used his hyperfocus as a shield, keeping any problems at bay. But since Oscar, he was one man-sized exposed nerve.

"I'm starting to see that. I just worry...I can't give him what he needs."

“I know about the Madison coven,” Freddie said.

Trent flinched at Freddie’s words. “Why? What do you mean?” He didn’t like to think about his “home” coven.

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“The vampire world is small, and we keep track of each other.” Freddie’s voice was even and grounding. No wonder people followed him. “We have to be prepared when a coven turns to evil and has to be put down. Your old coven never got to that point, but it did come across my desk in London.”

“Oh.” Trent’s brows furrowed. “Was it that bad? I was new to the supernatural world. I assumed all covens were like that.”

“The word was that leadership was weak, and that the fight for power was brutal.”

Trent nodded, not saying anything. He’d spent most of his adult life trying not to think about his old coven.

“We were planning on sending someone if it got any worse.”

“It was bad enough,” Trent whispered, looking away from Freddie. “The jockeying for control was at all levels. The coven master ran it like his own mini-army, and everyone was obsessed with rank. They’d do anything just shy of killing off a covenmate to be promoted. Eventually, they did start killing. That’s when I left.”

“Because they murdered your stepfather.”

Trent’s gaze snapped to Freddie, who still didn’t look away from the road.

“You think I wouldn’t find out about your history? You were in my covenhouse, even if only for a few minutes. It’s my job to know.”

Trent shook his head. "I guess. Yes. When my stepfather died, and then...everything else happened...I got out."

"Not all covens are like that, Trent," Freddie said. "Some do their best to protect each other and lift each other up. My people do."

"I suppose that's possible, but..."

"You can trust Oscar, you know. He could have had his way with you whenever he liked. He could have forcibly changed your mind."

Trent sat up straight. He'd forgotten about Oscar's gifts.

"His powers are incredible."

Freddie nodded. "Quite unusual. The power of mind control is one that usually manifests in older vampires. But even though he is young, he doesn't abuse it. He's a good person."

"I think that's true. But I also saw what happened to my mother. I don't know if I can ever trust a vampire. Not all the way."

They sat in silence for several minutes. The sky was clear blue above them, the clouds fluffy and white, as if Maine had given them a picturesque day as a parting gift. Finally, Trent broke the quiet.

"I know you'll put some kind of surveillance on me when we get back to the city."

Freddie grunted affirmatively. "We haven't seen any sign of Elliott. I don't trust him."

“It’s fine,” Trent said. “I expected it. But...can you make sure it’s not Oscar? I...we need the time apart.”

“Not every mating ends in tragedy, you know.”

“I know that!” Trent stopped himself and breathed in and out, trying to calm his system. “I do. Really. I just...I need the time.”

Freddie cocked his head for a moment, taking in what Trent said. Finally, he spoke.

“I’ll have Lillian do it. She won’t have any problem keeping you safe. And she’s discreet.”

“Thank you. Tell Oscar...I’ll call him in a week.”

The first couple of days back in the city were strange. The landlord had put in a new window, so Trent’s apartment wasn’t quite the mess he’d left it. Although he was on edge at first, there were no signs that he was being watched or followed, other than the occasional glimpse of Lillian. He attended his classes, but Oscar wasn’t there. Anthony gave him a piercing look when he first saw Trent, but Trent quickly calmed him down.

After he’d been back for three days, he had his first one-on-one lesson with Anthony. He arrived at the practice room early to run through his music with Julie.

“Where have you been?” she demanded after Trent walked through the door. Her hair was up in a tight bun, and her wire-framed glasses gave her the look of an imperious-but-still-glamorous schoolteacher.

“Family emergency.”

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“Come on.” Julie rolled her eyes. “Both you and Oscar were gone for a long weekend. I’m not Sherlock Holmes if I solve this mystery. You left town together!”

“I...I can’t really talk about it.” Trent swung his backpack off his shoulder and unzipped it, pulling out his binder full of music.

“Whatever. But something must have happened between you.”

“What do you mean?” Trent asked.

“Are you kidding me? You two go, and then you come back, but he doesn’t. Where is he? What happened?”

Trent pulled up a nearby music stand, metal scraping against metal as he slid the black contraption to the appropriate height. “Can we just rehearse? The Manhattan Lyric audition is in two weeks, and I have to...”

“Have to do better than Oscar?” Julie asked, snarkiness creeping in.

“Yeah,” Trent said, although his heart wasn’t in it.

Trent wanted to focus on music. He didn’t want to think about what had happened. He didn’t want to worry about how Oscar was feeling. He came to New York to achieve his career ambition and get away from vampires. If that was all that he did for the next five years, that was fine. He needed to let go of the long-haired vamp with the swimmer’s build who had made his skin catch fire with his touch.

“I’m going to call Oscar after this. The two of you are my friends. We’ll go to that coffee place with the hateful baristas and you two can work through whatever?—”

“I just want to sing!”

The words came out louder and harsher than he intended. He was exhausted from being so on edge. It wasn’t the upcoming audition, or even the vampires-are-trying-to-kill-me shit. It was Oscar.

Julie nodded, her eyes wary after being shouted at. “What should we work on?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“Dammit.” Trent closed his eyes, reaching for the control that had eluded him over the last week. After a moment, he opened them, locking his gaze to Julie’s patient face.

“I’m sorry.”

“Okay...” Julie waited expectantly. Of course, she wanted more information.

“I...yes. There’s something going on between us, and I don’t know exactly what it is or how to deal with it. I just need some space. I need to focus on my singing.”

Julie nodded, then slid out from behind the piano and walked over to Trent. She smiled and opened her arms, looking up for consent. Trent nodded.

She wrapped him in a tight embrace, and Trent felt something give, a knot of tension finally loosening and giving way. He had no one he could talk to, no one he could be fully himself around. He had kept everyone at a distance.

“Thank you,” he whispered into her ear, his face buried in her honey-scented hair. “I

don't think I can...I don't know..."

Julie pulled back and took his face in her hands. Her palms were warm against his cheeks.

"Listen, if you need space, that's fine. But as someone who also uses her career to avoid thinking about emotions, let me give you some advice. Sometimes distance is helpful. But for people like us, it's a distraction. We occupy ourselves with the mountains of work and all the internal pressures that we pile on our plates. We never actually feel the thing we say we need space to deal with."

Trent sighed, nodding. She was probably right. Not that he would tell her that.

"I just don't know."

Julie smiled, wide and warm. "That's okay. In the meantime, let's sing."

Chapter 19

Oscar

There were few signs that the old building had once been a church. Other than the steeple-like transom over the door and the two stained glass windows, it blended seamlessly into the city block. This was the third night Oscar and Lillian had sat across the street. Their vantage point was a long-shuttered yoga studio. It still smelled of incense and sweat.

Lillian was some kind of monster, and not because she was a vampire. She could sit there staring for hours at a time without moving or speaking. After half an hour, Oscar would get antsy and pace around the room.

Tonight was no different. They'd arrived at dusk, and now it was nine o'clock. For the third night in a row, no one had gone in or out.

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“Who’s watching Trent?” Oscar asked, desperate to fill the silence.

“I thought you didn’t want to hear about him,” Lillian answered without taking her eyes off her target.

“I...I was just checking in. I assumed you put someone on it.”

“Alan and Pip.”

“Oh. Good.” Alan and Pip were two vampire brothers that had come over from the London coven. They’d been recommended by Freddie’s old coven master to beef up security. They seemed nice, if a little bro-ey for Oscar’s tastes.

He couldn’t be annoyed at Lillian providing the bare minimum of information, considering that he’d asked to be kept out of it. Even so, he was unable to tamp down the instinctual need to check in on Trent, to make sure he was safe. That would probably never go away.

“Maybe Justin was lying about where the covenhouse is,” Oscar said, changing the subject. “Why would vampires choose to live in Canarsie, of all places?”

“Because the Azarian coven was gone, and their old covenhouse was taken over by a bunch of Brits.”

“Hey!” Oscar pursed his lips. The Grosvenor coven wasn’t just from the UK, even if Freddie and Lillian started it.

“And a few annoying Americans.” Lillian reached out and smacked Oscar on the arm. It stung, but he didn’t mind. It snapped him into the present moment.

“How many nights are we going to sit here and stare at an empty building?” Oscar stretched his arms over his head, fighting off a yawn.

Lillian sighed, staring a little longer at the old church.

“No more. Come on.” Lillian jumped up, heading to the door, the hardwood floor creaking as she stepped. Oscar trailed behind, glad to be out of the rank studio. Their vampire senses meant that he could detect every scent each sweaty aspiring yogi had left behind in the room. It was embedded in the architecture. He needed a break from the stench.

They bounded down the stairs and out to the first floor, stepping onto the sidewalk from the narrow hallway. Standing next to each other, they drank in the sight of the old sanctuary. The facade was a deep red brick, matching the rest of the block, and no light spilled out from the two large stained-glass windows. Without illumination from behind, Oscar couldn’t decipher what they depicted. All he could see were human figures with halos.

Halos. There were no angels, not in his life. Instead, it was just shades of hurt and anger. Elliott was proof of that. And Trent...

Oscar should let him go. That would be smart. There were too many obstacles: he was human, he was straight, he was competition. Yet the one encounter with Trent, before it was rudely interrupted by his ex, had been exciting. Emotional, even. It wasn’t a typical hookup, and Oscar didn’t know what to do with that.

He also didn’t know if he could let Trent go. His demon inside would push to be near him. At the very least, he’d have to be in the same city, or he’d be in literal pain. He

didn't want to spend the rest of his long life trailing behind the mate that rejected him. And when Trent died...

He shouldn't dwell on that.

"I've never seen you think so much in the whole time I've known you." Lillian smiled, her teeth white against the city night.

Oscar shook his head. "I hate it. I want to go back to what I do best: partying and fucking."

Lillian crossed the street to get a closer look. "I don't think the fucking is giving you what you need."

Oscar shrugged, not answering. It didn't matter if she was right. There wasn't an easy fix.

Reaching the front steps, they split, each going to one of the windows. Oscar peered in through the muted kaleidoscope of color. There was no movement, no flicker of light. He couldn't see in through the thick glass.

"Once Elliott is dead, will you give yourself a chance?"

"What?" Oscar stumbled, catching himself on a nearby shrub. "A chance at what?"

"You know..."

"I do not."

Lillian rolled her eyes and walked a few feet to her left, bending down to where a tiny basement window nestled inches above the ground. It had been fully hidden from

their vantage point across the street.

“A chance to feel something real for Trent.”

“Dammit, Lil,” Oscar said, moving to her side. “Matchmaking is supposed to be Anthony’s domain. It’s a coven master’s mate thing, not a head of security thing.”

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“I could give two shits if you date anyone, Oscar. But Trent is your mate. A vampire who can’t be with their fated one is a pathetic husk.”

“Well, that was harsh. I?—”

One growl from Lillian stopped the words on Oscar’s tongue. She tapped on the glass of the window. Inside was some kind of basement common room.

“Let your eyes adjust,” she said. “That’s a couch, and a few folding chairs. A coffee table. What do you see on top of the table?”

Oscar peered into the darkness, his vampire sight allowing him more clarity than any human sense could achieve. His gaze fell upon an array of small rectangles covering the long, flat, dark-stained wooden surface.

“Shit.” Oscar punched the brick facade, and bits of red stone flew off, forming a cloud around his hand. “Pictures. Of me. And of Trent.”

Lillian nodded. “They might be old. They might not mean anything.”

Oscar sniffed, hoping to catch a whiff of fresh scent, some clue they could use, but all he got was diesel and rotting garbage. It smelled like New York.

“Or Elliott could be even more obsessed than before.” Oscar frowned.

“I think we need to end the stakeout. There’s more to learn inside,” Lillian said, standing up from her crouch and turning away from the old church. “We’ll come

back with more people and force our way in.”

Oscar’s attempt at a mindless hookup had been a failure.

Not that he’d gone in with high hopes. But Trent had rejected him, and finding someone to have sexy times with had always made him feel better in the past. So he’d hit the apps, and it wasn’t long before he found a handsome jock to spend the night with. He was twenty-five, a hunky day trader who might as well have had “work hard, play hard” tattooed across his chest. A perfect candidate for a meaningless hookup.

That was the plan, anyway. The plan quickly went awry.

It was the odor. The man just didn’t smell right. It wasn’t that he smelled bad, per se, but Oscar yearned for the coffee and citrus that was Trent’s natural musk. Still, Oscar had powered through.

Until the guy had touched him. The minute the man’s fingers clutched at Oscar’s shirt, pulling it up and running along the skin of his lower back, he knew he couldn’t go through with it.

It wasn’t right. He didn’t want that man. He didn’t want any man. He wanted Trent.

But Trent didn’t want him.

A quick apology and he’d rushed out of the guy’s apartment and gone back to the covenhouse. In a perfect world, he would have slept, but Oscar was finding that sleep was a rare luxury these days. But even vampires needed to catch an hour or two every so often.

His lack of sleep only amplified the pervasive dread he felt as he marched toward his

doom. His doom being a rehearsal with Trent.

Also, why were they still doing the damn duet in the first place? They were trying to keep space from each other. Both of them had more important problems. Elliott was still alive and was likely still planning to kidnap him and kill Trent. Why work on the song at all?

In a word, Anthony.

The legendary persistence of the coven master's mate was brought to bear on the two of them, and there was no escape. At least, not for Oscar. Trent could probably move to Japan or Holland or something to get away. But Oscar was stuck with his coven, and with Anthony.

"Right on time!" Anthony cried out with delight as Oscar entered the studio. Trent and Julie were already there. Trent hunkered down in the far corner on a short stool, his blonde hair covering his eyes. If Oscar didn't know better, he'd say that Trent was sulking. That wasn't really Trent's way, but it certainly looked like it.

Oscar pulled out his score from his shoulder bag and sighed, avoiding eye contact with his unrequited mate. It was only an hour of rehearsal. He could survive an hour.

"Why don't we start at the top?" Anthony asked, a smile in his voice. Oscar glanced at Julie, who was wearing a wry smirk. Shit. Had Trent told her that they'd hooked up? Did everyone have to know about this? So many cooks, while Oscar and Trent were attempting to shut down the damn kitchen.

"Why are we doing this?" Trent asked, and Oscar chuckled inwardly. He was definitely sulking. At least Oscar wasn't the only one being tortured by this rehearsal.

“We should be working on our audition material for next week,” Trent continued.
“That’s what I would be doing if I didn’t have to be here.”

“Well, you do have to be here. Because if you aren’t, you’ll fail the assignment,” Anthony said, not even looking up from scribbling away in his notebook.

Trent sighed loudly. Oscar couldn’t help but be tickled. He’d never seen Trent so overly dramatic. It was in total opposition to his normal Midwestern calm, and it was hilarious.

Oscar opened his mouth to make a snarky comment, but Julie launched into the introduction, her strong, slender fingers coaxing real power out of the aging grand piano.

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Trent and Oscar sang.

Dio che nell'alma infondere

Amor volesti e speme,

Desio nel core accendere

Tu déi di libertà.

A lot had happened since the last time Oscar and Trent had sung this together. They'd been attacked multiple times. They'd had sex. They'd been betrayed. They went to Maine and came back home again.

Trent's eyes were buried in the score that rested in his hands. He was avoiding eye contact with Oscar, but Oscar knew the man. Trent was an artist. Singing activated the parts of his heart that he walled off. So Oscar waited.

As the music swelled, Trent raised his eyes, his blonde lashes fluttering, beautiful in the shimmery lamplight of Anthony's studio. Oscar felt privileged to stand there as that powerful, rich, luscious tone poured out of Trent. He basked in the beauty of the sound.

He'd heard Trent sing before, of course, and in the cabin, Trent had even sung for him. They'd practiced this duet before. But Oscar was getting to sing with him, now with full knowledge of what they were together, and the possibility of the mate bond stretched between them. Oscar could almost see it shimmering in the air.

Oscar stepped closer as the end approached, the harmony and counterpoint building the tension between them. He couldn't look away. Trent was sexy, of course, and incredibly handsome, but more than that, he was beautiful. His soul opened up when he sang, and Oscar was able to bathe in the pure feeling that he exuded. Finally, the duet reached its climax.

Insieme vivremo, e moriremo insieme!

Together we will live, and we will die together.

As they cut off that final note, Oscar couldn't hold himself in anymore. He lunged for Trent, crashing his lips against those of the handsome baritone, devouring him. Trent gave as good as he got, his need as powerful as Oscar's own.

Somewhere in the back of his head, Oscar was aware of Anthony and Julie sneaking out, but his mind was a blazing pulse of white, synapses failing to fire as he was consumed with feeling.

It was perfect. And then it ended.

Trent pushed Oscar back with a gasp.

"Please...please...I can't...I can't do this..."

His words hit Oscar with such a force that he staggered away from his mate. How could Trent not recognize how special this was? Oscar had done his best to stop it, but he'd failed. They were made for each other.

Trent was shoving his music into his backpack as fast as he could, avoiding eye contact, fumbling as he rushed. He was almost out the door when Oscar couldn't hold in the words any longer.

“Why do you hate me so much?” Oscar heard his voice crack as he spoke. “Trent. Please. What is wrong with me?”

Trent stopped suddenly, as if hitting an invisible wall. Oscar waited as Trent stood frozen in place. When he finally turned back, tears ran down his face.

“I don’t...I can’t hate you...I...”

He was breathing hard, unable to get the words out, and it was getting worse. Oscar went to his side, hugging Trent and whispering in his ear.

“I’m here. You’re okay, everything’s okay. Slow breaths, honey. You can do it.”

“I want to trust you. So badly. I want to,” Trent sobbed. He was holding on tight now, his strong arms locked around Oscar, leaning against him as if he couldn’t stand on his own.

“Shh, you’re okay, you don’t have to talk.” Oscar ran a hand down the back of his neck, petting him, calming him, doing anything he could think of to relieve the pain radiating off his mate.

“I...I do. I do.” Trent pushed back from Oscar, using the nearby wall for support. His face was red with tears, and there was real fear in his eyes. Oscar’s stomach clenched at the sight of it.

“I have to say this.”

Oscar nodded silently. Whatever Trent needed to do, he would be here.

“My mother is dead because she was my stepfather’s mate.” Trent started to shake, the tremors threatening to overwhelm him, but he took several deep breaths,

encouraging them to subside. “Worse. It was so much worse...”

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“Someone decided that my stepfather had gotten too ambitious. We were never certain who, although there were some obvious candidates. He’d risen too quickly in the Madison coven, jumped over vampires who’d been waiting years to move up the ranks. So they killed him.”

Trent gasped, swallowing his tears, and Oscar stepped forward. Trent held up his hand to stop him.

“I didn’t know him that well. If I’m honest, I wasn’t that sad. I was excited that maybe we would leave the covenhouse. But...”

“But a vampire and their mate don’t survive when the other one dies.”

“No...” Trent’s whisper was almost imperceptible. Then he slid down. He collapsed to the floor, his legs crossed and his back against the wall.

Oscar stayed frozen in place. As much as he needed to be there next to him, Trent wanted physical distance.

“But it’s not instantaneous,” Trent continued. “It would have been so much better if she had just...died. Instead, sh-she lost her mind.”

Trent buried his head in his hands. Oscar had never felt so helpless. This man was his mate, the one person he was supposed to protect and support at all times. But the walls between them had been too great, and this final barrier...Oscar worried it would be too much for Trent. That it would break him.

After a moment, Trent raised his head, his eyes red from crying.

“At first, it was small things. She had trouble remembering my stepfather was dead. She’d ask where he was. She couldn’t focus. But then she became violent. My stepfather had turned her when they married, so she was a full-fledged vampire. She would wander the halls. She attacked other vampires out of nowhere, covenmates, friends of hers. But she was a brand newvamp. She didn’t have the strength to take on any of the other vampires in the coven.”

Muscle movement rippled through Trent, a tremor starting from the ground and shaking his body. “So she went for me.”

He hugged himself tight, squeezing his eyes shut. The hurt was so raw and so intense, and Oscar could feel it in his gut. His mate was in pain.

“I almost died. Luckily, someone came in at the right moment and pulled her off me. They had no choice. They did what they had to, and even if I’d been against it, I was too injured to know it was happening. They took off her head and burned her body.”

Oscar couldn’t help himself. If Trent stopped him, so be it, but the pain was too intense to not at least try. He lowered himself to the ground and wrapped his arms around his human.

Trent collapsed into him, burying his face in Oscar’s chest. It was astonishing, this man who was stronger than any Oscar had known, being this open, this vulnerable. All he could do was be there with him.

After a few moments, Trent lifted his head and spoke. His tone was quiet, his shaking voice showing the deep fear that still lived in him.

“Oscar, I...I want to trust you, so badly. I want to believe that we could be

something, that we could be mates. But everything in my body wants to run away at the thought. My past screams out that being here, being with you, can only end in grief and death. I don't know how we could escape it."

Trent mumbled those last words into Oscar's shirt, and Oscar was struck with how like a lost child he was at that moment. Oscar loved how ambitious Trent was, how put together he was. But right then, he needed someone to take care of him. Oscar's soul yearned for both parts of the man: the tough and the fragile, the driven and the vulnerable. He'd do anything to be with all of Trent.

He ran his hand through Trent's hair, watching his long fingers wend their way through the tousled blonde locks.

"I don't know what the future holds," Oscar said. "We don't have control over so much. But we have control over this: we are here together, now, in each other's arms. That can be enough."

Trent looked up at Oscar, his eyes wide and his cheeks marked by the evidence of tears. There was an emotion there Oscar had never seen before in Trent. Hope.

Oscar basked in his mate's beatific expression, not wanting to say more for fear of breaking the moment. He cradled Trent's face in his hands, his fingers gently brushing away the last of his tears, lightly running over the bandage on his cheek that covered his injury from the attack in the cabin. The man was perfect.

He hadn't realized how desperate Trent was until he opened his mouth to speak.

"Oscar, please...I need you to kiss me. Please."

Chapter 20

Trent

Trent had nothing left. He had let light shine in on the darkest parts of himself and dragged his fears into the sun. There was nothing left to give. He was empty.

Or so he thought.

When Oscar's lips touched his, the cold vacuum that had opened inside of him, that had been growing there since the day his mother died, suddenly began to warm. It wasn't an instant fix, but there was an ember there where before there had only been icy darkness.

That warmth was Oscar's lips. Oscar's hands. Oscar's desire. Oscar's need resonated within Trent, rumbling in his chest, a deep quake that unmoored him and grounded him simultaneously.

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When the pillowy, feather-soft touch of Oscar's lips was suddenly gone, Trent gasped and opened his eyes. Oscar was staring at him, his sweet brown eyes exuding a care that Trent had seldom seen in the years since his mother's death.

"How are you doing?" Oscar asked, his voice filled with a quiet compassion.

"I'm...I'm okay. I've never told anyone about my mother. The only ones who know are the vampires who were there. I've been so separate for so long. It's scary to let go of that, despite the loneliness."

Oscar's lips widened into a smile, and Trent wondered if he'd ever seen anything so pure in his life. Oscar's hand went to his neck, his fingers running up and down, leaving the most exquisite trails of sparks behind on his skin.

"It's intimidating for me, too. But your trust isn't misplaced. Will you let me prove that to you?"

Trent nodded, not knowing what to say. He wanted this more than anything, to feel secure for once, to feel that someone else in the world had him. That someone would catch him if he fell. He hadn't had that ever, not even with his mother.

Oscar winked, and a sliver of lightning hit the base of Trent's spine. This man would be the death of him.

"Will you let me kiss you here?" Oscar bent towards Trent's neck, his eyes locked on Trent's, waiting for his response. Trent nodded.

The gentlest of kisses feathered across the sensitive skin where his neck met his collarbone. Trent shivered.

“Will you let me kiss you here?” Oscar lifted Trent’s t-shirt with his nimble fingers, eyeing his muscular chest. Trent nodded again.

When Oscar’s tongue flicked Trent’s pebbled left nipple, Trent’s brain sparked and fizzled like someone had poured a pitcher of water into his CPU. What was Oscar doing to him? This was a totally different side of him — not the desperate need of their first sexual encounter, but something deeper.

“Will you let me kiss you here?” Oscar gestured with his head further down, to the fine blonde hair of Trent’s treasure trail. Once again, Trent nodded.

The sensation was so gentle, so light, it was absolutely excruciating. Oscar made his way down further, his hands going to the button on Trent’s pants.

“Will you let me undo this?”

Trent glanced around. There were no windows in the studio. Students had sex in the practice rooms so often it had become an inside joke. Anthony wouldn’t mind. He’d probably be happy.

Trent nodded.

The touch of the cold air made Trent’s already-hard dick jump, and he couldn’t stop a moan from escaping. Oscar was beautiful now, looking up at him, his long hair framing his face, making him look like a deadly angel.

After all, wasn’t that what he was?

Oscar placed his lips just beyond the tip of Trent's thick cock. It took everything in Trent not to thrust the millimeters forward to have them meet.

"Will you let me pleasure you?"

"Fucking god, please, this is torture," Trent pleaded. "I need it."

Oscar gave a little hum of contentment, and Trent's balls jumped and tightened at the sound. If Oscar wasn't careful, this was going to go fast.

Slowly, so slowly, Oscar brought his face in, the very tip of Trent's cock meeting that sweet, wet warmth. Then he stopped.

Trent couldn't stop himself now, thrusting forward, but Oscar was quick, moving backwards so that Trent couldn't find purchase, couldn't get any more of his length into Oscar's mouth.

"What are you doing to me?"

The mischievous look in Oscar's eyes was exciting and terrifying.

At a snail's pace, millimeter by millimeter, Oscar enveloped him. Trent shook with a desperate need for him to move faster, the want building and building with no outlet. After what felt like ten minutes, Oscar's nose finally met the skin of his pelvis.

Trent almost came right there. Oscar's hand wrapped around his balls, stopping his climax at the source.

"Please, fuck, you have to..." Trent said, his voice cracking as his system short-circuited, but he didn't care. "I can't take much more of this."

Then Oscar began to move back, and holy fuck, he wasn't going any faster. Trent's legs shook at the sensation. What was happening? It felt like he would come at any second and simultaneously like he'd never come again. Release was so close, but Oscar wasn't merciful.

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“Come on!” Trent cried out, but Oscar was unmoved, as he continued his slow-motion assault on Trent’s senses. Up and down he went, never increasing the speed, never giving relief. When his lips were almost off, the air was like a slap against the skin of his cock. Then he’d move back down again, and he was once again in the warmest, wettest heaven.

At some point, Trent could no longer think. He was just a bundle of nerve endings and uncontrolled reactions. He was only vaguely aware that his groans were getting louder, and his brain was filled with only two words.

So close. So close, so close, so close. It became a mantra, a meditation on the glory of Oscar’s mouth, his lips now red and swollen with his appointed task.

When Oscar finally pulled off, Trent was no longer capable of thought. The whine that escaped his mouth was totally alien to him, a desperate expression of need that sounded as if it came from a stranger.

“You’re okay, handsome.” Oscar bent up and kissed Trent, his lips even sweeter with the taste of what they’d been doing for the last eternity.

“Am I?” Trent gasped. “I don’t think I am.”

“Sshhh.” Then Oscar slowly stripped off his clothes, and Trent’s cock twitched each time more flesh was revealed.

Oscar was beautiful. Trent hadn’t fully taken in just how beautiful he was during their frenzied sex in that cabin in Maine. The brown hair that lightly covered his body was

the perfect contrast to Trent's blonde.

All those ropy muscles made Trent want to run his hands over the tall vamp. Trent's erection was painful now, which was expected, considering Oscar had been teasing it for three thousand years. Trent moved to stand, but Oscar stopped him with a glance.

"Stay right there." Oscar straddled him. The pressure of his long legs pressed against Trent's sides, and his cock rested on Trent's stomach. "I told you I'd prove that you can trust me, can trust this."

"Oh, is that what this is?"

Oscar grinned and nodded, and then without warning sank down onto Trent's cock. Trent shouted as he was unexpectedly enveloped in a tight warmth.

"I...warn a guy, why don't you?" Trent's brows furrowed as he looked up at Oscar. "Don't you need lube?"

"Vampires heal fast. The pain's already gone."

Oscar's fingers found Trent's, intertwining and bringing their hands up and against the wall above Trent's head. Oscar kissed him, and this time it was a ravage. His tongue searched, leaving no stone unturned, and Trent basked in the sweet taste of hints of ash and crisp apple.

Then Oscar began to move. He squeezed around Trent, milking the man's cock with his talented ass. Trent let out a long groan.

"I forgot to ask permission to do this," Oscar said as he moved. His head fell to Trent's shoulder, leaving tiny gifts of kisses in little circles.

“You don’t ever need permission,” Trent gasped. “Whenever you want.”

“I told you, I’m proving that you can trust me.” Oscar nibbled on Trent’s ear, his tongue flicking at the lobe as Trent squirmed.

“I trust you!” Trent was having trouble getting any words out. The sensations were so intense.

Oscar’s face grew serious for a moment. “Good.” Then he leaned back, closed his eyes, and set a brutal pace, whining as he slammed Trent’s dick up into his prostate over and over.

“Oscar...I won’t last...”

“I know, baby, I know.” Oscar’s eyes were squeezed tight now, and he was so pretty, the muscles of his abs tightening as he pushed himself harder. “I want it. I want your cum.”

“Fuck, Oscar...”

“I’m close, baby.”

Oscar’s muscles strained, chasing his orgasm, a beautiful specimen of aggressive grace, like an athlete at the top of his form. The sounds he made drove Trent absolutely insane, and as Oscar neared his climax, Trent knew that he wanted one thing. He said the words that he thought he’d never utter to any vampire, the words that meant he was truly gone for this man.

“Bite me.”

Oscar’s eyes snapped open. His fangs peeked out from behind his lips.

“Are you sure?” he asked, even as he kept up his pace, driving them both to oblivion.

This was it. If Trent was really going to be with Oscar, this moment of vulnerability would prove it. And he wanted it. He did. More than anything. Enough to get over his fear.

“Do it.”

Oscar lunged, his face desperate and wild, and Trent felt a sharp pain in his neck. Then everything exploded.

His vision went white as he came, and Oscar’s arms tightened around him as the two of them vibrated together. They were so close, they were as close as two people could be, and it was good. Better than good.

He slowly came back to himself as Oscar’s tongue gently ran over the puncture marks in his neck. Oscar sealed the wound, and Trent felt the holes close.

Oscar lifted up and brought their foreheads together, his arms joining them even more tightly, if that were possible. Trent was still inside the man, his cock not yet fully soft. His dick wanted them to stay locked together as much as Trent himself did.

“Was that okay?” Oscar asked. “I know?—”

“Sshh.” Trent kissed him lightly on the lips. “It was perfect.”

“I want it to always be perfect for you.” There was a hint of uncertainty in Oscar’s eyes.

“You are perfect.” Trent breathed out, relaxing further into their embrace. “It’s better than I could have imagined.”

“Oh, baby, there’s so much more to come.”

Trent attacked the pancakes,stabbing a triangle of deliciousness, dipping it into syrup and butter to make it more delicious, and sliding it down his throat. He glanced up at Oscar, who, of course, didn't need to eat. He was sipping elegantly on a cup of tea. Trent shot Oscar a look and shoveled more pancake into his mouth.

“Will you come to my place tonight?” Trent asked around the mouthful of sweet sponge.

The twenty-four-hour diner was hopping, considering it was the middle of the afternoon. The white noise of chatter and silverware clinking was a rolling backdrop to their conversation,and the perfume of coffee and bacon grease wafted through the air.

“You can take the time to eat, love. I'm not in a hurry. I'm sure you worked up an appetite.” Oscar winked at him. He was so annoying. And adorable.

Trent chewed, swallowed, and laid his fork down. He did need to chill for a minute, or he would get a stomachache. Oscar was right, though. He hadn't been this ravenous in a long time.

He took a slug of coffee and glanced back at Oscar. Oscar's eyebrows raised, a look of amusement on his face.

“What?” Trent asked.

“You are just very...animalistic right now? Are you always like this when you eat? I like it.”

“Only when I'm having pancakes at three p.m. after vigorous sex in a semi-public place.” Trent rolled his eyes and leaned back. “Now answer my question.”

“Ah.” Oscar took another sip. “I would very much like to be with you tonight, but I cannot.”

“Why?” It was silly of Trent to assume that Oscar would want to immediately spend a ton of time together, even if they were mates. He didn’t like this one-eighty turn he’d taken. He liked people to need him, and not the other way around.

“We...we’re going into the covenhouse in Canarsie tonight.”

“I’ll come. Just let me go home and get my gear. I’ll watch your back.” The words were out without Trent even thinking about them. Trent marveled at the switch that had flipped inside him. Now that he’d accepted that Oscar was his mate, his protectiveness and possessiveness were at a ten.

“You can’t come, Trent. You’re human.” Oscar’s voice was soft and compassionate, but Trent bristled at the words, nonetheless.

“I can kill a vampire just as well as anyone else. You know that. And you haven’t seen me fight when I’m fully armed and prepared.”

“I know how good you are, Trent,” Oscar said, reaching across the diner table and resting his hand on Trent’s forearm. It was warm and comforting, even though Trent wanted to be annoyed.

“But if someone tears out your throat or disembowels you, you’re dead.” Oscar’s voice shook as he spoke. “I can’t take care of you and also do what needs to be done.”

“I don’t need anyone to take care of me!” Trent heard his voice getting louder, and an old woman in a purple cardigan glared at him from the next table. He glared right back.

“But I’m your mate, Trent.” Oscar sighed. “I won’t be able to help myself. If you’re there, all my focus will be on protecting you. Lillian would never allow it.”

There was a screech of ceramic against linoleum as Trent pushed the plate of pancakes away. He was being a brat, he knew that, but the thought of Oscar being in danger without him there to protect him made his skin itch.

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“I’ll follow behind, then. You can’t stop me from coming in after you.”

“Trent, please. I...I have to do this for myself.”

Trent crossed his arms. He didn’t say anything.

“So much of this is my fault,” Oscar said. Trent hated the sorrow that crept into Oscar’s eyes.

“I shouldn’t have assumed Elliott was dead,” Oscar continued. “I should have known he would stick around the city, that he would still be capable of doing evil. If I hadn’t been so concerned with myself, those vampires wouldn’t have attacked you, and you wouldn’t have come so close to death.”

Trent reached both hands out to grab Oscar’s, squeezing tightly.

“Then you never would have known I was your mate.”

A small but honest smile spread across Oscar’s face. He nodded.

“Thank you, but...I have to do this on my own.”

“Okay.” Trent’s stomach churned with anxiety even as he capitulated. Was this what loving someone was like? Making these compromises?

Love? Was that what this was? Had Oscar gone from his rival to his love so quickly?

Trent pushed the thought away. There wasn't the time for that.

"But call me if you need me. Promise."

Oscar frowned for a moment, but ultimately nodded.

"I promise."

Chapter 21

Oscar

The neighborhood was eerily quiet as the vampires assembled across from the covenhouse in Canarsie. There were seven of them: Oscar, Lillian, and Freddie, of course, and then four newer additions to the Grosvenor coven. The two brothers, Alan and Pip, had come over from London a few months after Freddie and Lillian had. They spoke with Geordie accents, which Oscar loved, and they dressed like they'd been following the Ramones around for a decade. They looked nearly identical, even though Alan was a few years older. If Pip didn't have a septum ring, Oscar would have trouble telling the two apart.

The other two vamps were Veronica and Kyle, and they were actual fighters. Before they'd been turned, they'd won bouts as professional kickboxers, which meant they had a better knowledge of combat than most vamps, who tended to rely on their claws and brute strength. Veronica and Kyle were married and had an easy, sarcastic rapport, no matter what they were doing. That included kicking ass.

"Not a fuckin' thing happening here." Pip walked into the street toward the old church.

"Be careful," Lillian called out in a gruff monotone. "We can't know if they've laid a

trap for us.”

“Only one way to find out,” Alan said as he followed his brother. Veronica and Kyle looked at each other and grinned, then took off as well.

“Will they ever grow up?” Lillian asked.

“Give it a century or so,” Freddie answered, then turned to Oscar. “Stay close to Lillian.”

The three crossed the street as Pip kicked down the front door. The lock snapped easily. The vampires piled into the old church.

It was empty.

Rows and rows of empty wooden pews. Most of the Christian paraphernalia had been removed, but the seating and the shape of the room gave away its ecclesiastical purpose. As did the small stained-glass windows—the two at the front, and two more at the back. Being inside a city block, it didn’t have the same real estate for grand depictions of saints and the like, but every window was filled with colored, opaque glass.

“Were they ever here?” Oscar asked Lillian. “Even the scents are muted.”

Lillian shook her head. “It makes no sense.”

“Lillian and Oscar, you take the basement,” Freddie ordered. “Alan and Pip, investigate the vestibule and choir loft. I’ll look at the chambers behind the old sanctuary.”

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Everyone sprang into action. Oscar strode to the stairs to the right of where the altar once must have been. A quick spiral down, and Oscar and Lillian found themselves in what looked to be the rec room they'd seen the night before. Folding chairs, a couch, a few tables. But equally empty as the upstairs.

Oscar moved toward the coffee table. The pictures of him and Trent were gone. He surveyed the area. At the rear of the room was a dark hallway that went further into the building. They'd need to look back there.

Lillian flipped over the couch cushions, then lifted the whole thing to inspect underneath.

"There's not even crumbs," she said. "Someone had to have come back to get the pictures. And they vacuumed? No crumbs, no dust bunnies, not a drop of blood splattered anywhere."

"It's odd," Oscar said. "They must know we've been surveilling the place. Why would they?—"

A flicker of movement from down the hallway caught his eye, and he was off, flying across the old carpet into the darkness.

"Oscar, wait!"

A figure turned into one of the rooms in the back, and he followed, so fast that everything was a blur. Maybe he was in a supply room or something? No time to look. He had the fleeing figure in his sights.

Whoever it was tucked themselves between some shelving and squeezed into an out-of-place hole in the wall. Oscar followed, not letting up, not wanting to take the chance of losing them. The loud metal crash behind him barely even registered. Had someone slammed an industrial door? It didn't matter.

He was in a tunnel now, crude and crumbling, the walls a mix of concrete and earth. He moved quickly through, although there was enough dust and debris to know that the passage was a new addition. Ahead, it opened up into a larger room, and a hulking form waited there for him.

It was Elliott.

"My mate." A few thin beams of light shone down on the brute's pale, square face from a grate at street level. He wore a cruel smile. He wore his usual uniform of a tight black t-shirt and black jeans with combat boots. How Oscar could have fallen in love with someone with such a boring sense of fashion, he'd never know.

"We've had this conversation already. I am not your mate. I do not belong to you." Oscar stood, his hands on his hips, not backing down. He was done with fear.

"I am the coven master of the Canarsie coven, and you are in my territory." The madness of petty power flashed in his eyes. "You'll do what I say. And I say you are my mate. I knew it from the first time I saw you. Your pretty face was so lost, so pathetic. I brought you in. I took care of you. You owe me."

"What do I owe you?!" Oscar's voice broke, but he couldn't back down. "You did nothing but torture and starve us."

Elliott's lips curled into a sneer. "It made you stronger, didn't it? Now you can fight as well as command the mind. Now you are fit to sit beside me as I rule the empire I am building."

Oscar rolled his eyes. Elliott had always been ridiculous, but this was a truly grandiose delusion. “I think my coven will have something to say about that.”

“Oh really? Where are they?” Elliott made a show of looking around the dark room. “I don’t think they’re coming.”

For the first time, Oscar really took in his surroundings. The atmosphere was damp, and the faint smell of sewage wafted through the air. The walls were in bad shape, shedding pieces of concrete at every turn. He wasn’t sure if he was in an ancient subway tunnel or some kind of waste management artery. All he knew was that it was dirty, it stank, and Elliott was completely at home.

And that Lillian and Freddie werenotright behind him.

“A clever little trap, installing a steel door where the tunnel meets the building. A strong one. No one’s coming. By the time they get through that barrier, we’ll be long gone.”

“Gone where?” Oscar tapped his foot against the dirt. This did not look good. But he wouldn’t go down without a fight.

Elliott laughed, low and cruel.

“I’m not going to give away the surprise! You’ll know when I carry you across the threshold.”

“And if I refuse?”

Elliott’s laugh died, and his eyes went cold. “I hope you’re smarter than that.”

Oscar wasn’t being caught unprepared, not this time. In one fluid motion, he pulled

out a long knife that was strapped to his hip. Guns weren't much use against a vampire, but Lillian had been training them in other weapons.

He lunged, and Elliott dodged, but not quickly enough. Oscar sliced into the side of his torso. It wasn't deep, but it must have hurt. Elliott hissed and extended his fangs.

"You owe me. You were alone. I gave you a life."

"How's your eye, asshole?" Oscar slashed again, keeping himself grounded and balanced in his stance. Elliott stepped back, and the knife cut across the tight black t-shirt, exposing pale skin underneath.

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“You trapped me in a house of torture,” Oscar grunted. “You used me and you drank from me. I owe you nothing.”

Elliott clawed at Oscar’s face. Oscar ducked, spinning to the side, and lunging once more with his knife. The long metal weapon bit into the muscular flesh. Elliott screamed, moving backward, deeper into the dark of the underground chamber.

“You are my mate!” Elliott growled, fleeing faster now. Oscar kept on him. Elliott might have brute strength, but Oscar had speed, and he wasn’t going to let Elliott get away. Eventually Lillian and Freddie would knock down the door, and he’d have his ex tied up with a neat little bow to deliver to them. This monster wouldn’t evade the justice he so richly deserved.

“If I was your mate, why did you never allow me to drink from you and complete the bond?”

Elliott was running now, no longer even keeping up the pretense of fighting back. There was another hole in the wall at the rear of the chamber. By the looks of it, it was another newly constructed tunnel. Elliott dove for it, and Oscar followed just behind.

“If I say you’re my mate, then you’re my mate!” Elliott growled. He was cruising around the twists and turns as the tunnel changed direction, but Oscar stayed on his tail. The walls of the passageway whipped by, but Oscar didn’t have a moment to take in where they were going. He had to stop Elliott. Eventually, they’d have to run into a wall, and Elliott would be done.

“How did you even become coven master?” Oscar called out to the fleeing vamp in

front of him. “You don’t have much in the way of personality.”

“Fuck you!” The turns in the tunnel were coming fast now, enabling Elliott to escape his sight for a split second at a time. No matter. Oscar could keep track of him from his petulant yelling.

“Won’t be doing that ever again, lover,” Oscar taunted.

“I killed anyone who got in my way. That’s how.”

They cruised around a bend to a long stretch with a thick metal door at the end. It was open, but Oscar refused to let it close and separate them. He fished out a throwing knife from his left boot and tossed it hard at Elliott.

Elliott grunted as the weapon hit the small of his back. He slowed but did not stop. Oscar caught up with him, reaching out with his clawed hand, hoping to snatch his shirt and pull Elliott toward himself, but Elliott dove for the doorway.

Oscar dove right after him.

Oscar hit the ground to find it wasn’t ground any longer, but hard wood. He felt it bend and stretch under the impact. He jumped to his feet to face Elliott, but instead was faced with a wholly new environment.

This wasn’t another dirty underground tunnel. It was a room of some kind, spare and utilitarian. The walls were painted a bright white, with a small circular window off to one side. On the other, there were a couple of short wooden benches. Sitting on one was a woman in her sixties wearing a smart pastel skirt suit. She didn’t look happy.

Elliott loomed on the other side of the room, a smirk on his face. Oscar stumbled. The ground was shifting underneath him. What was happening?

“Close it,” Elliott ordered. The large metal clank of the heavy door closing echoed throughout the tiny area.

Before Oscar could turn to see who Elliott was speaking to, he was hit with a sharp pain in the back of his head, and it all went black.

“Are you my rescue party?” A sarcastic voice cut through the groggy haze as Oscar fought his way to consciousness. “I was expecting someone more competent.”

Oscar rubbed his eyes, encouraging his vision to come into focus. Regardless, he thought he knew who he was speaking to.

“Lavinia?”

“You know me?”

Oscar could see her more clearly now. She’d obviously been in her rumpled outfit for days, but other than that, she looked intact. She had a broad face that in other circumstances would have been kind and welcoming, and long silver hair.

“I know your nephew, Justin.” Oscar’s eyes focused on the round window. He could see more beyond it now. City lights twinkled across the surface of surrounding water...what the hell?

“We’re on a boat,” Lavinia said.

Of course. The small round window was a porthole. And that explained his unsteady footing.

Elliott had clearly been planning this for a while. An underground tunnel leading to a boat prison? That was not something you decided on a lark.

“Lovely. Where the hell are we going?” Oscar stretched out his arms above his head. He hadn’t been shackled or anything. They must have confidence in the locks on the doors.

“Nowhere yet.” Lavinia smiled, but there was no joy in it. “We’ve been out circling the Statue of Liberty for hours. I’ve been watching out the porthole.”

“Fucking Elliott,” Oscar muttered under his breath. He breathed in, and his vampire senses were assaulted with a strong, musky, animal smell. What the hell was that? He glanced around, but the room was plain and nearly empty. The only place the odor could be coming from was?—

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“You’re a shifter! A wolf, by the smell of it.”

Lavinia nodded, her face expressionless.

“No wonder they kidnapped you,” Oscar said. “Justin said they kept you to feed from, but I couldn’t understand why they’d choose you. This makes more sense. You’re a wolf shifter. Your blood is potent.”

“So the big jerk keeps saying.”

“Why didn’t Justin tell us?”

“He doesn’t know.” Lavinia frowned, tapping her fingers on the side of her bench.

“How?! The smell is so strong!”

“Manners, child.” Lavinia sighed. “I raised him. He grew up around me. The odor doesn’t even register for him.”

Oscar rubbed the back of his head. A big sore spot pulsed at the crown. One of Elliott’s vampires must have clocked him.

“I’m surprised they’ve kept you alive. If you shifted at the right moment, you could do some damage.”

“Because they are greedy.” Lavinia crossed her arms and glared at the closed door separating the room from the rest of the boat. “They have been drinking from me

often enough that I've been too weak to shift. They're waiting to sell me off to a collector. There's big money in trafficking shifters. I'll probably end up in a cage in the corner of some ostentatious McMansion."

Regret and grief rolled through Oscar at her words. Rhonda had been an alpha, the strongest wolf in her pack, and Elliott and his vampires had murdered her. She'd tried to help them, and it left her people without a leader. Freddie had said he would assist the Scopan Lake pack in any way he could, but still. That had been Oscar's fault.

"Where is Justin?" Lavinia shifted in her seat.

Oscar's muscles locked at the question. He flexed and unflexed his right wrist. Well, they were in this together. He shouldn't start out by lying.

"He's being held at the covenhouse."

Lavinia growled, and the skin of her face rippled. She was trying to shift. The response was instinctual. Her family was in danger. After a moment, though, the undulations subsided. Lavinia remained human, although now the circles around her eyes had deepened even further.

She sighed. "Like I said, too weak to shift. Why is Justin your prisoner?"

Oscar raised both hands in a conciliatory gesture. "He betrayed us, gave away our location to Elliott and his goons. He was trying to save you, but my mate and I almost died."

Lavinia shook her head ruefully. "Sweet boy. I appreciate his devotion, but I can take care of myself."

"Maybe, but he doesn't know that." Oscar got up, walking over to the porthole and

staring out at the bay. The line of the water was right at the height of the window. “You’ve searched for ways out?”

“There aren’t any.” Lavinia’s voice was cold as she attempted to control her burning rage. “There’s just the one door to the rest of the boat, and the one door in the hull where you came in. We could try to open that, but I’m pretty sure I would die as the water rushed in. I’m not as impervious to drowning as you are.”

Oscar brought his head to his hands. “I keep fucking things up. I should have waited for Lillian and Freddie. I should have never assumed Elliott was dead. I’m the reason all of this happened.”

“That’s a bit egotistical,” Lavinia said, cocking her head and smirking. “I certainly didn’t have ‘locked up below decks on a tour boat’ on my bingo card.”

“Wait, this is a tour boat?”

“That’s how they don’t get stopped by the water cops, or whatever the hell they’re called. They do cruises back and forth from the Statue of Liberty.”

Oscar stood up from the bench. He looked around the room, peeking into every nook and cranny, but other than the stray candy bar wrapper, it was totally bare. One of these vamps had a sweets addiction.

“You have a mate?” Lavinia asked.

“Yes,” Oscar replied, circling the room once more despite the futility of it.

“He’ll come for you. Mates always do. My mother would have torn the throat out of anyone that dared lay a hand on daddy.”

Oscar plopped back down on the bench with a sigh. “He’s human. We don’t have a way to communicate because we haven’t completed the bond. He’s fragile.”

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Lavinia laughed, a low, rich sound. “Fragile? I doubt that. No one who was chosen by fate to mate a supernatural would be fragile. I doubt he’ll let his humanity stop him, and if I know Justin, he’ll be on his way as well, the minute he escapes from whatever cell you’ve got him in.”

“I don’t want either of them here! They’re safer staying away.”

“That’s not what family does, sweetie.” Lavinia smiled, and it was wide and kind, if a little ferocious. “Family comes when danger calls.”

Oscar hummed softly. He hadn’t had much of that kind of support in his life. Those six years with his foster dad Alexander, he’d gotten a taste of it. He hoped to show Trent the same.

He stood. “Okay. I can’t talk to Trent, but I can contact my coven master. They’ll be here soon enough to get us out.”

Freddie?

He waited for his master to respond. After all, he was sure Freddie was busy with whatever shenanigans were happening back on land. It’s possible they were attacked after Elliott lured Oscar away.

Freddie? Need some help here.

One minute of waiting turned into two, and then into five, and still no response. Oscar began to pace. Why wouldn’t Freddie answer him? Surely they’d realized that he’d

been captured.

Lavinia gave him a hard side-eye glance. “Not workin’, huh?”

Oscar shook his head and pressed his lips together. Had Freddie been knocked unconscious? Or was it possible to block the bond between a vampire and his coven? He hadn’t thought so, but now he was questioning it.

He threw up his hands. It didn’t matter. The link wasn’t working, and they had to move on to a different solution.

“Okay, we have to figure this out. They’re not going to leave us alone here forever. I could try to Compel Elliott, but I doubt that would accomplish much. I’ve grown in power since I’ve known him, but he’s older as well. And he’s more vicious than he’s ever been. One of his henchmen was able to resist when they attacked me initially, so maybe they’ve been training against my powers.”

“Still worth a try, darling.”

There was a loud clack as the door to the room was unlocked. Oscar startled as the sharp metallic noise penetrated his ear drums. When the door swung open, Elliott stood there, a grim expression on his face. Behind him were two other vampires, almost as muscular as he was. The three of them made an intimidating picture.

“Are you ready?” Elliott’s voice was sickly sweet, a parody of affection.

“Ready for what?” Oscar snapped. Just because he was trapped didn’t mean he had to be pleasant.

“Ready to start your life as my mate, of course.” Elliott took a few steps toward him, and Oscar suppressed his instinctual flinch. “In the morning we’ll dock the boat in

New Jersey. My vampires have been readying our new covenhouse in Hoboken.”

Rage coursed through Oscar at the vampire ordering him around. He stood and called forth the demon, his vampiric energy filling the room.

“Leave us. Exit the boat and let us go free.”

Everyone there froze, including Lavinia. Their faces went slack, and a tiny nodule of hope burst in Oscar’s chest. After a moment, though, Elliott shook his head like a dog drying itself.

“Nice try. But we’re prepared this time.” A shit-eating grin spread across Elliott’s face. “Didn’t you wonder why you couldn’t contact your British dandy of a coven master? A few friends of mine lit some leaves and waved their hands around and poof! Locked down tight.”

Oscar’s jaw dropped open. What had Elliott done?

“You’ve allied yourself with the witches?!”

Elliott shrugged and pursed his lips. “I told you, I’m building an empire here. Besides, if I’m going to set up shop in New Jersey, I have to deal with the witches. That’s where they live.”

Oscar shook his head and rubbed his eyes with his right hand. His ex was even stupider than he’d thought. Witches didn’t lend their gifts without exacting a steep price. Generally, vampires avoided them at all costs.

“What did they demand in return?” Oscar asked.

“That’s not your concern. All you need to know is that they set up their shield around

the ship, and they've been teaching us to resist your mind powers. So, you'll need something more powerful than your parlor tricks to?—”

Loud footsteps echoed in the small room as Elliott's two henchmen ran off at a clip, finally overcome by Oscar's command.

“I guess my ‘parlor tricks’ aren't totally ineffectual,” Oscar said with a defiant smirk.

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Elliott's eyes went cold, and he puffed up his chest. "Don't worry. You don't have to be conscious or whole to be my mate."

Oscar steeled himself as Elliott hissed and lunged at him.

Chapter 22

Trent

Trent plunked out the run on the piano one more time. This wasn't going well.

The building was quiet. The practice rooms were entirely empty other than him and the lone violin down the hall. Honestly, the violin was doing better than he was. He'd been stuck on one phrase for twenty minutes.

His voice was a little large to be singing Handel, but he loved the music, and it showed a good contrast to the heavier Verdi and Puccini that made up most of his repertoire. Anthony had encouraged him to push his ornamentation further, but the heft of his big tenor voice struggled to execute what they'd decided on.

It was lonely work, but ordinarily Trent didn't mind that. Most of the real effort of being a musician happened alone. At this level, singing was an elite sport, requiring a high degree of focus and muscle coordination.

He started the phrase again.

As he reached the apex, his voice finally locking into the melody, he felt a sudden

squeeze and pull in his chest. It was surprising and somewhat painful. He gripped the cover of the grand piano to steady himself.

At first, he worried he might be having a heart attack, but after a moment, the pain dulled. He checked in with himself. No sweating, no dizziness, no nausea. He was fine. There was just an invisible force yanking at his chest.

Something was wrong with Oscar. They hadn't completed the mating bond, but they'd been intimate. That could be enough to connect them. As the waves of uneasy discomfort surged through his body, he was sure that Oscar was in trouble.

The pull wasn't urgent. Oscar wasn't dying. But he was definitely in danger. Unfortunately, Trent had no idea where he was. Elliott's covenhouse was in Canarsie, supposedly, but he didn't have an address. Besides, the tugging wasn't coming from deeper in Brooklyn. It was from Manhattan.

He didn't have many options. If he spent the night wandering the city, blindly following the nascent mate bond into dark alleys, that wouldn't help Oscar at all. Instead, he had to go where someone might know where Oscar was. The Grosvenor covenhouse.

He stuffed his binder back into his backpack and hurried out into the hallway, slamming the door to the practice room behind him. He was practically running, typing the address into his phone at the same time. He ignored the judgmental looks of the other music students as he burst out onto the street.

Trent grumbled to himself as he jumped into the rideshare. It was a chunk of change to take a car from downtown Brooklyn to the Upper West Side, but he had to do something. Oscar needed help.

The tiny Chrysler Neon that had picked Trent up was falling apart. He was like a

sardine in a tin can rattling around a grocery bag. The driver was an elderly man with thick glasses, and it took every ounce of control Trent had not to yell at him to go faster.

When he arrived at the covenhouse, everything was quiet. The large apartment complex was intimidating in its silence. As he reached the front door, a young woman materialized out of the shadows. With long, lustrous hair and light brown skin, she was very pretty, and her face gave off a don't-fuck-with-me energy that Trent found appealing.

“What’s your business, human?”

Trent rolled his eyes. She had probably been human less than a decade ago. Some folks just really leaned into the whole “creature of the night” persona.

“I need to see Freddie.”

“The master is out.” She didn’t move from her post in front of the door.

“Anthony then. Tell him Trent is here.”

Trent saw her eyes flick off to the upper right corner of her field of vision. She was conversing mind-to-mind. After a moment, she sighed.

“Come on.”

The vampire led Trent to the common area of the covenhouse, back where he initially met Freddie. That was the day that Oscar was first attacked, and that Trent had discovered that his voice teacher was one of the undead.

The place was bathed in diffuse light, a few antique lamps casting an amber glow

over the room. Anthony sat in a large upholstered chair, reading a thick leather-bound tome.

“Trent. What are you?—”

“Where are Freddie and Oscar?”

Anthony’s brows furrowed. “They went on an errand.”

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“I know that they were breaking into the Canarsie covenhouse tonight.” Trent puffed his chest up, trying to convey confidence, but his tapping foot betrayed his worry. “Something is wrong. I can tell.”

Anthony frowned, holding up a finger indicating that Trent should wait, and closed his eyes. Trent leaned against a sturdy bookshelf, his arms crossed. The air of the covenhouse was cold against his skin. Figured. Vampires didn’t exactly need central heating.

Anthony’s eyes popped open. “Something went wrong. Freddie’s on his way back. He said he’ll explain when he gets here. Twenty minutes.”

The ache in Trent’s chest was not soothed by Anthony’s words. The bond tugged even harder on him. So far, he’d completely failed at locating his mate, and the frustration was compounding his worry.

“Let me talk to Justin.”

“What?” Anthony stood. “I can’t?—”

“Anthony. Let me talk to Justin.”

Anthony stared at Trent for a long moment, then nodded. He led Trent wordlessly through the halls of the covenhouse. Although the place had a boring, industrial design in its bones, it was teeming with art. Trent appreciated the color and texture, even if it was a bit cluttered.

They arrived at the last apartment on the left. Unlike some of the others, it didn't sport any decoration. Anthony knocked, and the door opened.

Justin did not look good. His blonde hair was disheveled, and his once-smooth face was lined with worry. He looked like he hadn't slept in a week. Strangely, he wasn't wearing his signature pajama pants, dressed instead in a pair of baggy cargos and a sleeveless t-shirt. His eyes widened as he saw Trent, and he took a step back.

Trent stretched out his arms, palms out, in a calming gesture.

"It's okay. I want to talk."

Justin's eyes darted to Anthony, who gave a slight nod. Justin sighed and stepped out of the way to let Trent enter, chewing at his bottom lip.

Not too far from the entrance to the apartment was a pristine kitchen with a small black table and four chairs. Trent sat atone without prompting. Justin took the seat across from him, trepidation written on his face.

Trent understood why Justin was anxious. After all, Trent had almost died because of the vampire's betrayal. But Trent knew the reasons behind it, and he couldn't say that he wouldn't do the same thing in that position. He was inclined to give Justin a chance to redeem himself.

"Why...why are you here?" Justin squeezed out the question in a ragged whisper.

"Oscar is in some kind of danger. I don't know what." Trent's eyes welled up, but he blinked the possibility of tears away. It wasn't the time.

"Oh..." Justin rubbed at his face. "I never...I never intended for him to get hurt."

“No. Only me.” Trent didn’t put any malice into the words. It was a statement of fact.

“I...” Instead of finishing the sentence, Justin just nodded. An expression of absolute defeat came over his face.

“And once I was dead, what then?” Trent kept his voice even.

“What?”

“What was supposed to happen next?”

“My Aunt Lavinia would be released.” Justin swallowed. “And Oscar would go with Elliott. Elliott said that Oscar was his mate, so I thought they’d be happy, even if he didn’t want it at first. It’s not like...”

Trent cocked his head, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s not like Oscar ever really looked at me that way, anyway. Romantically. It was better that he be with Elliott. Somewhere not near me.”

Trent sat in his stillness, waiting for more. He didn’t hate the young vampire. He’d grown up around worse. But if Justin didn’t understand the gravity of what he’d done, he couldn’t be trusted going forward.

“I...I’m sorry, Trent. I didn’t want you to die,” Justin continued, wringing his hands as he spoke. “I really didn’t. But my aunt...she’s the only family I have. The only real family, anyway. I can’t let them kill her.”

“No.” Trent’s gaze locked onto Justin’s eyes. He projected as much confident determination as he could manage. “You shouldn’t. And we’ll get her out. But you can’t sacrifice other people for that to happen. And you can’t trade on Oscar’s future.

He may not love you, but he is your friend, and you are his. His best friend, I think.”

A strangled sound burst from Justin as the dam broke, and tears ran down his face.

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“I’m so sorry. I did what I thought I had to do, and I was wrong. I was so wrong. I don’t know how I can make it up to him, or to you.”

Trent smiled. “You can help me save him.”

It hadn’t been hard to slip out without Anthony seeing them. The apartment complex that housed the Grosvenor covenhouse was large, and several different stairwells led down to the entrance. Trent felt a little guilty at circumventing Anthony’s wishes, but it was better this way. He needed to take action.

The full moon shone down as Trent and Justin stood on the docks, staring out at the sparkling bay. The marina was filled with boats, from yachts to catamarans to dinghies. The smell of salt from the brackish water was a sharp complement to the residual gasoline odor that clung to the vessels moored there.

“You’re sure the bond is leading you into the river?” Justin asked.

Trent nodded. “They’re definitely out there.”

Justin sighed, then glanced around at the surrounding boats.

“Come on,” he said, running down the dock and jumping onto a small blue dinghy with an outboard motor. The thing barely rocked with the addition of Justin’s slight frame.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ll hot-wire this motor. Then we’re getting your mate and my aunt.” Justin sat by the sleek-looking machine, the moonlight catching on its shiny yellow stripes.

Trent followed after him, hopping onboard and steadied himself as everything moved back and forth. He did not have Justin’s vampiric grace. “You know how to do that?”

“I had an unconventional upbringing,” Justin said as he pried open the casing and twisted a red wire and a purple wire together. “I learned some things.”

“Like hot-wiring a boat motor?”

“Yep.” Justin picked up a yellow wire, rolling it between his fingers. “Ready?”

“Sure.”

As Justin touched the yellow wire to the other two, the motor sputtered to life. “I hope it has enough gas to get us there.”

Justin guided the dinghy backward into the marina, careful not to scratch the other vessels. Trent shivered as a cool breeze blew in off the river. The few gentle waves that reached the marina still made the vessel rock back and forth.

“We’re going to go out on the Hudson in this toy boat? Won’t we get swallowed up by the wake of some transport ship or something?”

“Well, I don’t know how to hotwire a yacht, so we’re stuck with this.” Justin smiled, his fangs glinting, and he popped the motor into forward gear, giving it some juice. “Worry less about the boat and more about how a human and a vampire who doesn’t really fight will take on a bunch of burly bloodsuckers.”

The wind picked up as they shot out of the marina onto the choppy waters of the

Hudson River. Trent's blonde hair tossed in the breeze. He brushed it out of his eyes.

"I'm prepared this time." Trent smirked. Justin had no idea. "They won't catch me off guard."

Justin raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Once they were out on the water, the pull on the mate bond intensified. Trent pointed toward the Statue of Liberty.

"They're out there, somewhere near the statue."

Justin sighed. "Of course they are. The most obvious place on the whole damn waterway."

As they got closer, it became clear which ship was theirs. It was floating stationary about three hundred yards from Lady Liberty. A deep orange-red, the words "Anytime Water Tours" were emblazoned in bright white letters on the side.

The strong smell of seaweed hit Trent's nose. The salty, rotting odor made him gag. He quickly recovered, but Justin shot him a look.

"You okay?"

"I don't love being on the water."

Justin slowed the boat down to a crawl. As they approached, two vampires peered out from the tour boat, one at the front and one at the back. Both wore plain black clothing.

"It's like a goddamned uniform," Trent whispered.

“What?”

“Never mind. Pull us around to the front.” Trent tucked his body down against the hull of the dinghy. “We’ll deal with him first.”

As they got closer, it became obvious that “him” was a huge man with a short military haircut. He must have been a power lifter before he was turned. He was built like a barrel. He noticed their arrival, but not in time.

“What are you?—”

With barely a whoosh, the vampire’s throat sprouted the silver handle of a throwing knife. He hissed, clawing at it, but after a few seconds, he collapsed down onto the deck.

“What did you do?” Justin asked. “He shouldn’t have gone down like that!”

Trent flexed the fingers on his right hand and smiled. He loved hitting a target dead on. “Strange thing about vamps. They’re immune to most diseases, and you can’t kill them outside of fire or decapitation. But they’re particularly susceptible to a paralytic.”

Trent’s eyes went to a narrow white ladder welded to the side of the boat. “Let’s go.”

Justin guided them closer, keeping the motor on its lowest and quietest setting. Once they reached the ladder, Justin lined up the side of the dinghy to the side of the red tour vessel.

“You go first,” Justin said.

Without saying a word, Trent pulled himself up, quickly scurrying up the ladder. He threw his leg over and eased himself onto the boat. Trent made his way over to the paralyzed vamp, who was flat on his back. His eyes stared up at the full moon as if hypnotized. Trent slid out a machete from the holster concealed beneath his shirt. With one swift motion, he severed the vamp’s head from his body, grabbing it by the hair and tossing it into the bay.

Justin’s mouth hung open in shock.

“What?” Trent asked. “I wasn’t going to leave behind an enemy vampire to attack us later.”

Justin’s mouth twitched. “You were just more casual than I expected.”

The two of them padded toward the front of the boat, keeping to the shadowed side of the deck. A woman stood there, her arms crossed, a deeply unpleasant mix of boredom and arrogance on her face.

“This one’s mine,” Justin whispered.

“I thought you weren’t a fighter.”

“This isn’t fighting. It’s assassination. I’m better at that.” Justin turned to Trent, wearing a grim frown. “She’s the one that delivered the message about my aunt being captured. She was too fucking happy about it.”

“Well, do it quick. If others hear, this will get much more complicated.”

Justin nodded and slid out a knife of his own from one of his tall leather boots. He

whistled. The vampire turned her head, giving him a clear view of her neck.

Faster than Trent could even see, the knife was out of Justin's hand and flying, slicing through the moon-drenched night. Before she could make a sound, the woman's head toppled from her body.

"Fuck, Justin. I thought you were an innocent kid."

"No," the twink vamp said, moving toward the now headless corpse. "I'm just not strong enough to fight head-to-head. I've learned other ways of surviving."

He picked up her head by the hair and looked around. "Dammit. My knife went into the water." He tossed the vampire's head after it. "Come on."

Behind the captain's station was a large iron door, painted white. It was the only way off the deck that Trent could see. He turned the handle and tugged. It didn't budge. He glanced at Justin.

"I may not be as strong as a typical vamp, but I am stronger than a human." Justin reached out and pulled. The door swung open with a loud shriek. Both of them froze at the sound, waiting for more vampires to come running. No one came.

"It wasn't locked," Justin said. "It was just heavy."

After they were a few steps into the cabin, the murmur of conversation drifted up to them from beneath deck. Trent put his finger to his lips, and Justin nodded. Slowly, so slowly, they made their way down the metal stairs, being careful not to make any noise. As they descended, the talking got louder.

"You'll never be my mate." Trent's heart rate quickened as Oscar's defiant voice reached his ears. He glanced at Justin, who nodded. They approached a corner in the

hallway, but before they got there, Justin grabbed Trent's arm, pulling Trent's ear close to his mouth.

"There's a vamp guarding the door," Justin whispered. "I can hear them breathing."

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Trent peeked around the corner. On the floor sat a vampire who had probably been about thirty when he was turned. His head was down and his thumbs were twitching away furiously. His long, unkempt brown hair covered his face.

“Is he playing a game?” Trent whispered.

Justin hummed in the affirmative. “More of that paralytic would be nice.”

“That and some decent conditioner.” Trent shook his head. “But it’s hard to get. I only had the one dose.”

“Maybe everyone in the room beyond is engrossed enough that they won’t hear us take him out.”

Trent reached into his pocket, pulling out a shiny silver marble. His eyes stayed trained on the vampire, who hadn’t looked up for even a second. Trent didn’t know if he was winning his game, but he was definitely losing at being a decent guard.

With a flick of his wrist, Trent tossed the marble past the guard to the other end of the hallway. A sharp pinging sounded as it hit the metal wall. The gamer vamp’s head snapped up. He squinted and peered down the hallway to his right.

There was no one there.

He stood and lumbered toward the noise. Trent snuck up behind him with a few soft steps and clamped his hand down on the vampire’s mouth. He flinched as he felt the vamp’s fangspierce the flesh of his palm, but he didn’t let go. He spun the vampire

around, trusting that Justin could take care of the rest.

With one swift motion, Justin drove a wooden stake through the vampire's heart. Trent released him and he fell to the floor with a meaty thud.

"We make a good team," Justin said with a smirk.

"I thought vampires didn't like carrying stakes around. Too much of a reminder of death, or something."

"I don't really care," Justin said, slipping the stake back into his pants pocket. "Maybe you shouldn't carry around a weapon that someone could take and kill you with, but you know what? Sometimes you just need to murder a vamp."

From within the room, the murmur of conversation continued. Trent put his ear against the door to hear better. Oscar's voice came through loud and clear.

"I don't know what you think will happen." Oscar's voice was strident in rebuffing his sleazy ex. "I'm not going to love you. I'm not going to be your mate. I've found mine."

"You are one crazy little asshole," Elliot said. "But it doesn't really matter. Once your so-called mate is dead, you'll have no choice but to succumb to your fate."

"That is never going to happen." The defiance in Oscar's voice stirred Trent's soul. And it was also really, really sexy. "Besides, once Trent is dead, I'll die. You know how this works."

"You're talking about him as if he was actually your mate, but I understand what delusion is. After all, I knew his mother."

At those words, all the wind was knocked out of Trent. That fucking asshole. Of course. That's why he looked so familiar. He'd been one of the bullies. Not one of the worst ones, Trent would have remembered that. But he knew that voice. A voice that had taunted him when he was locked in a closet or lying on the ground after a beating. As a young vamp, Elliot hadn't ever been brave enough to do the actual deed. He was worse, a sadist who got off on the suffering in the aftermath.

A loud slam echoed through the door. "Don't you dare," Oscar said.

"Don't I dare what?" Elliot replied. "I was there. I saw her as she became more and more unhinged. I don't know why you would want to be mated to the son of those two idiots. I don't know why you would want to be with someone who hates vampires. Which is understandable, I suppose. We were assholes to him. We would have been nicer if he wasn't such a stubborn prick."

"Fuck you. Don't talk about my mate." Two quick slams. Scuffling. They were fighting.

Trent stepped back from the door and motioned to Justin. Oscar must have gone for Elliot. But Elliot was a beast. Oscar wouldn't have much of a chance without help. Justin kicked, and the door flew off its hinges.

Trent rushed into the room. He was greeted by the sight of Oscar and Elliot locked together. Elliot was gaining ground, pushing Oscar back toward the wall inch by inch while Oscar strained against him.

Seeing his mate in danger, Trent didn't care about his own life. He jumped onto Elliot's back, sinking a knife between his shoulder blades, hoping to inflict enough pain to give Oscar a fighting chance. Elliot tossed Oscar to the side. There was a fleshy thump as Oscar hit the inside wall of the boat and collapsed down to the floor. Before Trent could move, Elliott was on him, hoisting him up by his throat.

“Ah, and here’s the man himself. I’m so glad that I finally get to do this. You were a little brat when you were a kid, and you’re even worse now.”

Elliot raised his hand, and five sharp claws sprang from it. He pulled his arm back, and Trent braced for the incoming, piercing blow to his heart. But as Elliot moved to land the hit, Oscar was on Elliott’s back, his claws digging in anywhere they could find purchase.

All three of them went toppling over, hitting the floor with the sound of bones cracking. Trent hoped that none of those were his. He wouldn’t heal nearly as fast as anyone else in this room. His whole side throbbed with pain where he’d slammed against the hard deck.

Oscar was clawing at Elliot’s eyes now. He ripped them out with wild abandon, both the one he’d injured in Maine, now mostly healed, and the pristine, untouched one. Elliott bellowed in pain at the loss, grabbing blindly at the vampire behind him. Trent took the opportunity to scramble away, pushing himself across the floor to the opposite wall.

Elliott went crazy. He transformed into a whirlwind of arms and claws. Now completely blind, he lashed out everywhere around him, swinging wildly. Trent did his best to evade the man’s outburst, plastering himself against the wall, but Elliott managed to get in a few swipes on his chest and upper arm. They were shallow cuts, but they stung like hell.

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Trent kept his mouth shut, hoping not to draw attention to his location in the room. Elliott did the opposite.

“You fuckers are all gonna die now,” he growled, “and the wolf, too. You could have come peacefully. You could have been the coven master’s mate, and you threw it away for a weak little human.”

Elliott slowed his momentum. He couldn’t fight without some idea of where his enemies were. He slowly turned around in a circle.

“No one is dying here but you.” Oscar stepped forward and stood tall in front of the beast.

“There you are. You could have been my mate. Not anymore. Time to die, freak.” Elliott roared and lunged for him, stumbling but pushing through to inflict the damage he’d promised.

Oscar turned his head toward Justin, who was standing off to the side. Justin reached into his pocket and tossed Oscar his wooden stake.

“Trent is my mate! You are nothing!” Oscar shouted, goading Elliott to strike in his direction as he dodged. Elliott’s momentum propelled him forward, and he smashed his face against the porthole with a scream.

As he did, Oscar pressed the stake between two back ribs and pushed it into Elliott’s heart. Elliott screamed as he did. Every hour of torture, starvation, and manipulation at the hand of this monster had culminated in this moment of revenge. Trent

witnessed the pure triumph in Oscar's eyes as Elliott crumpled to the floor.

Trent was a little disappointed that he hadn't landed the killing blow, but if someone else had to do it, he was glad it was his mate. He soaked up the agony of Elliott's defeat. Trent stared into his bully's eyes as the light went out of them. There was no consciousness left. A surge of relief rippled through his body.

"Trent," Oscar shouted, crouching down to take Trent's head in his hands. "What's going on? Why are you here?"

"He's here without permission." Everyone's head turned to the door. Freddie stood there, his flaming red hair just barely fitting under the top of the entryway. Anger and frustration flashed across his face. "He should have waited."

Freddie glanced down at Oscar holding Trent in his arms and sighed. "But sometimes that's what mates do."

"I need you to be okay," Oscar said, bending down and inspecting Trent for any sign of injury. He pushed aside the torn fabric of Trent's shirt to reveal the cuts across his chest. "I can't...I just need you to be okay."

Tears welled in Oscar's eyes, full of fear and relief and something else. "I...I love you," Oscar said. "You're my mate and I love you."

Trent took in the raw emotion written on Oscar's face. He reached out and squeezed Oscar's hand. "Oscar, I'm fine. He barely scratched me."

"You're okay. You're okay. Elliott's dead and you're alive. That's all that matters."

"Trent's better than okay. He's a fucking killer." Justin giggled from next to Freddie.

“What are you doing here?” Oscar asked with a scowl. “Shouldn’t you be locked up somewhere?”

“Yes, shouldn’t you?” A deep woman’s voice came from the far corner of the room. Lavinia stood there, leaning, her arms crossed, somehow looking regal in her rumpled orange skirt suit.

Justin’s went white. “I just...I was trying to save you.”

“Do you think I need to be saved, little boy?”

Justin pressed his lips together and shook his head vigorously. Anger flashed across Oscar’s face. Trent had to diffuse this. He sat up and put a hand on Oscar’s thigh.

“He was scared, Oscar. He was worried about his aunt, and he made a bad decision. I have no reason to trust vampires, but I trust him. He’s your friend.”

Oscar didn’t say anything.

Trent squeezed his thigh affectionately. “At least talk to him.”

Oscar’s eyes softened. He looked over at Justin, who was draped in an aura of sadness, and then back to Trent.

“Okay.”

“Good,” Trent said. “Now kiss me.”

Trent tugged Oscar’s head closer to his and, even though they were surrounded by people, bestowed on Oscar the hottest, dirtiest kiss he could manage, tender and filthy, sweet and venomous. When he broke off, the look on Oscar’s face was one of

wonder and lust.

Trent smiled. “There’s more where that came from.”

“Let’s go home.”

Chapter 23

Oscar

The line of gray folding chairs outside the Manhattan Lyric audition room didn’t exactly exude a sense of welcome or comfort, but Oscar didn’t mind. He was one of only two singers waiting their turn. He flipped through his music absent-mindedly. After all that had happened, he couldn’t bring himself to be nervous. He was mostly just grateful.

Trent’s audition was immediately before his, so Oscar assumed he’d be there soon, although Trent was cutting it close.

The elevator bell rang from the other end of the hallway, and the two polished aluminum doors slid open to reveal his mate. Oscar’s cheeks warmed upon seeing how handsome Trent was. He wore a charcoal suit that accentuated his strong, compact body, and his blonde hair was perfectly coiffed.

A smile spread across his face as he made eye contact with Oscar. Trent’s steps bounced as he crossed to his mate, plopping down in the adjacent folding chair and leaning against Oscar’s shoulder.

Oscar kissed him on the temple. “Are you ready?”

“I think so,” Trent replied, biting his bottom lip. “I think...I’ve been ready for a

while. I just haven't let myself feel it."

"You'll get it. You're amazing." Oscar slipped his hand into Trent's, intertwining their fingers. Trent's palm was warm and comforting against his skin.

"Please. You'll definitely get it." Trent grinned. "I've seen your audition book. You're way more versatile than I am."

"Am I?" Oscar winked, and Trent let out a low chuckle. Oscar leaned over and whispered. "Whatever happens, we have time. You're my mate. You can spend the next hundred years singing if you want."

Trent tapped his fingers on the large black binder he held in his hand. "A hundred years, huh? So you think I'm gonna go vampire?"

"I, well, I hoped." Oscar was suddenly flustered. "I didn't mean...whatever you want to do is what I want."

Trent leaned forward and kissed Oscar gently on the neck, sending a cascade of tingles down Oscar's spine.

"I'm teasing. I'll become a vampire. Eventually. I don't want to look quite this young when you turn me. I'll get more respect if I'm solidly in my thirties."

"You...you're not wrong." Oscar's phone chimed, and he slid his hand into his pocket to quiet it. "That was the alarm I set for your time slot. They'll come for you soon."

Trent nodded and tightened his grip on Oscar. "It's crazy that after being so obsessive about this audition for so long, now it...it doesn't seem to matter as much."

Oscar pulled back and looked at him, raising his eyebrow. This was unlike his mate.

“Really.”

Trent rolled his eyes. “I mean, I care about it, obviously, but it’s not everything. We have a whole life to build, regardless of whether either of us is part of this program next year.”

Oscar leaned in and gently kissed Trent. His mate’s lips were soft and warm.

Someone behind Oscar cleared their throat. He broke the kiss reluctantly and turned to see a young woman in a matronly blouse with a bow at the neck. An intern, Oscar presumed.

“Mr. Erickson?” Her voice was monotone. “They’re ready for you.”

Trent stood, smoothing the front of his suit. “It’s time.”

“Break legs, sweetheart.”

Trent smiled and followed the woman through a nearby door, leaving Oscar on his own.

If Oscar were smart, he would have looked over his music one last time, making sure that he was confident in every phrase and breath. But he couldn’t find it in himself to worry over it. Instead, he closed his eyes, hoping to hear his love sing.

The doors to the studios were thick, but they couldn’t do more than muffle the clarion voice of a world class opera singer. And that’s what Trent was. Oscar knew it. He believed in Trent, and as the strains of his first aria rang out, Oscar lost himself in the luxurious sound.

Trent was nailing it. Oscar had never heard him sing better. He could tell that even through the wall. He couldn't imagine the richness of timbre the auditors were experiencing on the other side of that door. His mate was perfect.

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He had drifted off into an almost meditative state when the door opened with a creak, jolting him back to reality. He expected Trent to emerge from it, but instead, it was the intern again.

“Um...the auditors would like you to join us, Mr. Acosta.”

Oscar's brow furrowed in confusion, but he stood and followed her into the audition room. Trent was still there, leaning on the piano with an easy grace, chatting with the director of the program, a bearded man in his early forties. Maestro Zaslavsky.

“Ah, Mr. Acosta, thanks for joining. Mr. Erickson was saying that the two of you do an excellent version of the duet from Don Carlo. Since you had the appointment after him, I thought you might perform it for us.”

“Oh!” Oscar locked eyes with Trent, who was wearing a mischievous smile. “If...if you want to.”

“Of course I do,” Trent said, and gestured for Oscar to stand next to him. Oscar sidled up to him, basking in the confidence and ease that radiated off Trent. He was so relaxed. He must have realized he was nailing the audition.

Trent leaned in and whispered in Oscar's ear. “We're best as a team.”

Oscar's chest warmed with the certainty of Trent's words. He was right. The two of them had spent so long competing, but it was them together, joined with an ever-strengthening connection, that held the possibility of true triumph.

Oscar turned, facing the table of auditors, and smiled as the piano launched into the dramatic introduction. As Trent and Oscar began, their voices blended, balanced and complementary, and they poured themselves into the melody. They imbued it with their hope and their desire and, yes, their love, as the music swelled and filled the room.

Oscar's rooms at the Grosvenor covenhouse were spare. Before any vampires had inhabited it, the building had been modern condominiums above a ground floor office space, and Oscar lived in a basic one-bedroom. He'd done little to decorate it. He hadn't seen the need before now. The walls were still the slate gray of the original construction, and they were bare. He shifted self-consciously from leg to leg as Trent entered the apartment.

"Hey, this is where I?—"

Trent's mouth was against him before he could finish the sentence, pushing him against the granite kitchen island. It looked like his mate wasn't overly concerned with his lack of interior design. There was nothing tender about Trent now, his thick, muscular tongue invading Oscar's mouth. He moaned at the aggression. He loved it when Trent took control.

Oscar moaned even louder as Trent's hand came up to the back of his neck, gripping him and holding him as he continued to ravage him. The man was going to kill him. Oscar shuddered, and he brushed his rock hard cock against Trent's leg. Trent could be rougher, even. Oscar was a vampire, he wouldn't?—

"Wait." Oscar pushed back gently on Trent's chest. "You don't want to be a vampire?"

"Not yet," Trent replied. "Eventually yes. In a couple of years." Trent squinted at Oscar with suspicion. "Why?"

“It’s just...you’re human. Humans are very breakable.”

Trent didn’t answer. Oscar couldn’t tell if he was considering what he’d said, or angry at him for being overprotective.

“That makes sense,” Trent said. “But I’m not ready.”

Oscar nodded, wrapping his arms around Trent’s strong back. “We’ll wait. But...well, I don’t want to put any pressure on you...”

“What?”

“If we complete the mating bond, that will provide some protection, without having to turn you. You’ll gain some strength and speed, just not as much as a full vampire.”

Trent cocked his head. “Oh. Why don’t we do that?”

“I don’t know.” Oscar tore his eyes away from Trent, staring at the laminate floor beneath. “I don’t want you to feel pressure?—”

“Oscar.” Trent reached forward and brought Oscar’s chin up, forcing him to reestablish eye contact. “I love you.”

“You do?” The words were barely perceptible as they escaped from Oscar’s lips.

“Of course I do. I’m sorry it took me so long to say it. I...” Trent stopped, taking in a deep breath and letting it out. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m proud that you’re my mate.”

“You are?”

“I know...I was kind of an asshole. But I promise you. I’m in this.”

Oscar nodded. Tears welled up, and he forced himself to speak. “Now that the danger is past and Elliott is dead, I just...I’m having trouble accepting that things can be good. They haven’t been in so long.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t,” Trent said, a fiery determination shining in his eyes. “I’ll prove it to you.”

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With those words, Trent was on him, his tongue invading Oscar's mouth, strong and searching. Trent's hands were on him, tugging his jacket off, undoing his belt. The desperate need to feel Trent against him overtook Oscar. He frantically unbuttoned Trent's shirt, striving to get Trent's smooth skin and muscle under his fingertips.

Trent's hand was around him now, gripping him, and his whole body jumped at the electricity in the touch. He thrust his hips forward, desperate for the friction.

Trent broke off the kiss, pressing his forehead against Oscar's, the bridges of their noses touching. "How do you want to do this?" Oscar shivered at the power in those words.

"Please. I need you...please take control. I don't want to think anymore."

Trent's eyes sparkled as his hand went to Oscar's chin, turning his head to the side with a sensual strength. His tongue was in Oscar's ear now. Oscar squirmed and whined as Trent pushed inside, licking, then nibbling at the lobe.

"Ungh..." It was so much. When Oscar thought he maybe couldn't take it anymore, Trent broke off and spun Oscar around, pushing Oscar's pants down to his ankles.

Oscar leaned forward and rested his elbows on the kitchen island, closing his eyes tight.

"The perfect meal," he heard Trent say, and then his ass cheeks were being pulled apart and Trent's tongue was on his hole, flicking and tasting.

“Fuck, Trent, fuck that feels so good...” Oscar’s voice broke as he spoke. He pushed his ass back, enticing Trent to invade further, to go deeper. Soon enough, Oscar got his wish.

Trent was fucking him with his perfect tongue, breaching him and pushing in and out. It was heaven. Oscar couldn’t contain himself any longer, his moans growing to full on shouts of pleasure.

“Please, I can’t take it anymore,” Oscar called out to his mate, who was relentlessly torturing him, devouring his hole. “You have to fuck me.”

The feeling of Trent’s tongue disappeared, and the absence was devastating, but Oscar held out hope that it would soon be replaced by his thick cock.

“I need to prep you,” Trent said, pressing his finger gently against Oscar’s opening.

“I told you last time, I’m a vampire. I’ll heal fast. Just fuck me. Use the fucking olive oil for lube, I don’t care. Just get in me.” Oscar’s pleading was absolutely out of control, but he’d waved goodbye to his control from the first kiss.

He heard the clink of the olive oil bottle, and a slick finger pushed into him.

“Good enough,” Oscar said. “Get in me.”

“My impatient mate.” Trent’s voice was a low growl. “I’ll give you what you need.”

It hurt when Trent entered him, but Oscar didn’t care. The pain subsided soon enough, leaving only the intense fullness of Trent’s girth. He loved it, being used for his mate’s pleasure. He nearly came at just the idea of being filled with Trent’s seed.

Trent went slow at first, but after a few encouraging moans, his pace quickened.

Oscar gripped the far edge of the island with his fingertips as his mind turned off. The slap of Trent's muscular thighs against his ass was hypnotic, and Trent pegged his prostate again and again, pulling out pleasure-filled gasps and sobs.

"You feel so soft and tight around me, Oscar." Trent's pace was brutal, not letting up for a second. Trent was doing what he promised. He was showing Oscar that he owned him. "You belong to me. You always will."

Oscar's rock-hard cock jolted with Trent's words, and he felt his balls tighten. "I'm going to..."

With one powerful move, Trent pulled out and flipped Oscar onto his back, laying him down on the kitchen island. Oscar laughed with surprise, but that laughter died as Trent climbed up on the island and pushed Oscar's knees against his chest. Trent pressed down on Oscar's thighs with his muscled arms and buried himself inside Oscar once again. Oscar had a perfect view of Trent's face now, and the determination he saw there sent him flying. This was his mate, and his mate wanted him, needed him, needed that connection. His mate would never let him go. He'd promised.

Trent's jaw tightened, and Oscar could tell he was a few thrusts away from the precipice.

"Trent..."

"I want this. Make me your mate."

Trent's neck was inches away from Oscar's mouth. Trent started to lose control, his rhythm growing erratic, and Oscar let his fangs drop.

This man was his.

He bit down hard on Trent's neck. Trent cried out, and the warmth of his cum filled Oscar's insides. It was amazing. After a few swallows, Oscar unlatched himself and brought his wrist up to his face, slicing open a vein with his fang and holding it to Trent's mouth. Trent licked at the blood flowing down Oscar's arm and swallowed.

The bond snapped into place between them even as they both came again with an intense shudder. Before they'd been connected, but now they were joined. Love, gratitude, and satisfaction flowed from Trent through the bond.

Oscar wrapped his arms around Trent's neck, guiding Trent's head in closer for a long, slow kiss. This was how things should be. This is what it meant to have a mate. Not fear. Not ruthlessness. But giving themselves over to each other willingly and without reservation.

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“I refuse to lose you,” Oscar whispered into Trent’s ear, wrapping his legs around Trent’s waist.

“You never will.” Trent squeezed their bodies even more tightly together. “You never will.”

Chapter 24

Epilogue: 6 Months Later – Trent

Insiem vivremo, e moriremo insieme!

The applause thundered from the packed house of the Manhattan Lyric, rolling over Trent and Oscar like waves crashing against the rocks. With the bright stage lights in their eyes, the sea of faces appeared as an amorphous cheering mass. Oscar turned his head toward Trent, a tiny, adorable smile on his face.

“I guess they liked it.”

Trent winked and grabbed Oscar’s hand, prompting him to bow. Trent’s insides vibrated with the thrill of performing at the Lyric for the first time. The gala introducing the new Young Artists to the subscribers was an important fundraising event. That’s what they’d been told, and Trent knew they had absolutely killed it.

It had been a whirlwind six months. He had mated with Oscar. He’d moved into the Grosvenor covenhouse. And they’d both gotten into the Young Artists Program.

He wasn't sure exactly how that had happened, but he suspected Anthony might have played a role. All he knew was that the program had somehow found funding for one more slot. Which meant they took both Oscar and himself.

They were only a month in, but it was already life-changing. They spent their days working with professional singers and directors and musicians. They were preparing small roles in the upcoming season. Trent was exhausted and happy. And he was so grateful he had Oscar by his side for it.

The reception after the concert was a glittering affair. Trent didn't know anyone there, but he could tell these people had money. The older women were decked out in huge jewels and long gowns. Most of their husbands sported very expensive tuxedos that also tended to be fairly wrinkled. Trent did his best to make small talk, but he was thankful he had his mate next to him. Oscar was just so much better at it.

"Trent! Oscar!" Before he emerged from the throng, Trent knew who was calling from the sound of his light tenor voice. Justin.

He squeezed past a confused-looking older woman sporting a strange silver fascinator. Justin was riding the line of appropriate clothing, wearing a mesh tank under an open blazer. He did look good, though. He threw himself at Trent.

"Oof." Trent recovered and wrapped his arms around the tiny man, accepting the overeager hug. Justin stepped back.

"You were so good!" he squeaked as he hugged Oscar.

"Thank you, friend," Oscar said.

"We agree with Justin." A deep rumble came from the tall, redheaded coven master as he approached with Anthony on his arm. Freddie flashed a rare smile. "You were

wonderful.”

“Thank you,” Trent said. “That means a lot. I mean, you have to think we did a good job, but?—”

“Well, I don’t have to think that, but I do.” Trent turned to his left to see the director of the program, Maestro Zaslavsky, approaching them. Dressed in an elegant navy suit with a vest, the man cut a dashing figure. In his forties, the Maestro had a salt-and-pepper beard that many of the participants were absolutely drooling over. He wasn’t Trent’s type, but Trent got the attraction.

The Maestro was a man of few words, and even fewer positive ones, so when he gave a compliment, you treasured it.

“That’s very kind of you,” Oscar replied, extricating himself from Justin’s hug.

“Not kind. Just the truth.”

The Maestro sauntered off, waving at a tiny, elderly woman who was swimming in her huge red velvet dress, and heading to the open bar.

Trent smiled at Oscar. He hoped the Maestro’s words bode well for a great year ahead. Trent believed in himself, but he believed in the two of them more. He knew the future they were forging together would be glorious.

“Who was that?”

The breathless question came from Justin, who stared at the conductor as he walked away.

“Maestro Zaslavsky?” Trent said. “He runs the program.”

“Whatwas that?”

Trent furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. He glanced at Oscar.What does that mean?

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“He’s a supernatural,” Oscar said. “I’m not sure what kind.”

Freddie and Anthony moved in closer. “I don’t smell animal on him,” Freddie said, “so I doubt he’s a shifter, but beyond that I couldn’t say.”

“And it’s not polite to ask,” Anthony said to Justin in a pointed tone.

“He’s...he’s just so handsome,” Justin said wistfully, his gaze still locked on the man’s backside.

Trent rolled his eyes.

“We should probably keep making small talk,” Oscar said, and Trent groaned.

“Thanks for coming to support Oscar,” Trent said to Freddie and Anthony.

“Trent, we’re here to support you as well,” Anthony replied in a kind tone. “You are a Grosvenor now, part of the coven, even if you aren’t currently a vampire. We’re your family.”

Anthony and Freddie had really proven that in the last six months. They’d been nothing but kind, working hard to ensure that Trent felt included in everything that went on in the covenhouse. Freddie had also spearheaded the removal of the last few vampires left over from the Azarian coven. They’d been holed up in their new covenhouse in Hoboken. Trent wasn’t entirely sure how Freddie managed it, but in one fell swoop, he had cleaned the place out. Trent didn’t know if the vamps had been killed or imprisoned, and he mostly didn’t care. He was just glad they were fully

gone.

The witches, on the other hand, that was a different story. But also not Trent's area of expertise. He'd let the coven master deal with that hornet's nest.

Trent glanced at Oscar, who gave him a slight nod. The idea of a family this supportive was new to Trent. It had been many years since Trent had had any family at all. He never thought he'd have one full of vampires.

"Thank you. That means a lot."

Trent reached down and threaded his fingers through Oscar's, leaning his head against the taller vampire's upper arm and sighing.

A year ago, he wouldn't have dared to imagine being where he was now. Not only was he taking the next step in his career, but Oscar and he were building a home together. There was a whole future ahead of them.

He couldn't wait.