



V for Vindictive

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: She thought her messy work and love life were finally settling down, but it's only gotten worse. How will she survive several relationships and a new path to vengeance?

V here, and I'm back to settle the score with the jerks who created me. With Grams and Phillip in the wind and a pain-in-the-ass Dark Fae still after me, I'm barely catching my breath before things get...weird. And complicated. And a little bit spicy.

My mysterious powers can't be explained, but worse, my budding attraction for another guy is becoming a real problem. The gorgeous Brit is the only person keeping me from Doom and Gloom Central, and he's so pretty to look at. How else do you expect a heartbroken girl to get over someone she wasn't really dating to begin with? But when my not-boyfriend comes back, complicated isn't a strong enough word to describe how messy things get.

The confliction of my heart is only the start. The man behind all the terrible stuff going wrong in my life is just within reach, and I'm about to learn a painful lesson in betrayal. Turns out, this genetically altered monster's tale is just beginning. But when you're out to destroy the people who made you, it's bound to be an epic fight for your life.

This is a spicy continuation of V for Vampire Hunter with why choose love, desperate revenge, deeply troubled humor, and a cliffhanger. The third part, V for Vengeance, can be read in the ongoing serial story on Kindle Vella.

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Chapter 1

Wingman

Two weeks had gone by, and I'd finally settled into my new routine with the pack and Sloan. Mainly, hanging out in the cave day in and day out and prepping for my imminent future: a clash with a certain Dark Fae.

Sloan somehow procured materials for me to learn all there was to know about creatures frequenting this plane—still a difficult pill to swallow—and he spent a good portion of each day training me for fights. It was the continuation of what we started in Austria, except now I had a pack of Shifters as backseat fighters.

Lucky me.

Nigel and Topher were the worst, always correcting my stance and telling me where I went wrong. You know, because Sloan kicked my ass every fucking time we trained, and it was really starting to piss me off. But the parroting Shifter duo were the most annoying, particularly because I rarely saw that patronizing side of Nigel. Not even when we were partners had the dude been this obnoxious. Until Phillip, Nigel never talked down to me or went out of his way to correct something I did.

Mansplaining took on a whole newform—werewolfsplaining.

Before hell unleashed on my life, the Shifter was considerate, gentle, and never condescending. But I guess those days were long gone now. The mask had come off. The façade melted away, and this was the new Nigel.

I mean, why not? He wasn't trying to win my affection anymore. Maybe this was Nigel's real personality.

Then again, back when we fought together, I hadn't been worried about a Dark Fae with the power to attack me with magic either. And in all fairness, most of Nigel and Topher's criticisms were valid.

I'd learned that Nigel was much older than he looked. Much, much older. Like fifty years older. Turns out, Grams altered some of the memories of my childhood and school life to fit the story I was told. So, I'd never truly know if the life I lived up to this point was a total fabrication, or pockets of real mixed in with lies. Not unless one day I got the chance to talk to Grams again.

It was another betrayal that sat in my throat every time I thought about her. It was the other shoe dropping to realize my life was just a stream of carefully crafted lies, but I was dealing. Not that I had much choice but to get over it and move on.

In a surprising turn of events, vampires and Shifters were from the same realm and natural-born enemies, much like the stories told. That, however, didn't stop them from getting down and dirty with each other it seemed.

A tidbit I was unfortunate enough to stumble across when Claude reminisced about some of his past lovers—two men and a woman. All vampires and all who made it their personal crusade to kill him someday.

Talk about bad exes.

Honestly, Claude was a real basket-case. But for some reason, people still found him unbelievably alluring. In an odd, sort of deranged kind of way, it made sense. Not that I was one of them.

Thankfully, vampires couldn't procreate the same way Shifters could, so hybrids weren't a thing until the Organization went and played around with their genetics. Now we weren't terribly sure what sort of beasts they'd created. With what might possibly reside in my blood, I wouldn't be surprised if some werewolf-vampire Frankenstein monster was out there somewhere.

So, I continued to learn whatever I could from the materials Sloan gathered and from the stories the pack told. I asked questions. I pried into their pasts, because any distraction I could manage after a shitty few months was wholeheartedly welcomed.

Unfortunately, it didn't ease the pain or worry I carried in my heart about the man I'd left behind. While Sloan did a good job of keeping me distracted by conversation, and I was given plenty of time to get to know every person in Nigel's pack, nothing could ever truly keep my thoughts away from the Austrian who neither Sloan nor I had heard from since we fled Austria.

And it was far from the only thing I worried about.

Sloan had been a distraction in plenty of other ways. His sexual prowess couldn't be denied, and it made my mouth water when I thought about all the things we still hadn't done. His kiss inspired fantasies of what his mouth could do to other parts of my body. What would I discover about the Brit if he just touched me a little bit? Would the pleasure compare? Would I lose myself in his touch the same way I lost myself in Phil's?

I'm the worst.

It wasn't a question anymore if I was sex-addicted. I'd come to terms with my insatiable appetite in the bedroom, but I couldn't quite accept how quickly I moved from one man to the next. I was a Hunter, so relationships were complicated right from the start. But to think I was capable of wanting two men at once was not

something even I knew about myself.

It begged the question: was I really this heartless?

Worse, Nigel hadn't surrendered his sultry attention either; made clear after the first day of our stay. He may not be pushing like before, but it was still there. He definitely hadn't given up wanting more between us. So now I was caught between a weird shuffle of three men—one dude I wasn't even sure was still alive—and it was a nightmare of my own making. I didn't have anyone else to blame.

Fuck my life.

Both Sloan and Nigel continued to steal glances my direction, and it didn't help that sex was all I thought about these days. I hadn't felt the warmth of someone's body in a way that was pleasurable since the night Sloan and I kissed.

The night I betrayed Phillip.

I closed my eyes and swallowed around the knot of shame in my throat. Sat in a room full of people, all I wanted to do was feel Sloan's lips on mine again, and I couldn't pretend I didn't anymore. I couldn't ignore the dark, carnal desires anymore. Now that I had a taste of pleasure, I yearned for it in weak moments. Even when I shouldn't. Even when I had a world of guilt weighing down on my shoulders.

But I wasn't really at liberty to flee the building sexual tension. Not when it was evident anyone with an agenda against the Organization—or really anyone supernatural—planned to find and use me to do their evil bidding. It wasn't the sort of popularity a teen girl dreamt about, but I didn't get much of a choice in the matter.

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Whether or not it was uttered out loud, it was clearly an unwritten rule that I shouldn't go anywhere. Sloan didn't give me permission to leave the cave, and everyone did their part to keep the area around it well guarded in case I had a sudden urge to flee. I wouldn't, but I didn't fault them for being careful.

Still, I couldn't hide forever. The Organization would call on us again soon, and Sloan never explained how he'd kept them at bay for a full two weeks without a detailed report. Or how he'd explained Phillip's disappearance.

My throat burned, the guilt resurfacing with the mere thought of my previous partner.

"Okay," Tiff finally said, huffing and slapping her yoga-pant-clad thighs. "That's it!"

The rest of the room shifted their eyes over to the she-wolf as she stood up, dragging me with her. She huffed again loudly and jerked her eyes over to Sloan, who was perched on a chair in the corner with a laptop.

Not totally off the grid.

"She needs to get out of this damn cave. I don't care what you say. V is a powerful, formidable lady and she deserves to breathe fresh air!"

Sloan's lips tilted alongside mine, and the rest of the group mirrored similar looks. "Is that right?"

Tiff lost a little bit of her gusto in favor of swooning, and I couldn't help but giggle. When she heard it, she perked up and swung her arm around my shoulders, catching

my cheeks with one hand. “Look at this sweet face. She’s had enough of this dour, sour, and yucky dark cave. She needs sunlight. Fresh air. The strong scent of pine. The freedom of the forest!”

After two weeks, I knew better than to interrupt this woman. No sense in trying to stop the runaway train that was Tiff. Once Tiff made her mind up, there wasn’t a single person who could derail her efforts, and I truly admired that about her. It was a quality I often lacked when it came to Phillip because his voice was always the most commanding in the room.

Phillip.

“Look at this sad face,” Tiff said, emphasizing her point by squeezing my cheeks, and I could practically hear Sloan’s amusement. “Risk a little. Take her out.”

Nigel stood up, but he wasn’t given a chance to speak.

Sloan quickly spoke over him, already on his feet. “You’re right.”

My mouth dropped open. I hadn’t expected Sloan to give in, and it showed on my face. “She is?”

“I am?” Tiff parroted, just as astonished as I was.

Go figure she said all that while not expecting in a hundred years for Sloan to give in. It made me smile against my better judgment to think she’d spoken so passionately for me without any hope it would work out.

The rest of the group managed to keep straight faces, and it was a serious wonder how they could with Tiff’s hilarious antics. The chick was comedy gold and full of energy. And I liked her more and more every time she talked.

Sloan brushed back his hair and swept his gaze over to Nigel before taking calculated steps towards us. “I was just thinking the same, to be frank. It won’t be long before we need to move locations, and I agree you need a proper day out.”

“I do?” My eyes dropped to Sloan’s mouth the second his tongue swept across his bottom lip. “Today?”

Nigel grunted and crossed his toned arms. Sadly, Nigel was still delicious to look at, and I didn’t hide my desire very well when his muscular body presented itself with glorious clarity through his clothes. I couldn’t even pretend for a second I wasn’t thirsty as fuck.

“Two weeks is hardly enough time to sink under the radar. And what do you mean move locations? That’s news to me,” Nigel demanded in his pissed-the-fuck-off baritone.

Sloan didn’t look over. His gaze stayed with mine the entire time he addressed Nigel. “We’ll need to resume our assignments. The Organization won’t be appeased with any more excuses. Our service is needed in Sacramento, and it will take five hours to drive from here. We’ll be gone for a few days. Maybe a week. All depends on how quick we complete our assignment.”

“But Phil...”

Sloan’s smile rejected me the second it appeared. “I wouldn’t worry about Phillip. He’s clever, and if he hasn’t shown up, he has his reasons.”

“So he’s alive?” Nigel asked, voicing my own internal question.

The Brit sighed loudly, panning our group. “It’d take an army to get rid of that man, so yes, he’s alive.”

Relief hit like a cool breeze on a hellish day. “He finally made contact?” I asked, further prying and demanding an answer with a pointed stare at the other Hunter.

Sloan’s smile broadened. “He did.”

“And he’s okay?”

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One nod from Sloan was enough. He didn't elaborate, which meant that it was likely Phillip had been injured to some degree. But he was alive. He'd gotten away. That was enough.

“We're going back to the Organization?”

The Brit's smile dropped, forming a thin line. “We can't hide forever. Eros won't come looking for you after what occurred in Austria. Not at least until the dogs have been called off, so to speak. The Organization is aware he's been targeting you, and now he'll be hard-pressed to fly under the radar anytime soon.”

Mia tossed her dark hair back over toned shoulders, her demeanor shifting from casual to alert. Even Claude wasn't smiling anymore. In his usual weird attire—a shirt basically in tatters and a time-worn pair of denims—the wolf sat with one leg resting on the other and his arms bowed behind his head, silently regarding my partner. Topher had set his book down, appearing much too big for the chair he presently sat on. His eyes moved like silver bullets to where Sloan was, giving the other Hunter his full attention.

And of course, the most attentive was Nigel.

My once-close friend rocked his usual clean and chic look. His casual clothes were always freshly pressed, and I couldn't help but admire how strong he looked in everything he wore. I might still harbor my fair share of resentment towards Nigel, but the dude would always be gorgeous to me.

After giving the room my own panning glance, I addressed Sloan, “So...the

Organization knows?”

Theother Hunter’s gaze swept across the room, and the room’s eyes were quickly on him. “They do. It doesn’t appear they were aware he was back, even after Phillip reported the first attack.” The gorgeous Hunter’s jaw worked slowly. “Our hunch about a high-level player seems to be the case. It was likely buried the first time.” The room quieted. “Phillip made sure this one wasn’t.” The violence in Sloan’s stare put everyone in the room on edge.

Everyone but Tiff, that is.

“Yeah. Okay. We’ve gone off topic. Would you please take V out and let her live for a day? Also, can I come with?” Tiff demanded, easing the tension immediately.

Taking another step, Sloan offered me a curious look. “Can I possibly ask for it to be alone?”

Tiff’s mouth clamped shut and Nigel visibly tensed, neither one sure how best to respond. The rest of the group was silent, or didn’t care, because no one else seemed to respond to the back and forth the way the other two Shifters had.

“A date?!” Tiff cried out, tugging me closer. “Do it,” she whispered even though we both knew Sloan could hear it. “Do it for those of us who can’t, lady. He’s so damn hot. I’d kill to be you.”

Tiff was a persistent as hell wingman.

Nigel cleared his throat. “I don’t think—”

“V?” Sloan interrupted. “Would you honor me by taking a stroll with me this evening?”

Tiff squealed in my ear, and it nearly drowned out the sound of Nigel's teeth grinding. "He's a literal dreamboat, V. Do it."

Oddly, this conversation made me miss Kate. She'd be doing and saying the exact same things to me. She'd encourage me to live a little. She'd say I'd never get an opportunity like it again. "Embrace that hussy side, giiiiirl," she'd say.

I flicked my gaze over to Nigel, then thought about the man I'd left behind who I hadn't even been aware was alive until a moment ago. But then I remembered how close I'd come to dying. How close I'd come to losing Sloan. How I still didn't know what caused that time stall. How every day could potentially be my last.

Lips lifting, I offered Sloan a sneaky smile. "I thought you'd never ask."

Chapter 2

The Princess Treatment

I peered into the reflective chunk of glass Tiff aimed at me while Mia stood beside her with a seductive grin on her lips. "You're about to become Mrs. Sloan! Are we good or are we good, M&M?"

M&M was what Tiff nicknamed Mia. From how she explained it, the name had something to do with code words. Incidentally, Mia's last name also started with M, and it was the entire reason Tiff brazenly named her after a delicious, melt-in-the-mouth treat. Weirdest part about it all was that Mia let her.

After agreeing to go out with the sultry Brit, both girls closed in on me like the wolves they were. Mia I hadn't expected, so I was ushered to a corner of the cave with the best lighting, as expressed by the bubbly blonde, before I knew what was happening.

A half hour later I was in an outfit I'd never pick for myself, heels as sharp as knives, a thick layer of red matte lipstick, and several intense shades of eyeshadow that, instead of making me look like an evil spirit, made me appear all dark and mysterious.

The obsidian-eyed she-wolf circled me, sliding her intense gaze up and down my body before nodding her approval. "She's done."

Thankfully, a privacy curtain was kept in the deepest part of the cave for people to change in, so that was where I morphed into a demon's mistress with Mia and Tiff's help.

Unfortunately, the toilet situation in this doom and gloom cave was something I'd remember for the rest of my life whether or not I wanted to. All I had to say was thank God for modern advancements. I'd never take a toilet for granted ever again.

"I thought you didn't do makeovers?" I asked, tugging down the mini skirt. There might be enough length that my ass wasn't on full display, but one wrong move and everything would be laid bare for every unfortunate bystander to see.

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Mia's lips lifted mischievously. "When had I said I didn't like a good makeover?"

Tiff giggled and stole a glance at the group of men hovering at the front of the cave, ready to go out for their nightly scout. "The whole evening out was Mia's idea."

Shocked, I offered the goth seductress a flabbergasted look. "This was all your idea?"

Bending down to fix a spot along my lips, one of Mia's fingers lingered along my jaw. "Just enjoy yourself. You deserve to take a break."

Mia proved more complicated and mysterious with every new nugget of information I discovered about her, and I was wholly enslaved. I wanted to know all I could about the she-wolf now that it was clear I hadn't a fucking clue who she truly was. Mia was an enigma.

Really, there weren't words that expressed how outright befuddled I was by the turn of events as Tiff pushed me towards the front and into the view of the rest of the group. Aka, the men.

In a pair of slacks and name-brand shirt that exposed his powerful but slim build, Sloan looked like an A-list celebrity. His hair was tossed back in a way that spoke of talented fingers and an attention to detail. Not out of the norm, but tonight was another level entirely for the Brit.

Is he actually glowing right now?

I eyed the treetops, convinced he'd caught a stray beam of moonlight. But sources of

light were scarce outside of thin threads peeking through the overhead, none of which aimed his direction.

Theory confirmed—the man was glowing.

Ice-blue depths landed on me first with intrigue, and then with the intention to devour every inch of my body. It did things to my pulse that made me fidget under the intense scrutiny, and my heart failed to beat in any way effective for what I worried would be the rest of the evening.

“You look absolutely breathtaking, love.” In his sensual accent, the compliment landed with the precision of his blades and put me into a full-blown swoon.

What a devil this man is.

It was going to be a long night if I didn’t figure my shit out and get my body to listen. Or if Sloan kept sweeping me off my feet with straight-forward comments like that one.

I don’t stand a chance in hell.

Sloan wasn’t Phillip, so the way he looked at me was different. But it wasn’t any less provocative or lustful. No, if anything, it was a hundred times worse because Sloan didn’t give out his lascivious looks to just anyone.

The subtle smirk the Brit gave me was specially crafted for me and me alone, and I couldn’t deal. Even though it was likely seconds, the way Sloan’s eyes moved over my body felt like hours. And by the end of his inspection, every bit of embarrassed, fascinated interest was sure to show on my face.

So much for Hunter training...

Intense heat reached my face, turning my cheeks cherry-red when Sloan came forward and offered me his hand. His other arm was bent behind his back like this was some Victorian period courting and he was a gentleman calling on a lady. “It’s my honor to accompany you on a night out, milady.”

Holy shit.

I placed my hand on his, not totally loving how easily he got me to comply. “Uh, sure thing.”

“What a joke,” Nigel mumbled. “I don’t get Hunters.”

Topher scoffed beside him, agreeing. “Neither do I.” Topher grunted, all animal, his voice softer than Nigel’s. “Got to be the most ridiculous thing I’ve seen in a long time.”

Despite the peanut gallery and their vicious barbs, Sloan barely responded. Instead, the other Hunter took gentle hold of my hand before guiding my arm through the loop of his. “I hope you don’t mind, but I made reservations at a restaurant. I thought we could walk around the nearby town to do a little shopping afterwards.”

After escaping Eros and fleeing to the US, nothing I wore were clothes I owned. Everything was either from Mia or Tiff, and a lot of what I’d sported lately was to their taste. I wasn’t one for shopping, but the idea of picking out something that felt more like me was massively appealing.

It was just another reason to admire how much the other Hunter thought about me, and I spared a moment to get my pulse under control again.

“Shopping?” I asked, jaw a little lax in light of his affectionate demeanor. “Um, sure?”

The Brit's tender smile hit me the same way his compliments did. "I'd like to buy you a few things, if that's okay. All to your specifications, of course. But do me this little favor—let this unworthy bloke feel like he's helped you decide." Sloan winked at me, and I let loose a giggle that was by far the cutest and most girly of my life.

If this was how Sloan bewitched women, it worked. Holy shit, it worked so well even I was clinging onto every word he said. It was effortless and potent, and nothing like how Phillip played his hand.

I'm doomed.

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“He wants to buy her things?!” Tiff murmured to Mia, sighing wistfully. “What a dreamboat. Why can’t I meet me a man like that?”

“It’s ridiculous and fake, is why,” Topher commented offhandedly, bitterness tainting his voice.

I eyed the group, but Sloan didn’t appear to have any issue ignoring them, and he quietly led me out to the path that headed for town.

In our present garb, a moonlight stroll through the woods would’ve been laughable if done with anyone other than Sloan. It was several miles to the nearest house, and nearly forty to the nearest town. Sloan and I looked ready for a rich-person party on a yacht. I would’ve grumbled about it, but I didn’t want to make Sloan feel bad after all the trouble he went through to make it happen.

“V doesn’t like to be pampered like that,” Nigel added, his eyes meeting mine when I looked over my shoulder at him. “She’s not that type of girl.”

What, the girl who doesn’t deserve a guy to wine and dine her?

Despite his claim not being totally off the mark, I glared at my friend.

But it was Claude who sighed and spoke up in place of me, “Wow, you guys are so jealous it’s sad. What, bitter you didn’t get to do it first? Don’t hate the player.”

After two weeks, it was clear Claude liked Sloan. A lot. More than the others. More than Tiff. He eyed Sloan every chance he got, and no one could blame him. He was

an oddball, but one I respected.

Auburn hair blew into my face, catching rays of moonlight, just as I turned my head to give the bitter Shifter a piece of my mind.

As if barely bothered, Sloan gently brushed my renegade hair aside and smirked at the group behind us. “If you enjoy yourself, nothing they say here will matter, V. This is your night, and I’m honored you chose me to spend it with. Whatever you want to do, we’ll do. I don’t determine the agenda, you do. So, if a dinner and walk don’t appeal to you—”

“They do!” I nearly yelled and quickly cleared my throat, blushing. “I mean, you already went through all the trouble, and I could really use some new clothes.”

Sloan’s dashing grin reached his glimmering blue eyes. “Then, of course, whatever the lady wants.”

“Holy! What a man, M&M. What. A. Man,” Tiff said, defusing the tension instantly, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I couldn’t figure out where to put my weapons,” I admitted, shifting a dagger on the inner part of my thigh into a more comfortable position. “This outfit doesn’t really give a girl any place to conceal her weaponry.”

Sloan’s deep, husky laughter tickled my skin from how close we stood next to each other. Presently, we headed towards the car the Brit summoned for the evening. “I won’t deny it crossed my mind when I saw your outfit where you might put a weapon, if any. I’m impressed you managed to conceal a few, and I look forward to discovering how many for myself later.”

What, did Sloan train with Phillip on the weekends or something? Holy hell.

I nearly tripped over a branch, not ready for the other Hunter's seductive quip. "Hey!"

Sloan's arm was already around my waist, saving me from a meet-and-greet with the dirt floor. It was a ridiculous situation considering my superior blood and abilities. I'd very likely spend a full three days bemoaning the mishaps and misspoken words from our night out.

"I'm joking, V."

"Could've fooled me," I rasped, barely recovering my composure. "You can't come at me with one-liners like that, Sloan. It's cheating."

The Brit's lips slanted devilishly, and his long fingers stroked down my thinly covered side before spiriting away. "I'll endeavor to remember that for the future."

Phillip was bad, but Sloan was worse. Maybe because the Brit came across as innocent and well-meaning, so his seductive, left-field comments hit harder. Maybe it was because Sloan struck me as someone who didn't go out of his way to beguile a woman. Or maybe it was how his charming smile instantly disarmed my post-comment rage, making it impossible to stay angry at him.

Even cheeky, Sloan wore it all in an adorable way.

Whatever it was, I wasn't ready for the level of suave bastard Sloan brought to the table, and it was a constant effort to regain my cool façade around him.

"You may wonder why I hadn't mentioned Phillip before," Sloan started, catching me by surprise and immediately changing the tone of our conversation.

I yanked my head his direction, eyes narrowed. "Yeah. I would've appreciated you

saying something.”

“He asked that I didn’t, but I don’t agree. I think it’s important you understand why he hasn’t returned to your side.”

My heart came into my throat, understanding immediately that what I was about to hear would probably hurt worse than knowing I’d kissed some other guy and left him behind.

“He was injured by Eros’s magic, and it happened because Phillip did everything he could to keep Eros from going after us when we fled.” Called it. “But Phillip’s real reason for not returning is because he’s searching for Cash. Am I right to assume you remember him?”

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The Dark Fae bastard who basically told me that I had more than just vampire blood in me? Sure.

“Pretty tough to forget that face,” I remarked with a derisive laugh. “Did Phil mention why he went after him?”

The way Sloan looked at me said it’d been mentioned. And for a few seconds, I worried he wouldn’t tell me. But after a long pause, Sloan finally let loose a breath. “Whatever Cash found in your blood, it’s special and powerful. I’m sure you’re not confused about that, seeing how it’s the reason you and I survived in the first place. I imagine that’s why Phillip decided we needed to know what may be hidden in your blood, and it’s not something we can find out without Cash.”

Made sense. It didn’t explain why he decided to leave me and do it all by himself, though. If we were partners, it should’ve been something we tackled together. But again, I was left feeling like a burden.

The bitterness was sure to show in my expression as I swallowed the question I wanted most to ask and favored one a little less confrontational. “So, how long will that take? Weeks? Months? What about Kris?”

We finally reached the parked car just as I finished my soft-spoken query. With one look at the car, I determined it was fancy and easily worth a hundred thousand.

Lamborghini?

“That’s inconspicuous,” I remarked with a sly grin.

The other Hunter chuckled and offered me a cheeky smile of his own. “Forgive me. I wanted to show off a little. Won’t happen again.”

I waved him away, gently touching the sleek black car with interest. “No. You’re fine. It’s probably the fastest thing I’ll ride in, if I’m honest.”

Sloan’s devious smirk greeted my next glance. “Perhaps not the fastest thing you’ll take a ride on, though...”

Gentleman one minute, scoundrel the next. I couldn’t figure Sloan out, and it caused me equal parts intrigue and frustration.

“I—”

Sloan opened the passenger door before pivoting my direction and quickly interjecting, “Kris will join us on our missions, but I can’t give you a timeline for Phillip. It could be days. It could be weeks. Phillip doesn’t work on anyone else’s timeline.”

Ain’t that the truth.

“Guess that’s fair. So, Kris? What about the pack?”

“They’ll work with us too, if Nigel feels so inclined. We’re going after a pretty volatile vampire and his kin in the area, and the extra number could only help us at this stage.”

It was a nice change of pace to have someone who was reasonable and played well with others. Sloan didn’t go out of his way to argue with Nigel, and the rest of the pack seemed to respect him. Even Topher had warmed to the Brit. The number of differences between Phillip and Sloan piled up over the last several weeks. Despite

that, my thoughts always wandered back to Phillip.

I couldn't help it. I was broken.

Sloan motioned inside the car, and sitting on the front seat was a little silver gift-wrapped box with a cyan-colored bow.

I stalled on my way to get inside, eyeing the little present with confusion. "What's that?"

The other Hunter retrieved it and gently took my hand. Then with a kind smile, he dropped the small box into my open palm. "It's late, but happy birthday, V."

My throat constricted with emotion, and I had trouble forming a response.

Outside of Phil, no one mentioned my birthday since I turned eighteen. I mean, it made sense because it landed in the middle of nothing but shit. Still, the gesture was one I hadn't expected. It really felt like I was getting the princess treatment tonight.

As if understanding that perfectly, Sloan helped me open the little present and revealed a ring that glimmered with specks of blues, greens, oranges, and pinks inside an oval of milk-white. "An opal," he explained, helping me fit the gorgeous ring onto my middle finger. "I thought it would look nice on you, pet."

It was by far the prettiest present anyone had ever given me, and it perfectly matched my skin tone. Sure, it wasn't something I would've chosen for myself, mainly because I didn't see a point to wearing cute things when they'd only get dirtied by the job, but I'd be lying if I said I hadn't wanted something girly like it.

Grams would be losing her mind right about now. The thought of my grandmother who wanted nothing more than for me to be a pretty princess who fell in love with a

prince brought a smile to my lips.

“This...” I struggled to put a few words together. “I’ve never worn anything like it.”

Sloan brushed red hair from my shoulder and let his fingers tease the skin along my neck before he whispered sweetly into my ear, “And it looks perfect on you, really.” His hand ghosted down my back, never wandering anywhere too forward. “It’s been enchanted, so it won’t leave your finger without your permission. It can’t be lost or taken.”

I flicked my eyes up to meet his, realizing belatedly how close his face was. “It’s really pretty,” I finally managed before Sloan’s mouth covered mine and I wasn’t given a chance to say anything else.

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Chapter 3

Every Part of You

My gaze slid back over to the man driving the luxurious, rich-person car. It wasn't but five minutes ago when his lips were on mine and a kiss that could only be classified under heavenly took my mouth by storm.

I touched my still-wet lips, the phantom sensation of his kiss tickling along the surface. It teased the senses, and I'd been so eager to kiss him back that my arms had quickly wrapped around his neck and dragged him closer.

His smile against my lips had been lost in my eagerness to devour his mouth, and for minutes we battled, his tongue joining mine, his hands bringing our hips together, my fingers sinking into his silky dark hair.

I traced the path his tongue took when it licked my bottom lip, and I could feel the squeeze between my legs, arousal reigniting. It was shameful how wet I'd gotten with just one kiss. I still felt the evidence of it whenever I shifted. But guilt was a real bitch, and I closed my eyes and swallowed the terrible burn of shame creeping into my throat.

What would Kate say right now?

I could almost hear her voice whispering for me to go all in and sink my claws into that hot piece of "Yes, oh God, yes!" She'd nudge me with her elbow. She'd tell me I was being stupid to think about Phillip when he made it clear that what we had

together was casual, no strings. And then she'd cleverly argue I needed to live a little.

Hadn't I made a promise to myself that I'd actually go out there and live my damn life after nearly dying at the hands of Eros twice? Or how after the uncertain fate of my Grams damaged a good night's sleep for weeks I wouldn't give myself any more excuses? Or more importantly, how I had every right to live the way I wanted after I realized I was nothing but a weapon created with the genetics of the very thing I hunted?

When I lifted my eyes, fired up, Sloan chuckled beside me. "The expressions you give way to in silent moments are, I must admit, enormously refreshing."

Weight hit my stomach the second he said so. "Expressions? Shit."

I also promised myself I'd keep all emotion from showing on my face, and here I was, repeating the same mistakes.

It fucking figures.

Sloan's lips slanted upwards. "Try not to be too hard on yourself. Most Hunters are given plenty of time to train out in the world before being tasked the way you have been with high-level missions."

"Or before being chased by ancient, death-defying assholes bent on killing them?"

Sloan's chest-deep chuckle made my stomach do an odd flip. "Or that."

I nodded, in no mood to continue the discussion. "So, what kind of restaurant are we going to—and do they accept Mistresses of Evil as patrons?"

The way Sloan's delight reached his face and broadened his smile was worth the

redirection I took, and I internally celebrated the smooth transition from uncomfortable work talk to something a little lessworld-ending. “I think it’ll make you happy, and to hell with anyone that turns away a beauty like yours.”

Shit. I’d never be as smooth as Sloan.

Never.

After an awkward dinner and shopping excursion around town, where every person stared at us like we were up for auction, and a few women even found a reason to talk to Sloan, the other Hunter drove us to a secret spot on a hill that overlooked the city.

The sky was clear, stars brightly gleaming and scattered along the nightscape, and I’d never seen anything quite like it. Really, my life had been one fast maneuver to the next, and I rarely got to enjoy an evening out.

I mean, not like this, anyway.

Most of the nights I spent out were overshadowed by vampires with glinting fangs and the screams of the innocent townsfolk they lured into their traps. That, or the taste of blood in my mouth after a sound kick or punch to my body by a strong-as-fuck creature of the night. Followed by an explosion of ash when my vengeful, well-aimed stake sunk into the bastard’s chest. That was how I spent most of my nights before meeting Phil.

Don’t think about him.

Moistening my lips, I flicked my eyes towards the window, suddenly very uncomfortable with all the silence presently occupying the car. Unfortunately, the rumbling hum of the sportscar and the loud chirp of bugs outfor the evening weren’t loud enough to drown out the racing thump of my heart. It was all very romance

movie, if I was honest, and I fidgeted in a way I never had with Phillip.

I clasped my hands together, determined to smother out the quaking in my body. “This is a nice spot,” I whispered, internally berating my awkwardness. “Where did you even find it?”

Sloan cut the engine. Then the leather of his seat creaking reached my sensitive ears when he artfully leaned it back, giving me his full attention. “I have my ways.”

My heart was an erratic pound in my ears, and the muscles in my body were pulled tight in anticipation. But it was anyone’s guess what I could possibly be anticipating.

“Nigel probably told you,” I struggled to say.

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“Nigel told me,” Sloan confirmed with a boyish giggle. “He said it was a local secret. Probably where all the teens go to—”

“Be naughty?” I finished, cheeks on fire.

I’d bet my favorite dagger Sloan figured me out from the very beginning. It didn’t take someone clever to realize I was a total noob at dating hot guys—or really, guys in general. It seemed stupid to try to hide it when up against a top-level Hunter of his age and skill set.

Still, call it baseless pride, but I wanted Sloan to think I could act the part of a well-trained Hunter even out on a pseudo-date like we were. Pity date? Whatever it was, I’d never be convinced someone like Sloan was truly interested in a girl like me.

Sure, the Brit didn’t strike me as the type to play games the way Phil did, but everything about the night felt a little too accommodating and considerate. Like appeasing a child. Regardless if that was the case, I slowly fell victim to Sloan’s potent charms.

As my heart tried to figure out a rhythm, I worked quickly to control the emotions leaking into my expression. I schooled my face and relaxed my posture. Then finally, I unclenched my jaw. “It’s all a little...”

“Romantic?” Sloan supplied, his happy grin not lost on me. “Perhaps that was my intention.”

I wanted to scorn him, to call it a horrible waste, but I worried about seeming

ungrateful. With Phillip, I never hesitated to say what was on my mind. Sort of the beauty of the relationship I had with my sarcastic asshole of a partner. But with Sloan, I watched what I said and filtered out most of my usual sarcasm. I couldn't help it.

"It wasn't necessary, Sloan. All of this."

The glint in the Brit's ice-blue irises had my body reacting in the most girly way it could, and I hated how easily he broke through my bravado. "I beg to differ, but I'm not really the type of bloke to argue with a beautiful, quick-witted woman."

Fuck, this dude is good.

I could almost hear Kate saying I didn't stand a chance. And she'd be right.

Every time I tried to argue a point, Sloan found a way to reject me in a way that never sounded rude or dismissive. It was beyond impressive how Sloan used compliments and subtle flattery to put my complaints to rest. Worse, the way the other Hunter came across was completely genuine.

I'd been taught over the years on how to detect dishonesty and lies, and even if I hadn't, the feeling Sloan gave was one of sincerity and complete honesty. And sadly, I couldn't ignore how adorable Sloan was when he laughed like a little boy.

His laughter quickly filled the silence.

I could only open and close my mouth, unable to argue with his point despite the fact that it was quite literally insane how fast the other Hunter praised me. After seeing how he fought and what sort of ruthless and unforgiving trainer Sloan was, the gap between the person currently giggling happily beside me and the stone-cold killer was almost too much to comprehend.

Sloan sighed and scanned the cliff-edge view with a sweep of his eyes. “You still have your guard up around me. You don’t need to.”

“I don’t,” I argued quietly.

His smile dropped some. “You do, but it’s understandable. It would be strange if you acted the same way you do with Phillip. But I’m greedy. I want it all. Every part of you.”

What?

I offered Sloan an eyebrow, not following. “What do you mean?”

For the first time, Sloan wasn’t smiling. Instead, he let loose another breath and carded slender fingers through his thick hair, finally showcasing a rare side—agitation. It took me by surprise and I watched, completely captivated.

“I’m not making any sense, I realize. Forgive me. I seem to lose myself a little around you.” His eyes captured mine in a breathtaking moment, the gleam of determination not something I was ready to see. “That doesn’t mean, however, my feelings for you are impulsive.”

His feelings?

“He may have his reasons, but I don’t agree with how Phillip treated you.” Sloan leaned forward and, unfortunately, I didn’t move away like I should. No, I hung onto every word he said. I wanted to hear everything, and I stopped breathing just so I could. “You deserve to be cherished, V. It’s Phillip’s loss that he didn’t go out of his way to do it. He left space for another. I’m not the kind man you think I am. I’m greedy and will absolutely exploit any and all opportunities to get what I want.”

It wasn't that Sloan was wrong, but it hurt to hear bad things being said about Phillip.

Whether or not he treated me the way I deserved, the Austrian never misrepresented who he was. If anything, I was the one in the wrong. After I realized I might be in love with Phillip, I wanted it to be the same for him. I wanted to drag the statement out of him without any regard for how he felt or what he wanted. It was immature and selfish. And then we fought. So, if anyone was to blame for how things ended, it was me.

My throat constricted painfully, the realization of how I'd ruined things a tough pill to swallow.

Phillip made it clear he wasn't interested in a relationship, just fun. The Austrian did what he promised he'd do from the very beginning. It may have been like he said, he'd developed strong feelings for me, but the difference between us was Phillip knew when it was time to call it quits. Not to mention, he barely reacted when he found Sloan and I kissing.

The grip on my heart was deadly, and I suffered through an agony I'd never experienced before.

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As if knowing what I internally struggled with, Sloan spoke up again, “It’s not my place to say this, but you’re not obligated to stay committed to someone who won’t do the same for you.”

The other Hunter’s words registered slowly as I watched Sloan’s beautiful mouth form them. Heart thundering for an entirely different reason than fear, I stared at Sloan’s face, which was closer than it was a minute ago.

It was without flaw. Too beautiful, some may argue. But it didn’t compare to the assault of his words. Each sincere statement hit harder than the last, driving the reality home that I’d royally screwed things up with Phillip. It wasn’t Sloan’s intention, I was almost confident, to make me realize that, but it made me wonder if I held onto Phillip out of childish hope.

Maybe things between us were really over. Maybe the only one holding onto everything was me. Maybe that was the entire reason Phillip decided to go off and find Cash without me. Maybe it was time to start accepting we’d only be work partners from now on.

Here was a man who wasn’t like other guys, and he was going out of his way to openly declare himself as an option. I’d seen girls around me fall for much less.

I’d fallen for less.

Honestly, no one ever treated me the way Sloan did. He was beautiful, kind, and not at all full of baseless pride. He treated me the way I’d only seen in movies. He didn’t say things to get something out of me. He didn’t use them to put me down or scorn

me. He didn't treat me like I was incapable of taking care of myself. No, everything Sloan said and did was purely because he respected me, and it was something I could definitely get used to.

Not even Nigel treated me that way when he was pretending to be the goodly guy in my life. Sloan didn't go out of his way to small talk or chat without a reason, but the Brit never seemed to be truly silent around me either. He found reasons to talk to me. He asked questions and listened.

Nothing like Phillip.

It was only in that moment I realized the things the Brit said were what I'd desperately hoped to hear from Phillip. I wanted my stubborn, self-centered partner to declare war over me; to ignore his past and chase after me. And when the Austrian didn't, I was left with an emptiness I couldn't adequately describe.

I thought I didn't want love. I thought I was okay with casual and fun. I thought I didn't need anyone—and really, I didn't. But I wanted it. I wanted the love my parents had; the love my Grams and Gramps had. And maybe that was how I'd finally live my own life. But mostly, I wanted the freedom to fall in love.

Sloan's fingers caressed my jaw, tracing its shape. Glinting light eyes caught rays of moonlight, and I was immediately entranced by them. Our lips met seconds later. Swiftly, his hand curved around the back of my neck and urged me closer. The way he respectfully but powerfully beckoned me to him had me groaning into the other Hunter's mouth.

I climbed onto his lap, no longer hesitant. In the tight space of the car, it was an awkward crouch I was forced to take. But nothing mattered anymore. Not when the desire to taste Sloan and feel his body overwhelmed rational thought.

Our kiss went from gentle to hurried as soon as I settled onto his thighs with the steering wheel digging painfully into my back. Sloan dragged me closer, saving me from the pain, and drove his tongue into my awaiting mouth with a low, rumbling growl.

Another hard throb hit the place between my legs, and I circled my waist, desperate to relieve the building tension. Sloan's jaw clenched and his eyes shut, a feral sound echoing inside his chest. His body stiffened against the assault of my ass moving over the hard rise in his pants, but I was so damn horny and ready for it, I didn't even think about how shameless the continued shift of my hips made me seem.

Or how little I fought the urge to give in.

Light eyes jerking open, Sloan's chest rumbled again, vibrating between my thighs, and the blue-eyed Hunter met every roll of my hips with his own.

The friction alone was addicting. I wanted more of it. I struggled to say as much, so I continued to shift wildly against him, hoping the message would come across loud and clear—I was ready to make this more. I was ready to shed modesty and duty so I could sink into sin with the gorgeous Brit.

“That's it, pet,” Sloan whispered, his voice thick with lust and his hair a mess after my fingers were done with it.

Hands gripping my waist, keeping our bodies locked together, the other Hunter's mouth trailed from mine, then latched onto the throbbing pulse along my neck. A blatantly wanton sound left my throat, and my head dropped back. Teeth scraped a path down the arch until Sloan's tongue swept across the exposed bone of my collar.

My chest expanded and my stomach retracted. Pleasure overtook the senses, and I chased every morsel, desperate and shameless. I shed my earlier hesitations. Ignored

my head and gave into my body. Ridiculous, really, how quickly I was sucked into it all; how none of it seemed wrong anymore.

It felt right.

Sloan's strong grip on my waist led me into a tantalizing back and forth, rubbing my panty-covered clit over the rough fabric of his pants.

"Oh, fuck," I groaned, gripping his shoulder and boldly thrusting against him like I'd been fantasizing about doing for over a week.

With our mouths clashing at different angles, I worked quickly through the line of buttons on his shirt. Occupied with the kiss, I nearly tore through the fabric to just be done with it. But before I could, Sloan's hands enclosed over mine and stalled me.

Laughing into my mouth, Sloan's tongue flicked out against mine before dragging across my lower lip. "There's no need to rush, love. I'm not going anywhere."

Panting, I looked down after nearly hitting my head on the ceiling and then I awkwardly tucked hair behind my ear. "I'm sorry."

His sneaky grin eased the nervous coil in my stomach, then one of his hands worked the skirt I wore up to my panty line. "But that doesn't mean stop, V."

Sloan's hand sunk between my thighs. He easily navigated around my underwear, rubbing provocative circles over my clit, and then slipped fingers into my slit and the collecting moisture. His normally artful blue eyes were dark and pupil-blown when Sloan sucked one of the fingers he'd rubbed me with into his mouth.

Fuck, that's so hot.

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Keeping our gazes locked, Sloan cleaned his finger, tongue swirling around in plain view of my greedy eyes. Another torturous throb echoed between my legs. It'd been a while since I was this turned on. His eyes shifted down before he slid his hand across my wetness again, his otherhand dragging me down into a kiss. I tasted myself on him, and it only made my pulse throb harder.

Moaning, my hips undulated, eager to satisfy the tension. And Sloan didn't make me suffer long. He penetrated me two fingers deep, knowing right away how to bring me pleasure and never hesitating. Sliding his mouth close to my ear, Sloan nibbled my lobe with his teeth, breathing wet heat. "You taste as good as I thought you would."

I moaned without meaning to. "What—?"

Devilish smirk intensifying, Sloan grabbed my face and drove his tongue into my mouth in time with his fingers, making my question morph into moans. "Let me take care of you," he said, voice gravelly.

Our lips fused briefly before Sloan's thumb circled deliciously over my clit again, this time with purpose, and my hips unintentionally bucked. With my thighs quaking, a gasp fled my mouth and I rode out the violent, world-ending waves of sensation. I flattened my hands on the roof of the car to keep my head from colliding with it while Sloan's fingers continued their relentless torture.

Noises fled my mouth that didn't even sound like me, not that I really heard anything at all. Pretty tough to focus when I was being plowed by pleasure that was otherworldly. I hadn't realized how much I needed to feel the familiar pleasure, but I came undone the second it took hold of my body. I surrendered modesty and morality

just to succumb to it.

“I’m worried you’re not going to last long at this rate,” Sloan murmured, kissing me with the intention to dominate my mouth. Another one of my heady moans was quickly smothered by his powerful kiss, and I clung to Sloan like I was afraid I’d fall.

Because I was afraid. I was terrified of how easily I gave in.

The Brit’s panting breaths were in my ears, and the fact that he breathed at all was enough for me. It meant I wasn’t the only person too far gone at this point.

Everything in my lower body was tense, the vicious waves of pleasure nearly too much to register, and I fought to keep off the edge. But it was hopeless. No surprise, Sloan was a fucking genius with his fingers, and I didn’t stand a chance.

My chest hitched and Sloan’s forehead was forcibly pressed into my breasts as I violently came only minutes after he started. I had to clasp his arm to keep him from thrusting into me anymore, and his cute little chuckle was lost to the sea of ecstasy I was drowning in.

Mortification quickly swept in after I came off the high of my orgasm. Especially when Sloan licked his fingers clean with me still sat on his lap, my breathing loud enough to assault my own ears. The only solace I took out of the mortifying seconds afterwards was the hard length pressed between my legs.

Sloan was hard. For me. He wanted me. And after the amazing things his fingers had done, I’d gladly give him anything he wanted.

Gaze dropping, I hesitantly touched the hard rise in his pants and watched as Sloan’s entire chest and stomach constricted. Then his pupil-blown irises were back on me. Watching my expression carefully, he undid the zip and button of his pants. I didn’t

stop him or even help. I was mesmerized by his eager hands freeing himself from the confines of his trousers.

Our stares connected, and Sloan's jaw clenched before I heard fabric tearing. My lust-addled brain took a second to figure out what it was, and then I watched Sloan toss my underwear into the backseat. With another downward slide of my eyes, I took in the sight of his cock standing at the ready.

He's fucking huge. Will that even fit?

The Brit's voice beckoned my gaze back to his. "Can I, pet?" the blue-eyed Hunter asked, his voice bottoming out. "Because I want to." His hand sunk into his messy dark hair before he brushed it away from his eyes, chest tautening. "It's maddening how much I want you, V. It might not seem like it, love, but I'd wanted to take it slow with you."

It was clear how much Sloan blamed himself for the situation we were now in, but as I was quickly discovering, there wasn't a slow pace when it came to me and relationships. I was just as eager to consummate this thing between us as he was, and maybe that made me shameless and a total ho-ho, but who the fuck cared? What woman in her right mind would say no to this beautiful and incredibly kind man? I wanted him. Needed him, even. If anything, his obvious worry and consideration made me want him more.

Swallowing around a sudden lump of nervousness in my throat, I lifted off his thighs and crawled over his legs, taking charge. Grabbing strong hold of his shoulder with one hand, I angled his much-too-large cock with my other hand. His mouth opened, but I didn't wait. I sunk down onto him without warning, surprising myself, and the way his body visibly constricted and his eyes shut told me he hadn't expected it either.

The new but familiar sensation of something filling every space inside was like satisfying a craving I'd been suffering for months. It was perfect, and I wanted more of it.

Needed more of it.

Thank God Kate encouraged me to get birth control last year, not that I needed it since Nigel was infuriatingly anti-touch. Also, as a genetic anomaly, I likely couldn't have kids on my own thanks to those bastards who created me. Still, a girl could never be too careful.

The tension in Sloan's body made me worry he hadn't wanted it for a second, and I hesitated, the twist in my gut fucking brutal. But then the sexy Brit growled and kissed me like it was his intention to devour me whole. His hands worked me over his throbbing length, and I barely caught my breath long enough to moan or gasp.

It was a wild pace that stole my thoughts and flushed my body with electric heat. Our skin meeting reverberated in my ears, and I clung to the other Hunter, terrified of the pleasure he was giving me.

I hated to admit how different it was with Sloan—so different I didn't know what to do or how to respond, just hang on for dear life as ecstasy so goddamn overwhelming that it veered on painful took my body hostage with every thrust.

Head flying back, my thighs squeezed and my orgasm swept out like a tsunami of sensation over my body, much too quick for my liking.

Sex with Phillip always got me off, but it was a whole other world with Sloan. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was like once would never be enough.

The euphoric rush of my orgasm was starting to ebb away when I felt Sloan slow his

thrusts, his grip on my waist punishing but gentle. A low groan escaped his mouth, his chest contracting sharply, then he stiffened against me.

It was beautiful to watch the normally in-control Hunter come undone. His body flushed with the most gorgeous red I'd ever seen. And superior Hunter senses meant I felt it all: the rush of heat like I was being bathed from the inside out, the body-wide shudder everywhere we touched, the throbbing constriction of his cock as he came, and fuck, it felt so damn good.

Breathing out, Sloan wrapped his arms around me, hugging me close, his wet cheek pressed against my chest. Honestly, it was so sweet that I nearly said something about it. But the nagging urge to keep going brought me full circle when Sloan withdrew, his head beaded with sweat. I dropped a kiss on his parted mouth, and it twisted into a knowing smile.

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Why is this dude so fucking adorable?

“Again?” the sultry Brit whispered, already deducing what it was I wanted.

Normally it'd annoy me, but in this case, it was something I celebrated. It saved me the trouble of spelling it out. I didn't think I had the patience to do that anyway.

Licking my lips, I nodded and tugged his shirt, insisting the beautiful Hunter take it off.

In no small way, I wanted to touch, lick, and taste everything within reach. Really anything to satisfy every single desire I had for the man. Might as well when my inhibitions were off. Let it be tomorrow's worries, tomorrow's regrets. Tonight I was Sloan's and he was mine. I wouldn't surrender it to anyone, not even myself.

My angry yanks at his shirt only made him laugh cutely.

Well, pardon me, you beautiful asshole, for not wanting to destroy your clearly expensive shirt. My mistake.

Frustrated, I rolled my hips down on him, and the other Hunter groaned, his cock throbbing back to life inside of me.

That got his attention. Go me!

I'd never get tired of it, knowing what I did turned this gorgeous specimen on and made his cock react. It was such a powerful feeling.

“Makes pretty boys’ cocks throb” is going under the skills section on my resume.

I didn’t have time to herald my hilarious genius because Sloan’s gaze swiftly dodged off to the left, razor-sharp. Before I could blink, a dagger was in Sloan’s hand and his other arm was wrapped around my waist. Growling, he kicked the door out just as the car careened, heading over the cliff.

Holy shit!

Chapter 4

Green Dude Woes

Ididn’t know what was more comical about the entire moment that took place after our super chic car nearly took a nose-dive off a cliff—the fact that a dude sporting an all-black latex suit with green hair that defied gravity, looking like some kind of knock-off super villain, was fighting the pair of us while screaming like he hadn’t gone through puberty yet. Or the fact that Sloan, who’d already killed seven of the ten bastards Green Dude brought with him, was kicking all their asses half-naked with a hard-on.

Definitely won’t find this featured in any best-selling paranormal romance novels.

Probably worst of it all was how none of that even mattered to me anymore. All I wanted to do was put this asshole six feet under so I could get back to what I had been doing with Sloan. Only, there wasn’t any way to “get back to it” after Green Dude ruined the mood.

Fuck my life.

Upside to the entire situation was these dudes were clearly vampires, and it was like

coming home to fight them.

Sloan brought a small arsenal with him. As any smart, well-prepared Hunter should. So when we fled the car, it wasn't seconds later that the trunk was popped open and Sloan went ham on three nearby vampires.

My training kicked in, and I wasn't far behind my fast-acting companion. After minutes, we were down to the high-wail Green King himself. But before I could go after the bastard with all the rage, resentment, and clever Hunter training I'd been forced to learn over the years, Sloan stopped me.

"He's not a vampire," was all he murmured, surprising me stupid for a second.

The Green Dude scoffed unattractively and crossed his arms over his chest. "They said you were good, but you'll never be good enough for a trickster like me."

Trickster?

"Yokai," Sloan elaborated. "You could say his kind were what inspired Japanese folklore. Magic-using shapeshifters. You can count on this not being his true form."

Oh, great. Another thing to add to the list of fucked up creatures I had yet to fight.

"Untrained Hunter? What a treat."

"So what you mean to say is he wore all that latex voluntarily, when he could choose like, any other fabric existing in this plane or the next? And I mean literally any other fabric."

Sloan's lips lifted into an amused smile, despite his predatory eyes staying with our foe. "Some people are just beyond help, love."

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“What are you saying?! I look amazing,” Green Dude argued, continuing the odd, mid-battle conversation.

I thought through attack strategies, but Sloan’s grip on my wrist was firm, and his sharp gaze suggested I shouldn’t make any moves without him. I hadn’t fought with the other Hunter since Eros, but I knew him well enough to know that whatever this dude was, it put Sloan on edge. He wasn’t moving or attacking for a reason.

“Hand over the girl and I’ll spare you.”

I clicked my tongue and chuckled without amusement. “You need to stop watching so many poorly-scripted action movies. Or at the very least watch some good ones. No villain ever lives after saying shit like that, dude. It’s lame.”

“This one always does,” he countered, smirking.

A grin reached my lips. “That’s about to change.”

Green Dude snickered into his hand ghoulishly, the latex creaking with the movement. “Oh, youthful ignorance.”

We’ll see about that, asshole.

The wind picked up around us, the leaves at our feet taking flight, and Sloan’s grip tightened. It was all I needed to act. We moved in sync as green flames spiraled our direction and exploded against a tree. It wasn’t like Eros’s magic, and it took me by complete surprise.

Of course he'd have weird green flames. I mean, why not? It wouldn't be the first time my story deviated from its original plot.

My partner was quick to defend our position by throwing several daggers he'd retrieved from his belt at the green-haired nuisance. Flames shot up from the ground and consumed each blade, instantly liquifying them. Liquid metal splattered over the dirt, and my eyes dropped to it with nothing short of confusion.

What the actual fuck?!

"Is it hot in here, or is it just me?" our foe cried out, cackling like he was the main villain in some B-rate anime.

Whoever wrote this dude's lines needs to seriously re-think their writing career.

When Green Dude tossed me a self-confident grin, I swear I saw fox ears coming out of his neon-colored hair. "My hellfire is faster than even you, little girl."

If this dude was Yokai-inspired, then I was almost confident after seeing a set of fox ears that he'd be what they called a Kitsunebi. Well, something like it anyway. I'd learned very few mythologies had it right. More like bits and pieces sewn together. Kitsunebis used hellfire, too. Or at least I think they did.

I needed to read more.

"I can teach you things you'd never learn as a Hunter, little girl. Things that would make your entire race cry."

This asshole really liked to hear himself talk. And I swear, if he called me little girl one more time, I'd forget my training and just go for a kick to the balls.

Death by hellfire would be worth it.

“I’m good, thanks,” I snapped back, then lowered my voice, hand over my mouth like we were cute girls sharing secrets. “What beats this sort of magical fire?”

Thanks to Mr. Confident, I could ask questions. Normally during fights, mid-battle conversation was limited to grunts and necessary, last-minute warnings.

Full of himself, Green Dude didn’t bother to act in any way defensive. Not that he needed to when his hellfire liquified metal on impact. But he barely paid the two of us any mind. As if we posed no challenge at all.

Not a great sign.

Sloan readied his crossbow, but my companion’s eyes never wandered away from our enemy. Whether or not he had a reason to be that confident, clearly Sloan took this Kitsunebi-like villain seriously. “Nothing beats hellfire. Don’t let it touch you. You can’t regenerate if it consumes you,” Sloan whispered finally, our stand-off epic in nothing but daylight.

“Wait, what?!”

“Just don’t leave my side,” Sloan demanded before taking a protective stance in front of me. “Against this sort of magic, our only advantage here is he’s full of himself and we have each other. But never let your guard down.”

“Rude. I can hear you, Hunter,” the asshole muttered, feigning insult. “You people have no manners.”

“There are codes of conduct when it comes to killing and kidnapping innocent little girls with you evil types?” I asked searchingly, hoping to keep him occupied while

Sloan slid his hand out of eyeshot.

“Clever trying to distract me, but I see what your companion is doing. Better luck next time, Hunter,” Green Dude taunted. “I already know who you are by how quickly you killed my vampires. Normal Hunters would’ve been overcome by those kinds of numbers.”

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“These no-skill lackeys?” I clapped back.

“Were elder vampires, yes. You two made quick work of them, which suggests you aren’t on the same level as the rest. I’d been warned, but call me a skeptic. I haven’t seen Hunters this strong since I battled one who even the great Dark Fae fears.”

Phillip.

Well, at least this dude was as stupid as they got and appreciated a good monologue. Smart villains were hard to come by these days. Nothing like in the movies.

Green Dude yawned to himself and checked his watch. Yet another reason to scorn his outfit. Wearing a silver watch over black latex was outright ridiculous. I’d never let Phillip tell me I was a poor dresser again. Not with this dude walking around, wearing his latex ensemble like it was hot shit.

“I’d love to stay and play, but I’ve got very antsy bosses who expect their little princess delivered within the next thirty minutes.” His eyes dropped to Sloan’s bare chest, and I’d only just noticed myself his pants were buttoned again.

When did he do that?

“So sorry for spoiling your fun.”

Usually I’d bemoan a chatty villain, but today it bought Sloan and I plenty of time to orchestrate a silent plan. What little I did read about creatures with hellfire, they had two weaknesses: they themselves were slower than us, though magical hellfire was

faster, and hellfire wasn't without its limitations. If we could beat the speed of his hellfire or make him use more than necessary, exploiting the pause as it was forced to regenerate, then we could get the jump on this arrogant asshole.

Sloan never moved more than necessary, and he was always watching. He was looking to exploit an opportunity. It was Hunter 101 when you fought a foe stronger than you. Never act without a strategy, and Sloan was definitely forming a plan.

Certain hand signs and eye movements with Hunters were used to plan when words weren't an option. I'd picked up on his coded actions over along minute, decoded their meanings, and now I was biding my time until he signaled for me to start.

Our enemy's eyes narrowed and his body tensed. The hand on mine jerked away, and it was the signal I'd been waiting for. We flanked the green-haired villain from both sides, putting space between him and us. Hellfire scorched the floor where we had once been and then took a wide path to follow us. It was a mad-dash to get into position, but we did it.

Sloan appeared behind Green Dude and kicked his leg out, landing it with punishing force on our little green-haired friend. But the Brit wasn't fast enough, because green flames were already underneath him.

Fear hit my chest the same way it had when Sloan was close to being overcome by Eros. The feeling was so intense I was staggered by it. And in an instant, instinctively, my body knew what to do.

It wasn't clear how or for what reason it reacted, but it did. Time slowed to a standstill. Like before, the world around me froze as the green fire attempted to take hold of my companion. A wave of nausea hit my stomach and a strong, dizzying sensation occupied my head.

I grabbed hold of my knees to stabilize myself before I collapsed. The feeling finally eased a few seconds later, and I acted without thinking.

I didn't know what these Yokai-inspired bastards were or how to kill them, but decapitation seemed to do it for just about any creature that ever existed—myself included.

Dashing towards the car, I stole a long sword from the open trunk and didn't take in a single breath—not that I needed to anyway—before lopping off the Green Dude's head.

I didn't hesitate. I didn't drop a badass line like they did in movies. I didn't wonder for what reason I could stop time. I didn't ponder my blood. I didn't give two shits about anything but doing whatever I could to save Sloan.

It was weird to know my sword cut through but the frozen Green Dude's head remained right where it was. So, I used excessive force to punt it with the handle of my weapon, and then stabbed him through his heart for good measure. Thinking for a minute, I spun and sliced through every limb before slashing through his torso in a zig-zag pattern.

I literally cut him to pieces to make sure there wasn't any way he could survive. Honestly, I couldn't cover enough bases at this point.

Hunter swords were among the sharpest and strongest weapons ever made, so I didn't question whether or not it'd do the job. I refused to repeat our last fight's mistakes. I wanted to be confident the bastard was dead, especially after he ruined my perfect night out and much-needed sexy moment.

It would've been nice to interrogate him and find out who his bosses were, but not if it meant Sloan was in danger. It may seem easy enough for other Hunters to put their

own interests first, but I'd never let myself be that person.

Never.

Another wave of nausea hit before I was yanked away from Green Dude, now Very Dead Dude, and practically dragged across the dirt in a hurry to get me as far from our green-haired enemy as was physically possible. Guess my partner evaded the hellfire somehow, and I silently berated myself for not trusting him.

But it was Sloan's harsh pants in my ear that surprised me the most as our enemy collapsed onto the ground, headless and no longer a threat. The arms wrapped around my chest tightened impossibly before I was spun around and kissed hard enough to taste blood on my tongue.

"I lost sight of you and thought the worst," Sloan breathed against my lips after the kiss came to an abrupt end. "You disappeared and then you were in front of him. Was it...?"

Not used to hearing the man in any way hysterical, I nodded lamely. "The time thingy happened and I just..." I struggled to say anything with the raw emotion exposed on Sloan's face. "I didn't want to make the same mistake I made last time."

His forehead met mine before I was released. "No. You did what any Hunter would. You exploited an advantage." He turned to peer down at our slain enemy. "What brought on the power?"

The only thing that made sense was...

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“You were in danger,” I muttered quietly.

His eyes tracked back over to me. “Me?”

“The hellfire, it...I thought it’d get you,” I managed to piece together, heart and soul on full display. “I—”

My face was already in his hands, and his hot breath bathed my kiss-swollen lips. “It was all going according to plan. I would’ve evaded it, V. I thought you knew me better than that.”

Thoroughly chastised, I dropped my gaze to the floor. “I’m sorry.”

His thick laughter rumbled between us, and my eyes were forced back to his before our mouths met in a much gentler kiss. “No apology necessary. It’s on me, this. It’s my burden to prove to you I’d never be overcome so easily.”

I opened my mouth, but Sloan pulled away and made a call.

“We’re not safe here. It’s time to move.”

Chapter 5

Evil World’s Most Wanted

“It’s too rushed,” Nigel complained, trailing us. “My pack needs time to prepare for that sort of move. We can’t do whatever you Hunters say whenever you say it. We’re

not at your beck and call.”

It was silly because I always envisioned wolves on the run. No true home. No single place to call their own. The forest, really all of the land, was theirs, and it was crazy to think Nigel was more like a human in that respect. He set down roots. He made a home, in a cave of all places, and he was being more of a girl about this than I was.

Sloan loaded a few more packs into a less conspicuous car—a 2011 Toyota Corolla that’d seen more action than I probably had—and I followed my companion with Nigel hot on our heels. The rest of the pack hovered near the dense line of forest, keeping watch for anything that may be following us.

Because it wasn’t even minutes after we arrived at the cave before Sloan was packing our shit into a car, which had practically materialized out of thin air. But knowing Sloan, he’d probably made a call to the Organization well before we made a victorious return to the forest.

The dude had that kind of pull.

We’d left the car we went out with because Sloan didn’t want to use anything we could be tracked in. Instead, we took the scenic route back to our cave base.

“If it’s the Organization, why are you going back? Why are you putting V in danger over and over?” Nigel demanded when Sloan didn’t say anything.

It was difficult to keep silent. I wanted to reassure Nigel that Sloan was one of few people we could trust; to tell him all about our plans to corrode the Organization from within. But first we needed to find out who was pulling the strings.

Sloan sighed and brushed back stray dark hair before flicking his eyes over to the irate Shifter. “Do you expect her to run away and hide for the rest of her life? Or do

you want her to learn to fight for herself and make it so she never has to?”

Nigel opened his mouth, the stark contrast of pearly white teeth and an olive complexion distracting my gaze. “If you have the Dark Fae and those bastard Foxes after her, or really any powerful foe ever to cross over, she won’t survive long enough to learn.”

My partner let loose another irritated breath, clearly at the end of his patience. Not that I could blame him. Nigel was relentless when he wanted answers. Finally, Sloan shut the trunk before his eyes strayed over to me for a heartbeat, searching for something. His mouth glistened in nothing but moonlight, and I couldn’t stop my eyes from straying even if I wanted to.

Memories of our kiss, of his fingers between my thighs, his body shuddering, his tongue in my mouth, his throbbing cock buried inside, his lustful whispers saying my name, stole my thoughts for a second, and I rushed to distract myself by looking away. The blush had unfortunately already reached my face by then, and I didn’t know how I’d explain it to Nigel if he pointed it out.

“You underestimate her strength and power, as you do mine, Shifter. V was never meant to be a treasured gem locked away in a box. This situation was only ever meant to be temporary.” The car creaked as Sloan pivoted and settled his weight onto it.

The two men stared each other down, and it was the first time I’d seen Sloan look at Nigel in any way that wasn’t low-key cordial or generally apathetic. The tension in Nigel’s body was obvious as his jaw clenched and his nostrils flared. He didn’t say anything. It was clear he wanted to, but this was the life of a Hunter.

“Come or don’t. The choice is yours, mate.” Sloan tossed Nigel one last look before getting into the driver’s seat.

“This is what my life is right now,” I finally whispered, offering the awaiting group of Shifters a glance. “The more people I have on my side the better, but you don’t have to put your pack in danger for me, Nigel.”

His beautifully dark eyes dropped to the floor before he took my hand inside of his. “I made a promise to Grams and I intend to keep it, V.”

Smirking to myself, I nodded. “Grams would tell you to find someone else to use as an excuse.”

Nigel chuckled lightly, and the tension in his body finally eased. “She’d be proud of you, you know.”

I swallowed around the painful lump of emotion in my throat. “I hope so.”

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His grip tightened, and then our eyes met. “She’s always been proud of you. Always.”

“Yeah,” I said softly. “I know.” Squeezing his hand back, I lifted my chin. “That’s why I need to keep at it. I can’t let these assholes do whatever they want.”

His smile was absolutely breathtaking. “You’re right. If anyone can do it, it’s you.”

My own smile brightened before he released my hand and palmed his head. Then with a final fleeting glance, Nigel returned to his pack.

“Can I expect practically everything purchasable or evil-inclined to come after me, or...?”

This girl was basically number one on the Evil World’s Most Wanted List, and I couldn’t say I was super stoked about it. Not that I was under any impression that I could do anything to change it either.

The older Hunter chuckled and gripped the steering wheel, eyes on the horizon as color leaked into the star-speckled nightscape. The iridescent glow of approaching dawn gave the gorgeous man an almost angelic look, and I was momentarily dazzled by the sight of him.

I’d grown accustomed to being mesmerized by Sloan, but despite the time I’d spent with him, I hadn’t built any immunity to his good looks. If anything, it got worse the longer I was in his care. It was becoming a real problem. Sloan’s terms of endearment grew by the day and his passionate, utterly charming expressions were more potent

over time.

And the sex had been...fucking amazing.

Fantasies didn't come close. Typically, a fantasy was better than the reality—or that was what Kate said every time she complained about some angsty goth boy she met at a concert, usually some obscure upcoming bass player, because Kate was nothing if not predictable when it came to guys. But in this case, the reality was so much better.

Fuck, it was so good I thought about it whenever I permitted my mind to wander. Which was a lot since our night together. Sloan was a god for all I knew. A god of sex and giving a woman pleasure. I pined. I drooled. I devised ways to lure him into my bed.

Honestly, I worried I'd never get the upper hand with the Brit on anything, not now that we'd bumped naughties and I seriously considered offering myself as tribute should he ever decide he needed a sex slave.

Take me sex god. I'm your faithful bedroom ho-ho.

Unfortunately for me, I'd also adopted a sort of sex-after-fight coping mechanism to shit situations, and without Phillip to cater to my needs, I was left in this weird sexual in-between. With a gorgeous specimen right beside me, it was absolute torture.

He could be my sexual palate cleanser. We could make it a thing. I could be that girl.

Now I'm just trying to create excuses to go to Bang Town with Sloan again.

“It's clear that more than the Organization is after you, and my guess is someone at the top tipped these groups off.”

“Groups?” I moved into a more comfortable position on the seat, my lady parts throbbing after getting lost to fantasies of what I’d do if Sloan so much as hinted at sex again. “As in, Evil-doers Anonymous?”

Sloan’s amusement reached his eyes, and he tossed me a happy little grin. The look was an instant K.O. to my heartrate.

How is this man always so damn delicious?

“Something like that,” Sloan retorted, clearly amused.

Already falling victim to his charms again, I looked out the window and focused on anything that wasn’t the stunning man beside me. I desperately fought away memories of his clever fingers stroking and scissoring, of his tantalizing tongue flicking and filling my mouth. Memories of his powerful hands on my hips as he thrust into my deepest parts, invading my body in a sweet torture I hoped would never end.

I’m beyond help.

It was several hours into our trip, no real stops aside from snack and bathroom breaks, and the other Hunter glowed like he’d been prettied up right before a photoshoot.

In form-hugging black denims and a thin tank-top, even in casual wear, Sloan was serious eye candy. But it was the tattoo along the back of his neck that distracted me every time I looked at the other Hunter.

My eyes wandered to it almost as much as they did his slim waist and shapely arms. As far as I could see, it was the only one the Brit had. His chest hadn’t bore signs of any tattoos or piercings, and his arms were also untouched. Which was all the more

intriguing.

Sloan had caught my gaze stray to it at the beginning of our trip and told me it was a set of demon wings.

“Demon wings?” I had asked, tempted to touch the ink exposed along his neck. “Why demon wings?”

Sloan hadn’t look at me, and his usual smile was absent as he stared at the road ahead. “Just a reminder, love. One I need sometimes when life becomes...unbearable.”

His dark expression and sallow words made asking anything else incredibly difficult, and we fell silent for nearly half an hour before Sloan suggested we grab lunch. But his comment stayed with me even now.

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I wanted to know the reason his life became unbearable, and whether or not it still was, but I was afraid of being rejected—the same way I had been with Phillip. The thought of prying into something painful the way I had with Phillip made any questions I had die in my throat. So, I didn't ask. I couldn't. Even with everything he and I had done, I wasn't anyone special to Sloan.

I didn't have any right to ask those kinds of questions.

After leaving Nigel and his pack, we hadn't discussed what inevitably took place with Green Dude, and it was probably for the best. My head was riddled with sexual fantasies, and I worried if he brought it up, I might say something I couldn't take back. I might ask to sleep with him. Of course, he was likely concerned with the whole time-freezing thing where I cut a bastard to pieces. And my ass was over here thinking about touching his pretty baby-soft skin.

Sloan coaxed what little he could from me about my weirdo power moment: the dizziness, the nausea, the overall fear of losing someone close to me. I didn't divulge how it only seemed to occur with men I seemingly cared about. Honestly, it seemed like a bad idea to give too much away when I couldn't name what was happening between the two of us, especially since I didn't have a fucking clue what still remained between Phillip and I.

Shit was whack.

Did I really just walk headlong into another complicated sex—love?—triangle? What was I, the main heroine of some crazy love story?

Buildings scattered across the skyline, and it was evident by their size we weren't far from the city. Which would be a saving grace since I hated driving after my long stretch across the great ol' US of A with Phillip. And just like that, my thoughts strayed back to the Hunter who abandoned me.

Stupid Austrian always soured my mood every time I thought about him.

But it wasn't just Phillip who left. It was Grams. It was my sense of confidence. It was everything I thought I knew about myself. These days, it felt a lot like swimming out in the open ocean with no idea where to find land or any semblance of stable ground. And even surrounded by people the way I was, I still felt alone. Tragically alone. In bitter moments, I wished I could go back to those ignorant teenager days of fighting vampires. At least during that time, I could trust the ground beneath my feet.

For a moment, I missed Kate so much I wanted to cry. I missed the times I spent being a normal teenager with her. I'd never get those back. And for a long, silent breath, I grieved the loss like I grieved Gramps's death and Grams's uncertain fate—and even Phillip's departure to get answers about what was inside my blood. I let the sadness settle in my chest and throat, and then I swallowed it down and let it fuel my determination to get justice for every person I lost as a result of the very people who created me.

If this were an action film, this would be where the plot hit its climax and the main character realized there wasn't anyone but them who could change the ending. This was my story. Mine. I'd make damn sure it ended the way I wanted, whatever that meant.

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back onto the headrest. "Why does it feel like every time we take five steps forward, we're always ten steps behind?"

Warmth encompassed my hand, and I looked down to find Sloan's hand eclipsing

mine. “That’s the job, love. Even if you didn’t have the Organization after you, you’d still be left with everything else.”

“Feels an awful lot like I should...I don’t know, just give up? I don’t like it, but what if we don’t succeed and me being alive means they get what they want.”

I wasn’t one for suicidal notions, but sometimes I wondered if it would make it easier if I wasn’t here. If I was the key to crossing over, wouldn’t it be better to take that from them; force their hand and be the one to end it all. At least in that case I’d be the one in control.

The car slowed to a crawl before pulling over with a jerk to the side of the road. My face was suddenly cradled strongly within Sloan’s hands, and the steel-eyed Hunter forced me to look into his stare. What I found wasn’t anger. It wasn’t disappointment or chastisement. No, what floundered in ice-blue depths was a deep, impenetrable sadness. It stole the air in my lungs and took tight hold of my heart.

The other Hunter’s grip tightened and he yanked me closer, his hot breath painting my open mouth. “I know for what reason you even suggest such a thing, but never do it again, V. Never think that your existence is a burden to others. Never suggest death is the only way to right the wrongs, because it isn’t. You are more necessary, more valuable, more of a light in nothing but darkness than you could ever know.” His soft-spoken words hit harder than his punches. “Without you, we’d be lost.”

Mouth gaping, I couldn’t fathom his words before his lips slammed over mine so violently it was more of an attack than a kiss. His low warning growl was all I heard before I was dragged onto his lap and everything faded away.

Only Sloan’s violent kiss remained.

Chapter 6

Thirsty Bitch

It wasn't my idea of a romantic-mood starter, all this self-end talk, but it'd apparently done the trick. The very thing that plagued me since Green Dude rudely interrupted our post-date mood was happening again, right there on the side of the road.

Okay, so it wasn't really a great place to make out. We'd definitely chosen the worst spot to rediscover our youthful vigor and baser urges. Passing cars and their passengers would agree it wasn't a great time to exploit nothing but daylight and dirt roadside. But I didn't care when Sloan's mouth was quite literally a meal I couldn't wait to devour.

His hands were in my hair, under my shirt, inside my pants. Really anywhere within reach he touched. Every caress was an act of desperation and need, until there wasn't anywhere his hands hadn't gone.

Had I mentioned how soft Sloan's lips were? Well, by far the softest I'd ever kissed. And yes, I know I'd only kissed two dudes in total. How sad. But at this rate, my ho-bag days of tomorrow might lead to a baker's dozen. Maybe that was the goal. So with the prospective kiss-ho label in my future, I sunk into Sloan's kiss every time our mouths met.

The way his lips took the shape of mine and fused as though they were always meant to be there was sinfully hot. Like romance novel hot. It was clear as the seconds ticked on Sloan was eager to map out every crevice and groove in my mouth, the curve of my neck, and after yanking my shirt aside, the length of my shoulder. Each movement was a little stronger, a little more insistent, a little pushier, and I couldn't help but moan my approval.

Super handsome dudes showcasing how sexy they found me and how much they wanted to touch me was apparently a turn-on.

The Brit's eagerness fed my own, and it turned into a battle of who would be first to take it to the next level when my hands went after his shirt and pants, yanking and pulling to expose the petal-soft skin beneath. It was clear by the tent how hard he was for me, but I swiveled my hips for extra clarity. And his wanting groan and tensing jaw made the inner dominatrix in me proud.

My head fell back, the raging eroticism and arousal making my thoughts hazy and body weak as if slowly easing into a drunken stupor. Without pausing, Sloan traced my throat with his tongue and his fingers ate into my ass when he aggressively dragged me closer, snug against his rolling hips.

Oh God, that action alone was killer. The unparalleled stimulation between my legs, the pleasure and anticipation, remembering the overwhelming sensation of having his thick, throbbing length laying claim to every space inside me, it made it difficult to keep my own hips from swiveling over his with shameless encouragement.

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The glass inside the car developed a thick layer of steam during our depraved activity, and it distracted me for a second when my hand swept a frantic line across its surface.

The air was humid and thick—a punishment on lungs that didn’t need to breathe. My face was insanely hot. And with how prone my skin was to showing color, I’d be stupid to think I didn’t look wholly debauched when I finally pulled away and tried, then subsequently failed, to get a firm hold on my sanity.

Not that I believed I ever had a stable hold on my sanity to begin with.

Sloan’s fingers gripped my thighs, and his lust-lidded eyes flicked up to mine, the burning desire to have me right there on the side of the road clear in his stare.

He’d do it. He wouldn’t stop or wait, and my pulse raced knowing it was up to me to say yes or no. And I wanted to say yes. Fuck, I wanted Sloan so bad that I’d spent hours planning how I’d bring it up and take what was mine. Have the sexy Brit again. Taste the pleasure only he could give me.

But it didn’t feel right here out in the open, on the side of the road for all to see. I might be desperate, but I wasn’t that desperate—at least that was what I kept telling myself as I struggled to put a stop to everything. When I straightened, tossing back messy red hair, the horn of the car erupted. Sloan’s eyes widened, his entire body stiffened, and I went into an awkward crouch in surprise.

“V?” he asked.

But it was too late.

My overactive brain kicked into high gear, and the previous shame and confusion came rushing back in. It was that powerful, crashing wave of guilt that inevitably forced me back into my seat. Not that I was ashamed of climbing onto the lap of a sickly hot and amazingly kind older Hunter, but I was a little concerned about how quickly I did it considering it wasn't the time, place, or mood to have done anything even remotely sexual.

"Sorry," I whispered, wiping my mouth and fixing my shirt. "This isn't really the right situation for this."

Sloan gripped the steering wheel, then brushed through his chaotic hair. Hair I'd destroyed with eager fingers and grasping hands. His shirt bore signs of my desire to remove it, several buttons undone and his lapels no longer crisply laying against his collar. His belt was left open, the zip and button undone, brazenly exposing how hard he was for me.

My gaze dropped to his waist before I turned my head and closed my eyes tightly. The sound of shifting movement as the other Hunter put himself together assaulted my perfect hearing, but I did what I could to ignore it. I calmed the inner ho-ho. My head tried to convince me this was the right thing to do when my body screamed for me to get right back on that handsome Brit's lap and finish what we started.

Unfortunately, the memory of the silky texture of his gorgeous dark hair sliding along my skin encouraged another barrage of shivers to take hold of my body. It was an attack I didn't have a whole lot of experience tempering. Every sensation I shared with Sloan lived inside my head and body—a muscle memory of the most illicit nature—as if stored there for whenever my eyes caught sight of him. The same way it did with Phillip.

I'm definitely an addict.

I worked quickly to dispel the physical assault my own memory started, but it wasn't easy when the object of my desire was so close, his heat still practically stroking mine.

"If anyone should apologize, it's me," Sloan finally murmured, his tone entreating and sincere.

I laughed, a little entertained by our joint awkwardness. "Can we just pretend this didn't happen and get back to what we were doing?"

Sloan's eyes tracked back to where I sat, the light of day hitting them just right to give the pale color an almost iridescent glow. "One of these days, we're going to have to discuss what this is."

My hands clenched, and the subtle pound of my heart was in my ears. "But not today, right?"

His husky laughter was quite literally the most attractive sound I'd ever heard outside a few choice moans and groans. So when it filled the car, it was all I could do to contain my internal fan-girl scream.

I should be ashamed of how into Sloan I was, but it wasn't new or surprising. I'd been mesmerized by the man from the moment we met. It would be weirder if I wasn't spellbound by the gentle Casanova. Or maybe that was just an excuse I used to give myself the freedom to do what I wanted with him.

Shit, I don't know anymore.

The more I thought about it, the worse my confusion got. Nothing made sense

anymore. Not me. Not Phillip or Sloan. Not my future. Not a goddamn thing. Honestly, I was better off not thinking anymore. So far, all thinking ever got me was more questions and less clarity. Maybe I should give into my body and desire on this one. Or maybe I should vow a life of celibacy so I was never given the chance to fuck it all up.

Says the sex addict.

Yeah, there wasn't any way I'd succeed in a life of celibacy. I'd sooner go weeks without running into a villain bent on my demise than go sexless, surrounded by all these beyond beautiful types.

“Fair enough, love. I know when to surrender, and something tells me you're not ready to hear what I have to say on the subject.”

That was the understatement of the century.

Kris fingered purple curls away from her eyes, and her smile was absolutely bewitching when she finally came into view. Next to her was a man I didn't recognize. He struck an imposing silhouette in daylight, large arms sculpted with strong muscle and chest cutting a powerful shape in a thin top. His raven-black hair was short and neatly combed over, perfectly framing a strong and stoic face. It accentuated a mouth that was fully plump and a magnet for the eyes.

Spontaneous thoughts and fantasies of what it'd be like to kiss him popped into my head before I was able to expel them with the strength of my shame.

Despite it being maybe forty degrees, the dude barely wore anything at all. Which meant he likely ran hot—and I meant his body, not his looks.

Okay, so he was super hot.

It wasn't that I was thirsty for every dude who entered my field of vision, but most of the ones I'd met lately were quite literally gorgeous. Nothing like the high school boys I'd been around my entire life. Every guy was mysteriously attractive and appealing to my inexperienced eyes. All for different reasons. All with their own unique, impossibly alluring qualities. The cream of the crop.

Shit. I'm a thirsty bitch.

Still, this new stranger's gentle brown eyes which slanted towards his eyebrows and perfect smile were a welcomed change to all the sarcastic male types parading around me lately. I knew better than to trust a first impression, though.

Sloan's partner fixed her cleavage, which was ample and out of her shirt in a way that would make any person salivate. The woman knew how to draw the eyes. Her tight corset top shifted as she moved, and I stood stupidly frozen to the spot while she made her way over with the new stranger in tow.

Motioning to the handsome man beside her, the purple vixen greeted both Sloan and I with another gorgeous smile. "This is Sungho, the Shifter who found the vampire coven here. All of this area is his pack's territory."

When I spared a moment, I was absolutely obsessed with K-Dramas and their complex stories. Thanks to such a random obsession, I recognized his name as one I'd heard in a few Korean series I did manage to watch. It gave me an odd sense of excitement.

Not that it should matter. Humans weren't the only roaming species, so racism wasn't the same in our supernatural world. But it still existed. It was evident the Organization saw themselves as superior and created institutions here to perpetuate that culture, then categorized other creatures as bottom-dwellers and dangerous. After learning what I had about the Organization and their diabolical dive into genetic mutation, I no longer trusted anything I'd been taught over the course of my eighteen years. I'd been socialized by the very people who played God and ordered my parents' deaths.

My entire life was a lie.

I eyed the Shifter with interest, who sported a form-fitting t-shirt and pair of jeans. Casual wear. Not exactly what I'd expect, but I'd discarded preconceived notions about this world a long time ago. Besides, Shifters needed to remove their clothes before turning into whatever beast they were.

If he had a pack, one might assume he was a wolf, but I didn't know for sure anymore. I hadn't read up on all the types of animals and beasts in the Shifter category, so I'd likely be wrong if I tried to assume anything.

My gaze slid from his face, down his body, then back up again. The muscles in his torso flexed as if he was under attack, but his eyes never strayed from mine.

Maybe I make him uncomfortable?

"Sungho?"

The strange man with obsidian eyes and a body lean with muscle crossed his arms, finally giving way to a soft, greeting smile. "You must be the girl everyone's talking about."

Oh, great. My reputation proceeds me.

“Can’t really say you’re wrong, but I’m curious what sort of things are being said in the Shifter circle,” I commented dryly, stealing a look at Sloan.

As expected, the other Hunter was devoid of emotion outside of courteous welcome. Not that I expected anything less from my older predecessor. Sloan played well with others.

Phillip would’ve been tossing out sarcastic commentary about Sungho’s lackluster appearance or boyishly good looks. He’d be breaking down who the newcomer was and what he could be coaxed into, or what he was capable of. Or maybe he’d be grinning like he was full of secrets.

Sloan, however, greeted Sungho with nothing but civility and respect. “Your help is greatly appreciated.”

“Our interests align is all,” Sungho remarked, eyes staying with me. “The sooner we get rid of these pests, the better it is for my pack.”

Kris giggled and sighed before offering me an exaggerated roll of her eyes. I couldn’t help but smile, having missed the woman’s eccentric presence after nothing but testosterone-toting dudes and their opinions for the last few months.

“You said there were nearly fifteen, including whoever leads them?”

The Shifter’s demeanor changed in an instant, and his smile disappeared. “That’s our guess, but nothing’s been confirmed.”

Sloan nodded. “Then that’s where we’ll start. Is your pack joining us, or will it be just you?”

Kris had a hand on her weapon, eyes scouting the area for any unwelcomed listeners.

Sungho stole a look at me once more, his square jaw tautening before he answered Sloan. “Just me. As you might suspect, the rest of my pack isn’t very happy we’re working with Hunters.”

Go figure.

“No need to explain,” Sloan responded, smiling. “We are grateful their alpha could be spared.”

So, he was the alpha. That explained his aura.

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Sungho's eyes strayed over to me again, and it was a look that unsettled me more than I would ever admit. I couldn't decipher what it was or why he couldn't keep his eyes off of me, but I did my best to ignore it. Because after this mission, it was very unlikely our paths would cross again.

"We'll be at the greatest advantage during the daytime, and since sundown is quickly approaching, it's better to start tomorrow after some rest."

Sungho nodded his agreement, and without another word, disappeared. Still, the unsettling way his eyes roamed over me stayed with me long after he was gone.

I shook away the uncomfortable feeling and followed Sloan and Kris back to the car.

Chapter 7

Sword and Shield

Instead of the usual hotel or motel, Kris had the good sense to rent a temporary house in the area. Because she said it was the least she could do for a girl uprooted from life and forced to live in a cave for over two weeks was to offer a comfortable place to stay.

So, I got my own room.

It was a necessary barrier after everything Sloan and I had done when we were alone together. In a house together, it'd be hard enough. Sharing a room would've been torture.

Kris explained that she'd be out of the house the first night gathering more intel, and so I needed as many doors between us as I could manage.

I was issued a phone, a standard high-security laptop, and given the necessary weaponry and armor to take on a mission this complex. But at least what we were up against seemed like coming home after being out in nothing but wilderness. Crazy to think I was thankful to fight vampires, but I was.

Unfortunately, taking down a coven with only the four of us would take some careful planning. Covens could have anywhere from a few to an entire society in terms of numbers. Every Hunter was taught to err on the side of caution in these cases. Though, after discovering the strength and just crazy shit I could do, I doubted any vampire, young or old, would pose much of a challenge to Sloan or I.

But again, caution was always encouraged.

First, we needed to determine how many vampires there really were. Then we'd figure out the best way to wipe out their numbers—either by attacking while they were forced to stay out of the light, or ensuring they had no place to return at dawn.

Seeing how everyone evil-inclined and their sister were after me, I suspected that all the precautions stemmed from that more than what we may find out with the coven. Who knew what other beasts waited in the shadows for their chance to take a shot at me? Regardless of what awaited me when I stepped out that front door, I was thankful for the distraction.

Sloan was already fast at work planning our next move, and everything that occurred before with Eros and between the two of us faded away to duty.

Thank fucking Buddha.

Teasing back dark hair, which fell forward in a manner far too gorgeous to be natural, Sloan swiped from one image to the next on the tablet he was holding. His jaw worked before our eyes met. “Hungry?”

For a second, I worried I might be drooling because the man was truly delicious to look at, and it likely showed on my face. But I quickly discovered he only meant to suggest I hadn’t consumed blood in a week or two. I’d nearly forgotten myself, that I was the same thing I hunted.

Sloan touched my knee, smiling, and rose from his seat. He retrieved a blood bag and used a special warmer to heat it up. Then he poured it into two separate mugs before returning to the sofa we’d spent the morning on. The Brit motioned for me to come closer and sit next to him. Unfortunately, I hesitated long enough to get a smirk out of him, and then he drew my noncompliant self over to the sofa and painted our sides against each other.

And just like that, my heart lost its rhythm. The work I’d put into forgetting about his heat, his smell, the way his lips perfectly melded over mine, the way our bodies fit seamlessly together was lost in the instant his warm flesh met mine.

I didn’t need to look over to know that Sloan easily saw through my weak charade. Mostly because I struggled to temper my body’s reactions to the incubus’s mere presence. I could practically feel his amused smile from where I sat. Running away wasn’t an option, so I opted for pretending to be engrossed in my blood-filled cup.

No matter how often I drank the thick liquid that sometimes tasted sweet, sometimes savory, I’d never get used to it.

“You know, at some point you’ll need to look at me,” Sloan teased, and I outright groaned in response. His happy laughter hit my ears a second later, and it took everything not to whine for him to have mercy on my poor overworked heart. “I must

admit, your reactions tickle an urge inside of me I was never aware I harbored,” he admitted in a soft whisper, as though he worried we’d be overheard.

Great. Just great. I’d basically encouraged Sloan’s inner sadist into existence.

The air between us was highly charged with something I’d rather not acknowledge; the same way it was the night I climbed onto his lap and let him have his wicked way with me. The hair on my body rose to attention, and it was the first sign that I needed to find a way to escape.

But how? Kris was out for the day, and the two of us were very much alone now. Feigning exhaustion wouldn’t work because of who Sloan was. He’d see through any poor excuse I gave him. It was in moments like these where it really sucked to have such clever men around me.

I couldn’t get away with shit!

Of course there was always the alternative. Give in. Touch him and lose myself in his gorgeous body. Ugh. And I wanted to. It was all I thought about these days. I didn’t owe Phillip anything. What we had was never exclusive, only distracted fun. So why shouldn’t I? Besides, we’d already done it. What was one more time—or five? Seven? Well, we could figure out an exact number later.

Says the nymphomaniac.

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I offered the front door a wistful glance before finally peering at the incubus beside me. His smile hit, and it was all he needed to claim victory. I'd never win against him. "I don't know if you're trying to make things worse, but spare me, Sloan. Please, for the love of Buddha or whatever deity is listening, spare me any more embarrassing epiphanies."

My hands held onto my cup like it was a lifeline, and to some degree, in that moment, it was the only thing keeping me from throwing myself at the Casanova beside me. Only one topic ever sobered both mind and body, and it was all I had. A last ditch-effort to save myself from the disgrace of lunging at a man in a horny, YOLO madness.

"Has Phillip gotten in touch?" I asked, swallowing blood down alongside the guilt in my throat.

Sloan's smile faded. "As fate would have it, he rang just this morning."

My eyes shot over to the gorgeous man beside me, and I recovered the cup I nearly dropped in surprise. "How is he? Did he tell you anything? Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Though Sloan didn't physically react to the barrage of questions, his smile was gone. I'd stolen it from him. Bringing up Phillip was low, but I was too upset I hadn't been told right away to really care what the other Hunter thought of my abrupt change in topic.

The Brit brushed back his silky hair before putting his silly cat mug down. It was one

of my favorites because the tail acted as a handle and its puckered buttohole was right there for all to see. I mirrored him by setting my own cup beside his—a dog whose tongue served as the handle of the cup—and then pivoted Sloan's direction.

The other Hunter's light eyes traced a path from my eyes to my lips, then he took hold of my hands and brought them into his lap like it was the most natural thing in the world to do. My heart startled back to life. Something about the way he touched me suggested what I was about to hear was going to set me off.

I sucked in a breath as the silence grew. "Sloan..." His hands tightened around mine, and I swallowed the lump forming in my throat. "What are you not telling me?"

The other Hunter looked down at our joined hands, then he sighed and the slump in his shoulders signaled a defeat I'd never seen on him. My heart all but came into my throat. "He's asked that I partner with you. Permanently."

His words hit like a blow to the chest. "What...?"

Sloan's thumbs gently caressed mine. "I should say, he's no longer working under the Organization. In order to obtain information necessary for our cause, he made a target of himself. There was no other way. He knew what he risked when he accessed that information."

"He's...being hunted?"

For the first time, Sloan's face projected the grief he felt. "He is."

Words fled. The pound in my head was so loud I couldn't hear anything Sloan said afterwards. It was like being abandoned by Grams all over again. The loss hit so hard that I didn't even realize until Sloan had me in his arms that I'd collapsed.

“Why go through all the trouble if you’re just going to abandon me now?!”

“Phillip can be reckless with himself, but when it comes to you, he’s measured and would never risk your safety. If he were to come back, it would put you at great risk.”

Tears burned unforgiving paths down my cheeks as I fought to get a hold on my emotions. It hit so hard so fast, I couldn’t get a handle on my reactions.

So fucking embarrassing.

“So what, we just leave him to fight alone?” My throat hurt, and I struggled to get the words out. “You may be okay with leaving him out there alone, but I’m not.” I pulled away, angry. I fixed my posture and lifted my chin. “Tell me where he is, Sloan.”

Sloan touched my face, smiling softly. “This may not make sense to you, but the information he holds right now is the only way we’re going to find out what’s different about your blood. Until we know, it’s too risky to stay together. Just trust him. Phillip may be stupid in love, but he’s a genius when it comes to staying alive and achieving a goal.”

I didn’t want to, but I laughed. Hewas severely stupid in love, and I’d be the first one to tell him when I got to see that smug face of his.

“But—”

“One month,” Sloan interjected, his gaze staying with mine. “That’s all I ask, V. One month, and then we’ll go find him.”

“One month?”

Sloan’s lips teased upwards. “One month is all he’ll need. If he hasn’t done it by then,

we'll go save his ungrateful ass from whatever trouble he's gotten himself into."

I giggled, the thundering hammer of my heart still wreaking havoc on my ears.
"Okay."

"But if we do this," the Brit started, no longer smiling, "we can't go back. Once we become an enemy of the Organization, it'll be a great deal harder to achieve our end goal."

If we went against the Organization, it'd ruin all the plans Phillip had to implode it from within. Could I risk all the hard work he put into it? Yes. Phillip saved me, and I'd save him if it came down to it. We'd find another way to topple the Organization. Without Phillip, there wasn't a rebellion. We needed him. I refused to leave him behind to die.

Sloan's warmth enveloped me, and I absently leaned into his firm body. "He doesn't deserve you, and I'm going to make him regret leaving you in the first place," the Brit pledged in a soft whisper.

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I loved Phillip. The love he had for me may not be the same and I may never get the chance to be with him the way I wanted to, but I wouldn't abandon him.

I'd fight for him.

I'd be his sword and shield.

I'd always be there, like a shadow, no matter whether he loved me back one day or not. Because that was just who I was. I refused to become what the Organization trained me to be.

I refused to be a heartless, soulless weapon.

Chapter 8

New Kind of Chaos

Phillip

Being a Hunter the way I was and raised inside a facility meant I was no stranger to torture of the mind and body. Very few could break my mental strength, and no length of torture could ever conquer me.

Until I met V.

Nothing prepared me for the torment I'd undergo when I voluntarily left the young spit-fire in Sloan's care. Mostly because their connection was undeniably strong and

it would be unfair of me to expect V to remain faithful. Not when everything I did was to push her away.

I'd given the young Hunter very little hope that our relationship could be more than physical. Even when my true feelings for her slipped out in a misguided moment, I still managed to pivot the conversation to how it didn't matter in the end.

We couldn't be together.

I despised myself for what my rejection did to her. It was inevitable in our line of work to sever ties when emotion got in the way. I never struggled to set the necessary boundaries to do what needed to be done to bring down the Organization.

Ich bin ein Scheiße...

Still, it was vital I remained unattached, especially after Giselle was killed. Becoming tied so wholly with another could only end in tragedy, and I refused to do that to someone again. To endanger her. I locked down my emotions and shut her out, like I'd done so many times before.

So, imagine my surprise, when my walls came down without effort every time V was near; how I easily fell into her hopeful orbit the second her eyes landed on mine. I was swept away by her optimistic drive to have it all, and when she faltered in vulnerable moments, I wanted to pick her back up again and promise she could have everything she ever desired.

Instead, I fell into old habits. I didn't lift her spirits. I tore her down and refused to let her hope for more. And while I'd never admit it to anyone, not even Sloan, I regretted every word spoken that night V asked to be together. With swift action, much like in a fight, I broke her heart, and the abandonment that distorted her face haunted my every breath since.

And then I got what was coming for me.

Sloan, comforting her the way I never believed he would, kissed V as though I wasn't a room away. As if I wouldn't see them locked in a passionate exchange. He and I knew better. Sloan did it to ruffle my feathers; to directly challenge my feelings for her. Most of what the clever Hunter did was meant to derive some sort of response from me. Sloan liked to think himself more emotionally evolved than I, and sometimes I couldn't argue he wasn't. But it was a tactic he used enough to be obnoxious.

This time was different, though. Whether or not it started as a game, Sloan was genuinely falling for V. The way he looked at her was the same way I did when I first realized I couldn't leave the sarcastic lass alone.

His eyes followed her everywhere she went. His body always seemed to be aimed the direction she was in, even when his eyes were on me. The Brit spoke more, laughed more, and seemed to shed his tough, outer layer around the spirited Hunter. Sloan was just as spellbound as I was, and it was the first time I struggled to do what was right—to walk away.

Call it cosmic punishment. I had done this to V, to myself. I'd abandoned her, leaving the young Hunter with no other choice but to escape into the arms of another.

Sloan had already succumbed to her charms. His smile was always one second away anytime she was in the room. I'd never seen the other Hunter engage someone quite like he did V, and it was laughable to think his association with me might minimize his pursuit of her.

Sloan was a beast on the battlefield. He was kind, strong, and quick-witted. The Brit never hesitated to exploit an opportunity. It was easy to deduce he'd be the same way in love. Worse, I'd practically guided her Sloan's direction, thinking my longtime

friend would do as he'd always done—play politely but never seriously.

But I was naïve. I miscalculated. V was beyond beautiful, brutally strong, and wonderfully witty. Any man or woman would be lucky to claim her as theirs. And the fact that it was I who forced them together sat on my chest, in my throat, replayed in my memory every second I was apart from her.

I didn't have any right to be angry with either of them, and I wasn't. To some degree, I wanted that happiness for both of them. But I was angry at myself. I'd convinced myself that if she was happy and safe, that would be enough. But every time I spoke with Sloan and his voice softened with affection as he detailed their time spent together, it was like a blade to the heart.

The night Eros got away, I was barely hanging onto life. I'd managed to trick the Dark Fae into believing he'd succeeded in defeating me by creating an illusion of decapitation with a difficult to produce invention, one that required magic, and then I stopped my heart using a technique I'd perfected over the years. It severely weakened me, nearly to the point of incapacitation, for several weeks afterwards.

Knowing that the two managed to escape made it worth every painfully weak second it took to get back to fighting condition.

Eros could somehow track me, and the very thought of endangering V again was the entire reason I couldn't return to her side. Not when Cash knew the secret of her blood and tracking him would prove treacherous for my young partner. So, I kept away. I convinced myself it was for the best; that I wouldn't regret it because V's life was worth suffering the loss of her heart. But I hadn't been prepared for the chaos of my emotions, or how even Giselle's death didn't compare to losing V.

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Still, Cash insisted that if I wanted to know the origin of her blood, I'd need to get information in return—the location of a known Fae portal and the only place where a creature like him could pass from this plane to the next. The information was only privy to those at the top, and it would mean I made an instant target of myself; a rogue agent deserving of immediate execution, which the Organization would likely send their best to do. Their best included Sloan and V.

The irony wasn't lost on me.

Most of all, it would mean I could no longer be by V's side, not with the entire Organization out to claim my head and our association would be met with a similar fate for the two.

Looking down at the small USB in my hand containing the location of the portal, I tightened my grip on the disposable phone I held against my ear. "Sloan," I said, voice bottoming out, "keep her safe. When I have the information, I'll reach out."

"I doubt V will be appeased with such a lame excuse, Phillip," he argued in a tone that suggested he thought I was in the wrong for keeping my distance. "She'll want to go after you. She's been in danger this entire time, and that's hardly stopped her from doing what she wants."

"This is different."

"Because it's the Organization? Hasn't it been all along, though?"

I sighed loudly, getting a chuckle out of Sloan. "Are you determined to drive me mad

tonight?”

“I miss you too, mate.”

Sloan was insufferable when he got all holier than thou on me.

“You know I can’t come back,” I finally growled, clutching the USB. “You’re just as capable of training and protecting her as I am. Hell, maybe even more so. You actually give a shit.”

“Oh, like you don’t give a shit? How long have I known you? Long enough to know when you’re lying to yourself to convince the world around you.”

“Didn’t stop you from capitalizing on it,” I spat out, unable to contain my venom.

It was long seconds of dense silence before Sloan responded, “So, it did bother you.”

“V is free to do what she wants. Our arrangement was purely physical.”

“Was it, really?”

The rage went straight to my head with the condescending tone the other Hunter took.

He would never understand the torture of leaving V after I promised never to abandon her. Never know how my heart was torn to shreds at the mere thought of anyone who wasn’t me being made privy to the gorgeous flush of her skin when she was turned on. Or how she discarded her modesty for the sake of chasing pleasure. Sloan would never truly comprehend how much I’d miss V’s raspy laughter and infuriatingly sassy banter. No one would ever compare to the way she burrowed into my heart, taking up all the space left.

“Are you implying something, Sloan?”

Sloan’s voice rumbled deeply in my ear. “Dunno, mate. It just all sounds like a convenient excuse to me. But I can’t force you to come back if you’re determined to distance yourself.” I could hear his end rustling, probably because he was running fingers through his hair in frustration. “It’s going to be hell dealing with her if she refuses to let you go.”

It took all my patience not to yell at the other Hunter. He’d been given the go-ahead to pursue her without interference. He’d never know how close I’d come to damning the consequences and returning to her side.

But V deserved better.

“What, afraid to take on our feisty little V? Can’t win against a Hunter who’s half your size and a hundred times less experienced?” I chuckled devilishly. “Who would’ve thought the great Sloan would be overcome by a mere teenager?”

His answering laugh was rich with amusement. “That’s quite ironic of you to be taunting me when you surrendered plenty of times to that little half the size and a hundred times less experienced Hunter.”

“You’re an arse,” I complained, smiling against my will. “I have to go. Just do what you’re told, you smarmy bastard.”

His sigh was loud in my ear. “Right. Do me a favor, though.”

“I thought I already was,” I countered childishly.

Sloan chuckled softly. “I’d win her heart in a fair fight, mate. You just never gave me the chance to show you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I sassed back, no longer smiling.

“Don’t die. And don’t stay away forever. I never pegged you as a bloke who’d run away with his tail tucked up between his legs.”

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Teeth gritting, I took a moment to calm down. “I’m not running away.”

“Could’ve fooled me. But if you die, I don’t think she’d recover from the guilt. So whatever you do, stay alive and come back.”

I’d forgotten how obnoxious the Brit could get when he was determined to make me see reason. It’d been a few decades since I had to deal with his stubbornness.

“Phil...”

“I heard you. Keep her safe and I’ll think about it.”

Before I could get dragged into another argument, I hung up the phone and destroyed the device. Throwing a bag over my shoulder, I left the small cabin I had stayed at the last few days and headed for the rendezvous point Cash described in his last message.

Cassius stood beneath a large tree, dressed in expensive name-brand clothing and sporting a face marred by ancient runes for every life he’d stolen.

The Dark Fae hadn’t been too much trouble to track, because he could never remove the tracing bug I’d imbedded into his skin after he became my informant.

When Cassius turned tail and ran after leaving us for dead, he’d gone underground with a group of on-the-run targets of the Organization. Many who owed me a favor. So, his own turned on him and kept the Dark Fae conveniently restrained while I traveled to come have a chat.

The glowing purple Fae eyes glided over to me, and the lines of his face deepened with genuine disdain. “You’re late.”

“Payback for escaping after we were blasted with magic.”

Cassius clicked his tongue and ran fingers through his platinum hair, which was highlighted with lavender strips. “You’re a real shite. Do you have what I need?”

Smirking, I grabbed the silver Truth Cuff from my pocket and offered the other man another look. “You know I won’t trade until you give me what I want, Fae.”

Cassius’s eyes dropped to the object in my hand, and he stiffened. “Do I really have to?”

“Guess you’d rather I keep the location of the Fae portal to myself, then...”

“No!” he yelped, coming forward. His eyes dodged left and right before he offered one of his arms in surrender. “Let’s get this over with. I want to cross over the second we’re done here.”

“The information you have needs to be worth the USB. If it isn’t, I’ll end you right here,” I warned, wrapping the string around his proffered wrist tightly. “Everything you know, or no deal, Cash.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the Dark Fae grumbled. His dragon-slit pupils thinned. “What I tell you will make you rethink staying on this plane yourself. It’s not pretty. Your little girl is going to change the tide, and I don’t want to be here when she does.”

I’d never show it, but his words unsettled me greatly. Anyone who met V and knew what she could do would already conclude she was a game-changer. But I’d be lying if I said it didn’t scare me what sort of future was in store for her. I hated to admit it,

but if what I found today meant even Sloan couldn't protect her, I'd have no choice but to return to her side.

And I was conflicted. Could I return and keep my distance? Or would I succumb to her devastating charms and let the world burn to taste her lips again?

"Get on with it," I barked angrily, already put out by my own thoughts. "I'm sure it won't be long before the dogs catch our scent."

Cassius's eyes widened, and he panned the area with fear seeping into his expression. "You want to know what she is and what it means, right? Well, it's ancient. What's in her blood hasn't been seen in over two-thousand years."

I stared at him, determined to keep my face from giving away my thoughts.

"Pure Chaos Fae. The original Apophis, if you will. The first Fae created Egyptian lore, as you well know. And really every ancient lore. They loved to be viewed as gods when they crossed the planes."

The first Fae lived for being adored, and it was no secret that many of the "gods" in mythology were based on Fae who crossed the planes to wreak havoc on humans.

"Anyway, their powers were dangerous and violent, I'm told. Nearly wiped out every creature in every plane they traveled to. Unfettered power like that comes at a cost, Hunter. It's the definition of chaos. Every time she uses it, it will grow harder and harder to control. She'll become less herself."

I took a step closer, and Cash flattened against the trunk of a tree. "What do you mean? Are you implying she will slip away to darkness, Fae?"

The Dark Fae's vibrant eyes glowed in terror. "She's a hybrid, so who knows. But

that sort of power unchecked can only lead one place. The more she uses it, the harder it will become to control it.” His lips tilted for a second. “Oh, and this infatuation you have for her, that’s part of it. They were often called Royal Sirens. No man or woman could refuse their charms.”

Lies.

He lifted his wrist, as if knowing what I was thinking. “I can’t lie with this, Hunter. Your invention is a bitch to deal with, and you know better than I do it works. I don’t know how they obtained ancient Fae blood, but I suggest you get out while you can.”

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Even should it be true, I'd never tell her. V would spiral and refuse to ever love again. She'd become a eunuch. Whatever our future, I'd never let anyone take that spark of hope from her.

No one.

Redirecting the conversation, I crossed my arms. "How were they eventually wiped out?"

Cash sighed loudly, the sunlight hitting his angular features as he turned his head, clearly not the least bit happy I was dragging this out. "Can't really say. It was once implied they had trouble procreating. Something about the power they wielded destroying their bodies. What I can say is they ruled for tens of thousands of years without competition. They freely crossed the planes without losing their power. The Organization is either incredibly stupid to think they could control this sort of magic, or they know how to defeat it should things get out of hand."

The Organization obtained the blood, so it wasn't too farfetched to think they'd ensure there was a fail-safe if she ever rebelled. Either to contain her or kill her. Unfortunately, the cleverest minds were behind the Organization.

The reverse serum worked on V's other blood, but she'd shown this Fae-magic blood could bypass its effects. That was made clear when she saved Sloan, from what the other Hunter described.

Fuck. Now I have to involve Sloan.

The only way to know for sure was to locate the information the Organization may have, and the only way to do that was to use someone still working for the Organization. That left Sloan, and that meant that staying away was impossible.

Fucking shit.

I dragged fingers through my hair, trying to figure out what move to make next.

But as I did, Cash cleared his throat and spoke up again, “There may be a way to bind it.”

Lifting my gaze to the Dark Fae, I offered him an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“It’d require maintenance—alotof it—and I’m not sure how it would work with her being a hybrid, but I think it can be done.”

“I’m sensing a huge ‘but’ coming,” I remarked, knowing from his face that it wasn’t an easy task.

Cash eyed me for a moment, then crossed his arms. “She’d need to cross over to the Fae realm. None of the Fae in this plane are capable of binding magic that strong. Not even me.”

His eyes dodged off to the right, but I’d already turned my head. I snatched the bracelet from his arm and removed Blood Slayer from its sheathe. “This conversation isn’t over. You’ll have to do more to get this USB.”

“You’re such an overbearing prick.”

“Beats being a slimy snake. Be grateful I don’t feel like tossing your sorry arse to the Organization for the part you played in V’s parents’ death.”

Cash's lips lifted. "Must be so tough being head over heels for a girl with ancient Fae blood. I wouldn't wish that fate on my worst enemy."

Before I could retort, I was cutting through an arrow aimed at my heart. Then both Cash and I fled opposite directions to avoid magical symbols forming beneath our feet.

Guess the buzz kill brigade were here.

Chapter 9

Tragic Commonality

"You never talk about yourself," I pried abruptly as we took a beaten path through the forest, ready to stake out a potential location nearby. "I mean, not really. Why do you men folk never talk about yourselves. I feel like you know everything about me, and yet I know so little about you."

I didn't hide my agitation well, and it likely projected on my face as hormonal teenage rage while we walked side by side, always aware of our surroundings.

Sloan was dressed in smart fighting attire, and his usual weapons were everywhere I looked today. His slim waist was strapped with an assortment of blades alongside some inventions I recognized Phillip liked to carry on him.

Sungho and Kris were paired off and checking out another potential location. We'd narrowed it down to two, so the odds of us finding it today were high. But the angsty, self-deprecating teen in me was more interested in prying into things I had no business prying into.

You'd think after Phillip I'd learn my lesson, but here we were again, digging a hole

I'd likely be buried in.

My every action probably screamed of abandonment issues. Not that it'd be totally off the mark to say so. I was fully aware of how desperate I'd become to connect with someone—anyone—who didn't run away at the first sign of trouble.

I'd vowed to live, at least while I could. Presently, my choices were to try something new and chase after Kris, who was gorgeous. Honestly, it did appeal to me, since I'd in no small way wondered about my sexuality. I'd be lying if I said I didn't take a good few days to seriously think about it. Or, I could give whatever weird thing happening between Sloan and I a shot.

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After Phillip had made it clear he didn't plan to be an option, not now, not ever, even when it came to being partners, I'd be stupid to think waiting until his missteps finally caught up with him would eventually lead to a happily ever after.

"I wasn't aware you felt that way, but I can understand why, knowing Phillip," Sloan responded, lips lifting sarcastically. "I never volunteered information because you seemed uncomfortable with the current state of our relationship."

My gaze slid away, suddenly very aware of his. "All my relationships are starting backwards these days."

"A tragic commonality with Hunters, I fear," Sloan countered with a chuckle.

"Still, that wasn't cool of me. You're a nice dude, and I think with everything considered, you're the most thoughtful guy of the bunch."

The light-eyed Hunter's laughter was rich and came from deep within his chest. It made my stomach flip-flop. "I'm going to choose to see that as a compliment."

"Hey, it is!"

"And it's nothing less than what you deserve, V."

"You damn suave bastard," I grumbled to Sloan's continued entertainment.

"I fear I'm becoming something of a masochist myself."

“I’m afraid to ask why,” I remarked, smirking.

Sloan’s eyes glistened with meaning and he reached for my hand, brushing my knuckles gently. It hardly compared to the night I’d climbed right onto his lap and performed acts that would shame a lesser person, but the light touch made me just as giddy. In seconds, my heart was off to the races, and it was probably painfully obvious to the other Hunter I enjoyed the small act, whose hearing was just as good as mine.

“I find myself desperate to hear your chastisement while you call me a bastard. It’s a relief to see your guard come down around me.”

Heat reached my face, and I scrambled to say something. “Okay, yeah. You’re definitely a masochist. What kind of person wants to be verbally abused?” I was hyper-aware of how close Sloan was, and my eyes couldn’t seem to stray away from the hand that had only touched me moments ago.

“Be that as it may, it gives me great joy to know you feel comfortable enough to be a little sassy with me. I doubt I’ll do anything but smile all day.”

The way Sloan dropped lines like it was nothing really showcased the man’s easy charm. He never seemed bothered by what I did or said. He never blamed me for treating him like shit. I definitely owed him an apology as time dragged on and our relationship became complicated.

“Still, I’m sorry.”

“For?” Sloan seemed genuinely surprised I’d apologize.

I licked my lips and readjusted the crossbow I carried on my back. “For everything. For how I treated you the other day when you told me about Phil. It’s understandable

you'd want to keep that from me. I shouldn't have blamed you for not telling me sooner. I mean, you did tell me eventually. And you know, for being saddled with me and getting nothing but complaints. It can't feel great to be put in danger for someone you don't even know." Sloan didn't speak at all, so I busied myself with my belt to keep from being too fidgety. "Guess I'm still scared to get close to anyone, but I promise I'm working on it."

And that was the truth.

I didn't want to turn into a jaded old goat like Phillip who never let anyone in. That was the last thing Grams wanted for me. And even though I was still upset she kept things from me, I understood why she did it. It was all a lot, and Grams only ever wanted the best for me. She didn't get a chance to live a normal life from what I knew, and maybe that was the reason she worked so hard to give me at least some semblance of one.

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense.

The other Hunter's light eyes beamed, then Sloan slowed to a stop and pivoted my direction. "You've had your entire life upended. All your loved ones are gone. Phillip, despite his reassurance he wouldn't, left you with someone else. You're being hunted down by every creature bent on teaching the Organization a lesson, and those who may even be working for it. Your blood is a mystery, and controlling your powers even more so. Lastly, all of this occurred within months of you turning eighteen. Yet, you stand here and apologize to me?" His smile was heartbreakingly gentle. "Fascinating."

Well, when you put it like that...

I eyed the man thoughtfully. "I keep forgetting that you're nothing like Phillip. He'd tell me to buck up—or something as equally patronizing."

Brushing back his dark hair with another bright smile, Sloan eyed the treetops. “Phillip has a lot of reasons to be cold to this world, but around you, I saw something in him that I haven’t seen the entire time I’ve known him.”

I swallowed, suddenly uncomfortable but desperate to know what the Brit would say next. “What did you see?”

As if catching himself, Sloan fixed his posture and offered me a less-than-inspired grin. “Life.”

“Life?”

Walking again, Sloan smoothed out his leather jacket and cleared his throat. “It’s hard to explain, but Phillip always seemed to have one foot in the grave. The only thing keeping him alive was his vengeance. But around you, it’s as if light has finally shined on a place that had been drenched in darkness for centuries. Like you brought him back to life.”

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“That’s impossible,” I said, throat tight. “He left me the first chance he got, Sloan.”

Despite my argument, something in my chest panged. I had no business feeling hope, but I did. Deep down, Sloan’s words revived the optimism that maybe I could reach Phillip again.

Maybe we stood a chance.

But then Sloan sighed and confirmed my unspoken fear. “I’d wondered if maybe you could reach him, but even I’m not sure now that he’s chosen to leave. He seems more determined than ever to do everything alone.”

Fuck.

I’d nearly done it again. Hoped.

Shit.

Moistening my lips, I picked up the pace and settled my gaze on the path ahead. “So, what about you? Why don’t you have anyone in your life? I take it you and Kris aren’t a thing.”

My question seemed to catch the quietly brooding Brit by surprise because his eyes swiftly shot over to me. “You wish to know why I don’t have a loved one? And you’d be correct in assuming there’s nothing between Kris and I, though I admire her greatly.”

Figured he wasn't the type to date one and kiss another. I mean, not without communicated consent if that was the type of relationship they had. Kris gave me no-one-man vibes, and I admired that about her. Truth be told, I worshipped her.

Must ask her to teach me her ways.

I nearly lost my courage for a second, face to face with Sloan's solemn stare, but I refused to back down. Not when I could finally ask questions and maybe get answers. With Sloan, it felt achievable.

I kept my gaze locked with the Brit's. "Is there a reason why you don't have someone?"

For the first time, Sloan visibly hesitated, unable to answer. But when he lifted his gaze back to mine, he no longer looked unsure. No, if anything, he looked super determined.

"Like Phillip, I lost someone I loved."

I waited with bated breath, not sure why my heart hurt when Sloan said he'd loved someone. Of course he had. He wasn't as old as Phillip, but he'd lived far longer than any human had. It'd be ridiculous to think that an immensely charming, unbelievably kind, and incredibly clever Hunter like Sloan wouldn't fall in love at some stage.

He wasn't Phil.

In the gleam of sunlight, Sloan was striking. It didn't help that the last two nights I'd been plagued by dreams of kissing and doing shameless, sinful things with him. Dreams of sinking my fingers into his lush dark hair and mapping the contours of his muscles as they flexed and relaxed. And...I was drooling.

Hormones. I'm going to blame hormones.

“Oh?”

Sloan seemed to choose his next words carefully. “My sister.”

Relief hit, but then I realized how horrible it was to react the way I did when someone told you they lost their sister. “What happened to her?”

Branches and dry leaves crunched underfoot as we trekked deeper into the forest. The sunlight was sporadic and our surroundings grew darker with every step, but my senses were tuned into the way Sloan's heart seemed to quicken at the mere thought of his sister. Uncomfortable didn't express how I felt in that moment.

Sloan paused in his forward hike and turned to me. His jaw worked before he finally spoke. “The same fate as your parents.”

The Organization executed her?

“For what reason?” I asked, breathless.

His lips were downturned before he took a step my direction and lowered his voice. “Unlike your parents, she knew what she was doing. She betrayed everything she believed in and joined forces with a Dark Fae.” Closing his eyes, he sighed deeply. “She fell in love with him.”

Well, shit.

It made sense that love would leave a bad taste in your mouth if your own sister went and turned against you for the sake of being in love.

The other Hunter's soft smile returned. "Don't worry, love. It was a long time ago."

“Still...”

Sloan’s hand brushed against mine before he tangled our fingers together. With fluid grace, he kissed the top of my hand and his eyes seemed to beam vibrant shades of blue while caught in a stream of sunlight. “She made her choice, and I will make mine when the time comes,” he said, lips caressing my sensitive skin.

“When the time comes...?” I repeated, a little winded when I didn’t even need to breathe. “What—?”

Both of our heads turned, weapons already out and at the ready. In an instant, the air I hadn’t realized I sucked in came whooshing out. A familiar figure stood in nothing but daylight, and their appearance struck me to stone.

It can’t be...

“Grams?”

Sloan grabbed me as I took a step, his voice practically a growl. “No.”

“But—”

“V, you can’t trust him.” The lines in Grams’s face deepened with concern.

“Who, Sloan?” Struggling to understand what was happening, I tried to get out of Sloan’s hold to go to her. His hand tightened. “Sloan, let go. It’s my grams.”

“That’s not your grams.”

Sucking in a confused breath, I was suddenly on guard.

Something about the way Sloan reacted made me anxious. His eyes didn’t leave the woman who I only recognized as my grandmother. I hadn’t known the Brit long by normal human standards, but as someone who’d fought by his side, I knew what that look was. It was a look I’d seen only once before. With Eros. If whatever this was gave him that expression, then I could only surmise it was a creature neither of us wanted to go up against.

Removing a long dagger from my belt, I prepared myself internally. Whatever this fucker was, it’d regret taking Grams’s form. In seconds, Sloan and the shapeshifter were rushing each other. I barely even blinked before they collided in an explosion of sparks. Electricity in the air, I moved into action. Like I’d been trained to do, I quickly sped across the earth and attacked the thing from behind. It effortlessly defended itself against the two of us, as if we posed no real threat.

And it was likely because we didn’t.

Its speed easily matched ours. If anything, it was faster. My partner didn’t stop attacking or look my direction. It was evident in every move he made that he was aiming to kill it. Even though I was still unclear what it was, I figured decapitation in all cases was the way to go. The two of us worked around the Grams Imposter, always a second too late to cause injury.

And then it happened.

Fumes spread through the air, wafting into my nose as swiftly as it fled our enemy’s body. Sloan slowed, blinking rapidly, and my limbs grew heavier with every second that passed. The urge to fight seeped from my thoughts, and my eyes tracked back to

Sloan. His face distorted, fighting what was happening, but it wouldn't be enough.

The pheromones moved through our bodies too quickly, driving out all desire to fight. Thoughts were harder to catch. My head grew as empty as the cloudless sky above our heads.

When the silence in my head drove out all emotion, my weapons fell to the ground. Then my knees hit the floor. Looking across, Sloan mimicked the same position. Head lolling back, I was left empty, thoughtless, and completely compliant to our enemy.

"Fight it, V. Don't give in," Sloan bit out, his hand reaching for one of his discarded weapons.

The woman looming over the two of us grinned devilishly. "I thought it would be harder than this, but it seems like neither of you has lived up to your name. Pity," she said, cackling. "Not that I'm all that disappointed."

Anger boiled up from my chest and reached my throat. My feisty spirit returned in a rush, bringing with it every vulgar word in my vocabulary. Thoughts clamored one after another, bent on killing whatever this beast was. I gained control of my limp limbs and moved a hand closer to my weapon, using whatever strength I could. It took a lot to concentrate, but slowly, I was getting there.

"Fuck...you..." I finally managed through a lax jaw.

Pivoting my direction, my sweet Grams's face distorted into an elated smile. She kicked away the weapon I reached for and snickered to herself while she did.

What a bitch.

Despite everything from head to toe being the very image of my grandmother, the smile she beamed at me was nothing like the woman who'd raised me. It swam in malicious, killer intentions, and it had no place on my Grams's face.

"Imposter..." I hissed, willing my body to move so I could chase after my weapon.

Our enemy's eyes sparked with interest. "Guess I spoke too soon. You really are quite the strong brat, aren't you?"

A great cloud of pheromones flooded the air around me and the thoughts of anger and frustration quickly fled my head, swept away as if they were never truly there. And again, I was held hostage inside whatever this thing's power was.

Chapter 10

Sirens Say, What?

My head fell forward like it was suddenly a hundred pounds, and I struggled to stay upright. But not before I caught sight of Sloan grasping something in his open palm. With a reverberating crack, electricity surged into the air and broke whatever spell we were under. A blink later, both of us were on our feet, weapons clashing into the beast.

Re-energized, I swung my arm out, blade tightly clutched, and aimed for my grandmother's throat—something I never imagined in a hundred years I'd do. But this was an imposter, not my sweet Grams who spent every waking hour since my parents died giving me all the love and comfort I needed. You know, when I was young. Then she kicked my ass repeatedly for years.

But hey, with love.

Sort of.

The creature dodged every one of my swings, and Sloan was just as unlucky. His body danced through the air, trying to penetrate its defense. The shiny metal of his blades glinted in streams of daylight. Then his form twisted and moved beautifully through the space, and if I wasn't so worried about my own head, I would've stopped to watch the gorgeous display of what a true, high-level Hunter looked like when they fought. But I didn't relish being decapitated today.

Don't lose your head, V. Focus on the fight.

When the other Hunter finally landed a blow on its bare flesh, his long blade sparked and a harsh clang rang out.

Thanks to the many tomes Sloan forced me to read, I figured out in a single moment what we fought. The speed, its morphed appearance, the pheromones, the impenetrable skin...

Siren.

It was one of the first creatures I learned about, because Phillip cautioned it as one of the many nefarious assassins my enemies would send to capture me.

Swiftly, I evaded the gleam of the Siren's serrated weapon, one that would hurt like a motherfucker before I instantly healed. Like I'd spent a lifetime practicing, I somersaulted out of reach and honed my focus on the unique sheen of its skin.

Talk about an epic defensive and offensive fighter. Sirens were no joke. They were Fae who used magical pheromones to weaken their opponents into compliance. As if that wasn't bad enough, they also sported skin stronger than any known material in the human plane. Even Hunter blades couldn't penetrate their armor.

I caught Sloan's gaze, and we shared a silent moment. I depicted his plan with the quick movement of his hands, then moved into action. His blade clanged over and over, testing different areas, but each place was shielded by the Siren's invincible flesh.

The only way to deal damage to a Siren was to break down its shielded skin until it was vulnerable. From what I read, that was a task in of itself. Worse, Sirens could only be killed by stronger magic or full, heal-evasive decapitation. Long story short,

I'd need to be quick and overly thorough. A simple swing and lop off move wouldn't suffice for this fucker. Unfortunately, my magic only seemed to come when a person I cared about was in danger, and I wouldn't risk Sloan's life just to use it.

The Grams Imposter twirled, throwing several blades our way, many we dodged. But unfortunately, a couple stabbed me straight through the chest, and it was a bitch to remove them so I could heal. It also seemed they were doused in poison, but nothing that did more than throb and burn before dissipating.

It wasn't clear how long we had before another pheromone spell was in the works, but from what I read, they couldn't do it limitlessly. It'd take time to regenerate their energy. So I had to be thankful for that little nugget of hope. Since the Siren hadn't tried to overpower us again with its pheromones, I had to believe it had used all its energy already.

Maybe my luck isn't total shit after all...

The beautiful Hunter beside me lassoed a barbed rope around the Siren, his ethereal light eyes igniting with homicidal rage. He knew how little time we had to defeat this beast of an opponent because the dude had likely fought one of these damn things.

Thanks to torturous tutoring, I was pretty clear on the stakes, too.

His little lasso trick didn't work. The tiny Grandma Rose lookalike broke through the Hunter-strong metal wrapped around it and an explosion of pheromones flooded the air.

Just as Sloan swung his sword out and prepared himself for another fight to maintain control over his mind, something that started in the pit of my stomach surged up into my chest and pushed out. A shrill cry fled the Grams lookalike and she scurried back on her hands and feet. It was honestly the creepiest fucking thing I'd seen in a long

time. Something right out of a horror movie.

That's going to give me nightmares.

My grandmother's face morphed for a second, and then fell away to a color that wasn't human. White with a rainbow hue. Its skin seemed to melt away and fall onto the forest floor. Its fingernails grew obscenely long and sharp. And when the thing opened its mouth to hiss, its incisors were razor-sharp like vampire fangs but longer. Horns grew out of the middle of its forehead and temples, and everything about the creature was unnaturally long and awkward to look at. In full daylight, what once resembled Grams now took on a form I'd only seen in the huge books Sloan brought for me to read.

Sirens were supposed to be beautiful creatures that lured humans to their death in the deepest recesses of the ocean. But they were actually just clever magic-users capable of assuming any identity they wanted. Despite seeing pictures of their true, authentic forms drawn in the books I'd read, it still hit like a gross nightmare to look at one crouched like a demon of Hell right in front of me.

"You can't be!" the Siren hissed.

It was in that moment both Sloan and I seemed to realize the pheromones weren't affecting us. Even though I sensed them in the air and detected their scent, I retained my thoughts and control. Whatever I'd done, it rendered the attack useless.

Sloan didn't waste time attacking the cowering beast, and I was right behind him. We worked together to get the creature into a corner.

But something about it seemed weaker than before. Most surprising was it hadn't used its pheromones again, almost like it couldn't. Like its power had been snuffed out. It wasn't fast, barely evading our attacks. Its eyes shot from left to right, looking

for an exit. When the creature postured for escape, Sloan swung his sword out, ready to decapitate it before it could.

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And then the air around me throbbed and jolted.

Caught off guard, I panned the area before everything came to a screeching halt. Sloan still had his sword arm thrown out, ready to cut a deadly line across the Siren's throat. But it was the Siren, who was eager to escape, that I was focused on. Somehow, the Siren's eyes managed to track my movements as I took steps its direction. But it didn't move.

It couldn't.

Time had stalled out again, but it didn't occur while I was worried about someone dying. This time it happened without rhyme or reason.

Still, I'd count it as a blessing and end things here.

I wasn't sure how I knew it hadn't been able to harden its skin, but I did. Just got the sense it couldn't anymore, not after whatever burst from my body happened. I'd somehow weakened or completely incapacitated all of its abilities.

Weird intuition is a nifty new trick, no lie.

But before I could cut through the Siren's throat, time started again and Sloan decapitated it with his long sword. Neither of us expected it, so Sloan paused, clearly surprised.

Unlike with other creatures we fought, its body caved in on itself and crumbled to the ground like pieces of broken stone. No blood, no ash, merely sat there like we'd

poured a pile of gravel onto the forest floor.

“It didn’t harden its skin or use pheromones,” Sloan said to himself, standing after giving our surroundings another sweep with his eyes.

I chose not to mention the time stall and stood beside him. “Whatever magic I used seemed to disable its power,” I commented, a bit unsure of how else to say it.

Sloan offered me a curious look. “Did you intend to use it?”

“Not even a little bit. I don’t really think that’s how it works. It’s like a defensive mechanism. It somehow knows when I need it and what I need it to do.”

I sounded crazy, but that was the only way I knew how to explain it. Ever since Cassius unlocked my magic—summoned it?—it came when I needed it.

Sheathing his sword, Sloan walked over to me. His eyes glided down my body before he eased closer, toying with a large, open flap of fabric near my breast. That would be where I was stabbed by a painful-as-fuck blade. My very less-than-sexy nude bra was exposed beneath, and I covered it after batting the other Hunter’s hand away.

“You’ll need to change if we keep heading to the location.”

“That’s all you have to say in this situation?” I asked, perplexed. “I just disabled a Siren’s abilities, and you’re worried about my bra showing?”

His dashing smile disarmed my rage, and he dug out a unisex tank top from his pack. “I may look cool and unruffled, but inside I’m a screaming mess.”

“Bullshit,” I snapped, snatching the shirt and tossing my jacket and all its weaponry to the floor.

Sloan sucked in a breath when I unceremoniously tore the shirt off my body and quickly put on the new one. His eyes were lustful orbs by the time I slipped my arms through my jacket and fixed my weapons.

“Guess I shouldn’t be surprised that we nearly died at the hands of a rare creature assassin and are right back at it like nothing happened.”

Branches and dead leaves crunched with every step as I carried on like we hadn’t been attacked by a beast of an enemy. The fight felt like hours, but it was likely only minutes in human time, so we hadn’t lost much daylight.

At least taking on a coven of vampires would feel like a vacation after that little dance with the Devil.

Sloan easily matched my pace and stole a glance at me. “You seem upset.”

“Upset ain’t it, Sloan. We just survived an attack with an opponent that even Phil struggles to defeat. I’m counting my blessings right now.”

“Yet, you don’t seem all that chuffed that you did,” Sloan countered, lush lips lifted some. “Even I’m at a loss for what to say. It’s not often I fight Sirens. If anything, it’s the first time I’ve ever seen one come out of nowhere like this. But you made fighting one look effortless, love.”

Sighing, I picked up the pace. “Was it me, though?”

“What do you mean?”

“This power...it’s not something I was trained to use. It’s not me. It’s luck, honestly. Today, I only survived because whatever thing lives inside my blood decided to help.” I stole a look at Sloan, and his eyes met mine with intensity. “But it feels

dangerous to rely on it. I can't explain it, but I don't trust whatever this magic is. Whatever the Organization fiddled with, it's definitely something they shouldn't have."

Nodding his understanding, Sloan turned his gaze ahead. Beams of renegade light hit his body as we walked, and he seemed to take a moment to carefully choose his next words. Wind whispered in my ears and the nearby wildlife went back to their day as if nothing happened.

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As if we hadn't just fought for our lives.

"You're not wrong to question it, and we'll train your other skills so you won't have to rely on it." The Brit's glistening gem-like eyes slid back over to me. "But I fear I must argue with you."

Mouth thinning, I looked at the path ahead. "Oh? Going to lecture me about how I should just be grateful for the outcome?"

His laughter rang out and caught my attention right away. "Not at all. You fought better than most seasoned Hunters today. Every movement was completely in sync with mine. Other than Kris and Phillip, no one has been that in tune with me, and Kris took nearly a decade to do what you did today." The side of his lip tilted into an impish smirk. "So, again, I hate to disagree with a beauty like you, but what you did today was not luck or chance. It was talent and training. It was the mark of every top-level Hunter."

I might miss Phillip to the point of physical pain, but I was seriously glad I had Sloan. He made each passing day bearable. His words calmed a storm in my head. He knew just what to say to ease my insecurities.

"Thanks, you gorgeous British bastard."

The happiness that ignited his face was as if I'd given him the best compliment of his life, and it destroyed me. I couldn't pretend I wasn't insanely attracted to him when he smiled like that.

“Anytime, love.”

Silence fell over us, but it wasn't uncomfortable. It was necessary. As a Hunter, no matter what we faced, it was business as usual and onto the next when we fought. It may be unique circumstances, but that didn't change the fact that innocent people were at risk the longer this vampire coven was left unchecked. Our first priority would always be to the innocent lives threatened by the creatures hunting them.

Getting my head back in the game, I refocused on the task at hand. We could debrief later when we finished the job. Until then, I'd thank my luck I didn't die at the hands of a Siren and move the fuck on.

We weren't far from the location, and there was no telling what other beasties waited in the wings for me. So, I kept my eyes peeled for anything nearby. I relied on all my senses to detect anything amiss, and when I picked up the sound of footsteps, I stopped in my tracks. Something felt familiar about the sound, but I prepared myself for another attack. Sloan didn't seem worried though, as he came to a stop beside me. His hands were free of weapons, and he simply stared ahead.

A second later, two figures loomed about two hundred feet from us in the path ahead. They'd come over a hill and stopped just as it crested. My heart ceased its beat before I realized who they were.

“Did you guys take the scenic route, or just get outright lost?” Kris asked, laughing. But one look at Sloan and my expressions when she finally closed in on us and her smile disappeared. “What happened?”

I opened my mouth, but Sloan cut in ahead of me. “Just a little trouble. It's all settled now, though. Not to worry.”

As if picking up on something left unsaid, Kris nodded and offered the two of us

another one of her sly smiles. “Danger magnets, these two.”

Sungho, whose eyes didn’t leave mine the entire back and forth between the other two, finally looked over at Sloan. “The other location turned up nothing.”

Kris rolled her eyes and giggled. “Right to business. Next time I’m pairing up with V. You boys are no fun.”

Collecting myself and brushing off how uncomfortable Sungho’s stare made me, I smiled at the sassy vixen. “I’m game. I think Sloan attracts more danger than I do.”

“He really does!” Kris yelped with enthusiasm, making the man beside me snicker. And surprisingly, Sungho’s lips tilted up, just shy of a smile.

“So you can smile? I mean, really smile. None of that courteous greet-and-grin bullshit?” I teased the silent man.

His smile departed the second I pointed it out. “You’re seeing things.”

“No...it was definitely there. You smiled. A real, god-honest grin of delight.”

Kris dropped an arm around my shoulders and laughed loudly. “He’s a tough nut to crack, but he’ll eventually give into our charms, V.”

Sungho silently stalked ahead, ignoring us. But it’d thankfully broken the tension, and I was super grateful for Kris swooping in to save the day.

Chapter 11

I Hate You

After confirming the location and about fifteen active vampires plus the elder leader, it barely took the other three an hour to figure out a plan of attack.

Sungho turned out to be an incredible asset. He even spared time to teach me the distinct difference between scents—something I hadn't been taught by anyone yet.

Despite our weirdly ominous introduction, Sungho turned out to be a joy to talk to. He reminded me ironically of the Japanese term “tsundere.” He came across cold and apathetic, but his actions and gentle regard spoke differently. Like Mia, I was captivated by the dissonance of his character and wanted to get to the bottom of who Sungho truly was.

Nigel texted that he and the pack would be arriving within the hour, so it was decided we'd attack before nightfall. If we killed off the elder first, we'd have less trouble wiping out the rest of the coven.

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Vampires in strong clans like these were inherently linked with their elders. These type of bloodline vampires were weakened temporarily when their elders were defeated. Typically, there was a period of vulnerability when the next elder was being chosen by the blood connection within the coven. It took anywhere from minutes to days for the power from the previous elder to find a worthy vampire in the clan.

Under normal Hunter circumstances, this offered us a great advantage. But we weren't any normal Hunter crew. Still, taking every advantage available to us was good vampire hunting and meant it wouldn't get messy. Although, truth be told, I needed it a little messy right now. Between my head and body pining after Sloan and my heart aching for Phillip, it'd be a welcomed distraction.

"Sloan and V will take the elder out, and then the rest of us will wipe out the other fifteen. If we play our cards right, we'll be home in time for dinner," Kris announced, smirking. "This number shouldn't be any trouble for our group."

With a nod, the group broke apart, but Nigel lingered by my side. I offered him a look before his eyes dodged over to the front door. "Can I talk to you?"

"Room for one more?" Sloan asked when I struggled to agree.

Nigel made a sound in his chest before nodding. "I need to speak with both of you, so let's go outside for a bit."

After following the two men out, some distance from the house and away from prying ears, Nigel gave the area a short onceover before sighing. "I smell it on you. Did you run into trouble earlier?"

What a fucking nose this dude has on him.

“I thought you might ask,” Sloan said, crossing his arms and offering me a small look. “We did, but it’s handled.”

“What’s to say this mission isn’t a trap? There’s someone in the Organization ballsy enough to send a damn assassin wherever she goes, and you’re not the least bit worried about this little coven invasion?”

Sloan’s body tensed under the attack of Nigel’s words, but he didn’t seem at all surprised by it. “It may not matter soon, but trust me when I say that I’ve prepared for every possible outcome with this mission, and I don’t take her safety lightly.”

What wouldn’t matter soon?

But I’d had enough of the back and forth where both acted like I wasn’t party to the conversation or capable of speaking for myself. Mostly Nigel. Though, it wasn’t new he came across overprotective. It didn’t used to bother me. I used to think that genuine care looked that way, but Phillip and Sloan proved that I was plenty powerful on my own. Nigel needed to trust me more, and I wasn’t sure if he ever would.

Crossing my arms, I cut in, “I don’t need anyone protecting me, Nigel. Believe it or not, I’m the reason we survived today.”

I didn’t relish gloating about a kill like the one today since it was totally by accident we won, but someone had to put Nigel in his place. Maybe this time he’d listen to reason. Maybe one day we could overcome this obvious flaw in his personality.

Nigel’s lip twitched and his jaw tensed perceptibly. “You?”

Smirking, I bumped my arm into Nigel’s and his soft smile made my heart pound.

Feelings I'd long thought buried came clamoring into my throat, and the telling blush in my cheeks nearly gave me away. Nigel would always be my first boyfriend, and no matter how much of an overbearing jerk he'd been, he was still the Nigel I'd drooled and dreamed about for years.

Sloan's hair caught a gust of wind, and the light hit him a second later when the brilliant sun peeked out of the cloud cover. "She's telling the truth. As embarrassing as it is to admit it, her skills were what saved us on several occasions."

By skills he meant this uncontrollable power living inside me, but whatever.

The werewolf's olive complexion seemed to glow in the unfettered sunlight, and it made me miss him. Miss the playful banter we shared for all those months we dated. Miss the way he smiled at me. Miss the ease of our relationship, even if it was more of a friendship in the end than a passionate love affair. It'd been a comfortable place to go when Grams and Hunter life weighed heavily on my shoulders. His arms were welcoming, his smiles always a comfort, and I'd missed it honestly, enough to make my eyes drop to the thickly-corded arms crossed over the Shifter's chest.

"You don't have to worry about me," I finally stated softly, cheeky grin on my face.

Before I could continue, the hair on my body stood on end and an electric jolt took my spine captive. Strangely, the sensation of someone nearby caused me equal parts alarm and excitement. With my eyes shooting from Nigel to where I felt the bizarre presence, I immediately discerned a familiar figure.

Outfitted in a vest with an obnoxious looking sword strapped to his back, the newcomer was leaned up against a 1967 Ford Mustang.

When did that get there?

“That’s my lass. Telling off some overconfident dog in the middle of the road,” came his sultry Austrian accent, and I’d never wished to hear a voice more in all my life.

For a second, I hesitated. The Siren took the shape of Grams, and it wouldn’t be far off for it to figure Phillip was a good sell for the next one. Clutching my dagger, the two men around me stiffened at the sound of his distinctive voice. Every movement the gorgeous bastard made was entirely Phillip, but I didn’t let my guard down for a single second. Still, Sloan didn’t move to attack or remove a weapon. Only Nigel seemed ready to go for the man’s throat.

“Took you long enough, mate,” Sloan finally said, his happy grin making my grip loosen on the dagger I held. “Nearly started the party without you.”

“We can’t have that. I’ve been itching to use Blood Slayer on some deserving vampires.”

Lamest sword name, ever.

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As if he hadn't escaped death, then gone and gotten himself blacklisted by the Organization, Phillip strolled over with his lips tilted. "And no, you can't use it. I know how eager you've been to get your petal-soft hands on Blood Slayer, V."

The sexual innuendo wasn't lost on me, but all I felt in that moment was intense relief. Phillip was back. He was home. I'd never tell him how much I'd missed the bastard, but the feelings of it rushed my throat and made it impossible to speak.

Nigel growled and blocked Phil's path to me. "You have some fucking nerve."

"I'd get out of my way, dog, before I forget why I let you stay in the first place," Phillip warned hotly before his enchanting ocean eyes slid over to me. "I traveled a long way to be here, and you're no obstacle at all. Don't test me."

I hadn't really seen Phillip bare his teeth, ready to tear out Nigel's throat, quite like this before. It wasn't how I expected our reunion to go. I'd had enough pettiness to last a lifetime, and these two never let up.

Before anything else could be said, I landed a blow on Phillip so hard that he was sent vaulting back. Nigel's eyes widened in astonishment, and even Sloan seemed to be surprised by the turn of events, but neither of them intervened. Nor would they dare.

Phillip deserved nothing less.

In a swift second, I hovered over the jerk who'd toyed with my heart for months. Kneeling, I eyed the Austrian with what was likely a vicious gleam in my eyes. I fought back the urge to fuse our lips together in a violent kiss, one that I'd dreamed

about for weeks, and opted for a sneer instead. “You have some fucking nerve,” I repeated Nigel’s words, voice bottoming out.

Phillip’s gentle smile nearly stole my rage, but I held it together. I wouldn’t forgive him so easily, and I’d make him pay for the nights I mourned him—when I didn’t know whether he was alive or dead. All the days I spent drowning in the guilt for leaving him behind.

“I know you hate me. I deserve it. But, pet, I’ve missed you.”

Throat tight, I swallowed again and again to keep from crying, body frozen in the crouch I’d taken. “You’re right.” I stood to my full height, leering down at the bastard, and Phillip made no move to get up. “I do hate you.” Turning around, I left him on the asphalt where he’d landed and headed towards the house without ever looking back at him.

I hate you mostly because I love you so much.

“Isn’t it risky for this asshole to join back up with us and attend one of our missions?” I asked Sloan, after the three men I’d abandoned returned to the house. Phillip didn’t get so much as a glance from me, and I could practically hear his amusement every time I ignored him.

Within seconds of our abrupt return, the rest of the group fought for space in the living room to play nosy neighbor to our less-than-welcoming reception of Phillip. Sloan had gently ushered me to a seat and served me a much-needed cup of coffee. His calming energy helped drag out some of mine.

It didn’t go unnoticed to anyone how affectionate the Brit’s smile was towards me, or how often his hand seemed to find purchase on my body—always touching or caressing within perfect view of everyone else. The least amused was Phillip, but

very few would know any better. To an outsider, his usual assholery was plain as day. But to Sloan and I, it was evident in the barely-there twitch in his neck he wasn't happy about how often Sloan touched me.

Serves him right.

“Ever heard of hiding in plain sight, V?” the asshole Hunter remarked, chuckling in a way that made my heart miss a beat.

But the Austrian's eyes were stone-cold and calculating my every emotion, tearing apart my poorly constructed façade of nonchalance, determining what was really in my heart, and it was the entire reason I couldn't let our eyes meet.

He'd know how much I missed him; know how much I wanted to hate him but never could. Know how my heart yearned for him, and how his return had settled the acidic burn living in my chest every day since I abandoned him to his fate. But I'd never let him see that in my eyes. I wouldn't let the douche-canoe off that easy. I wanted to break him, even just a little, for how conflicted he made me. For the fact that now I was caught between two, all because he left and made room for someone else.

Eyes on Sloan, I touched the gently smiling Hunter's hand in full view of Phillip, making sure that nothing about my hand over Sloan's was hesitant or lacking affection. It was a bitchy move, but one the asshole deserved.

Sloan was my strength, had been for weeks, and he eased the trembling in my body with a single touch of his hand over mine. Calmed a rampant pulse sure to destroy me. Soothed an erratic heart, which suffered every time I looked at Phil. From the way his hand wrapped around mine and his azure eyes glinted, the Brit knew it all.

Thank Buddha for this sweet, gentle man...

After sneaking a glance at the Austrian Hunter, it was evident the move had done its job. Phil's eyes had a dangerous glint in them and his jaw was impossibly clenched, just seconds from breaking teeth.

"Can you relay to the bastard in the corner that I don't need his snarky-ass response? You're plenty capable of answering a question I asked you, Sloan."

Sloan's mouth tilted, his face expressing how little it bothered him to be used to stoke the other Hunter's flames. Squeezing his hand and letting my fingers cling to his, I silently apologized to the other Hunter, wishing my desire to punish Phillip didn't mean tossing the Brit in the middle. His answering smile suggested he wasn't the least bit angry about it, and the gorgeous man even added a small kiss to the top of my hand for extra oomph.

I owe you one, Sloan, you fucking saint.

Sungho, who I was told knew about our vendetta against the Organization and could be trusted, sat in an armchair nearby, smirking. I caught the smile when I peeked at him through my peripheral. The rest of the group was huddled in a corner, watching the car crash that was my love life in real time like it was a trashy reality show. They didn't even try to hide their gross interest in what I'd do next to systematically destroy the Austrian for everything he'd done to me.

The bastards were eating it all up.

I hadn't been open about what I was feeling, but most picked up on the tumultuous relationship I had with Phillip and how attracted I was to Sloan at the same time. At the end of the day, I was a girl wrought with a broken heart, and I didn't do a good job of hiding it.

Tiff and Mia were joined at the hip, and their whispered conversation didn't go

unnoticed by me. “I love this new feisty V. She’s all bite and no bark. The asshole deserves every bit of poison she spits at him,” Tiff conveyed with a wistful huff.

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Mia, nodding, aimed a solemn stare my direction. “I have a few tonics we can slip into his drink.”

Claude outright cackled. “Poor dude wouldn’t last long against one of Mia’s tonics. Not even an all-powerful, vampire hunting monster like him can evade its effects.”

As if none of it affected him, Phillip kept his focus on Sloan and me. He caught my sideways glance, and I internally cursed my curiosity. The lift in his mouth suggested Phillip knew all too well I was struggling.

Then it dawned on me. “There’s a plan, isn’t there?”

Phillip made a sound in his throat, clearly approving. “There is.”

“The mission is a ruse,” I voiced slowly, piecing it all together.

Sloan nodded emphatically. “Kris, Sungho, and the pack will go after the coven like initially planned. But while they do, we’ll take a little trip to one of the Organization’s facilities.”

“For what?”

Sloan shook his head, indicating he wouldn’t share what our true agenda was in front of anyone else. Which meant that whatever we were about to do was going to get us in major trouble. By my deduction, it was likely to do with what resided in my blood.

So this is going to be fun.

My lips lifted for the first time since Phillip arrived. “So, we’re about to do something very naughty. I’m game.”

Phillip rose from his seat and then took a knee in front of me. Without realizing it, my eyes found his and I couldn’t look anywhere else. An expression I’d never seen on him distorted the lines of his face, and it made it difficult to stay angry at him.

“Once we do this, there’s no going back,” he stated, voice rattling deeply. “Are you ready, lass?”

You could cut the tension in the room with a knife, but the second our eyes met, there wasn’t any other answer I could give him. All the rage and bitterness melted away when his gorgeous face came into view.

“Yes,” I whispered, closing my eyes when Phillip cradled my jaw in his palm, “I’m ready.”

Chapter 12

Fighting for Her

Sloan

Her entrancing eyes held mine for minutes before they skittered away. Over to him. And I knew it would happen the second Phillip returned, knew how her heart truly only beat for him, but I hadn’t expected it to hit quite as hard as it did. So, I gave into pettiness, into the urge to express how close we’d become, if only to satisfy my own childish frustration.

I touched her without reason, without restraint, without any idea of what I truly wanted from this ambiguous thing she and I shared. Knowing that I couldn’t have

her. Knowing that I'd lose her before I could ever capture her. But still, I reached for her. I touched her velvety-soft flesh and burned it into my memory.

It was a lump in my throat when I realized I'd likely spend the rest of my life replaying every small memory of her, so I didn't dare to miss a single thing.

I recalled the way her skin flushed a soft rose color when I fingered her. How her tongue teased mine and her lips eagerly moved to kiss me. Remembered her surprising boldness and the tight warmth when she swallowed my prick inside of her. Remembered the beautiful curve and pulse of her body when she was overcome by the pleasure I gave her, and the raspy note to her voice as she came. Recalled every sultry upturn of her mouth when she caught me off guard with her aggressive actions. I'd gladly be enslaved to her just for one of those smiles.

And that night we spent together, I'd drowned in her intoxicatingly sweet aroma and reveled in how the warmth of her body put my own into chaos. I wanted it to last forever. Couldn't fathom this beautiful creature ever being anywhere else but in my arms.

Had we not been interrupted, I would've very likely spent all night memorizing every line, every curve, every beautiful stretch of her body. I would've worshipped her shape and left nowhere untouched by my hands or mouth alike. Had her as many times as she allowed. If I had it my way, I would've taken her somewhere to shut out the world. Bring her into my arms and spend the night holding her, caressing her, singing of her beauty and kindness.

I'd never let her go.

Despite what Phillip disclosed to me prior, the feelings I had for her weren't simple lust or infatuation and, therefore, not caused by whatever ancient blood she harbored—I refused to believe pheromones from some Royal Siren could ever be this

strong. It may explain my initial fascination with her, but her mannerisms and personality were truly what intrigued me. And I refused to believe that this ongoing captivation was caused by a pheromone reaction, because it wasn't her body I was after.

It was her heart.

“Sloan?”

I looked up, having been lost for several minutes to my internal contemplation. “Have you said your goodbyes?” I asked, knowing she already had. Her expression told a story of sadness but determination to make the people who genetically created her pay.

“Nigel took a little longer than the rest,” she clarified with a small, wispy laugh.

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Of course he did. The wolf is clearly still in love with you.

“I imagine you had to get creative?” I teased, lips lifted.

Her answering smile eased the coil in my stomach—the one that had been there ever since I knew Phillip planned to return.

“He’s salty, but he gets it,” she said, laughing again in a way that always got my blood pumping.

I was so far gone in my captivation that I no longer tried to hide it. I couldn’t. Every moment with her put a smile on my face, and concealing them was next to impossible as time went on. It bore repeating, but I was wholly besotted. I could no longer taunt Phillip for his overwhelming attraction anymore, because I’d fallen into the same trap. And now we were two poor sods pining after the same young Hunter.

What a tragically poetic story this is turning out to be...

And then Phillip was beside her, his intelligent eyes already depicting the struggle inside my heart.

I might be clever enough to hide my intentions from V, but Phillip was nearly impossible to fool. It was likely he knew well before I did. As infuriating as it was to admit, Phillip was a proficient Hunter and very little got past him. I took solace in the fact that he seemed completely inept in love. And because I revered him, it was all the more reason not to surrender without a fight.

Phillip may be who stole her heart first, but he didn't deserve her, not the way he was right now. It was my sole objective to prove he needed to be more or piss off. I would win her heart by any means necessary.

Phillip being the clever man he was knew what was coming. It was the entire reason the Austrian was at such odds with himself. If he didn't fight for her, he'd lose her. His present self would never win against me. And while I never intended to lose a fight, if he fought at his best and I at mine, then I'd never second-guess her choice.

Whoever she chose.

"You seem a little out of it today. Are you really okay?" V asked, surprising me stupid for a second.

She seemed to pick up on my emotions better than anyone else did sometimes. I'd even argue before I knew them myself. Always far more in tune with others than she was with herself.

The tragedy of life.

Phillip scoffed and eyed me quietly. "He may put on a good show, but Sloan's a lot more absentminded than you'd believe."

I couldn't help but smile. "That would be the pot calling the kettle black, aye, Phillip?"

V seemed incredibly amused by our banter, but to my eternal glory, she fitted her arm through mine and escorted me to the front door ahead of Phillip. I didn't need to look back at the other man to know it'd gutted him. The heat of his anger was practically in the air around us.

“I’m driving,” she announced, snatching the keys right from my hand. “I’m tired of feeling like you guys are chauffeuring me around. I’m a goddamn Hunter, too.”

Sassy little bird.

I pivoted just in time to see Phillip’s happy grin, and it struck me again how much the other man genuinely worshipped her. Guilt panged in my chest, but I had already decided to see this through because my feelings were just as strong as his.

V deserved someone at their best. Someone who was ready to surrender their entire self to be with her. Someone who would support and encourage her to keep that spark and bite. Nothing less would suffice, not with what resided in her blood.

She’s the future.

After Phillip explained what he learned from Cassius and what the Organization toyed with in their genetic trials, the stakes were beyond what any of us imagined. Risking our place in the Organization was essential to getting what we needed, but it couldn’t be done without Phillip’s assistance. It was risky. We’d be up against our own, but we had something they didn’t.

V.

Before I was given a chance to ponder where to sit, Phillip stole the front seat and offered me a smug grin when V sighed loudly, not at all happy.

“Backseat, perv. I don’t want to be this close to you for the drive,” V complained when I walked over to the car.

The feeling in my chest intensified, but I ignored it.

I'd absently wondered how the top-level Hunter might address the tension between them, or how he might remove himself emotionally, but Phillip seemed more inclined to get as close as possible and antagonize her at every opportunity. Quite the paradox, seeing how the Austrian hadn't intended to return in the first place.

Falling in love turned him into quite the child.

Phillip carded through his luscious dark hair, then swiped his lower lip with his thumb, idly fingering his snake-bite piercings. "Thought you were a professional, lass, or is all that equipment for show?"

What a low blow.

“Don’t be a dick. You don’t get to play Patronizing Phillip when you went off on your own despite having a partner. If anyone here is unprofessional, it’s you.” Her words were delivered with cutting precision, and I couldn’t have been prouder.

Hiding a smile, I got into the backseat despite her complaints. Knowing Phillip, he wouldn’t surrender the seat no matter what truth she spat at him.

And like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the Austrian leaned back with his arms bowed behind his head. “You’re right. I’ve been an asshole, and I deserve to be punished. So whenever you’d like to get on with it, I’ll let you do whatever satisfies your anger, sweetheart.”

“Oh?” she exclaimed, feigning surprise. “Whatever satisfies my anger, you say?” Something about her unnerving tone caused my body to stiffen. “Then you’ll have no problem taking the reverse serum and sparring with Sloan until my anger is satisfied. You’d, of course, need to keep taking the reverse serum for a day to really feel the pain of your injuries. It’s only fair. Can’t lie, imagining you slapped around by Sloan is already making me really happy.”

Lifting a hand, I covered my mouth and tried not to laugh too loudly. But Phillip’s face from where I sat was enough to have me snickering for days. His eyebrows rose into his hairline and his smug smile was instantly gone. It was a rare expression of surprise and confusion on my longtime mate, and one I’d tease him about for the decades to come. She’d gotten him, and I’d never seen anyone beat Phillip at his own game quite like she did.

But very quickly, my amusement turned into acid in my throat. She and the Austrian were a perfect pair, and I couldn't ignore how good she was for him. V could handle someone not even Kris or the cleverest Hunters managed to handle after years and years of hunting with him. Not even I could put Phillip so swiftly into his place.

"Let's just go, you annoying prick," she said with a huff, but I would've had to be blind to miss the way her lips rose into a secretive smile.

Bollocks.

Chapter 13

Nympho Chick 101

The Organization would be looking for Phillip, but the sneaky Hunter had something up his sleeve that even I had to acknowledge was impressive.

In his long life of mixing magic and science, Phillip created a device that temporarily concealed his identity as someone else. It was seriously some Harry Pottershit, but instead of morphing his actual face with a potion, anyone in contact with him was somehow affected by chemically altered pheromones similar to what Sirens used. It played with their heads, sort of like a drug, and made them think Phillip was someone nearby to them. In this case, another Hunter. He'd appear different to each person, so it was vital we get what we needed and then get the fuck out. Linger too long and someone was bound to talk and get suspicious.

It did make me wonder for a tiny second if he'd ever used it on me, but I'd probably never get it out of him. Just another reason to not-so-secretly despise him.

Sloan assured me that they'd used it enough to know how long it worked and how much time we'd have. This was also Phillip we were talking about—the ultimate

trickster—so he'd cleverly evade suspicion somehow, even with the odds stacked against him.

The dude was just annoyingly obnoxious like that.

The only other little detail to figure out was me being at one of the Organization's facilities, restricted to high-level Hunters only. I might be Sloan's partner, but my presence would definitely raise suspicions. That was, of course, until both Hunters disclosed how my identity was not known to most Hunters, save a few already privy to it.

Perks of being a kept secret, I guess.

And because Sloan rarely went to Organization-run buildings with Kris, it was unlikely anyone would immediately think something was off that I was there. They'd think I was his elusive female partner. Despite its name, sometimes our evil creator wasn't so, you know, organized.

Ain't that a bitch.

"And you said someone named Eddie was going to escort us through the building to where we need to go? Isn't that dangerous for him? How do we know for sure he can be trusted?"

I geared up, preparing for anything. If things went sideways, we'd have to fight our way out of the facility. Which was the entire reason Phillip insisted he go. With my luck, some bastard knew we were coming and already laid a trap.

Phillip wore one of his signature devious grins, dressed like the sexiest bad boy of the year—a form-fitting black tank top and a pair of fashionable jeans. You know, the kind of jeans that really clung to the body and were a bitch to get out of. Not that I

was imagining the melt-in-your-mouth delicious bad boy taking them off.

Okay, I was, but could you blame a girl when Phil's backside was impossibly pert and it was any wonder how the fabric held up to the mere girth of his bulky thighs.

That's not the only girth I want to admire...

The older Hunter was quite literally sin incarnate with his tattoos exposed and his thick, dark hair swept back away from his eyes. I'd forgotten how massive Phillip was; how every cord of muscle was the definition of strength. I may have, just for an itty bitsy second, imagined licking every bit of inked flesh he left exposed. His neck was especially enticing from this angle.

Flesh you could really sink your teeth into, ya know?

I hadn't really considered how thirsty my stare had become until the Austrian winked at me, picking up on how tasty I found him. "Oh, we can trust Eddie. I have so much on that bastard he'd be personally writing and signing his own death warrant if he ever betrayed us."

Ominous much?

Catching my eye roll, Sloan was kind enough to explain the blue-eyed Austrian's vague comment. "Kris will release information if Eddie were to betray us at any point in our visit, and it'd be the Organization and a great number of other unsavory types who'd be after him once she did. Should we miss a check in, she'll act, and he's plenty familiar with how Phillip and I do things." The ghost of a smile Sloan failingly hid a second later sent shivers down my spine.

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That's one evil grin.

“Seems like getting dirt on your friends and enemies is the name of the game as a Hunter,” I commented snidely, eyeing Phillip and silently plotting how to do just that on the overconfident asshole.

His answering grin made my stomach twist, and not in the way I hoped. Instead of wanting to vomit or throw something weighty at his stupid face, all I wanted to do was push him into the nearest wall and rage fuck him.

I'm most definitely a nymphomaniac.

“Information is currency in our business, pet. So very few ever get enough on me to have a leg up. Let's just say that I'm the last person you want to make an enemy out of.”

At least Phillip was a consistent arrogant asshole. I couldn't write a better Phillip line if I tried. Talk about living up to an image, the dude was practically a walking, talking stereotype.

We get it. You're a bad boy.

The Austrian's glistening light eyes captured mine from across the space before I frantically looked away, too afraid of what my own eyes might say if I stared at him too long.

Fitting daggers and different bottles into my pockets, many I'd likely never use for

myself, I tried to subdue my sudden nerves.

I'd gone up against worse and lived to tell the tale, so that wasn't my main concern. No, what worried me was more what we'd find in my file; what secrets we'd uncover. As if the ones I already knew weren't a literal shit-storm. But lately, the way Sloan and Phillip looked at me was different. Something was up. Something they weren't telling me.

Slinging a bag of weapons over his shoulder, Sloan offered me a lingering look before heading out of the motel room ahead of us. It was the first time Phillip and I were alone together since he returned, and all the feelings, all the pent-up frustration and desperation, came rushing into my chest.

Clearing my throat, I went to grab another one of our weapon bags, but Phillip quickly intercepted me. And in a heartbeat, we were mere inches from each other. The heat of his body registered. Then his luscious scent one rattled breath later. Without realizing it, I spent a long minute inhaling his devastating aroma before Phillip captured my chin and my eyes were forced open.

When did I close my eyes?

I froze the instant the gorgeous Hunter's warmth fused with mine, our hips meeting. Phil's strong torso contracted, making every muscle painfully clear under his thin top. His bulky frame blocked out the light from the window, and I was drenched in his towering shadow. Every bit of Hunter training and anger that lived inside my chest for the last few weeks came whooshing out of me. But when I went to take another breath, Phillip's mouth pressed gently against mine.

You'd never believe I told him I hated him a day ago, or that only a few days before that I'd been riding on top of Sloan—his friend—because I didn't hesitate to kiss him back or sink my fingers into his shirt and yank him closer.

The familiar sensation of his lips caressing mine gave me every reason to let loose an outright feral sound. Normally, I'd be mortified, but I couldn't be bothered to be ashamed. Not after yearning for this very thing for what felt like forever. Relieved didn't cover how I felt when his tongue slipped past my lips and tasted the inside of my mouth, the same way it always had.

Every movement of his tongue and hands on my body were burned into my memory. Burned into my very dreams. It was everything I'd secretly hoped for from the very moment he came back into my life, and I couldn't pretend anymore that it wasn't. I'd hate him later. Hate could wait. Right now, I needed to kiss his damn face off.

Consequences and morality be damned.

His deep, thundering growl tickled my lips and chest before Phillip withdrew. I didn't waste a second chasing him. Taking strong hold of his face, I went to my toes and slammed our mouths together. Thick, powerful fingers sunk into my hair, angling my mouth to better accommodate the older Hunter's passionate kiss. His hands fled my hair, chasing curves and teasing my body like he'd spent every waking moment thinking about it. Wanting me the way I wanted him. Desperate to reacquaint himself with every place that made me moan and pray his name.

Oh God, it feels so fucking good.

Slipping hands under his shirt, I tasted every strong contour of his shape with the pads of my fingers, already too far gone to care how wanton I sounded, or how eager my body was to merge with his. The powerful Hunter gripped my waist, then took violent hold of my ass. Dragging me forward, our kiss grew wild and messy.

The sensual taste of his blood on my tongue when my incisor nicked the other Hunter's lip was all I registered before I was pinned to the wall, my legs tightly locked around Phillip's waist. The Austrian's abs tautened against the palms of my

hands still under his shirt and Phillip groaned into my mouth, the evidence of how turned on he was thrusting against my stomach.

“Phillip,” I breathed his name, praying reality would stay away for a moment longer so I could really enjoy the perfect feeling of his body pressed against mine.

I missed this.

When I went to rub his fully hard erection over his pants, Phillip captured my wrist and pinned it to the wall above my head. His chest rose and fell with effort. Clearly the man was struggling, so I rebelled for a heartbeat, desperate.

“Don’t do this,” I whispered, shamelessly pleading him. I needed him, and I knew what the look on his face was. It was the same one I’d wear once reality settled back in. “You fucking owe me this, Phil,” I added angrily, too far gone to have retained any semblance of self-respect.

“Du versuchst mich immer,” the panting Hunter whispered softly in his foreign tongue, forehead falling onto mine. “You’ll never know how much, mein Schatz.” Phillip’s thumbs caressed my cheeks, his eyes dancing across my face, and then he released me.

I nearly chased him again. Something told me I’d chase him to the ends of the earth if it came down to it. Maybe even to Hell itself. But as I took a step his direction, Sloan appeared in the doorway. Stiffening, I brought a hand to my mouth, attempting to hide my flushed face, but Sloan would have to be blind to miss the massive rise in Phillip’s tight-as-fuck jeans.

Eyes straying, I tried to feel guilty because the man I’d just sexed up like I was a starved woman walked in on me trying to sex up another guy the same goddamn way.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 2:45 am

I couldn't ascertain at first whether or not Sloan figured out what happened between us because the Brit's smile never wavered.

Phillip didn't attempt to hide anything and only offered the other Hunter his usual devious smirk. "Your timing is as impeccable as always, mate," the shameless Hunter commented offhandedly, then slung the rest of our luggage over his shoulder.

Sloan's eyes strayed over to me for a half-beat before he grinned at Phillip. "I'd say sorry, but we both know I'm not."

Snickering, the Austrian clapped the other Hunter on the shoulder before heading out of the room and down the stairs. I struggled to say something, anything that might explain what happened, but the Brit merely offered me his gentlest smile yet.

"Don't worry, love. You've done nothing worth that look on your face. You don't owe me anything, and I'm not angry."

I don't fucking deserve this beautiful and unbelievably sweet man.

"Just focus on the task at hand, yeah?" was all he said before escorting me out the door.

Trailing beside Sloan, I struggled to get my head back on the mission and not how close I'd come to ripping off the Austrian's clothes and boning him right then and there, even with Sloan just around the corner. I was guilt-ridden, but I wasn't confident I wouldn't do it again if given the chance. Which meant I really was heartless and broken.

Kate would be proud though, no doubt.

As I slowly made my way to our parked car, Phillip's words replayed in my head. I repeated the Austrian's words over and over, recognizing a couple he'd said in his native tongue but blanking on their meaning.

We'd tossed our phones when we got to the hotel and planned to grab a burner phone on the way to the facility to use for the mission, so Google translate would have to wait.

I really need to learn German.

Chapter 14

A Familiar Rhythm

Palming my face, I recovered from one of the most intensely awkward drives since my life became a literal shit show. Or maybe since I was born. Who knows when evidently my memories were changed on occasion—or maybe more than Grams let on—and it was very likely I didn't remember the worst awkward moment of my life.

She's a jerk, but I miss her.

With a great huff, I peeled off my jacket and haphazardly flung it onto a nearby chair. I took one look at our room for the night and already knew it was going to be a long one.

Not counting that I had to share it with a man I'd only just smooched the fucking face off of, but Sloan was out rendezvousing with Eddie to pin down details for tomorrow's stroll through enemy territory. Which meant the two of us would be alone for long enough to make me anxious.

I couldn't trust myself around the devastatingly alluring Hunter, and it was almost certainly going to lead to the forbidden huffy-puffy if I didn't orchestrate some sort of diabolical get out of jail free card, or find a way to knock myself out for the rest of the evening.

Too bad alcohol doesn't work for me the way it should.

"You look like you're planning your escape," Phillip murmured with a husky laugh, somehow already in front of me.

I couldn't even call myself a Hunter anymore.

Shit.

I audibly gasped and attempted to get away. But instead of evading his advances, my knee went right into the arm of an in-room chair. I might be an uber powerful Hunter capable of striking down some of the fiercest foes in existence, but even I cried out the second my kneecap connected with nothing but wood. It hurt like a bitch!

Fuck you, chair. Why are you even in here?

Silently, I cursed whoever thought this ridiculously tiny motel room in the middle of nowhere needed an out-of-place piece of furniture. I mean, there wasn't even a desk for the wooden chair to make any sense.

I heard the familiar husk of the Austrian's laugh before Phillip rounded on me, then unceremoniously dropped down to a knee, putting my no-no zone right in front of his annoyingly handsome face.

Oh, yeah. That's going to end up in a fantasy or dream sometime soon. Most definitely.

“What the actual fuck, Phil—”

No doubt, my face showed how outright crazy I thought the other Hunter was when he bent forward and kissed where I'd struck my knee. “Poor lass. So out of sorts that you need your prince charming to kiss your boo-boo all better,” the sexy Austrian said before effortlessly dodging the knee I'd aimed at his face.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 2:45 am

I crossed my arms, trying to hide how much the silly act affected me, but my face was already all kinds of red and my blood pumped loudly in my ears. “Fuck you. I’m over you treating me like a child, Phil. I deserve some goddamn respect.”

Luminous artic-blue eyes rose to meet mine from where Phillip was knelt, and the emotion swimming inside them made my heart lose its rhythm. “You’re right. I’m sorry, V.”

Phillip never apologized with feeling, so the sincere apology took me off guard. One might assume he was sorry for being a patronizing asshole, to which Hell would’ve frozen over, but I picked up on the depth of feeling in the other Hunter’s apology. He wasn’t saying sorry for treating me like a child; he was apologizing for rejecting me, then leaving me behind. Because it was Phillip we were talking about, the look had more impact and his apology nestled into the place where my heart was still dedicated to him.

My throat burned, so I only managed to nod my forgiveness. I wanted to stay angry, but the anguish in his expression melted my rage. When Phillip rose to his feet, I had to crane my neck a little. Maybe that was his plan all along because he quickly swooped down, grasping my jaw with firm but painfully gentle hands, and kissed me like he was so desperate to touch me that he couldn’t wait.

And maybe he couldn’t.

Hell, I couldn’t.

Far be it for me to deny him a little make-up kiss, and that was all it took for my

initial hesitation to fade away and my arms to find their way around his neck. On my toes, I dragged the massive Hunter down so I could deepen our kiss. And like we hadn't been fighting or he hadn't left me over some misguided attempt to protect me, we fell back into a familiar rhythm.

Phil's hands gripped the fabric of my thin t-shirt before he tore through it like it was a piece of paper.

"Hey—"

Growling low in his chest, Phillip nipped my lower lip, then sucked it into his mouth, effectively silencing me before I could berate him. "Just be a good girl and moan for me, lass." He forced me backwards until I hit the mattress. "On your back," the Austrian ordered in a tone I was painfully accustomed to hearing.

That's Phil's bedroom voice.

Swallowing, I laid out over the bed as instructed, because it was natural to follow Phillip's lead in the bedroom. But I suddenly felt the weight of what we were about to do settle into my stomach when his powerful body loomed over mine, blocking out the light. Before I could argue it was a bad idea, Phillip's gaze slid down to my heaving breasts. With one side of his mouth upturned, the other Hunter drove his knee between my legs, forcing them open.

My body immediately responded and I arched into him, a rush of pleasure hitting my hips. "Oh, fuck."

The Austrian's hungry mouth moved over mine, nipping and tugging my lips apart while his fingers danced across my stomach. Several excited moans left my mouth, but they were instantly smothered by his forceful kiss. The thigh pressed between my legs moved, creating delicious friction. All I could do was swivel my waist to feel it

more, thrusting brazenly over the hard muscle pressed against the center of my pleasure.

Angling my head back with a grip on my red hair, the other Hunter swirled his tongue around mine, ate my lips, and traced my palate and teeth. Phillip's thick fingers clenched inside my loose tresses and yanked hard enough to get me to move but not enough to hurt. My neck arched all the way back. His mouth fled mine down the curved length of my throat, nipping and biting my pale skin until it was likely red with the attention.

Drawing away from me, my previous partner grasped me around the throat with enough strength to get my attention. But the hold was never threatening. Not that the jerk could do anything to me now; we both knew which one of us was stronger. My lips lifted, and I couldn't help but laugh a little to myself thinking about it.

Confusion deepened the lines of his face as Phillip regarded me. "Find this funny, do you?"

"And you don't?" I cackled. "Two days ago, I told you I hated you. A month ago, I thought you were dead. And maybe two months ago, I said I had feelings for you and you told me it was a bad idea." I huffed a little. "Just seems to fall perfectly in line with how fucked up my life is these days."

Phillip kissed my mouth hard enough to punish me. "Only you could sit here discussing the weather with my hand cupping your breast," he taunted.

I knew he did it to derail the conversation, but I still looked down in surprise, giggling. "Would you look at that...you are."

"Ich verehere dich." The Hunter's tender smile was out of place, and my laughter faded.

“Excusie?”

I really need to learn German, like yesterday.

“I don’t know why I thought I could stay away,” the gorgeous man above me whispered softly. His eyes jerked towards mine in shock, clearly surprised by his own utterance.

Hilarious.

It was a rare sight, and one that joined a long list of out of place faces on the Austrian since he’d come back.

Don’t think I could have a weirder sex life if I tried.

“Did he touch you?”

For a second, I just stared at Phillip in open confusion, not exactly sure what he meant. Instead, I was trembling, all hot and bothered and fighting the urge to lunge at him despite our little comical interruption. “What? Who?”

Phillip sunk his fingers into his hair, angrily grunting. “No. Don’t answer that.”

Wait a second...

“Are you talking about Sloan?”

Fuck. Sloan.

Guilt crept into my throat, a real bitch when all I wanted to do was sink into depravity with the criminally sexy Hunter. A thunderous growl rumbled between us before Phillip was kissing me again, tongue roughly twirling around mine. I couldn't help but groan in appreciation. It felt so good. It had to be a crime for him to be this good at sexandas good looking as he was.

Phillip's hand replaced his knee between my thighs, and the Austrian made quick work of my pants and underwear. I didn't have time to register exactly when his fingers sunk inside of me, only that they were there and driving me crazy before I realized I sounded like a wanton banshee.

I mean, holy fuck, why does it always feel so damn good?

I didn't want to admit it, but I was glad Phillip did whatever he wanted. It saved me the trouble of second-guessing it. It even let me blame it all on him, as childish as that was.

As his movements worked my thighs apart, I succumbed to his wicked fingers and tongue, surrendering all my self-respect as a powerful, independent woman to give in. Quickly, I forgot why I even bothered hesitating. Might as well enjoy it. I could die tomorrow. Who knows. Another sexy guy and roll in the bed was living it up, if

Kate's definition of high school rang true.

Convenient excuse, V.

Twisting the sheets in my hands, I fought the oncoming orgasm. I'd die of shame if I came too fast, and Phillip would never let me hear the end of it. Biting my lower lip, I jerked away from his touch.

Chuckling, the other Hunter removed his shirt with one hand. Muscles danced and rippled under a sea of ink. The gleam of the metal piercings in his nipples and belly caught my distracted stare. His powerful body was painted in both light and shadow, and it was a marvel to gaze at. I'd forgotten the strong cut of his shape and the way his biceps moved and balled under smooth, inked flesh when he shifted and hovered.

The gorgeous criminal lookalike brushed dark hair away from his ocean eyes, his abs forming a ridge of mountains along his stomach when he braced on the balls of his feet. His pecs reshaped and flexed when Phil's eyes finally settled on mine. The look the sexy Hunter gave me was the same one he always displayed when he was turned on and ready to pounce.

"I've missed you, mein Schatz."

That means 'My Darling.' Google told me so.

I stiffened at the passionately whispered term of endearment, but I wasn't given the chance to address it like I wanted to. Somehow, Phillip had worked the button and zip of his pants open and was already stroking himself, in full view of my greedy eyes. It was a damn miracle I didn't drool when I caught sight of his large, tattooed hand stroking his fully erect cock.

That's some cheap porno shit, so why am I turned on?

Any other time and I would've teased him, but I couldn't find the words. Couldn't really speak at all. His shameless actions rendered me speechless, the bastard. He knew I turned into a beast when the other Hunter openly exposed himself.

I doubt anyone would know what to say when the Devil himself is staring at you while pumping his massive, throbbing erection.

His ethereal blues caught mine before Phillip snaked his way back over my body and hooked one of my legs over his arm. Then with a sneaky smile, he sunk into me.

The overwhelming stimulation took my brain hostage. Every thought that wasn't wanting it harder and faster fled my head. "Phillip!"

His hips smacked into mine without reprieve. The loud slaps echoed in my ears and I clung to him, rolling down to feel it more. Every powerful thrust forced a sound from my throat that gave everything away, and soon I didn't do anything but beg him for it—to take me harder, faster, deeper.

"Fuck, Phil," I panted, driving fingernails into his back.

Phillip's kiss was near violence. "Please, don't call my name in that voice," he pleaded with a voice roughened by lust.

I nibbled his ear, and his body shuddered against me. "Fuck me so hard I can't speak, then."

His answering groan was full of the desire to do just that, give me the fuck of a lifetime. His pace and strength intensified to the point where I literally couldn't speak. I didn't even breathe. Could only anchor myself to his strong body and chase the pleasure until it hit its peak and my entire body constricted.

“Scheisse,” he cursed before stiffening.

Warmth flooded my hips, and then everything relaxed. Phillip rolled over to my side, panting even though he didn’t need to breathe. But that was how I knew he was really into it. His body craved air it didn’t need, and so did mine.

The mechanical ping of someone’s phone went off from Phillip’s side of the bed. I turned my head to see the naked, beautiful tattooed Hunter turn over to check his phone with a grunt. But as I went to ask him who texted, Phillip tossed the phone and dragged my face back over to his. Then the other Hunter kissed me like he intended to suck out the rest of the air in my lungs.

Slow-blinking, I watched him pull away, unable to do anything but stare at the other Hunter like a fucking idiot. “Wha—”

“Get dressed, mein Schatz. Sloan will be here in five.”

That was when reality came rushing back in.

Shit.

Chapter 15

No Friend of Lux

The man we planned to meet greeted us at a door a short walk into the facility, after we made it through a security check. It was luckily as smooth as we hoped it would be.

I eyed the brown-eyed, blonde-haired man who, on any other day, I might never pay a second glance—slim, casually dressed with nothing remarkable to separate him from the rest. Honestly, nothing about his appearance suggested he was a Hunter.

He was so forgettable.

My gaze slipped from a forgettable face to his hands, noticing quickly he didn't have any calluses at all. Either Eddie had a great skin care regimen, or he'd never fought a day in his life. Which made me wonder what purpose he served at this facility. But the way Eddie stared at me, openly, brazenly, made me uncomfortable.

Phillip's hand touched my lower back before it spirited away and my pulse thrummed, sadly not for the reasons it should.

I was still thinking about the other day and our little quickie romp session. We hadn't

discussed it, and Sloan came right at the five-minute mark like promised. Guilt hit. I chased the arriving Hunter with my eyes, sure he could see it all on my face, but Sloan only smiled and greeted me like he always did. After that, it was business as usual. We discussed the plan, went to bed, and despite sharing one, Phillip didn't touch me again.

Talk about mixed messages.

Then again, Phillip was the king of mixed messages. The nonchalant Austrian spent the morning getting ready for our mission, and I decided it was best to keep on task and spend my time worrying about how we'd get what we needed, and then get the fuck out. And while my gaze followed Phillip everywhere, it also strayed quite a lot to the beautiful and beyond kind Hunter who I'd also taken to pound town only a short time ago.

The Devil called, V. He wants his Hell back.

Eddie turned, sniffing and rubbing his nose after one look from Phillip forced him into action. He keyed a code into the door and the many locks keeping the door securely shut clicked before Eddie yanked it open. Sneering for the briefest moment, he motioned for us to go inside.

One look told me it was an archive of some sort, and the lines of boxes on endless shelves were as long as any large warehouse.

Paper documents in this day and age? Weird.

Eddie joined our group before the door closed behind us with a huge clanking sound, and I stiffened. Alarm rang in the back of my head for some reason, but I dispelled the feeling, knowing we'd planned this out perfectly and there wasn't any reason to be wary. Even should something go awry, Phillip and Sloan were here.

Yeah, we got this.

Someone's hand brushed against my back again. But when I reacted, Sloan leaned in and whispered to me. Right away I knew it wasn't Phillip but the Brit who touched me this time. "Breathe, love."

I sucked in a breath, flushing slightly. "Sorry."

I could practically feel Phillip's gaze when Sloan leaned in closer, smiling the way he always did with me. "You're fine. This won't take long, and I'll be with you the whole way through."

The Brit's gentle words calmed a part of me I hadn't even realized was bothered by this walk through a place that created me. Created monsters. I may put on a brave face most days, but these were the same people who killed my parents and genetically designed me from the very same blood as the creatures I was forced to hunt. It put me on edge just to travel through a place that my parent's murderers likely wandered, too. And maybe I'd discover even worse secrets today.

Not sure what could be worse than my parents dying because of this fucking place or being a literal Frankenstein, but I'm sure life will figure it out for me. Just my luck these days.

Sloan's hand wrapped around mine, squeezing tightly. Looking down and then back up at beaming sky-blue eyes, I was reminded of why my head and my heart yearned for him. Sloan cared, and it was blatantly obvious in every action he took and every word he spoke.

Being the immature budding woman that I was, one look at Sloan's full lips reminded me of the kisses we'd shared, the hot breaths we exchanged, the way our bodies moved together, the perfect feel of him coming inside of me. It wasn't long ago that

his mouth and fingers had done the most tantalizing, pleasure-eliciting things to me, and I'd be lying if I said I never thought about it. Even with Phillip back.

Fuck.

Sloan was the farthest thing from Phillip. Polar opposites in literally every sense. Two ends of the spectrum. He gave me things Phillip never could, filled places Phillip never touched. Probably most notable was that nothing the Brit did made me second-guess myself. A part of me knew Sloan was what I needed, and if I was smart, I'd let the thing I shared with Phillip fizzle out to nothing. Because no matter how I spun it, Phillip and I wanted different things—were different fucking people.

My throat was tight as I squeezed Sloan's hand back, smiling and silently thanking him again. Suddenly, someone cleared their throat and I jerked my head over to find Phillip's eyes narrowed on the two of us. I stole my hand back and crossed my arms over my chest, as if it'd somehow mask the attachment I felt towards Sloan from the Austrian now burning holes into my face. My throat constricted with guilt, something I noticed it was doing a hell of a lot these days.

Maybe rage, guilt, and frustration were the only things my teenage Hunter brain knew how to do anymore.

"This way," Eddie called out, breaking through the silence. "I want this over, so don't dilly-dally."

Who even says dilly-dally these days?

Covering a smile, I trailed after our guide and tried to stay focused on our mission; the entire reason we were even skulking around in enemy territory. Thankfully, it didn't take long to find what we needed.

Phillip took all the files marked with my name and then, eyes shifting from left to right, he found the corners where the security cameras were placed. After confirming we were in a blind spot, he held out a tattooed hand covered in the usual rings.

Eddie sighed loudly, then dropped a small USB into the Austrian's hand. In the same breath, Eddie held out his own hand, probably for whatever they discussed as payment. "They'll know it was you. Your little scienceexperiment doesn't work on security cameras, and there's no way to access the feed, so they'll know soon enough."

I kept my face expressionless, but my heart did a few extra beats. The asshole had uttered the very thing I'd tried not to worry about the entire stroll through this facility, and the unsettling feeling in my stomach was back.

Phillip's lips lifted devilishly as he dropped another USB onto Eddie's awaiting palm. "I think you're better off worrying about what story you're going to tell them when they see you lead us directly to the information."

Groaning, Eddie brushed back his dense blonde locks, absently looking over to one of the cameras. "I'm leaving now. You know which exit to use, and remember, I've done my part."

With a parting sneer, our shifty-eyed tour guide quickly escaped the archive room. We were left alone with a messenger bag full of the Organization's secrets. Not wasting time, we exited the same way we came in. And as we made our way to the exit, the ominous sensation from earlier came crawling back into my chest.

It felt too easy.

As if manifesting trouble with my thoughts, several Hunters suddenly blocked our way out. Their outfits bore signs of high-level Hunter by the mere equipment they had, much like Phillip, but each one had outfitted a mask with only their eyes visible, which was rarely a good sign.

Shady shit, those masks.

The two men beside me stalled, already sensing dangerous intentions the same way I did.

"I have to admit, I wasn't expecting you lot to brazenly walk into my facility, but here you are," a voice said from behind the line of Hunters. "Then again, I'd expect nothing less of you, Phillip."

Shit.

Like drawing curtains away from himself, the Hunters pivoted, clearing space, and a man dressed in a chic, well-tailored suit stepped through the line of masked Hunters, his expensive shiny shoes clicking over the floor.

Startling silver eyes the color of a bright full moon immediately found me first, and something about the way this massive, over six-foot newcomer looked at me made my stomach twist into knots.

The man's short, stylish black hair framed a handsome face, even though everything about his presence put a threat into the air I hadn't felt with anyone outside of my enemies. He was beefed up like every dude I'd seen on the payroll, so that didn't really set him apart. What did was how he wore it; how he walked and talked. The way the Hunters around him followed his every move with their eyes.

It didn't take long to figure out this dude called all the shots. And if that wasn't enough, then the way this arrogant asshole carried himself and addressed the men beside me suggested he was nothing but bad news.

If villain had a look, it would be this silver-eyed boss dude.

One glance at Phillip told me that whoever this guy was, it was someone he knew—intimately. I'd wager someone Phillip worked under at some stage by the familiarity in the new guy's tone. If I was right, this might be the suspected guy at the top; the one we'd been looking to put a face to.

And here the bastard is, blocking our one way out of this shithole.

Most couldn't read the Austrian with one glance, but the way he stared at the suit-wearing villain was the same way he looked at Eros. Phil's eyes didn't move away, wary of the man's every move, never letting a single action go unnoticed. But this was Phillip we were talking about, and he was nothing if not a sarcastic bastard, so he recovered quickly.

"Lux, I should've guessed it'd be you," Phillip commented, lips lifted but clever eyes dangerously honed in on Lux the same way they did with any enemy. My guess was Phillip already suspected Lux long before we stepped into this facility. "If anyone was going to sell their soul to the Devil, it'd be you."

Whoop, there it is.

The man weirdly named Lux put a hand over his suited chest in mock compliment, the massive width of his upper torso dwarfing his hand in a way that would earn its fair share of small dick jokes from me if I weren't figuring out an escape route. "That's awful sweet of you to say, but I'm not the traitor here. You are."

The silver-eyed villain stole a look at me.

"I must admit, the granddaughter of Rose is much more beautiful in person than I ever expected. I can see why you, the man who's been infamously known to be allergic to love, would fall so head over heels. Pictures don't do you justice, my sweets."

Ew. Gross.

I kept my chin lifted and a hand on my weapon despite the urge to physically gag. Everything about him screamed evil bastard, and right now, we were at a disadvantage.

Phillip's eyes blazed with rage, but he clicked his tongue and flipped a small device in his hand, one I recognized shut down magic. "I did think this was a little too easy. So you were waiting for us. Guess it was you who found Eros and sent him to recover V."

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 2:45 am

Lux shrugged, grinning a little to himself, acting like this were a meeting between colleagues and not the moment before a fight. “He was already after you, but I may have given him a little extra...hmm, direction and equipment.”

“Thought so. I doubt the other leaders sanctioned the use of a notorious Dark Fae to hunt down some of your best Hunters to recover an asset. Must’ve paid a hefty fee out of the Organization’s coffers—or your own,” Phillip went on conversationally.

Lux chuckled and crossed his arms, his strong jaw clenching and unclenching.

My Hunter training picked up on the growing agitation across our enemy’s body. The bastard might put on a good show, but the nervous ticks, the stress in his jaw and shoulders, the way his pupils thinned and muscles bulged suggested he was being riled up by the things Phil said. The calculating Austrian was getting to this dude, and bad.

“Not at all. His only wish was to see you dead and those around you.”

“You miscalculated, old friend. Eros won’t stop with kidnapping anymore, not after what she did to him on our last encounter.” Phillip didn’t elaborate, probably in hopes of leaving Lux frustrated by the mystery, and I counted on that being the aim. “He’ll come after her knowing that I care for her, and then you’ll lose your prized goose,” Phillip stated confidently, surprising me stupid for a second.

Did he just say he cared about me?

But it was clear by the way Lux reacted that he hadn’t realized Eros might want me

dead, and his silver-eyes shifted uncomfortably before his jaw tautened.

My companion knew what buttons to press with this one, and it was painfully obvious how capable Phillip was when it came to undermining someone's confidence. I'd never admit out loud how hot it made me, but if I hadn't already been so into the arrogant Hunter, then this would've been the thing to do it.

I paused for a second, some of what Phillip said before finally registering, and I opened my mouth, brow knitting together.

Wait a fucking second. Did he just say I'm a goose? What a fucking asshole...

One look at Phillip's amused smile and sparkly blue eyes, and I was sure he'd done it to fuck with me. Only he would be up against a final level boss with all of his lackeys and find the time to taunt me. I mouthed "asshole" at him, making the Austrian snicker cutely to himself.

God, I'm doomed. Why's he so damn cute when he looks like he's out committing crimes for a living?

Sloan at least had the good sense not to smile. He was closer than before, his eyes tracking from left to right, figuring out the best way to overcome the odds. It was then that I noticed the thing in Phil's other hand. A simple recording device. Clever. But I'd expect nothing less of the other Hunter, and by the look on Sloan's face, he'd already figured out the best way to proceed.

Presently, we were up against a group of ten Hunters with powers unknown to us, not counting Lux. I sensed Lux wasn't human like I expected the higher ups to be. He was clearly something altered, same as us, so it'd be dangerous to underestimate what he could do. Or any of these Hunters after finding out what was in my blood. And because we couldn't openly talk or use our usual code since the other Hunters would

understand it, we were forced to quietly and separately calculate a plan of attack on our own.

“I’m afraid I don’t have time to chit chat. The little lady and I have an appointment we can’t miss.” Lux snapped his fingers and the Hunters around him pulled out their respective weapons.

But what surprised me more was the sudden electricity in the air as several summoned magic and the space was suddenly charged with it. The reason Phillip held what he did finally clicked. He was already aware these were magic-users.

Throwing the device into the air, it crackled and sparked, shutting down their magical attacks before they could reach us. Then Phillip was instantly taking down three Hunters simultaneously all by himself. Just as quickly, Sloan joined him, subduing one while slashing another.

As more rushed in from several corridors behind us and in front of us, I moved into action. I promised my two Hunters I’d never be far from them, and the closer I was, the easier it was to work as a team. Swinging out at several Hunters who came running forward, I stabbed, dodged, kicked, and slammed my way through a line of them.

The corridor wasn’t very wide, but several corridors were connected to it, so I used them to my advantage. Kicking off walls, I landed, tumbled, and cut into several Hunter’s legs on the way to the other side. I blocked an attack to my chest, countering it with my fist, and the other Hunter grunted and hit the wall.

Then I pivoted, evading someone’s arm, and kicked their knees the direction they weren’t meant to go. The telling crack hit my ears before the masked Hunter collapsed onto the floor. Stabbing down, my blade impaled their chest and blood gushed like a lake from the wound. Handstook hold of my sword before I withdrew

it, and the dying Hunter curled in on themselves, watery cries haunting me in an instant.

It wasn't like killing a creature. This was human to some degree, and they were clearly suffering.

Staring down, it hit me a second later that by their shape, it was a woman, and reality was a real bitch. It was staggering to think I'd have to kill one of my own. It was the first time I fought my own kind like this, and my heart wasn't okay. But I didn't have any other choice. It was kill or be killed. If I didn't get them first, they wouldn't hesitate to get me.

Shaking off the uncomfortable reality of what I fought, I evaded another attack a new enemy aimed at me. Staggering my stance and cranking my arm back, I landed a blow on their stomach so hard it sent them lofting into the air. Then the attacking Hunter hit a window and crashed through glass.

Luckily, my close contact fighting skills were especially good, and with my superior speed, I easily navigated every Hunter around me. It was like watching a movie in slow motion. No Hunter who came swinging at me stood a chance.

Another crack echoed in the hall, subduing the magic users once more before the effects of the first wore off. Thank Buddha Phillip was a scientific genius.

As I defeated one after another, my confidence grew. I started to hope. But then something pierced my skin when I turned and suddenly found a pair of silver eyes in front of me. My neck burned, and I quickly slapped a hand over the place I'd been stabbed with a syringe.

A rush of sensation took hold of my body, sweeping out and numbing every limb with deadly quickness. I watched Lux toss the syringe to the ground with a lift to one

side of his mouth. Lazily, I looked back to where my companions were still fighting. Phillip and Sloan were surrounded by so many Hunters I could barely see them.

“Fu...ck,” I slurred, a dizzying sensation striking my head as I teetered. The world blurred and wobbled. My vision swayed, making it difficult to stay upright. And then there were silver eyes again, staring down at me from where I’d collapsed on the floor. The world was warped and distorted, but I distinctly felt someone lifting me before my vision tunneled.

“That’s a good girl,” a faraway voice said before darkness closed in on me and stole my consciousness.

Chapter 16

V for Vindictive Bitch

When the empty, endless sleep I'd been drowning in finally slipped away, my body was paralyzed and I couldn't open my eyes. Whatever drug they'd given me, it rendered my body immobile.

Fucking figures.

But I could hear the familiar click-clacking of a keyboard and metallic clang of something nearby. Then footsteps approaching, which were heavy and male by the sounds of it. Someone else walked over, but their steps were much lighter and far too hesitant to be a Hunter or someone in a position of power.

Using my sense of hearing and touch was all I had. I couldn't breathe or take in the air around me, so smelling was off the table. I relied solely on what I could hear, and I took special care listening to every sound that might serve me now or later.

By the resonating echo of every noise, the room was very likely small and enclosed. And by the needles penetrating my skin and straps binding my arms and legs to some sort of bed, it was probably some kind of medical lab. Had to really love the irony of ending right back where I started—as a lab experiment.

But first and foremost, I was a Hunter. I wouldn't bemoan my capture; I'd figure this shit out and escape. Grams prepared me for this, and I wouldn't let her down. I wouldn't let Phillip and Sloan down.

If they're still alive...

The acid in my throat was excruciating, but the burn was worse because I couldn't move or react to it. It just overtook the senses—until I centered myself on the task at hand and not the fate of my two Hunters.

“I want every test run on her again, dammit. Find out what she can do. Now,” a voice I vaguely recalled said, laced with frustration.

“But, sir,” a woman's voice murmured, the sound of rustling following her soft-spoken response, “her body is showing signs of distress. She needs to recover before we do anything more.”

“Donna—”

“We have her blood, and that should help with determining some other things in the meantime. But if we do too much too soon, there could be lasting effects and—” the woman argued, a little louder than before.

“I don't care what effects there might be on her!” the angry man cut in sharply, sounding a little too huffy-puffy for my tastes.

And they call us women emotional. Ha!

“We only need to know how to replicate it, and then we'll get rid of her. She's a liability as it is. Too many people are already asking questions.”

Oh, great. They planned to make more of me. Now I really had to get off this damn table and get my hands on the blood they took. My to-do list before managing a brilliant escape was growing by the second.

My fucking life, right?

But it was a relief to know that at least Donna didn't sound like a mindless drone. Something nagged at me about her name and voice, though. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it sounded familiar. Like a forgotten memory.

"But the leaders—"

The man, who I now recognized as my silver-eyed captor, Lux, chuckled without humor. "The leaders are so afraid of some foretold Fae prophecy that they don't want to mess with her, but she was created for the sole purpose of getting across the planes without diminishing Hunter powers."

Fae prophecy? That's not ominous.

"You were on the same goddamn assignment, Donna. You know all of this. She's ours to do what we will with. Once we know how to replicate it, we won't need her anymore. That's why I was against a natural home upbringing for her in the first place, but you and those bastards insisted it would facilitate better results."

My hatred for this asshole grew with every word out of his terrible mouth. I never thought anyone would come close to how evil Eros was, but here this dude was, the very definition of villainy.

Upside to all of this was evil guys tended to monologue. All that these villain types ever babbled on about was kill this, stab that, "Oh no! She outwitted me again!" like this was some sort of Scooby-Doo special.

Lux huffed contemptuously, continuing his self-righteous monologue, "Lot of fucking good that did. Now we have a real problem on our hands. Rose has gone missing after burning down one of our archives." Go Grams! "Two of the best Hunters

in the Organization have gone rogue. If you don't salvage this, it's your head I'm serving to the leaders."

Got to love how surprised these villains acted when people betrayed them. Like it was such a surprise that people who they meddled with, blackmailed, threw to the wolves and left for dead would somehow figure out it was probably not in their best interest to keep—I don't know—involving themselves with the assholes responsible for it.

But even better out of this entire fucked experience was that the dude must really think I was going to die here today to be giving away all their best-kept secrets. Though, most were likely to be in those files we sniped off them. Still, I couldn't wait to prove this smug asshole wrong. I'd be the chick that got away.

Give it time, Lux. I'll show you just how difficult it is to kill me.

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But I clung onto something he said. Grams, she'd escaped somehow. She was still alive, as far as they knew, had even burned down one of their stupid archives like the fucking badass lady she was, and it was like breathing fresh air after suffocating for so long. Grams wasn't dead. She was out there being the same badass bitch who raised me.

Something in my core throbbed, but before I could figure out what it might be, it died away to nothing.

The woman beside me made a small sound in her throat, but a door nearby creaked and footsteps resounded on the floor, coming closer.

"We haven't been able to locate them, sir," a man's voice said, a baritone that vibrated in the ears and cut through the clacks of a keyboard and the mechanical sounds of equipment. "But we'll double-down efforts with our best."

I didn't breathe, and from the sounds of the woman near me, no one registered my awakened state. But whatever drugs they had me on made it impossible to do much else but listen.

Figures he'd have me drugged up and powerless, but it was an unbelievable relief to hear my two had gotten away, even if I hadn't.

"You and your team had better, Grey, or it's your head I'm serving to the leaders for this ridiculous ineptitude. How hard is it to find and neutralize two Hunters?"

Lux must have a real thing for serving the heads of others to these so-called leaders.

The other man grunted, and then I heard shuffling, likely shifting from one foot to the other—an agitated movement that suggested whoever Grey was, he didn't care for the way Lux talked to him. "We think they may know where the girl is, so relocating might be necessary."

That's promising...

Scoffing, Lux seemed to take a moment to ponder what was said. "We won't be long. Right, Donna?"

Spoke too soon.

Donna's small breath was full of resignation, and something about her hesitation suggested she wasn't there because she wanted to be. "V's body—"

"I see what this is," Lux commented, his tone sinister. "You think you can somehow make amends to the friend you got killed? Like that's going to make her daughter forgive you for what you did."

Wait...what?

Donna made another sound in her throat, clearly reacting. "I didn't know they'd be killed," she argued helplessly. "And you said they wouldn't be hurt, just given a warning. They didn't even know anything, Lux. She...Mariam didn't know anything." Her voice cut off into a small sob. "She would've told me, and I would've seen it in her thoughts." Without seeing her, I knew she was crying. "She was a capable Hunter, and she would've listened—"

"Bullshit. They were clearly sticking their noses where they shouldn't, and it was only a matter of time. How else did you expect it to end, Donna? Her daughter was a genetic monster created to help us cross over to the other realms, and she would've

done everything to get her away from us. Three hundred years' worth of research done by trial and error would've been gone, vanished, ended." Lux laughed again, his mocking tone carrying through the air.

I was still digesting the bastard's previous accusation, but the way Donna responded was telling all on its own. Her voice quivered. Their deaths weighed heavily on her. Either she was coaxed into giving the information, or she genuinely hadn't expected it to lead to their deaths.

Grams taught me how to detect deception and outright lies in what others said, and while I couldn't use my sight to confirm, I was confident that Donna hadn't wanted them hurt. She cared about my mother. It was clear in the way she said her name and how her voice softened. My mother, even now, was someone she viewed fondly.

"Make no mistake," Lux went on officiously, "it was your information that got her parents killed. Only a handful of us knew its location. And for the same reason you ratted those two out, you'll put an end to this girl when the time comes. Don't lose sight of all you've done here to advance the Organization's goals. The girl is a liability. Prophecy or no, she has the power to destroy our entire operation, and that means you and the ones you care about."

"Brother—"

Brother?

Hissing, Lux cut her off. "I told you never to call me that in public, you stupid cow. Run another magic panel," Lux commanded, his voice razor-sharp.

"Isaidshe needs to rest," Donna stated in a powerful voice, finding her courage despite her earlier hesitation. The tremor was still there, still in the undercurrent of her tone, but I could almost see the faceless woman lifting her head, eyes trained to

the bastard near her, ready to fight should she need to.

I didn't know what to make out of this weird sibling situation, where one was clearly evil and the other was...conflicted? But what I did know was it meant there was a vulnerability there that I could exploit. I might be able to appeal to Donna's affection for my mother and guilt over getting her killed. It could get me out of this shithole.

Lux tutted Donna, his voice dropping so deep it was nearly a growl. "Did I ask for your opinion? That's an order. Run another test and call me when its finished. I have to put out a few fires, so I don't have time to deal with another one of your existential crises, Donna. We need to access her power. Now. Whether you go home to your family or not lies solely with us being able to do so."

It'd take someone incredibly ignorant not to read between the lines of Lux's ominous statement. If she didn't do what she was told, Donna was as good as dead. And maybe her family, too. Quite frankly, it was startling to think that Lux would even sell out his own sister to get what he wanted. His own blood.

Donna's information might've been what led the Organization to kill my parents, but it was painfully clear she hadn't expected it to end that way. She likely didn't have any other choice but to do what they said. She was as much a prisoner to this place as the rest of us. I couldn't hate her for it, even as she continued to take blood from my arm.

This was the Organization Phillip often described—out for themselves and willing to do whatever it took. It reaffirmed my desire to take them down and burn it all to the fucking ground. We were simply a means to further their agenda, and our lives were obsolete the second we stopped doing as we were told.

For a moment, I thought about Grams, hoping she was still out there kicking ass and we'd one day be reunited; that one day I'd get to wrap my arms around her and tell

the wily old fox how much I loved her. But until then, I'd fight for all I was worth. That was how she'd want it.

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I was vindictive, and I'd get out of here if it was the last fucking thing I did.

The sound of footsteps receding from beside me stole me away from my internal rally, and then Lux was calling out from farther away, "Once we have what we need, you'll be the one to kill her. If you don't, Donna, God help you, it'll be the last time you ever defy me. I'm done giving you chances."

So they had a way to kill me. Or at least they thought they did. Just another reason to work my ass off to get out of here.

The eerie threat lingered in the air as the room door clanked shut, and then it was just the two of us. The silence went on for nearly ten minutes before I felt Donna's hand touch my arm, the trembling caress shocking to my hypersensitive senses.

Then Donna was whispering, so faintly it would've been inaudible to human ears. "I know you're awake, and I know you haven't any reason to trust me..." As if her words summoned my mobility, my fingers moved and I could finally take a deep, powerful breath. "Don't move. Don't breathe," she whispered urgently. "I'm not talking to you with my voice. I'm reaching out to you through your mind. They'll be watching, so try not to move at all."

I froze, no longer breathing.

Her hands worked on my arm for a second, a few things coming loose, then her voice was in my head again like before. "Your mother and I were best friends a long time ago, and my mistake led to her death. I told my brother something I shouldn't have, and I haven't any right to ask you for forgiveness. I deserve whatever fate comes to

me after this. But if you could just..." Her soft, barely-there voice in my head trailed off. "If you could just get my family to safety once you've escaped, that would mean the world to me."

My heart ached for her. The resignation in her voice was in every word. Whatever she planned to do, she knew she wouldn't come out of it alive. And I wanted to tell her that she didn't need to sacrifice herself, but I was afraid of interrupting.

When she didn't immediately talk inside my head again, an anxious coil started in my stomach, but then my body felt lighter, less drugged. I sensed the power within flutter and move, alert and flickering anxiously to life. I slowed my heart and smothered the urge to breathe in relief. My entire escape rested on my ability to control my body's reactions, and I focused all my attention on that while Donna's voice continued like a faraway melody in my head.

I tuned into it, listening intently to every soft word.

"After you hear me leave this room, wait three minutes. I'll cause a distraction. Leave through the door and take a right. I have an extra keycard, weapons, and equipment in my office. Use them. The code is 42768. Take a right out of my office and follow the hall all the way down. Use my keycard to get through the double doors, and watch out for Hunters. There will be a small, keycard-access-only door when you walk through. Go in and take the elevator to the top. It's a back access for this facility, and one only myself and a few others can use."

Her voice was wispy and hurried, but I listened carefully, missing nothing, and repeated the code she told me over and over in my head.

"Lux is gone for now, probably in an attempt to keep the other leaders off his scent, so it's only I think eight other Hunters and about a dozen scientists who run this underground lab. The scientists are all here involuntarily, blackmailed to work on this

project in secret for Lux, so they won't fight you. They're scared and don't have any choice but to be here."

Scared, like Donna was. Hostage, like Donna was. Left with no other choice, like Donna was. And it hurt to think that she was cornered, forced to be here, threatened to do things she didn't agree with. It was all there in the way she fought back, in the grief-stricken voice when my mother's death was blamed on her. A victim of a shitty-ass fate manufactured by the Organization the same way mine was.

I wanted to see the woman who was saving my life, knowing my mother had once called her a friend, but I wouldn't risk it.

"I'm going to unbind you. I can't fight like you can, or do more than this, but I can make sure they don't know you're gone right away." I heard her take a small, anguished breath, and I knew right away she was crying again. "You look so much like your mother. Mariam would be so proud of the woman you've become."

Donna's hand touched mine, and the warmth was so powerful I nearly reacted. "There are far more of us behind you than you realize. You've given us hope, so much hope, V, and I'm so grateful to you. I wished you weren't forced to do any of this, you're so young...much like your mother was." Her voice cut out, and I heard her swallow another sob. "But you're never alone. Simply ask 'Do you speak of flames and games?' and if they respond 'Only flames,' then you know they are one of us. Most importantly, if I die here today, I stand with you, with all that you are. We all do. Never forget that we'll come if you call us, whenever, wherever. We'll give our lives to fight back the minute you ask."

My throat was suddenly seized with emotion.

She'd given me hope that I hadn't realized was wavering. Knowing I wasn't alone, knowing I could find others, knowing that I had allies, it was more than I could've

ever hoped for. I'd get the fuck out of here, and if I had anything to do with it, I'd save Donna and her loved ones when I did.

I sent out my thoughts, hoping they'd reach her mind the same way hers did mine. "Thank you. I don't blame you. Whatever your reasons, it's the Organization who's done this, not you. And I'm going to get us both out of this, Donna. I don't leave people behind."

She made a little sound in her throat and sniffled before I heard her shuffle across the floor quickly. The door creaked and then thudded shut. As instructed, I counted the minutes until I could escape this hellhole, or burn it down to the ground trying.

It's time for the vindictive bitch, V, to show these bastards who they're messing with...

Chapter 17

Lame-Named Sword

The first couple steps were disorienting because it felt like my body wasn't fully awake. Everything was oddly numb and prickly. So, I stumbled to the right and nearly crashed into one of the many machines lining the room.

Being drugged sucked balls, seriously...

But I got my shit together and shook away the fog in my head. Slowly opening the door, I peered out into the low-beam hallway.

It looked like something out of a horror movie, and I absently wondered if zombies were a thing. If they were, I was sure as shit never going to sleep again. Brainless monsters with their gnashing teeth and decaying bodies freaked me the fuck out as

odd as it sounded. Give me a vampire or howling wolf the size of a bear any day, but ghouls and fleshy human corpses were a hard pass even for this superior Hunter.

My backside was on full display, but I'd been in weirder situations and couldn't care less how I looked. Whoever reviewed these security tapes was going to get the middle finger while I was at it, though. I offered the security camera a look and gestured to whatever asshole watching to fuck off, then slipped out of the room door.

It was a standard hospital-like facility—everything glaringly white and undecorated. Practically sterile to look at. Nothing about the hallway stood out, aside from a door a few feet to my right with a pin-access handle.

That's my ticket out of here.

After ensuring no one was nearby, I made my way over to the door and keyed the code Donna gave to me into it, hitting the buttons hard enough to satisfy my frustration. The light blinked green before I dragged the heavy door open and slipped inside the room.

It was definitely a far cry from the rest of the place. Little trinkets, a horde of papers, and a laptop littered the mahogany desk off to my left. Books were organized into a shelf behind the desk, all with long medical titles I hadn't any hope of pronouncing. Each one worn-out by excessive use, their spines broken in by long hours spent poring over the pages.

It was clear she took her job seriously, though I wasn't too sure how that made me feel knowing it was people like me who they experimented on. But Donna's office was cozier and a much more loved room than the rest of the place. It definitely had character, and despite not really knowing the woman, it felt like her everywhere I looked.

As I grabbed my militia-grade clothes—black military boots, dark pants with pockets for days, leather jacket, and several body belts to hold my weapons—I changed out of the hospital gown I'd been wearing. Looking over at a single picture frame on Donna's desk, I noticed the smiling faces of two small children held in the arms of a woman whose beaming blue eyes hit me right where a memory lived.

It was the same woman in my dreams, crying at our doorstep and begging for Grams's forgiveness. She'd been on her knees, mascara running from a never-ending

stream of tears, expression riddled with the strongest grief one could feel, and all I remembered was reaching out to her, doing my best to comfort a sad woman when I was barely out of diapers.

Donna.

The little faces next to what I now concluded was Donna were her carbon copies, and I didn't need to be Sherlock to know she probably meant her kids when she asked me to get them to safety. She was a mother. Yet, Donna was out there trying to rectify something that wasn't her damn fault. I mean, not really. All while two little kids relied on her to come home.

I'm not going to be the reason she dies. No one should grow up without a mother like I did.

I slipped several throwing daggers into my belt and then, eyes widening, took hold of a sword I'd recognize anywhere. Its beautifully crafted handle had several jewels imbedded into silver, and the design of it was absolutely one of a kind.

Blood Slayer.

How did they get this from him?

For sure I'd imagined the Austrian going to the grave with this sword before handing it over to anyone, and something nagged at me to see it here. Something told me its presence was significant.

The lame-named sword glinted as I lifted it from the wall. Swallowing, I eyed the spectacular craftsmanship, wondering how I'd spent all this time with Phillip and never truly looked at it. Not even while he rambled on about its fantasy origin story. Even now I couldn't help but roll my eyes at how a grown-ass man had droned on

about its history and how it came into his possession.

It was literally the stupidest shit Phillip ever uttered, and that was saying something.

I strapped it to my back, determined to get it back to the man it belonged to, and tied up my hair. Right now, I didn't have time to reminisce or think about Phillip; it was time to get the fuck out of this prison.

Sneaking back out of Donna's office, keycard tucked into my pant pocket, I crept down the hallway, listening for anything that could give me a hint to where she'd gone. Then the low howl of a siren filled the air, causing me to freeze.

The door wasn't far. I saw it in my peripheral vision, but as I listened, I heard Donna's distinctive cry, one that was all pain.

Some would argue I should've escaped for the greater good, because if I stayed, I risked being recaptured, and that would mean the Organization—rather, Lux—won. But that wasn't the Hunter I wanted to be.

Hell, it wasn't the person I wanted to be.

Donna had a family, kids and maybe a partner, who needed her to come home, and I'd be damned if I let her sacrifice herself over guilt. Mom wouldn't want it that way. At least from what I knew about her she wouldn't.

I removed the sword from my back, cranking my neck from side to side and hearing the telling cracks. Then I flitted down the corridor into the room where Donna's scream had come from. She was already surrounded by four Hunters.

Cowering, she clutched a wounded, visibly bleeding arm, but her eyes quickly found me when the door smacked open, nearly breaking apart with the strength I put into

the maneuver.

“Oh, good. I was worried I’d miss the party,” I said, huffing petulantly.

Shit, I’m starting to sound like Phil.

The four Hunters pivoted, and magic radiated from them as they withdrew their respective weapons. One went for a large sword the size of his torso, growling, and for a second, I could literally hear Phillip’s voice in my head, cracking small D energy jokes right before he sliced the brute to pieces.

“That’s the girl!” another one said.

Captain Obvious over here saving the rest of them from having to brain too hard, I guess.

“I’m not really a fan of being imprisoned or people who hurt others to be quite honest, so I guess this is where you and I are at an impasse, my dudes. Either leave now or die here.”

I really needed to invest some time into writing better lines. Even I cringed hearing the soap opera dialogue leaving my lips. Phillip was always so much better at delivering badass lines. Same with Kris and Sloan. I, however, sounded exactly my age—like I’d trained at Disney.

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The world throbbed violently, and then my power hit the four Hunters hard enough that several went scuttling back.

Donna's eyes widened. "So, it's true..." Her next whisper confused me, enough to get an eyebrow. "You have the magic of the ancient Chaos Fae."

Chaos Fae?

My thought was cut short as the first Hunter tried to summon his magic. At least, that was what I gathered when the dude made a fist and lifted it like he was aiming for the Douche-Bag of the Year Award, fight-movie version. But when nothing happened, the four stared openly at me. Like with the Siren, I somehow knew they couldn't use their magic like before, so I took advantage of their confusion.

I dashed forward and sliced the one nearest me to literal pieces before ending with a swift decapitation. It was the way Phillip would want it, and even though he and I rarely agreed on anything, this was the one time we did. Slice and dice them so much they couldn't recover.

And that was the motto I now lived by.

Poor Donna was caught unawares by the bloody spray, her eyes perpetually wide, while the rest of the Hunters moved into action, trying to take me down as a group. But as if in response, my power throbbed again and suddenly they were on fire. Not just fire, they were burned to ash in seconds by fiery red flames that destroyed everything they touched. It took me a moment to figure out what was happening, but when I did, I grabbed Donna and dragged her away from danger.

The room quickly filled with thick smoke, and the fire detectors screamed in my ears. But my training kicked in, and I hurried the woman out of the room and down the hallway to safety. She tripped several times, looking back over her shoulder. But when she realized where I was headed, she started to fight my hold on her.

“The others—”

“I’ll get them. You’re going up first, Donna. I won’t have your death on my conscience, and I’m not about to let you die over some misguided sense of justice for my mom. I’ll send you up, then I’ll grab the others,” I quickly explained, finally pushing her into the elevator. “Wait for them and hide somewhere.”

Donna’s curly silver hair fell over an aging almond-colored face, glittering blue eyes staring on in confusion. “It’s dangerous...”

Finding my smirk, I eyed her through the closing elevator doors. “I’m much more dangerous, Donna. I’ll be up in a jiffy.”

Once I knew she was safely fleeing to the surface, I turned around. Shutting my eyes, I breathed in deeply. Only four more Hunters to go, and then I’d get the captive scientists out of here. No one who wasn’t already meant to die would on my watch.

Not today.

I fled down the same hallway I’d come through and turned the direction where the fire was already crawling up the walls. The rate at which it incinerated and how fast it destroyed whatever it touched didn’t match regular fire, and I figured out quickly it was likely hellfire like that one fox bastard. But this fire came from me.

If it came from me, then it shouldn’t hurt me, right?

Testing the theory, I reached out and ran my hand over the flames. When it didn't hurt or burn my flesh to ash, it was crystal clear that whatever power this was, I'd survive it. Unfortunately, the scientists wouldn't, so urgency was crucial.

This power didn't seem to discern between friend and foe like all the other times I'd used it. This power was hungry and destructive, and it scared me to think I'd summoned it without ever truly meaning to. But I'd take my time freaking out about it later. Lives were at stake, and I couldn't waste any more thought on the total fuckery my power was these days.

A Hunter covered with a gas mask and wearing nothing but black rounded the corner, their bulky, obscenely large frame somehow avoiding the flames eating away at the walls. Guessing from their size, it was most likely male. And when he lifted his hands into the air like he was putting on some kind of lame-ass magic show, it didn't take much effort to figure out what sort of Hunter this one was.

But I was faster.

I closed the space between us, swinging my sword up, and then came down on him like vengeance personified. I cut through bone and muscle, the sword slicing through like it was no task at all.

Blood Slayer didn't feel like a normal weapon now that I'd used it. Even Hunter blades didn't cut straight down through a body like this. It was surreal to watch the Hunter split into two pieces and fall to the ground in a mess of blood, innards, bone, and muscle.

I scowled, not prepared for the visual of a man cut in two.

I hadn't gone up against someone like myself in this capacity before, and it wasn't a pretty sight to look at. It made my stomach twist forebodingly, but I focused on

getting the innocent lives out of this death trap my magic created.

Might later plead Sloan or Kris to procure a dreamless tonic just to avoid the nightmares I'd have after this little escape adventure.

Jumping over the mess, I fled around the corner. The crackling of my hellfire followed me just as fast as I could run, my boots thudding loudly over tile. The flames ate through the walls and smoke filled the air, smothering out most of the corridor light. But finally, a door came into view and I yanked it open. The sound of bending metal and broken hinges suggested the thing had been locked. Thankfully, not much of an obstacle for my superhuman strength.

I'm awesome.

A few men and one woman were crouched in a corner, wearing white cloaks and clearly afraid for their lives. Seeing how I was forced to break the heavy door just to get into this death box, they'd probably been locked into the room when the sirens went off. Which was all the more reason to haul ass to get everyone out.

"I'm not here to hurt you," I rushed to explain before a Hunter from outside the hallway tried to stab me with their dagger.

I evaded it, swinging my arm down and breaking their outstretched one. Then I sent the asshole flying into a burning wall with a hard kick to the stomach. In seconds, they were burned to ash; weren't even given time to cry out before they were dust.

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If I didn't have to worry about that same thing happening to the poor souls locked in this lab, I would've said a little prayer for these poor bastards. Like we were trained to do all our lives, these Hunters were just following orders. It killed me to think that if not for that horrible asshole, Lux, no one would've died today.

"We have to go, or you won't get out of here."

The lady scientist seemed to recognize me, and she gasped before getting to her feet. "You're her!"

The others looked at each other and seemed to drop their shoulders in relief. Without time to really let them digest it all, I grabbed the group like we were one big, happy family and fled like a jerk down the hallway.

Don't ask me how I did it, because I'd say it was on pure adrenaline I somehow got them past furious flames and into the back-access elevator, but I just did.

I attacked the up button for the elevator with an angry finger, watching the doors struggle to close with a group of frightened eyes on me.

Feels like it does in the movies. Why do elevators gotta be such bitch-ass obstacles in horror films?

The hair on my neck stood at attention, and my core pulsed. Sensing them before they got close, I ducked down, evading an attack I knew was coming. Another Hunter sailed over me, hitting the closing elevator doors, and I rushed to drag the bastard away from the fearful scientists.

We struggled for a second, but these assholes would never be stronger than I was. Sinking Blood Slayer awkwardly into my enemy's chest, I worked quickly to get out from under the other Hunter.

I jerked my eyes up, breathing a sigh of relief to find the doors closed and the red up arrow pinging their upward escape. Then, my knee driving hard into the Hunter's stomach, I used my strength to cut their chest open, and the body beneath me shuddered before falling limp.

I closed my eyes, head dropping down for a second, and hair fell into my face. It was only for a second, but I silently rallied.

I'd faced worse. I'd survived worse. But this was the first time I was solely responsible for so many lives on the line and lost. Grams had trained me for it, but the brutal emotions still hit me out of nowhere. The guilt, the fear, the anxiety, it all came rushing into my chest, and I had to work quickly to push them back down.

So when I finally got my emotions under control, I opened my eyes, more determined than ever. On my feet again, I rushed to go back the way I came and listened carefully for any noises that didn't match fire or equipment. When that didn't work, I used my keen sense of smell before finding a Hunter standing in front of a door, ensuring none of its occupants escaped.

Flames closed in around the lone figure, but they refused to move. By their shape, I concluded it was a woman, but one that gave me an odd sense of déjà vu. And when she finally turned to look at me, I was surprised to see her go straight for her mask.

Taking it off, I was suddenly face to face with someone I knew very well. Someone I never expected to see here among the same Hunters who were party to my capture. Someone I couldn't seem to fully comprehend when her face came into view.

Tiff.

What the actual fuck...

Her curly blonde hair fell over her shoulders, her beautiful features illuminated in nothing but firelight, and she smiled at me as if we weren't standing in the middle of a burning facility where I'd been forcibly held.

Licking her lips, she crossed her arms, projecting an arrogance I'd never seen on her before. Reaching out, she touched the flames right in front of me and wasn't burned by them. "This sort of magic doesn't work on me, V."

Right, Shifters weren't affected by this sort of offensive magic. It was the entire reason Eros feared them. I'd have to be smart with how I attacked, and that was a tough thing to do when your power ran entirely on instinct. Would it somehow know what I could use on her?

"Why...what the fuck are you doing here, Tiff?"

I refused to believe Tiff would betray me, or that she was capable of anything even remotely horrible, but the way her smile broadened and she turned to look down the hall where another Hunter walked told me that I was about to learn something I didn't want to know.

"Topher and I really hoped we'd be the ones who got to kill you, and it's pretty sweet to think dreams really do come true." Her eyes gleamed dangerously, igniting to a full beam, a sign just before they shifted.

I'd seen it on Nigel plenty of times to know, but as I stood there, beyond betrayed, I was only left wondering if he knew. It didn't make sense that I was always right there, easily captured, and they hadn't made a move. If Nigel had been involved, it

wouldn't make sense to leave it until now. And I wanted to hope with all my heart he wasn't aware they were traitors all along.

Regardless of what had or hadn't occurred, there were innocent lives at stake if I didn't do what was necessary and end this bullshit right here. It might be staggering to face off against people who I'd once considered friends, but it wouldn't stop me from doing what I needed to do.

I was a Hunter, and not the kind the Organization wanted me to be. I fought for justice and a better future.

The other Hunter, supposedly Topher, took his place beside Tiff. And now that I could put a name to him, I recognized his brawny shape. The way he stood was all Topher, and it only hit harder knowing that all of this wasn't some elaborate hoax.

Tiff had fully shifted into her wolf form, quickly followed by Topher. Their weapons clattered to the floor and their clothes were torn to pieces. With two sets of gleaming wolf eyes on me, it was any wonder I found the strength to move forward at all.

But I did.

Twirling Blood Slayer, it was almost like Phillip was there with me, cheering me on. He'd say something like "I knew they couldn't be trusted" or "Bark all you want, it's time I put you down, dog." The Austrian wouldn't bat an eye, just smirk in his usual arrogant way, and then he'd take them down.

He wouldn't spare them a thought.

And it was with his voice in my head that I said, "Then what are you two traitorous assholes waiting for?" Lips lifted into a brazen smile, I strengthened my stance. "Here's your chance."

Chapter 18

Jealousy and Piggyback Rides

Facing off against people who I fought beside, laughed with, shared secrets with, gotten to know and even regarded as close friends was an endless burn in my chest. But if it was one thing Grams and Phillip both taught me, it was that anyone could betray you for any reason. This was the world we Hunters lived in.

The world I, a genetically altered human, lived in.

As a Hunter, it was kill or be killed, and I didn't have the luxury to reminisce about our time together. Because it was clear at some stage, whether it was from the beginning or somewhere along the way, Tiff and Topher chose to become my enemy.

Who the fuck really knew.

Tiff's fully transformed wolf, which had patches of blonde and grey, growled low in its chest. The beast's blue eyes were homicidal orbs, glinting in nothing but firelight. She was easily the size of a bear, and if I wasn't already well-acquainted with the look of them, I'd have some trouble adjusting to the sheer size of Tiff transformed.

The fabric of Topher's clothes ripped and fell apart, some fluttering to the floor and catching fire, as he shifted into an all-black wolf with silver eyes.

Funny how I used to find Topher's wolf form hauntingly beautiful and by far my most favorite out of the entire pack. It appealed to me visually, and I always looked for it when the pack was in their wolf forms—the powerful body covered in nothing but abyss-black fur and with ethereal eyes the color of silver metal. The sight hit like a supernatural dream.

I'd never once been terrified to see the pair in their beast forms. Granted, that was before I ever considered I might one day have to fight them like this.

The grip I had on Phil's sword tightened as Topher snapped his saliva-coated teeth angrily at me, a low rumbling growl leaving his snarling muzzle.

Honestly, it still rattled me to see them the way they presently were, knowing their entire intention was to tear me apart from limb to limb and end me right here, right now. I'd never faced a werewolf, let alone two, and I hadn't expected that my grand escape would be barred by two terrifying wolves I knew.

This is some bullshit.

My body throbbed forebodingly like it did every time something happened I didn't have any control over. But for some reason, it felt like I summoned it this time—summoned my power to do what needed to be done to end this fight before it ever truly started. The sensation of my magic overwhelmed and consumed me before radiating out in a circle around my body, a solid weight moving like a phantom through the air.

Tiff leapt at me, already halfway across the space between us, and Topher was sunk close to the floor, ready to do the very same thing. Their powerful bodies were tense,

the intention to kill me in every strained muscle and bristled hair on their fur-covered forms. But as the hazy, translucent power hit out at them, the world slowed to a stop, suspending Tiff mid-air and keeping Topher perpetually frozen to the floor, a second before lunging.

Gripping Blood Slayer and finding strength in the phantom presence of my Hunter companions whose fates were still unknown, I moistened my lips, knowing this was my one chance. I wouldn't get another. If I hesitated, Tiff and Topher wouldn't fail to do whatever they could to kill me.

Taking the first few steps and stopping right in front of the airborne wolf, I lifted my sword, then cut straight through Tiff's thick wolf neck, severing her head without any trouble. Then, without pausing, I twirled and sliced through Topher's wide, heavily muscled nape. His didn't give me trouble either. It yielded to the sharpness of the sword same as Tiff's did.

It was almost too easy for all this was—betrayal, two wolves against one Hunter, the end of a friendship, the beginning of second-guessing every person in my life. I expected maybe there'd be something that stopped it, whether it was the sword failing to cut through or perhaps time moving again, but nothing did.

Just slice, and that was the end of their story.

As the sword's blade fell and clanged against the tile floor, frozen hellfire licking up the walls, the realization that I could simply defeat two powerful creatures like these Shifters inside paused time made it feel like this power I wielded was too much for any one person to own. It was too simple, too strong, too destructive. But I was grateful for it in that moment because it put an end to things quickly.

They were both given a clean death, one they wouldn't ever feel, and that was about all I could do for them despite wishing it never came to this at all.

Frozen like they were, neither head moved from its place, but I knew once time started again, they'd be dead. Shifters, like other creatures, couldn't recover from decapitation and didn't heal the way Phil, Sloan, and I did.

So, I offered the two one last fleeting glance, punishing pulse in my ears, acid in my throat, stomach in knots, before walking over to the door Tiff once blocked. It'd been so easy to end their lives, but inside I was a twisted mess. I couldn't even begin to unpack the emotional turmoil simmering in my throat. Instead, I focused on what I was there to do.

With a little calculated effort, I broke through the heavily barred door and retrieved the scared humans cowered in the corner. It was an awkward as fuck haul with them stiff and still crouched in my arms. I begged whatever magic deity had stopped time to stay that way a little longer as I fled. And by some act of Buddha, I made it to the elevator.

Cursing, I set all the scientists I carried onto the floor in front of the elevator like a pile of luggage and tried poorly to call on the powers within to restart time so I could get the fuck out of this death trap—the place where friends became foes and my tragic history was confirmed.

When nothing happened, I sighed loudly. “Fuck my life!”

Like the words had summoned action, time moved again and the doors to the elevator pinged with the keycard I used. I didn't wait. Without even bothering to explain how the terrified humans got there, I ushered them into the elevator and hit the button for the top.

They rushed to flee when we took a long, low-lit corridor to the outside world and nothing but dry and brown earth met my eyes. The sun blazed down from the sky, not a cloud in sight, and the temperature was easily over a hundred degrees. Useless

perspiration had already formed all over my body during the intense escape, but I'd likely be doused if I spent too long in this heat.

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I hardly cared at all when the sight of four familiar figures surrounded by a group of terrified scientists came into view. A tear escaped my eye, and I struggled for a second to figure out how and why they'd come.

I dropped the sword I held, and Phillip came rushing forward. His eyes fell to his favorite weapon, suddenly perplexed. "You wielded Blood Slayer?!"

I swallowed around the lump in my throat, unable to figure out what to say first. "Oh, like it's hard? No, wait...what the fuck do you mean by asking about the sword first, you jerk?!"

His gentle smile was full of unspoken affection and his light eyes beamed with ill-repressed pride, but the Austrian didn't come any closer.

For good reason.

Because the second I finished chastising the man, a woman whose smell haunted my very dreams took me into her arms and didn't let go. "I missed you, Vivienne. I'm so proud of all you've done, and I knew if anyone could do it, it'd be you who'd find a way out."

"Grams..." I barely smothered the audible cries of relief, enveloped in her familiar scent and pressed against her frail but somehow strong body. "I missed you so damn much, you wily old fox."

Her arms tightened around me, holding me impossibly close, smooshing my face into silver hair that smelled like cake and cookies. "You did good, kid. You did good."

Fuck, I could never hate this woman. I love her so much.

I barely contained the pure joy and relief streaming from my eyes as I embraced the weapon-heavy woman back, holding her body so tight I was worried I'd break her. It made me smile just to see her carrying her favorite spiked bat. I nearly laughed out loud when I saw it strapped to her back.

And as if no time had passed, Grams simply ran her fingers through my hair the same way she always did when she wanted to comfort me. "I have a lot to say sorry for, but I'm just so glad I got to see you at all."

Pulling away, I caught her hand and pressed a kiss to it, shutting my eyes and desperately hoping this wasn't some drug-induced dream. "Water under the bridge, Grams. I love you, and I'm just glad you're alive."

The time etched into her face was more visible today than it had ever been. She looked world-weary and a ghost of her usual self. I'd never seen the woman look anything but confident, but the way she looked today spoke volumes about how what transpired between us had weighed on her mind during the months we were apart.

Someone cleared their throat, and I looked up to find another set of familiar light blue eyes. "I hate to put a pause on the reunion, but we need to get everyone to safety and ensure their families are taken care of. We don't have time, sadly. I assume you have somewhere they can go, Rose?"

Sloan's striking smile eased the tension in my chest and my lips lifted in return, not aware how much it relieved me to see him safe and unharmed. Donna was beside the Brit, her wounded arm already wrapped in bandages, and I breathed a small, thankful breath.

Kissing my cheek, Grams whispered, "Don't be afraid to live and love, sweetheart."

Love is the greatest thing you could ever do in this godforsaken existence. If it's the last thing I ever get to say to you, I want you to chase what you want and be who you are without apologies."

I closed my eyes, another tear burning down my face.

"Don't regret not chasing the things you want because you're afraid of how it might turn out. You'd be surprised by what you can accomplish when you're fighting for someone...or many someones," she said, kissing my other cheek.

Someones?

When my grandmother pulled away, her eyes beamed intensely with unspoken support. She was cheering me on, telling me to live, to love, to be unafraid to do everything I wanted.

Naturally, my eyes glided over to Phillip, who kept a respectable distance, but his entire body was taut and his eyes were blazing with an emotion I hadn't seen since the night he told me he loved me.

A look that hit me right in the feels.

Then I glanced at Sloan, whose smile wavered in a way it never had. The narrow stare the gorgeous Brit directed at me made it clear he wanted nothing more than to come over. But as if he was frozen to the spot, his eyes shifted from me to Phillip and his mouth thinned, the light in his artic-blues dimming. He shut his eyes, looking away. The tension in his body was visible through his clothes, and it was the first time I'd seen Sloan look apprehensive. Resigned, even.

But why?

I opened my mouth, but Sloan turned on his heels, sinking a hand into his dark hair, and then ushered Donna and the others to an awaiting helicopter. My grandmother's soft hand touched my face. She nodded her goodbye before heading over to the military-issued helicopter. She, Kris, and Sloan helped the escaped scientists into it before I was left alone with Phillip.

“How did you manage to find me?” I finally asked, breathing out some of the tension from an impossible escape.

Phillip's eyes dropped to the sword, and his lips tilted in their usual sexy way. “Well, had I known Sloan gave you a ring we could track, I wouldn't have left my precious Blood Slayer here in this shithole.”

There it was—the spiteful, sarcastic asshole we all knew and loved.

The look the Austrian offered Sloan's gift was all jealousy. He didn't even bother to hide it this time. It was the same way he stared when Sloan smiled at me or I touched Sloan in plain view. Even with the ring being one of the main reasons they could find me, Phillip clearly didn't celebrate its existence. And the way Phil spoke about the ring I wore dripped with bitter regret.

It was such a silly little thing that elicited such a strong reaction from the usually unaffected Hunter, and it intrigued me.

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Honestly, I loved the ring I'd been given by the sweet Brit who'd picked up the pieces of my broken heart for weeks while Phillip was gone, and it was a weird knot in my throat when I thought about how Sloan left earlier. The fact that Sloan's ring remained when he hadn't made my chest pang spitefully. I couldn't name the feeling, barely understood what about Sloan leaving hit so hard, but I decided maybe it was for the best.

My heart and head were in constant chaos, conflicted by all I'd learned, all I'd become, all that occurred. I craved normalcy, and Phillip was oddly normal for me.

After staring death and betrayal in the face, I was thankful for the familiarity of Phillip's presence—the person who'd been by my side from the very beginning. Sure, he'd left, but he came back. He was here. And it was hell to be this close to the smarmy jerk and not to be able to kiss him for all he was worth.

When I saw Phillip standing there, covered from head to toe in artillery, ready to tear down walls to get to me, it took everything inside of me not to run and throw my arms around the stupidly large Hunter.

Of course he survived. He always did. Nothing could kill Phillip, I was convinced. Still, I'd been so afraid of losing him, worried that I'd be the entire reason the Austrian was wiped from the face of the earth, that tears poured from my eyes the second I saw the asshole was safe and basically the way I'd left him.

Except, Phillip looked at me like his world had come to a shrieking halt when I'd been captured by the enemy. Like he couldn't believe I was standing right there in front of him.

His complexion was not as glow-tastic as it usually was. Phillip bore all the physical signs that he hadn't slept, eaten, drank, or really done anything to take care of himself since however long I'd been locked away by Lux. And I wasn't prepared to see the overflowing emotion in his eyes every time Phil's gaze connected with mine.

It made me unnaturally fidgety for someone who'd courageously killed not only a group of elite magic-using Hunters without mercy, but two Shifters who I considered close friends. Someone who brazenly flitted to the rescue of a woman who was intimately connected to the reason why my parents were murdered.

"I hadn't mentioned it before, but I can track Blood Slayer wherever it is. It's a sword that's never truly lost to its owner. Pretty cool, huh?" The Austrian explained when no one asked, his blazing light eyes floundering with something left unspoken and glinting in nothing but midday sunlight.

That one look made my throat constrict and stomach twist in a way far too wanton to be within eyeshot of the woman who raised me and all but been missing for nearly half a year.

"But I never imagined you'd be able to wield Blood Slayer."

Curious, my eyebrow rose in question, but Phillip outright ignored it. I stole another look at the grumpy Hunter, determined to lighten the mood by teasing him a little. "Isn't it just a sword?"

Phil's eyes sparked hotly, taking the bait, and he let out an exasperated sigh. "Did you not listen to a word I said?! Blood Slayer only permits its master to use it. No one else can use it. Should they try, it would burn their wicked hands. My baby is a smart little thing, aren't you?"

And now he was talking to it like a person. Great.

Put out, I tossed the sword over to the ridiculous man beside me. It was still covered in Tiff and Topher's blood, but I tried not to think about it for the moment.

Too much had happened, and it was difficult to make sense of it all. I didn't really know how best to react. First the issue of my birth and my mother's betrayal and death, then Tiff and Topher turning out to be the traitors in my midst. Now with Phil, Grams, the lingering thing between Sloan and I, the sword, it was a bit too much for my brain to handle all at once, so I focused on the simplest of the bunch.

"Seems awful sketch, Phil," I snarked, giggling when Phillip glared at me. "I mean, Lux and Bad Dudes Co. brought it here, didn't they? No one got burned. Why wouldn't anyone be able to use it?"

"Blood Slayer doesn't work like that. It knew it had to go with you, so it let them touch for a little bit. My baby's smart."

Apparently, over two hundred years of lone-dogging it meant you literally went cray-cray and started believing your sword could take commands like some sort of pet.

What a pitiful creature this Austrian was.

I rolled my eyes, very close to calling the man seven levels of insane. "Sure, sure. Whatever you say. I mean, I had it all handled with or without the sword. But thanks, I guess, for showing up after I'd done all the work."

The Austrian's expression was overtly sour, and it took every bit of control I owned not to outright cackle. "Not my fault I had to wait on Rose before coming for you. If I had it my way, we would've been here hours ago. I would've killed anything and anyone who got in my way."

"Oh?" I asked, smirking.

Phillip cleared his throat and ran fingers through his hair. “It’s good to see you’re still the saucy little lass I’ve grown to love.”

“Love...?”

The Austrian’s eyes widened before he turned away, sword on his shoulder, and grunted. “You get them all then?”

I quieted, suddenly remembering who I had to kill to get here, and the lump in my throat returned. “Yeah. I got them all.” I crossed my arms, fighting off the creeping sensation of regret. “We were betrayed by some of our own.”

Phillip’s eyes found mine again. “By whom?”

I swallowed, watching all the scientists get situated in the large, double-blade transportation helicopter.

Kris was accompanied by Sloan and another Hunter I didn’t recognize in the task of getting everyone safely into the cabin. All I could make out about the new Hunter was his luminous dark brown skin and enchanting green eyes. Otherwise, he wore a mask over his nose and hid most of his features. Our gazes connected for a heartbeat before the strange Hunter shut the cabin door and disappeared.

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“Tiff and Topher,” I finally muttered.

Phillip’s eyes blazed, and his jaw clenched before he sunk a tattooed hand into his dark hair, the muscles shaping his torso doing a seductive dance my eyes couldn’t help but watch. “Then the information about them was good. Both Sloan and I were aware and watching. It’s why you were never left alone with the pair of them. It seems they had connections to Lux, and they were likely feeding your location to him. Which would explain how Eros found us.”

Guess that proves Phil suspected Lux like I theorized. And also, that I was sort of bait to confirm their suspicions.

Ah, the life of a Hunter.

Stealing a look at him, I kept my voice even. “And Nigel?”

Phillip harrumphed. “He’s likely unaware they were traitors, so you can rest easy, Maus.”

Maus? Yet another thing I’d have to Google when I found time after unpacking the shit from this entire series of unfortunate events.

“For now, he’s only a thorn in my side, the way the bastard has always been, but not in a way you have to worry about,” Phillip added, as if the very words left a bitter taste in his mouth.

What a grown-ass child, but I’d expect nothing less at this point.

I breathed a small sigh of relief, glad that Nigel hadn't been aware they'd betrayed us, but the Austrian was quick to add, "But now he and the others are compromised. Not that it matters anymore."

I watched the other Hunter head the direction of the helicopter. Before we reached it, its blades started to spin, preparing for flight. Confused, I followed, not sure what Phillip meant by his last statement.

I noticed Grams was now in the cockpit, already deducing she'd be the one taking us to wherever they planned to go. She was an experienced pilot and could operate a long list of transportation vehicles. It would be easier to say there were very few things she didn't know how to operate.

It was a relief to have her back. Grams was my rock, but everything had gotten so complicated, I didn't really know how I felt when it came to the deadly huntress who raised me under the guise of simply killing vampires.

Simply killing vampires, the good ol' days.

What I did know was that my powers were beyond imagination and far too dangerous for any one person to wield. Yet, for some reason I sensed I was learning to control them. It wasn't really clear how or why I thought so, but the same way I always knew what occurred when I did use them—those little theories—I knew I'd gotten better at summoning the chaotic power within.

Still, the more support I had from people I trusted, the easier it was to navigate this shitty minefield of realities and uncertainties.

I was curious to find out what Phillip discovered from what we stole from the archives, assuming he'd managed to keep it. Which, if they'd gotten away, I suspected they probably had.

To my befuddlement, the helicopter started to lift off the ground and ascend into the sky without us. I hurried after it, coming to a slow stop when it was clear we wouldn't be joining the rest of them wherever they planned to go.

“Wait, why are they leaving without us?!”

Phillip's sneaky smile met my next glance. “From here, it's just you and me, mein Schatz.” Then, kneeling, he offered his back to me like I should automatically figure out what absolute bullshit he was on about. “Come on, V.”

“Come on, what? What the fuck are you doing right now?”

“Giving you a piggyback ride, obviously. You don't know where we're going, and you might hide it well, but you're weak. I can tell. So this just makes things easier.”

Unfortunately, I was weak. My legs shook, my head was woozy, and I was seconds away from collapsing. All signs pointed to too much power use, and I'd be lucky if I lasted any longer on my own two legs. But that didn't mean I wasn't going to fight him about it.

“The fuck it does!” I folded my arms across my chest, and Phillip heaved a great sigh.

“So you'd rather just hang out here until Lux deigns a reason to return?”

Suddenly uncomfortable, I swallowed my pride and climbed onto the Austrian's back. “You're a fucking asshole to do this to me when I haven't any way to argue.”

Phillip's happy laughter reached my ears—a sound I'd missed so much it made me smile against my will. “Hold on tight, maus. Wrap those strong, skull-crushing thighs around my waist and press that erotically soft body into my back like you missed me.”

When I went to smack him, the Austrian captured my wrist and kissed my open palm. It paralyzed me when those sinfully soft lips caressed my sensitive skin, dredging up feelings that hadn't any business surfacing after I'd been held hostage and forced to kill people I considered friends, then unceremoniously reunited with the grandmother I'd been so sure was killed at some stage.

"You jerk—"

"Hold on tight, pet," Phillip whispered, his voice thick with sinful insinuation. I'd know that bedroom inflection anywhere. Bouncing me into place, he wrapped his large hands intimately around my thighs, grasping. "And try not to rub up against me too much, yeah? Even I don't have that much willpower."

What the actual fuck...

I let out a sound of protest before we were flying across dry, cracked earth so fast the world around us moved in slow motion.

Chapter 19

Dummkopf in Love

Phillip

The second V was drugged and taken, my worst fears were realized. I'd failed to protect her the same way I failed with everyone I cared for. And if I didn't act fast, I'd lose her. Which wasn't an option.

I refused to let her go.

I'd been so concerned with whether or not I should love her that I forgot how swiftly the ginger-haired spitfire could be taken away, and regret sat in my chest for the entire week we organized and tracked Lux to his secret desert location. A week where friends became foes as Sloan and I hurriedly pored over the documents and files we'd stolen from the archives.

I had left Blood Slayer, knowing Lux would want to use it to find me. The arrogant prick would think a little abracadabra magic might work on my favorite weapon, but it wouldn't. Blood Slayer would never betray its owner, and I made damn sure that it'd find its way to her side; only to later hear Sloan had given V a special tracking

ring on some fairytale date they shared, and my efforts were moot.

I wanted to hate him, and I did greatly dislike how he found a way to tie himself with her in ways I never could, but the only person I could truly hate in that moment was myself. I should've told V I loved her; that I would die for her, kill for her, burn this world to the fucking ground to be with her, and that I no longer hesitated when it came to her.

My jaded heart only beat for her.

I'd make a proper arse out of myself with nothing but sweet words if it meant I could have just one more chance to be with her. I'd say fuck all to the world and tell whoever listened that I was smitten and shamelessly her slave.

I didn't give a fuck.

If by some act of whatever deity was listening she was safe, I'd make bloody sure to love her to every extent of the word the second she was back in my arms. I'd give her whatever she wanted, however she wanted it.

Lux was the sort of clever bastard with a black heart that, while he may have kept her alive long enough to get whatever information he sought, which was likely what her powers did and how to replicate them if the information we received was accurate—and it was—he'd make damn sure she didn't live beyond those purposes. He couldn't risk it, not when V's mere presence gave hope to those rebelling from the Organization.

Many had already secretly defected. Far more than I was aware existed. With the information we obtained, a list of over a hundred defectors was among it, many of whom I suspected but could never confirm.

Rose was on the list, the wily old fox.

Unsurprisingly, the Organization was tracking their movements and attempting to subjugate them through pointed allegiance tactics. But quite a few on the list I recognized as being “killed in action,” which meant they were executed by the Organization because they were unable to sway them.

And from what I learned thanks to a few informants, one who helped us escape with our lives when Lux attacked and the Organization hadn't caught onto it yet, they operated with a secret code and were quietly organizing for the day when V fulfilled the supposed prophecy foretold to end the Organization's reign.

The known defectors on the list were aware and moving carefully without alluding to the rest, so the Organization had already lost their edge.

But one thing was for sure, Lux would kill V before an organized rebellion could take place. The information we recovered indicated there was a known work-around with her abilities. They'd developed a two-part serum to shut down her regenerative abilities and magic. Once she was sufficiently paralyzed and unable to fight back, they could decapitate her and end her life.

Upside was I could counteract their serums by creating a reverse serum to both, like with the one that shut down our vampire blood. It wouldn't take very long to figure out with my propensity towards chemical genius, but I'd need to get V to safety before I spent any time preoccupied with lab work.

What I hadn't expected was to come to this highly guarded facility, ready to kill everyone in sight and get my lost love back, only for V to have already done all that and more. I'd hazard a guess by saying she likely used her chaotic power to escape. And by the smell of smoke on her clothing, she'd burned the facility to the ground and destroyed all evidence with it.

Aside from the security footage, whatever experiments or information they had on her burned with the rest. The clever lass dealt a deadly blow to Lux's operation, and he'd need time to recuperate the loss and explain away the sudden departure from his responsibilities.

But most surprising was the blood dripping from Blood Slayer, clearly after use, as she walked from the exit, red hair glistening in nothing but sunlight and gorgeous eyes a vibrant red glow. It wasn't the first time I'd seen the color change in her eyes, but for some reason, its deadly beam had unsettled me greater than any time before it.

Still, V was beautiful in spite of being a hostage for over a week. Her powerful eyes found mine, and I'd never fought so hard to keep my hands to myself. But with Rose already taking the young woman into her arms, I spent several minutes trying to wrap my head around the sword choosing her.

Never in its history had it chosen another owner while its first master was still its decided master. When it came back to me like always the moment V tossed it to me, it felt like the act of my special sword taking both of us as its master was confirmation our fates were connected. Hope unlike I'd ever felt burrowed into my heart.

Not one to get romantically poetic, I couldn't help but think, "She was always meant to be mine."

One look at Sloan solidified that my longtime mate understood the gravity of the sword choosing her and I both at the same time. The despondent sadness was in his expression when the usually aloof Hunter turned and headed for the helicopter, somehow smaller with his shoulders sunk down and his head dropped.

But as the rest of the group left us, I reverted back to the old Phillip tactics. I struggled to say what I truly wanted to say. Instead, I taunted and teased her. I acted

out like a bloody child, relishing her petulant sighs and grumbling compliance.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 2:45 am

As the saucy lass's soft body pressed warmly into my back, the desperation to kiss her, to fuck her, to hide her from the world and steal away to a place only she and I could share had never been stronger.

I spent the entire last week regretting every move made that led to her capture. I'd gotten cocky and forgotten the strength of the enemies I'd gathered throughout the years. Ones who didn't play by the rules and didn't negotiate. Ones who were willing to torture and kill without asking questions.

And I spent just as long trying to figure out why I dragged my feet and stayed away. Why I thought loving her would ever be wrong or the worse thing I could do. Why I ever considered letting anyone else be the one by her side.

I was a fucking dummkopf, and I didn't deserve her, but I'd spend every day becoming someone who did. Because, frankly, I couldn't live without her anymore. I'd make an absolute arse of myself doing whatever it took to convince V that only I could love her like this.

Sloan was a good bloke, one who deserved more, but V was mine. She was mine from the very first moment we met.

If I genuinely thought that V would do away with her vengeance, I might spend a little more time convincing her to tell the world to piss off and live free from all others. But the woman I loved was someone who deeply cared for more than herself, and I'd likely only get myself the boot if I suggested abandoning our agenda.

Only One Thing Left to Say

After days spent traveling around in non-sensical patterns, using a multitude of different human transportation methods, we finally made it to Germany.

There were a few moments when the Austrian's eyes would linger a breath too long on my lips, but for the most part, Phillip was unusually determined to get the two of us to where we needed to go.

I'd never admit how disappointed I was that he hadn't kissed or really even touched me over the last few days. I expected him to be all hands and lips after everything we'd been through. I'd even hinted to the jerk a few times that I was ready to be enslaved to his clever fingers and thrusting hips, but not even once did he do anything about it.

Oblivious asshole...

Either he was too goddamn focused on getting the hell out of dodge—not that I could blame him—or the Austrian was second-guessing that little clandestine moment where our bodies merged and we forgot about all the shit going wrong between us. I certainly hoped it was the former. I couldn't deal with another cat-and-mouse game with the love allergic Hunter. Not when I'd never been so desperate to live like it was my last day on Earth and be with him, body and soul, regardless of what tomorrow brought.

Tossing my bag onto a nearby table, I gave the underground bunker a quick onceover. From what I could see, there was only one bed, a small kitchenette area, and the rest of the room was filled with everything one could need for lab experiments. I eyed the man who'd been the bane of my existence since our eyes met in my high school Biology class.

Phillip was unloading a pack of different things, mostly weapons. His hair was styled back away from his face with product that smelled like everything good in the world. Some of his gorgeous black hair came loose around his eyes as he vigorously parsed through his belongings.

Calm down there, sparky. We only just got here.

Finally, he found his ridiculously tiny laptop. A thin sheen of sweat collected on the gorgeous bad boy's brow, and I watched a bead travel down his face and stop to hang out like a bad friend on his strong jaw. I'd never been so envious of something in all my life.

I want to lick his sweat away and watch him squirm.

Before I could tear my eyes away from the enticing meal that was my partner, Phillip's magnetic gaze swept over to me, and my spine straightened the second his lips twitched upwards in an ungodly sexy way. "Planning to stand there all day, lass?"

Lifting my chin, I motioned to the noticeably one-person-appropriate quarters. "This seems a little small for the two of us, especially considering you're a mountain troll."

Palming his gorgeous hair back into place, Phillip chuckled a little before glancing at the bed. That one look of his before his luminous arctic blues slid back over to me did things to my pulse I'd nearly forgotten about.

When he set down one of his daggers on the metal table, it clacked loudly, sending my heart into a tizzy, giving me totally away to the other Hunter. But I didn't have time to berate myself before Phillip was in front of me, his size dwarfing mine.

The black shirt he wore stretched over his pecs like he'd washed it one too many

times and now it was two sizes too small. Bet the bastard did it on purpose so I'd look thirstier than I actually was. His pierced nipples were distracting, and I licked my lips like I was about to have dinner.

Nothing but meat on tonight's menu.

The lame pun practically told itself.

I'm shameless and punny.

My eyes strayed a little too long to trace each strong line of his torso, and I internally bemoaned how I was pretty much a thirsty bitch without his help. I struggled to recover as the other Hunter leaned in, the gleam of his face piercings catching my eye before I was boxed into the wall by a pair of massive arms and a door-wide chest.

Holy fuck!

"I'd argue it was just right, hmm, Goldilocks?"

I scoffed, suddenly dry in the mouth. "Goldilocks didn't have to share it with a tattooed giant with sticky hands, did she?"

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 2:45 am

His throaty laughter, the seductive musk of his cologne, and his invitingly minty breath made it hard to keep still and stand my ground. “You’ve never complained about these sticky hands before. Why bother pretending now?”

I’d spent days trying to get back into his arms. I promised myself once I did, I’d face him head-on and tell him the truth. I’d tell him I wanted to figure out what this thing between us was, and it was time he put up or shut up because I deserved better than to be led around by the nose, like some sort of child who didn’t know how to make decisions for themselves.

But when I looked up, finally ready to lay into him with all the courage I’d mustered since I first thought I lost him, I was met with an expression that immediately stole any words I wanted to say to him. Phillip’s hand was on my face, and the look he offered me was the same kind of determination he wore in a fight. I was suddenly very afraid of what he might say to me.

Would he reject me now after all we’d been through? After I’d finally decided to make him more than a fuck buddy or sexual palate cleanser? Would I be forced to stay in tight quarters with a man who didn’t want me anymore?

“I love you,” the other Hunter uttered, his voice the softest whisper. “I want to be with you, V. No more games. I refuse to run away from what this is, and please let it not be too late. I’m begging you—I can’t live without you, and I know I’m not worthy.” His voice cut out, but then he added, “But I promise to become someone worthy of you, even if I have to make a proper arse of myself to do it. Even if it means you make all the rules, you call all the shots, and you lead me around like your fateful pup.”

All I saw for seconds was Phillip on all fours with a leash around his neck.

New kink unlocked!

But then I realized the smile on my face was sending mixed messages because it wasn't the smile of a woman in awe over a love confession, it was the smile of someone devising a terrible fate for another person. Of course, that wasn't totally off the mark since I absently wondered if I could order a leash off Amazon, or did it need to be from a specialty store?

The Austrian offered me a saucy smirk, and I tried not to swoon. "Are you trying to tell me that I haven't seen proper arse yet? I was so sure—" I started to argue, but Phillip didn't let me finish.

His mouth covered mine and our bodies merged roughly, his oversized frame painting mine up against a cold cement wall. The Austrian barely gave me time to breathe—not that I needed to—because his tongue was everywhere inside my mouth, tracing every ridge, every tooth, and his hands didn't waste time tearing through my clothes.

If I hadn't been so eager to be naked, I would've lectured the brute about another pair of clothes destroyed because he couldn't be patient enough for me to take them off like a normal fucking person. Instead, pieces of them hung around my bare chest and stomach as Phillip worked his way down to his knees, kissing and licking along the way.

My breath came hot and fast when he ripped through my shorts and nibbled my sensitive flesh over my underwear. I sunk fingers into his hair, mesmerized by the sight of his impatient mouth kissing and tasting every patch of moon-white flesh that met his eyes.

“Phillip,” I gasped as his fingers sunk into me and his mouth followed, flicking his tongue against the one place that never failed to make me moan.

My head was a mess of words and feelings, but I needed to say the one thing I promised myself I’d say when I finally got the chance. “I love you, too.”

The other Hunter’s eyes were practically fire when he looked up, and then the Austrian hummed a happy little growl before guiding my leg over his shoulder. “I know, mein Schatz.”

What a jerk...

My thoughts were cut short by the intentional swipe of his tongue on my clit again before he sucked it into his mouth and flooded my hips and thighs with a thunderstorm of sensation.

“Now beg in that sweet, good girl voice so Phillip knows how much you love what his mouth does to you,” the other Hunter rumbled, the vibration of his voice doing unbelievable things to me from where he spoke between my legs.

So now we’re at the third-person part of this little bedroom adventure.

I giggled before moaning and latching onto his shoulder to anchor myself to something solid. “Fuck! Don’t make me laugh, you ass.”

Phillip squeezed my rear with one of his large hands, sneaking a look at me while his tongue lapped up the moisture between my thighs, the sight making the place he licked throb. “Mm, this is the only ass you need to bother yourself with, pet. Phillip’s order.”

“You’re so goddamn ridiculous,” I complained, groaning again when the Austrian

sunk another finger inside of me.

Phillip grinned to himself before getting to his feet and lifting me off the ground. “Yet, you missed me anyway, didn’t you, maus?”

I couldn’t help but smile, knowing that he often switched to playful banter in the bedroom when he was in an incredibly good mood. And it was as clear as day how happy the man was with one look. Even I had trouble giving him a tough time when he was the perfect definition of a kid who’d gotten exactly what he wanted for Christmas. His smile was so vibrant and blatant it made my cheeks unnaturally hot.

This all may have been a weird way for two people to finally say “I love you” for the first time, but it definitely felt very Phillip to me, and I’d missed how often he caught me off guard with his childishness.

“You’re soaking wet, little Hunter,” Phillip murmured thickly into my ear, then pressed a small kiss to my cheek.

Normally, being called little anything grated on my nerves, but in his bedroom voice, it was unbelievably hot.

“Not that I have any right to tease,” he added, bringing my hand to his pulsating cock as he freed it from his black denims. “I’ve been rock-hard for days, and just the smell of you right now is enough to set me completely off. I want you so bad, engel. I want to fuck you until your legs give out.”

A stuttered sigh escaped my mouth before I felt his hard length rub between my thighs, stroking lewdly against my soaking wet slit. The sounds alone made my stomach contract. I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist, taking control of our pace and overpowering the kiss like I’d dreamed of doing for weeks.

It felt like coming home.

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I'd been lost for so long that the mere smell of his inviting musk and feel of his strong body overwhelming mine was enough to put every fear out of my head. Every moment of uncertainty I struggled with was quieted the second I was in Phillip's arms. Simply knowing he was here—really, truly here—and knowing I could be with him like I'd always wanted to was the single greatest thing that had ever happened to me.

What does this make us, though?

Sure, it might seem like such a childish notion to be hung up over what to call him, but I hadn't considered we'd ever get to this stage of a relationship. I never considered the ooey-gooney label part of this dance we did.

I mean, this was Phillip we were talking about.

The dude clearly had a philophobia. Not that I blamed him after what he went through with his past love, but I definitely never considered there might be a future where there'd be an option for us. Honestly, it didn't matter what he let me call him. The mere fact that the other Hunter told me he loved me and he wasn't going to run from it anymore was enough.

Plenty, actually.

Call me easy, but I didn't give a single fuck what anyone else thought. The fact that Phil would be there and he loved me would always be enough for me.

My fingers wove into his luscious hair and my mouth nipped and slid against his with

eager abandon. It was enough to flip the Austrian's switch, and our tongues battled while he navigated his way over to the bed. The powerful muscles beneath my fingertips that were constricting against my thighs was a mood all on its own.

I'd missed the feel of Phillip's body moving against mine, and I even found the courage to whisper as much to the sauntering troll.

The impish smirk reached his glistening light eyes. Gently, he laid me out over the bed like I might break apart the second he let me go. Phillip's jaw tensed and his eyes closed, massive body hardening visibly. "If I hadn't known better, I might accuse you of being a Succubus, lass. I'm barely holding it together, you realize."

I'd never been so satisfied. It was usually me struggling to stay sane and in control. The fact that I could make someone like Phil fight himself made my lips tilt and heart flutter.

"Then I suggest you let it all go, Phil. Give in. Fuck me however you want. I'm all yours." I swallowed, dragging him closer by his neck and nibbling his ear. His chest contracted with a strong inhale, and the soft groan he let loose gave me such a powerful feeling. "All yours, asshole."

Phillip kissed me hard enough to nick my lip, the taste of blood mingling with the taste of Phil, and then he forced my legs open and settled between them. Clawing at his clothes, I finally got my revenge when I tore through his much-too-tight shirt, then his expensive jeans.

It was a rush to get him inside of me. Nothing felt more important than merging our two bodies into one and consummating this thing between us. Finally, sex meant something, and I couldn't wait to experience what sex between two people in love felt like.

I kissed wherever I could reach, sinking teeth into the older man's flesh and celebrating every moan and groan I dragged out of the other Hunter. Phil's hand closed around my throat just before he thrust his entire length into me, knowing exactly what angle got the greatest pleasure. Reacting, I arched as the weight of his body collided with mine.

There weren't words that'd come close to describing how every part of me was somehow complete, or how much love came into my voice when his heat and mine became impossible to tell apart. All I could say was that all those love stories made total sense to me now. I finally comprehended the depth of feeling shared between two people when love and sex perfectly melded together.

"I love you," I whispered, tears breaking away from my eyes.

Normally I'd be mortified, but I didn't give two shits how weak crying made me look. I wanted Phillip to hear the words again. I wanted him to know how much I cared for him; how little I could express such a big, explosive feeling inside my chest.

He's finally here to stay. Truly.

Phillip's intense gaze connected with mine, and his thumbs swept through tears on both sides of my face. The small lift in his mouth set my body on fire. It might be missed by someone else, but that smile was so full of feeling, so full of intense, life-altering love that I sensed every bit of it the minute it appeared.

Kissing me hotly, Phillip groaned and slammed his hips forward so hard I arched and gasped. He clung to me, thick arms wrapped tightly around my body, and pinned me to him. His movements grew uncharacteristically crazed and unhinged, like the Austrian worried this was all some kind of dream.

To be fair, I had trouble believing this was real life, especially after it felt like I'd

never get what I yearned so desperately to have. Like my luck would serve nothing but bullshit up on a silver platter to me now and forever.

Phil's deep voice was hoarse and unnaturally faded every time he whispered my name, and it gave me the oddest sensation in my belly, so I clung to him and focused on the heat flooding my hips.

I was already close before we'd even started, so it didn't take very long for Phillip to drive me over the edge. Coming so hard my vision failed, I screamed his name and chased the bliss-induced high with my hips.

The other Hunter shuddered and stiffened against me, and then warmth flooded my insides. When I moved to free myself, Phillip's mouth came down hard on me and he rocked his hips forward again, never pausing for a second.

Shuddering, I fought the overstimulation. "Wait—"

"Not now, not ever, V. I'll never wait again," Phillip growled throatily. "You're stuck with me forever, lass."

I would've smiled, but Phillip was already ramming into me, my legs hooked around his arms.

And for hours, he didn't let me go.

No matter how much I begged for a second to gather my thoughts, the Austrian was always either touching or kissing away my complaints. Chasing me all over the surface of the bed. Behind me, sinking himself in over and over again in powerful smacks. Forcing me to sit on his lap, legs straddling him, head dropped back as he drove up into me, touching places inside me I didn't know existed. On his back with my hips working over his, keeping a rough grip on my thighs, lust-saturated voice

encouraging every roll, every rock, every swivel.

You name it, we did it.

Even knowing one word from me, our safe word, would stop it all, I didn't dare utter it. I couldn't. Because as much as I complained and tried to flee, I loved the way he never let me go. Not for a single second.

Chapter 21

Let's Talk a Little Chaos

"So, you come in looking like a felon to my actual Biology class and only now decide to dress like a real scientist when no one's watching?"

"You're watching," Phillip corrected, and I swallowed the uncomfortable lump in my throat, far too aware of that fact myself.

The other Hunter explained earlier that he was creating a reverse serum for what they used on me, shortly after Phil stabbed my arm with a needle to take my blood. Lux would need time to regroup, seeing how we took all his scientists, including the sister who helped me escape, and burned his operation to the ground, leaving nothing but rubble to prove it was ever there.

But Phillip was finally telling me everything, like the fact that there were whispers of Eros being on the hunt again. Which was such great news when our encounter nearly killed Phillip the last time.

But a part of me wanted the Dark Fae asshole to come at me so I could test this new

control I seemed to have over my power. Or really, to put an end to a terrible reign of a Dark Fae with sadistic serial killer tendencies for anyone Phillip remotely cared about.

Of course, the snarky elite bastard presently playing scientist with my blood wasn't convinced I truly had any control at all over my power. But when I was in Lux's lab, something was different. I couldn't explain how I knew. I just did.

Since Grams was back in the picture, I was confident Phillip would get annoyingly careful around me. From the way he explained it, while we were on the run, Sloan, Kris, Grams, and a few other Hunters on the Organization's hit list were gathering troops.

So, my only mission was to stay alive.

Imagine that. A teenage vampire hunter, turned enigma, turned every top-level bad guy's favorite target, turned the Organization's Most Wanted only had to survive long enough to lead the march on the bastards who created us.

No big deal.

Phillip also regaled the tale of his little frolic with Cash. It was evident Cassius was ready to flee this realm for his. But for some reason, Phillip had the Dark Fae on a tight leash—leashes being our new thing and all—and Cassius wouldn't be far away wherever we went.

Which begged another question, why?

Phillip looked up from his work, which I'd watched with nothing short of captivated interest for the last few hours. The usual smirk hung on his lips as his hands worked so quickly a human eye couldn't follow. "Believe it or not, I much prefer that felon

look,” the other Hunter added with a gleam in his eye that said he was on a naughty train of thought and I better be careful with what I said next.

The way the pale-eyed Austrian easily got my heart going was a talent all on its own.

“Yeah. No one here is surprised you’d say that.”

“You’re the only one here though, mein Schatz,” was his quick, entirely too sensual retort, and my pulse thrummed loudly in my ears.

It always felt like I was one word short of jumping his bones, but we had more important work to do, so I changed the subject instead. “What did Donna mean when she said I was a Chaos Fae?”

It was the first time in hours Phillip paused in his work. “She mentioned that?”

“You knew?” I countered, throat tight. “What is it?”

Phillip’s luminescent ocean eyes fell away from mine, and then he clicked his tongue and removed his latex gloves. “It’s complicated,” he finally muttered.

I’d never seen Phillip look the way he did when he uttered those words, and it was hardly confidence inducing.

Fidgeting, I circled the desk, which was over encumbered with the mad scientist’s current experiments, and took my place by the other Hunter’s side. When I looked up at him, the Austrian’s eyes finally wandered over to mine. “You’re going to have to start trusting me, Phil. I deserve to know everything there is to know, same as you. I’m a Hunter first, and I doubt it could get worse than it already has.”

Turning, Phillip took my face in his hands and our foreheads met. “Why must you

pry into everything? Why can't we just stay here in our little bubble and live out our lives together?"

"Um, first of all, you'd literally lose your mind if you couldn't stab something with that lame-named sword." Signs that the other Hunter found me amusing tilted his mouth, and I couldn't help but smile as well. "Second, you're not the 'live simple' kind of person and neither am I," I rebuked, trying to smother out the anxiety taking hold of my body. "So, what is it about Chaos Faes that's giving you that heart-wrenching look, dear Phillip?"

Clicking his tongue but smiling like a little boy, Phillip pinched my cheeks. "Don't patronize me, V."

"Oh, what, because that's your job?"

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Phillip snickered happily, and I tried to hide a smile. “I missed you, more than words or actions could ever express, mein Schatz.”

Mirroring his hold, I brushed my thumbs across his strong face and admired how beautiful the world’s deadliest Hunter was. “I missed you too, you jerk. But I won’t be distracted by sweet uttered nothings. You should know better by now.”

Sighing loudly, Phillip bent down and kissed me so softly I almost didn’t know how to react. Then pulling away, he wrapped his bulky arms around my shoulders and held me close. “Pure Chaos Fae are ancient and extinct.”

“Of course they are.”

“And their power is destructive. It becomes impossible to control and darker the longer they wield it. It’s an unprecedented and far-too-powerful ancient magic, V. One that hasn’t been seen in over two millennia.”

Naturally.

“And Cassius thinks the only way to control it is to cross over to the Fae realm and have it sealed and bound by some no-name Fae with the ability to do it.”

“Something tells me that doing so would mean throwing ourselves to the wolves,” I commented offhandedly.

“It wouldn’t be the smartest move, no.”

Plus, Cash wasn't the easiest to trust, even bound by Phillip's Truth Bracelet thingy. He could opt to withhold information, hence avoiding the "lie" part of the contract. Cassius already proved to be a sneaky devil, and I wouldn't put it past him to find a loophole.

Not only that, but the dude would run at the first sign of trouble if he wasn't worried about Phillip getting to him first—and more specifically, if he thought Phillip was as good as dead.

Cash was the truest form of coward.

Thinking, I considered our options. "And there's no guarantee such a thing would work, either. It's a shot in the dark, and one we can't afford to try right now." We'd be at the mercy of a brand-new realm, and one that used magic better than I ever could. "I'm not ready to take on a new realm of shitheads, and leaving this one could put our own people in danger. The Organization and Lux will double-down, no doubt, and I can't be the reason that our friends are picked off one by one while I'm playing Fae realm explorer."

"I hate to agree with you—"

"Why do you hate agreeing with me, you asshole?" I cut in sassily.

Chuckling, Phillip continued, "Because it's the same conclusion I came to myself, and I really hoped you'd argue the latter, lass."

His deep, husky voice echoed in the ear pressed against his chest where I detected the uptick in his heartrate. Phillip was a master of control, so the fact that he let his guard down around me was enough to solidify the trust he was finally putting into our relationship.

Despite the dire-as-shit talk, I was on cloud nine.

Slipping my arms around him, I hugged the oversized jerk closer, trying to digest what he said but also knowing I never truly would. “But there’s one thing that changes it up. I’m a genetically created mix.”

“You are.”

“Which means there’s no telling what I can or can’t do,” I argued, finally peering up at him. And I was so glad I did, because a half second later, Phillip offered me the sweetest smile yet. One born out of pride and absolute awe.

Kissing me again gently, Phillip took strong hold of my jaw and stared at me with fiery intensity, his gaze mere inches from mine. “Why is it that you know just what to say to give me hope? What’s this power you have over me, maus? It’s terrifying.”

“Things can terrify you? That’s what’s truly terrifying, my dude,” I snarked.

“We’ll do it your way,” Phillip said to my eternal surprise.

“Phil ceding ground? Is this a dream?” I mocked with a gasp.

Pinching my nose spitefully before smacking my butt hard enough to get a sound out of me, Phillip put on a new pair of gloves and got back to his work. “It’ll take a few days to figure out this reverse serum, and I have a few other gadgets to make for our next little excursion, so go sit in the corner like a good little girl and let me work.”

I saluted him sarcastically. “Aye, aye, el cap-ee-tan!”

Over two weeks passed, and finally the mad scientist was ready to leave this claustrophobia-inducing box of chemical fumes and sultry temptation. He’d

successfully created a counter-active agent for the shit they used to paralyze my abilities. Cleverly, he made them into little dissolvable pills I simply put under my tongue, and thankfully the effects were quicker to work than the syringe versions.

Phillip then did the same with the reverse serum.

It was interesting how hot it made me to think about my genius scientist partner creating the very things that could save my life when push came to shove. Plus, I could carry more on me with these new tablets, and I kept bottles of them in several reachable pockets.

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Equipping the usual assortment of enemy-conquering weapons and accessories, I took a moment to admire the Hunter silhouette I struck in the only reflective surface inside this hellbox I'd called home for a couple of weeks.

My naturally wavy red hair was pulled up into a neat ponytail, which sported several intricate braids, giving a totally unobstructed view of my freckled face. My hazel eyes glistened in a way completely unnatural for a human, and I idly wondered what they looked like when I was in the midst of a fight.

Did they really turn red?

Suddenly, Phillip's much larger frame outlined mine. His mesmerizing azure stare captured my gaze in the mirror.

The Hunter's luscious dark hair was gelled back away from his eyes, which were lined with dark black eyeliner. The usual piercings were in place, as was the accessories he used against an assortment of foes. He'd worn the usual jacket, probably jam-packed with all his favorite knick-knacks; inventions that overpowered some of the strongest enemies we could face.

That was Phil's greatest power, cleverness.

I absently traced the lines of my gorgeous partner's tattoos with my gaze, starting just under his strong jaw and spreading out over every visible expanse of flesh before disappearing under a thin, black tank top.

Before I realized what was happening, Phillip had a hand around my throat. It was

neither aggressive nor threatening, merely demanded I listen carefully. His bedroom eyes glimmered before he bent and hovered his mouth close to my ear. “Trust no one,” was all he uttered, his other hand locking on my hip. “Especially not Cash.”

Swallowing, I nodded. “I got it.”

Dropping a kiss on my neck, Phillip let loose a breath. “I mean it, V. Eros is tracking our steps and has very likely gotten to Cash and a long list of others if my gut is right—and it’s rarely wrong.”

Surprised to hear it, I gawked openly. “Then why keep that asshole close?”

“Because it’s time to face off with that Dark Fae bastard on our terms. It’s time to end this little game he’s playing,” Phillip growled, eyeing me in our reflection. “I think you’re ready. But if you aren’t, now’s the time to say so.”

I almost couldn’t believe it at first. Phillip finally trusted me. I mean, truly trusted my abilities and regarded me like the Hunter I’d become. Words couldn’t express how amazing it felt to be finally seen for who and what I was. Not someone in need of protection, but the weapon I’d been trained to be. Someone who was capable of tearing down an entire operation of Hunters bent on killing me.

Fist clenched and heart in my throat, I nearly stumbled over the words I wanted to say. “I-I am! I really am. The bastard needs to be taken down, and he’ll be a good test of my new control.” Turning around and looking the Austrian in the eyes, I offered him my most confident smile. “The two of us are a force to be reckoned with, and I don’t think that sly asshole stands a chance,” I added emphatically.

The other Hunter cradled my chin and smirked in a way that always hit me right in the hips. “You’re right. We are, mein Schatz. And he’ll think he’s the one catching us on the run, but I have a plan that will trap the bastard long enough to put an end to

this little dance of death. Do you trust me?”

Always. With every part of me. With my life.

Letting loose a shuddering breath, I nodded. “I do.”

“Then I want you to do what you do best,” Phillip started, a devious glint in his pale blue eyes, “Use that adorable innocence everyone underestimates to convince Cash you want to go to the Fae realm and mean ol’ Phillip won’t let you.”

Confused, I tilted my head.

Phillip’s tattooed hands slipped into my hair and he bent down, ghosting his soft lips over mine. The sudden spark of pleasure nearly distracted me away from what we were talking about, but Phillip quickly spoke up and got us back on topic. “If I’m right about Eros, then he’s using Cash to get close to us. Cash will want to get you alone, out of my protection. And that’s what you’ll do, lass. You’ll follow him right into Eros’s trap. But it’ll be a trap inside a trap, yeah?”

What a clever bastard this man was.

“The old switch-a-roo,” I commented, laughing. “So, you’re trusting me to go up against both if things go pear-shaped?”

Phillip’s eyes dropped to my lips, and I could tell he wanted to kiss me. I waited for it, but the Austrian spoke again instead. “You’ll have Blood Slayer. It won’t go awry. I won’t let it. This will work.”

Usually, his confidence made me roll my eyes and toss something sassy at him, but today it was just what the situation called for. Still, I was nothing if not consistent about my teenage sassiness.

My lips lifted into a sly grin. “You just want me to touch your sword.”

Phillip’s eyes danced with amusement and his jaw worked, clearly fighting the urge to outright cackle. “Maybe just a little bit.”

Licking my lips, I eyed the sword strapped to his back. “Thank you for trusting me,” I said to the other Hunter’s visible surprise.

Then his hand locked around my neck and the Austrian kissed me so hard I didn’t breathe at all for several minutes, tongue caught up with his in a sensual dance.

Forehead pressing against mine after kissing me silent, Phillip’s jaw strained and his eyes closed tightly. “No. If anyone should be saying thank you, it’s me, V. You didn’t have to give me another chance. Fuck knows I don’t deserve it...or you. But I’ll make damn sure you know it wasn’t wasted.” His eyes opened, beaming in the lights from above. “You’re my partner. And fuck all if it makes me sound like a proper simp by saying so, but you’re a hundred times the Hunter I’ll ever be.”

A simp!

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I nearly lost it to hysterics, finding the word impossibly adorable on a man who looked like he'd just served ten years in the big house.

I'd always wondered about this so-called "gap" Kate always raved about when a dude looked like a criminal but was sweet and kind to his lady of choice. Honestly, I never really got why she was so obsessed with it. She was the girl who chased down guys who looked like they'd taken a loan out at a tattoo parlor, but now I got it. It made sense. I was addicted to the gap in Phillip's terrifying appearance and his sultry sweetness.

Call me a convert, because I was totally a gap girl now.

I groaned, hands on the other Hunter's face and eyes set on his. "How fucking dare you, dude. How dare you make me want to throw you down and fuck you right here when we have a Dark Fae to catch."

Phillip laughed huskily. "There's time."

"Oh, shut up," I retorted, smirking. Then I stole the sword right off his back and aimed it at him. "There's no time like the present, you beautiful jerk. Let's go trap us an old-as-fuck Dark Fae, hmm?"

Chapter 22

Friend of Cash

It wasn't very long after abandoning our hellbox home before the surreal luminosity

of the richest purple captured my gaze from a figure looming out ahead, waiting for us.

Here we go...

Cassius was leaned up against a tree, dark marks exactly how I remembered them on the cowardly Dark Fae. To be fair, those markings would be impossible to forget, seeing how they were my first introduction to the guy who abandoned my parents to their fate.

Cassius's gorgeous golden-hued flesh beamed in a weird-looking tunic over glossy black, body-tight pants. I didn't really know much about fashion, but the outfit looked weird enough to be ridiculously expensive. Which was the very reason I'd never understand fashion. Silver-blond hair with hidden pockets of lavender fell over a face that was annoyingly beautiful for someone who'd been a real thorn in our side.

His appearance would definitely claim the heart of every girl I went to school with. It just screamed the next member of BTS, and Kate would literally lose her fucking mind over him. I could just hear her now, shaking me bodily by the shoulders, trying to impart the intensity of her love, and scream-whispering something along the lines of "That's my future husband!"

Despite it being Cash we talked about, it still made me smile against my will to think about Kate's energy running over the Dark Fae and taking him hostage until death do they part. I mean, I'd never let it get that far, but it was plenty funny to think about terrifying the supernatural Fae with the strong power of the very human Kate when I let her at him.

Just a little.

Just to make him squirm for a second.

I sensed the absence of the air's movement around the overly casual Dark Fae, whose eyes moved over my body with overt curiosity as if seeing me for the very first time, and I instantly recognized he had some sort of protective barrier around his body.

"Hmm," the tall and lithe Fae suddenly vocalized, taking a few steps my direction. His purple eyes darted over to Phillip, clearly expecting my partner to intervene, but when the Austrian didn't, Cash's visible interest radiated in his cat eyes. "It's definitely noticeable to any magic-user she might cross that she's something else entirely. The energy she puts into the air is unmistakably strong and dangerous."

The Fae's seductive purple eyes traveled over my body in a way that made me want to smack him down with a punishing blow. "Andsheis right here, so talk to me, Dark Fae, not to Phillip."

The bastard had the gall to look over at the other Hunter for confirmation, and I quietly seethed.

As a woman and a Hunter, I was well-acquainted with misogyny and how to effectively deal with it, both human and supernatural versions, but I wasn't in any position to punish it today. The upwards slide of Phillip's lips told me he knew it all, and he was definitely enjoying himself over it.

Jerk.

But after declaring our mutual love, it almost appeared as if the Austrian was constantly covered in a glow. It took all of my training not to drool and stare at him every second I was permitted to. If we were a normal couple, this was about the time when I'd fall into his arms, tell him he was hot, and kiss the smirking bastard for all he was worth.

Today, he was still all sparkly and shit, but we'd reverted back to the usual poke-and-

prod banter he and I were prone to using with each other. I'd finally landed me a Grade-A criminal hottie, and I couldn't even brag about it to anyone. So much for romance. We barely classified as a couple most days.

"She's the boss," the Austrian commented sarcastically.

I flipped a dagger in my hand, eyeing my partner. "You're a real asshole, Phillip."

Cash watched the exchange, his eyes flicking from Phil to me with growing interest.

Landing the final verbal blow, Phillip bowed, arms out like an absolute bastard and his ethereal eyes capturing mine with an emotion I'd know anywhere. "If you say so, lass."

I clicked my tongue and looked away, putting on a show for a one-person audience.

Despite the annoyance, our bickering was done on purpose. Of course, Phillip being true to his craft found great ways to rouse the true teenage rage from me. He was nothing if not an obnoxiously all-in sort of dude when it came to a mission. Every little remark, every snip and complaint, was meant to disarm Cash and make him believe we were already at each other's throats. Last thing we wanted was to make our relationship seem like it was all smooth sailing.

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Although, that'd never be true of us. Phillip lived for getting under my skin, and I lived for punishing him for it.

Even should the Dark Fae pick up on the sexual tension between us, he'd never believe that the love allergic Austrian would ever fall in love with some sassy teenager, and that worked in our favor.

It was also pretty damn hard not to give into the desire to continuously berate the pale-haired Fae, but I was given a mission, and I'd do it the way I had any other—with the skills I'd cultivated over the years. First, I'd be a little prickly. Then, I'd let the Dark Fae think I was warming up to him on some level. And finally, when he was effectively convinced I didn't totally hate his guts—which was the real obstacle here—I'd convince him to take me to the Fae cross-over spot under the cover of night to “seal my power.”

The true challenge was to give the man a reason to believe I hadn't any control over my powers and that I worried I'd hurt someone I cared about. Granted, that wasn't a far-off worry of mine, but I trusted my gut. It'd gotten me this far in life. It told me I had more control than what everyone believed.

Still, we'd need to find a way to give the impression it was out of control. That meant fighting something in Cassius's presence. Of course, Phillip already had a plan in place for that very occasion. Not far from here was a known vampire coven, a pretty powerful one seeing how it hadn't been dealt with yet. Two birds, one stone. We'd take out the problem coven while pretending my powers had become uncontrollable.

By burning the entire fucking place to the ground.

I barely contained my glee picturing Cassius's face when I went vampire loco with hellfire and Phillip's lame-named sword. It almost made it worth all the cozying up I'd be forced to do with a man who was planning to offer me on a silver platter to that bastard, Eros.

In our theatrical play of a woman scorned after a fight with her criminally sexy but very domineering partner, it would become painfully clear to Cash that there was trouble in paradise. From what Phillip said about Cassius, the coward capitalized on a woman in distress.

But really, don't they all?

To get back at Phillip for all the shit he'd put him through and to steal away his prize before hand-delivering it to the very bad, seriously psychotic Dark Fae, Eros, Cash would need to coax me to trust him and follow his lead. Being the innocent and vulnerable young woman I was, I'd hum and haw for a day or two before giving into his suggestion, all for the sake of the ones I loved. Then after taking a stroll through the woods with the sneaky bastard, Phillip would set the trap.

Apparently, all the new knick-knacks Phillip spent the last two weeks making were for that very event. And he was confident this would be the final hurrah for the vicious reign of the Dark Fae, Eros.

Well, that was the gist of it, anyway. I'd taken creative liberty to describe the numerous steps in our plan, but I preferred my dramatic version.

"Let's get moving," I demanded loudly, flicking skeptical eyes over to Cash. "We're sitting ducks out here, and I'd personally like to get out of this dark and depressing forest, thanks."

Cassius's pretty eyes glinted and his lips slid up. "Ladies first," he gestured politely.

I sensed the movement of his magic and glared spitefully at him. “Keep your magic to yourself. Unless you want me to cut something off you value in exchange, Dark Fae.”

The slits in Cash’s eyes thinned and the purple irises shined for a half-beat before he nodded. “Very powerful, indeed.”

“And one to keep her word,” Phillip added, smirking. “So I’d be careful not to test her patience. Take it from someone who’s been on the unfortunate end of it a time or two.”

Cassius chuckled lightly, clearly having fun with the idea, and then we started on our trek back to civilization.

To say I was surprised we hadn’t encountered some kind of assassin hired to take me out would be putting it lightly, but I imagined that Eros was keeping a close eye on our trio from somewhere nearby.

With what I knew about the elusive and terrifyingly strong Dark Fae, he wouldn’t want some assassin Lux hired to ruin his trap. Eros knew perfectly well how powerful the two of us were together, so he’d likely wait until he could get me alone before doing whatever it was he planned to do.

I eyed the sword strapped to Phillip’s back, remembering its weight in my hand as I sliced through two people I’d made the mistake of trusting.

It wasn’t that I regretted killing them—they hadn’t given me much choice in the matter—but the sword and their deaths were a reminder to never forget what I’d lose by getting too comfortable with my own limited view of the world and the people in it. So, I’d never underestimate what Cassius or Eros might do. I’d be ready at all times. But I’d move the way I’d been told to until there wasn’t any other choice but to

improvise.

Cassius always seemed to find a reason to look over his shoulder as we headed for town, finally finding a road to walk adjacent to in the forest, but he was quick to pretend he hadn't. Neither Phillip nor I reacted or made any mention of it, but we both noticed it was far too often even for a man on the run like he was.

Seeing how he was a crafty devil with escape, I seriously doubted it was because Cash thought he might get caught at any moment. No, it was the actions of a man fully aware he was being watched—and closely.

“So how many is it?” I asked out of nowhere, and both men comically stared at me in outright confusion. I sighed loudly and tapped my face, insinuating the marks on Cassius's. “How many did you kill to get all of those?”

Phillip tried unsuccessfully not to grin, and if Kate had been here, she'd admonish me in a mockingly sweet voice, “Oh my god, V, you can't just ask someone how many people they've killed!” Well, you know, if she wasn't totally oblivious to the world of supernatural fuckery literally at her doorstep every day, that is.

Cash absently touched his face, and then his eyes found mine. “More than I care to admit, little one.”

Phillip made a sound in his throat, knowing I was about to lay the man out for treating me like a child. But I couldn't choose violence today. Instead, I'd opt for sass.

“That's not an answer, old man,” I quipped.

The crestfallen face Cassius offered me immediately after the comment was reward enough for choosing the physical high ground and deep-diving into my teenage

ridicule.

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The Dark Fae self-consciously rubbed his face and fixed his clothes as if he worried I could see it all right there on his face and outfit, his age. Lucky for him, he still looked like a twenty-something boyband idol rather than the several-century-old supernatural creature he truly was.

But I'd never tell him so.

Phillip strolled a bit closer to me before wrapping an arm around my shoulders and leaning his much-too-gorgeous face in close. "Everyone is old compared to you, lass."

"Shut the fuck up before I give you the knee, grandpa," I threatened, the side of my mouth lifting.

Cassius took a moment to revel in Phillip's blatant chastisement, and when the Dark Fae covered his face, laughing and turning his head away, Phillip brazenly stole a kiss and nearly sent me face-planting into the dirt floor in shock.

I stumbled, catching the wink the saucy Austrian sent me before he put space between us and fingered through his hair like he hadn't done a goddamn thing. Even our flirting pissed me off, but it'd be a lie to say I wasn't having fun with it. Grumbling, I looked down to hide the smile on my lips.

Ugh, why am I so in love with this bastard?!

The hitch in the other Hunter's step suggested that Phillip was having the most fun right now, and I quietly plotted my revenge while tapping my face again and prying

harder at the Dark Fae. “Come on. Cough it up. How many?”

Cash sighed, defeated. “Maybe fifty...”

My partner cleared his throat, throwing the Fae a look. “Do you seriously believe I’d stand here while you boldly lie to my partner, Cash?”

The Dark Fae hesitated as I stared expectantly at him. “Maybe two hundred?”

“As in two hundred completely innocent people? Wow, you’re a fucking piece of work,” I remarked, not caring that it didn’t exactly sell the compassionate side of me.

Cassius was quick to retort. “I’m not making excuses, Hunter, but I didn’t really have a choice in a lot of those deaths. He used enchanted items I made with my magic, and so I was cursed by proxy.”

A convenient excuse, but just who is this ‘he’ person?

It was interesting to think they’d be marked as a substitute if it was their magic. That hadn’t been mentioned previously, and it intrigued me.

Phillip grunted, clearly not in agreement. “We all make choices, and you knew exactly who and what Eros was.”

Eros?

My partner stared at Cash, emphasizing his next comment. “Two hundred times over.”

Mad burn, Mr. Smith.

It never occurred to me that Cash might've worked with Eros. Though, his present predicament made more sense if that was the case—crossing paths with Phillip, becoming his informant, and being the first person the Austrian interrogated in regards to Eros's return—it was all starting to make sense now. The reason Phillip didn't believe Cash when he said he didn't know Eros returned was because, likely, the purple-eyed Fae still worked for that serial killer bastard, acting like a sort of spy for Phillip.

What a clever asshole my partner was.

I was a little curious what the Dark Fae could tell me about the dude who'd nearly killed me and the people I cared about, but I saw an opportunity to cozy up to the cowardly Fae and decided to take it.

Act sweet. Act compassionate. Don't laugh.

“Wait a second...so you didn't even kill half the people you're marked for? Then those are more Eros's marks than yours. Dude, that's pretty fucked,” I said, softening my tone.

My genius Hunter partner seemed to pick up on the direction I'd taken and sneered openly, falling perfectly into his usual character as an asshole who didn't give anyone a pass. As emotionally deficient as the man had been over the course of our relationship, it always came as a surprise when the Austrian cleverly reacted exactly how I needed him to on a mission.

Of course, he'd never needed to be smart in love relationships—seeing how Giselle was his first and last until me—so I conveniently blamed that and gave the gorgeous bastard a pass.

Cassius's lips twitched and his ethereal eyes jerked over to me, almost as if he

couldn't believe I was giving him the benefit of the doubt. "You might not believe it, but I've tried many times to get out from under Eros's thumb. There's a way to remove these marks, but I can't do it until after I'm free of him. Unfortunately, he's a very powerful man and I value my life, Hunter."

A way to remove the marks?

"Clearly," I countered. "But I get it. We all do what we can to survive. I'm sure I've done things for the Organization that puts me in that category, too."

Phillip cut in gruffly, "You're nothing like him. He chose to keep aiding and abetting that psychopath. He's only here because he's afraid of what I'll do to him, maus."

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Cash's mouth fell, and something about the Dark Fae's expression hit me in the chest. It reminded me of Nigel when he tried unsuccessfully to convince me that he was sorry for what he did. But I tried to remind myself that Phillip urged me not to trust Cassius, so I repeated it in my head until his expression no longer panged in my chest.

"It might not mean much now, but I am truly sorry about what happened to your parents, V," Cassius added, and my throat tightened with emotion.

Don't be swayed, V. He's playing you.

I took a solemn breath and nodded at the Dark Fae. "I don't blame you, I blame them, so we'll just leave it at that."

For the first time, the pale-haired Fae smiled so gently I nearly face-planted for the second time that day. "You really are too kind and I don't deserve it, but thank you for hearing out my apology, V."

Phillip's eyes caught mine, and I could hear his voice in my head saying "Don't trust anyone. Especially not Cash." But my gut was telling me something was off. I didn't detect a single lie in what he said, not in the entire time we'd spoken.

What if Phillip had it wrong? What if Cash wasn't the person my partner claimed he was?

The Trouble with Cash

“You Hunters justadorewalking from here to there, and literally everywhere. It’s maddening,” Cassius finally proclaimed petulantly. “Well, we civilized magical folk prefer faster means of transportation.”

Digging a hand into his pocket, Cash pulled out a tiny stone. To anyone, it looked like a river rock you’d find anywhere in the area. It wasn’t a fancy-looking gem like they typically used in movies, and I eyed it with curiosity.

Phillip leaned against a tree, arms crossed. “It’s maybe five miles to town at most, and you want to waste a precious transportation stone on it?”

I flicked my eyes over to Cash, whose mouth was pursed unattractively. “You forget, Hunter, I make these as easily as you do those little barbaric inventions of yours. I could summon a vehicle, but you made it perfectly clear I wasn’t permitted to, so this is the next best thing.”

Taking a car left us vulnerable to attack. We couldn’t move quietly or react effectively in one. Man-made things were also extremely susceptible to magical assaults, and it could lead to more harm than good using one. So, when given the choice, Hunters preferred to walk, flit, or a pairing of both. But unfortunately for Cash, he couldn’t flit like the two of us, so we were stuck with walkingfor the moment.

“I don’t trust wherever that stone will take us,” Phillip added decidedly, light eyes flicking over to mine. “So it’s the cuff or we walk.”

Cassius dropped his head back, sighing loudly in frustration. “Get on with it then, Hunter. My feet hurt, I’m hungry, and it feels too open out here.” Throwing out his arms like a child having a tantrum, the Dark Fae sent nothing but glaring rage at my

partner.

Pulling the familiar silver string out of his pocket, Phillip strode forward and wrapped the Truth Bracelet around Cassius's arms. Then, smirking, he asked, "Where does the stone go?"

Fae were hurt by iron, that little myth was true. Like I said, the supernatural world seemed pretty damn helpless when it came to metal in some form or another. Vampires, silver. Werewolves and their kin, gold. Fae-born, iron. The list went on and on.

So, Cassius was beyond lucky Phillip didn't use iron instead of the silver he chose for the Truth Bracelet. This chat would go a little differently if he had. Probably like a squealing pig running from slaughter, and the very thought of it gave me the most devilish smile yet.

Huffing dramatically, Cash looked square into Phillip's eyes. "The stone will take us to the town five miles away. Happy now, Hunter?"

Unwrapping the silver string from the Dark Fae's arm, a roguish smile tainted my sexy partner's mouth. "Quite happy, yes."

Rubbing his arms, Cash grumbled under his breath. "That shit stings every bloody time." After glaring at Phillip one more time, the Dark Fae beckoned me over with a hand. "Come, come. You'll need to be touching me for this to work, and I don't want any complaints about touching this disgusting Dark Fae, capiche?"

This saucy asshole is going to get himself smacked at some point. Mark my words.

Slowly, I made my way over. Phillip had already landed a hand on Cassius's shoulder, clearly hurting the Fae with his grip because I caught the purple-eyed dude

flinch, then heard him girlishly whine “Owie.” It took every bit of my Hunter training to keep a straight face through the entire ordeal, and I internally applauded myself for not cracking a single smile.

After another huff, the Dark Fae outstretched his hand with his palm up politely to me. I was tempted to look at Phillip, but that would send the wrong message, so I grabbed Cassius’s hand like I wasn’t hesitant at all. What I hadn’t expected was that the Dark Fae would be surprisingly hot to the touch, and I visibly reacted the second his hand enclosed around mine.

With one side of his mouth tilted, Cash peered over at me and brazenly said, “I can get even hotter than this when I use more than just my magic, V. If you’re ever curious, just let me know and I’ll show you.”

A loud smack rang out only a half second later—called it!—and Cash’s head was thrown forward with brutal force. My perfect vision easily caught the slow-motion punishment my violent companion paid to the Dark Fae, and it nearly made me cackle. But again, I held it together long enough to play a sympathetic friend to the loose-tongued asshole who didn’t deserve it.

“Phillip,” I admonished gently, “please don’t brutalize our mission companion. Who knows what talents will come loose and fall out of his ears if you hit him with all your strength.”

“I beg your pardon!” Cash erupted angrily, and Phillip was already losing it to a fit of laughter. “Well, I suppose I deserve that.”

“You do,” I agreed with a glare. “I’d be careful how you treat me because, while Phillip will never be on your side, I can be swayed.”

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“V,” Phillip warned, playing his part well.

The Dark Fae grinned like a damn imp, and I tried to ignore the small part of me that was utterly attracted to him for it. “I quite like this partner of yours, Phillip. She’s a great deal smarter than you and much nicer to look at.”

Smirking, I tossed Phillip a triumphant look. “I win.”

Phillip gripped Cash so hard the Dark Fae cried out.

“Okay, okay. Don’t get your knickers in a twist, sheesh. No sense of humor at all on this one,” Cash complained, sneaking a glance at me and grinning when he caught me smiling against my will. “Hold on tight, if you’d be so kind,” the punished Fae demanded, his thumb caressing my hand tenderly and drawing my gaze over to it.

I might be totally misreading the signals here, but I was starting to think that I’d effectively seduced the man. Granted, I’d only intended to encourage a comradery and not an illicit liaison, but beggars can’t be choosers.

The rock in Cassius’s hand glowed and vibrated above his palm before the air was sucked right from my lungs and my head went light and hazy. Everything was spinning and confused for a second before we stood behind a set of brick buildings, somewhere in a back-lot where very few people wandered.

Phillip eyed Cash’s hand still holding mine and dragged me away from the Dark Fae by the arm. “Cheers,” he remarked mockingly. “Our accommodations are elsewhere, but you hang out here and try not to get killed, mate.”

The Dark Fae's smile dropped. "We're not staying somewhere together?"

"And let you steal my partner while I sleep? My, my, you must really think I'm a stupid bastard, Cash." Phillip's hand found my lower back as he addressed the man, not at all worried what message the closeness might suggest to a clever mind. "You're only here because V thought you'd be useful, but I'm still not sure whether or not you're worth keeping alive. You run your mouth and switch sides any chance you get. So let me be clear, you're here purely because of this woman, and when she gives me any reason to rectify that, I'm going to take it. Capiche?"

Shots fired!

I quietly admired how Phillip folded that smarmy little "capiche" comment into his snarky monologue, taunting the other man's use of it. It didn't occur to me I might be enormously turned on by Phillip verbally assaulting someone in my presence, mostly because he did it to people I cared about who didn't deserve the tongue-lashing. But the familiar tension between my legs argued I absolutely could be aroused by something as simple as this.

I'm most definitely a nympho. Certifiably so.

Cassius's eyes jerked over to me, searching for something. "Then I guess I owe you my life, milady," he finally entreated, lips lifted slightly. "I won't forget it."

Something about his expression hit me again, and even though I knew he was a master of manipulation, I was effectively caught by the sincerity of it.

"Um, right," I retorted slowly.

"Until tomorrow," Cassius said pointedly to me and me alone before bowing his head. Then fixing his shirt and pants, he strode towards the main road and took a left

before disappearing from sight.

I watched him until Phillip's fingers slipped between mine and my hand was pulled. "Come, love. We can flit from here."

Smirking, I grasped the older Hunter's hand and we quickly escaped the town, leaving Cassius behind.

It wasn't even two seconds after the motel door shut when the other Hunter was on me like a lion would be a gazelle.

Lion analogies, V? Really? That's what we've amounted to as a person?

The gorgeous oversized man stripped out of his shirt, exposing nothing but tattooed muscles and the sexy piercings I always found myself eager to play with. Everything on him was flexed and taut, the same way it was in a fight. It was mesmerizing to look at this close up. Even though I'd seen it a hundred times in the bedroom, it still got me all hot and bothered before one touch was exchanged.

Hooded ice-blue eyes gazed at me when I took several steps back, discarding my jacket and weapons. Each hit with a distinctive thud on the carpet. My pulse raged in my ears, knowing the look the Austrian gave me to be one that meant I wasn't going to get a wink of sleep. Not that I minded. But playing coy was sort of our schtick, so I evaded his reach before I was captured by firm hands and slammed down onto the bed with enough force to steal a gasp from my throat.

The beautiful jerk really got off on the chase and fight I gave him each time. As he once described it, Phil wanted a brat he'd need to tame with a spank or two. I'd never admit to anyone out loud how much I enjoyed being it for him. Granted, being a brat came naturally to me. I wanted to be punished, just a little. I wanted to fight, argue, trade saucy insults, and then feel the other Hunter's massive hands around my throat,

squeezing the air I didn't need.

Phillip's knee parted my thighs roughly, and my voice fled in a surprised moan. "You were a little too convincing today, mein Schatz. Almost as if you wanted to be punished," he admonished in a voice laced with sexy displeasure.

Don't ask me how I know the difference between regular displeasure and sexy displeasure, I just do.

His powerful body hovered over mine as one of his tattooed hands slid along my naked stomach, lifting my shirt away from my breasts. When my eyes dropped to his hand, Phillip grabbed me around the jaw and forced my stare back to his. After satisfying himself with the desperate look twisting my face, the Austrian offered me an impish smirk and bent his head down to suck my nipple into his mouth after skillfully yanking the lace of my bra away.

I shifted and swiveled against the sensation, already giving into him. His mouth was so hot and his tongue so wet that it didn't take much to make me a vocal mess. The powerful older man worshipped the flesh and nub of my breast, an expert at giving me pleasure.

No matter how many times I found myself under him, every time was a new sensation and feeling. It never failed to surprise moans from my throat.

Blunt nails scored their way down my toned stomach, and I curved up, groaning in need. "Don't forget whose you are," Phillip whispered huskily, stealing a hot kiss.

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His gorgeous glittering eyes met mine from inches away, then he tugged at Sloan's ring on my finger. Slowly understanding what he wanted, I took it off with some hesitation and Phillip haphazardly tossed it onto the floor. Out of his pant pocket, the Austrian pulled out a beautiful ring that was a deep red, surrounded by a woven nest of black and gold.

But for some reason, my eyes strayed briefly to the discarded opal ring, not sure what the sudden pang in my chest was with the very thought of not wearing Sloan's ring anymore, but I tried desperately to do away with the fluttering thoughts.

I stared at the new ring as, bent over with his chest expanding and retracting with effort, Phillip fitted it over my left-hand ring finger. He brushed back his loose black locks with thick fingers and licked his lips. Hesitantly, pale eyes flicked up to meet mine, and I couldn't help but stare stupidly back.

I'd never seen the powerful man look so vulnerable, and at one time I'd even go as far as to argue the other Hunter was incapable of it.

Still, my eyes wandered back to Sloan's ring, and thoughts of the other Hunter appeared unbidden in my head. It was quite literally ridiculous to be here with Phil, wearing his ring, and thinking about someone I'd been convinced wasn't the person I wanted.

What's happening to me?

Phillip offered me a sheepish smile. "It's time for you to stop wearing another man's ring," he implored in the sweetest voice yet.

I should've been over the moon, but the words dropped like lead in my stomach, and I'd never been so instantly uncomfortable as I was under one man while dreaming of another.

What the fuck is wrong with you, V?!

Then Phil's mouth was right next to my ear, dropped so low it wouldn't be detected by human, or even supernatural ears if they weren't close by, and my thoughts snapped to attention. "Cassius may be tempted to keep you for himself at this rate, so keep that ring on at all times, maus."

I startled slightly when the whispering Hunter's hand sunk into my pliable gym leggings and he drove several fingers into me. My heady moan was swallowed by his hot mouth and tongue overwhelming mine, smothering every sound that tried to make its way out. I couldn't spare a moment for the conflicting thoughts inside my head because the older man knew exactly how to distract me into a mindless mess.

Pinned down to the spot, my stomach and chest retracted sharply with every hard lunge of his fingers.

It was torture not to be able to move, but truth of the matter was, it'd be easy to overpower the brute. I was stronger than him—and one utter of "goblin goo" and he'd set me loose himself. But I didn't want freedom. I wanted Phil and every ounce of pleasure he gave me, good or bad.

"Do you understand?" Phillip asked, stalling his hand's mesmerizing movements. "Answer me."

I sucked in a sharp breath. "Yes."

"If Eros gets a whiff of betrayal or the trap we're setting, he'll move quickly and

desperately,” Phillip went on, fingers flicking and twisting. “Then we’ll both have to react accordingly.”

My hips gyrated, chasing pleasure. “You’re sensing betrayal?”

Something in the other Hunter’s eyes cut through the lust and pleasure like a sharp-as-fuck knife, and it all but ended my desire to continue this little interlude of ours.

When his hand froze, fear hit my chest and I grabbed hold of the man’s face. “What is that look?” I demanded. Phillip’s eyes strayed, so I sat up and forced him to meet my gaze. “Phil?” I dropped my voice to the same barely-there whisper his took when he beseeched me to keep his loaded-with-intentions ring on. “What are you not telling me?”

“They were called Royal Sirens,” Phillip finally said, eyes igniting with something akin to dread.

“Who were?”

Phillip’s hands took hold of my hips, keeping me steady. “The ancient Fae blood you’re mixed with.”

Royal Sirens?

“So...” I pieced it together. “You think I’m seducing Cassius with my abilities from that?” I surmised slowly, knowing the answer already. “And with you and Sloan? Nigel?”

His eyes narrowed violently. “No—”

Oh, god. Sloan. Had I seduced him with some unintentional power?The revelation hit

me as hard as a punch to the stomach, and I had difficulty voicing my next question—feeling somewhat miffed that I’d given Phillip a chance to tell me everything in the hidden lab and he hadn’t until I dragged it out of him today.

“But how can you be sure?”

The weight in my stomach was outright painful. If I’d inadvertently seduced everyone I met, then how could I ever trust the feelings I shared with others? Trust the feelings Sloan had for me?

Why am I thinking about Sloan right now? It should be Phillip.

Shaking the thoughts away with vehemence, I refused to let the confliction of my feelings distract me from what this all meant. It was the inevitable other shoe dropping. I’d never be the girl with a happy ending, not really. I’d spend a lifetime second-guessing people’s feelings for me and wondering if endangering them was worth it.

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And as if sensing my line of thought, Phillip took strong hold of my face and brought my eyes back to his. “I was falling for you well before those parts of you were ever activated.”

I opened my mouth and then shut it, ignoring the pang of guilt for worrying about Sloan before paying the man in front of me a thought. “You can’t know that. Nothing about my blood has been straightforward. I’m the first of my kind, as far as we know. How the hell can you be certain, Phil?”

There’s something seriously wrong with me. Fuck.

I tried to free myself from his hold, but Phillip chased me and our mouths met again; this time in a way that made me want to cry, mostly because Phillip would never truly know how much I’d betrayed him.

“V...”

It was rare for Phillip to struggle to say something, and it only hit me harder to see the powerful man at a loss, completely unaware of how I felt.

Swallowing the hard lump in my throat, tears broke free of my eyes and I didn’t even bother to hide them. “You kept this from me all this time and chose to tell me now, why?”

Phillip’s thumbs gently wiped away the steady stream of tears, and he sighed loudly. “Because I promised I would be honest with you, and because it doesn’t matter how I came to love you, only that I did. You can argue whatever you’d like, but I’m not

letting you go ever again, lass.”

I sucked in a sobbing breath and took hold of his wrists. “If I seduced you—”

A smirk tilted his lips. “Who says I didn’t seduce you first? I hear teenage girls can’t help but fall for their super-hot teachers.”

Now he’s pulling the teacher card?

“Your baseless confidence is always so impressive, but you’re not the one with mystical seduction powers here, Phil,” I bemoaned, and Phillip’s smile widened.

Fuck, I don’t deserve him...

Cheating girlfriend with Nigel. Cheating with Phillip. It had to be some kind of cosmic joke at this point for me to be in the arms of one and yearning for another. I couldn’t even blame being young anymore—this was depravity.

The gorgeous man’s eyes glistened like they always did when he found what I said amusing. “Oh, I think some would argue differently.”

“You’re a real tool, you know that,” I grumbled, avoiding his all-seeing eyes. “So what, I’ve been seducing everyone with pheromones or some shit?”

“Who knows,” Phillip replied, not helping at all. “Like you said, you could be doing it with some kind of power, or it’s just that natural V charm. But one way or another, Cash is falling for you.”

“You have to be kidding me,” I rebuked resentfully.

“And only I get to ogle you like that,” Phillip added with a boyish grin.

Hasn't stop me from ogling, apparently. Fuck my life, seriously.

"So that's your real issue here," I taunted, leering at the older Hunter.

Phillip didn't miss a beat. "I don't like to share."

It was evident he was concerned about what the attachment meant for our plan. The usually fifty-steps-ahead Hunter hadn't expected this plot twist, and now we had to plan for that possibility, too.

But I had bigger issues to worry about it would seem.

Chapter 24

Deal with the Devil

"I've been waiting for hours," Cash complained the second we appeared in front of him. He sat at a table in front of the in-town cafe, one leg crossed over the other and a cup of foam-fancy coffee in his hand.

I eyed the Fae as he took a dainty sip. "Yeah, really seems like you've been in dire straits over here," I taunted, earning myself a petulant look from the light-haired menace.

This dude was sometimes more of a teenage girl than I was, and I wasn't exactly sure how to respond to such cutesy behavior.

"You expect me to stand here, dutifully awaiting my master's return?" he sassed back, nostrils curled unattractively.

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Phillip made a noise in his throat, finding the dude hilarious before heading inside the café. I watched him go and took that opportunity to sit down next to the Dark Fae, who acted as though he fit in perfectly with the hardworking, small-town folk who lived here.

I'd promised myself to leave the whole "cheating but not really cheating" debacle for another day. I had bigger fish to fry and a mission to complete. I could worry about that bullshit later.

The fashionable Fae in front of me dressed himself in another outfit that could've come right off the runway for all I knew. It wasn't weather appropriate, but likely because Cassius ran hotter than most, as it was my unfortunate luck to learn only a day ago. The rest of the town was sporting jackets and hats, bundled up for the ice-cold wind presently taking the area by storm.

The sassy Fae's silver-blond locks were swept back in a chic look, his angular, feline features on display to the many greedy eyes passing along the street. In a black-and-white paint splattered top that hung off one shoulder and a pair of form-fitting faux-leather pants, finished off by a set of alligator skin boots, Cash was out to make a statement. He had money, looks, and obviously a poor sense of direction to be in a town like this.

The pompous asshole looked utterly lost.

Based off the café's god-smacked owner, who was understandably torn between the international hottie in front of her and the one out in front of her business, and the flabbergasted patrons visiting on their regular morning routine, my two companions

were likely to be the talk of the town by the end of the day. We'd have to be careful. Blending in wasn't these two dudes' strong suit, and I couldn't even muster the strength to complain about it anymore.

Gorgeous cat eyes stole a look at the glass window where my Austrian companion was ordering the two of us something. A girl had to eat, and we'd be on another walk through the woods to find the nearby coven after this.

"You're wasted on him, love," Cassius said out of nowhere.

Leaning in, I acted stupid. "He's an arrogant asshole, but he's good at his job. Even you can't argue otherwise."

Cassius licked his lips, and the slits in his eyes narrowed to thin lines. "I didn't mean as your work partner," he divulged in a soft whisper. "I've known that tosser a long time, and he's never looked at anyone the way he looks at you. But the two of you are a disaster together. You're better off choosing someone who doesn't mind dancing to the tune you play."

Very briefly, Sloan's face appeared in my head, and it was just another reason to hate myself today. Worse, the foreboding reminder that I might have abilities that could seduce any person I wanted was right in front of me. I'd be stupid to think that I was some great beauty or personality that brought any man or woman to their knees, and the knot in my throat was fiercely punishing.

I wanted to trust their feelings for me, but the sudden burst of popularity made more sense now with this new fucked-up bit of information. It made it harder to deny when someone like Cash was falling hook, line, and sinker for it; made me second-guess my relationships, even when nothing had been confirmed and we didn't know for sure what the fuck my blood could or couldn't do.

Still, the question lingered in the back of my head every time I was faced with more damning evidence that it might be exactly what they said—I seduced them with Siren-like abilities.

Since it was Cash who suggested it first, I dropped my voice and quickly glanced over at Phillip, glad that he was pretending to be occupied at the counter. Cassius should know better than to think the other Hunter couldn't hear us, but people did stupid shit when they were infatuated with someone.

I was plenty aware of that fact, my latest situationship with two men plenty fucking evidence of that.

“What makes you think this isn't just because of what I supposedly am?” I posed rationally.

The Dark Fae's purple eyes beamed, catching the sunlight, and his mouth twisted into an impish smile. “Clever Hunter. You wouldn't be wrong to suspect as much. I imagine Phillip finally told you everything. That's a surprise. I hadn't pegged him to be the sort.” Cassius glanced over his shoulder, then eyed the ring on my finger. “He's been a little unlike himself, hasn't he?”

His tone insinuated a whole fucking lot, mostly that Phillip was under the spell of my Siren seduction, and I hated that I couldn't argue he wasn't.

“Not to worry, I have my ways to be impervious to Siren influence, even at Royal Siren strength. Can't say the same for the smarmy git in there.” Then the Dark Fae's eyes landed on me with a glint I didn't like. “Or perhaps...another person weighing heavily on one's mind.”

What the fuck is this sneaky snake up to?

I caught my Austrian companion's shoulders stiffen before he was stuffing some bills into a tip jar and working his magic on the café owner, probably to afford me more prying time. I didn't hesitate to take advantage.

"Impervious to Siren influence?"

Cash's smile broadened. "Curious?"

"How could you really know for sure unless you..." I left the rest unsaid, but the clever minx in front of me figured it out without trouble.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl, and I noticed a soft glow around the Dark Fae sitting in front of me, another stone sitting in his open hand. Looking around, I noticed everything was frozen. It wasn't like when we flitted. More like when I froze the world with my power all those times either me or someone I cared about was in danger.

The Dark Fae touched the ring Phillip gave me the night before, and I managed to smother the desire to pull my hand away. "Answer my question and I might answer yours," he said cryptically. I waited with a "Come at me, bro!" look before he continued, "This trap you're setting for me and Eros, can I get in on it?"

Wait, what?

My spine straightened, and I desperately worked to not show any sort of reaction on my face. But the Dark Fae seemed to pick up on it, his smile full of pride and immediately giving him away. I was rattled to my very core, never expecting that Cash would figure the two of us out so quickly. Honestly, from what I knew about the other Hunter, it was rare for someone to outwit Phil, and I wasn't sure what to do next.

The fair-haired Fae didn't wait another breath before adding, "If you want my help, I'll need something from you in return."

Of course he does...

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Peering down at the stone vibrating in Cassius's hand, I asked, "What do you want?"

"A little bit of your time and power, love. That's all. I have something I need to retrieve from some very powerful people, and you're just the person for the job," the Dark Fae entreated huskily. "We'll need to act...close. If they think you and I are besotted, they'll think I hold some power over you and we can retrieve this very important item I need before returning to my realm."

I wasn't even a little bit surprised. More so, I wasn't stupid either. The Fae made it sound innocent, but Cash was basically using me as bait in a trade and relying on me to deal with the carnage after he'd gotten his grimy hands on whatever it was he wanted back—or to steal, because I wouldn't put it past the Dark Fae for it not to be his in the first place.

Unfortunately, without Cassius's cooperation, we'd have to change our entire plan, and it could mean not getting our guy. We couldn't afford to lose Eros, not with the entire Organization after me now.

It was now or never.

"Okay," I finally muttered, and Cassius offered me a sneaky smile. "But not until you do your part, asshole."

He held his hand out to me, and I simply offered him a what-the-fuck eyebrow. Sighing loudly, he motioned for me to put my hand in his. Phillip made me promise not to trust Cash, and I didn't know how to do that in my current predicament. Either I took his hand to ensure he helped with the trap, or I give him the finger and we start

at square one. It was one of those V gut moments, so I put my hand in his.

The Dark Fae's lips tilted up secretively before a symbol appeared and disappeared on the top of both of our wrists. "This is a binding contract between us magical folk. Should we not do our pledged parts, we will be stripped of our magic."

What the actual fuck!

"I didn't agree to that, asshole!" I yelled angrily.

Cash shrugged and released my hand. "You're Phillip's protégé, so I can't trust that you won't pretend this never happened after I do my part. Since you want this Eros madness finished, and it benefits me greatly to be done with his sadistic arse as well, this contract safeguards your promised end. Unless you don't hold your end, you've nothing to fear, love."

"That sounds mighty convenient, Fae," I rebutted in frustration.

Phillip's going to kill me.

Before I could verbally whip Cash with the rage and resentment of a young woman whose life turned to shit under a year ago, the world came back to life and the stone was nowhere in sight. I got the sense that the stone didn't work for very long, and seeing how he hadn't used it with us before, it was likely very difficult to make. I wanted to pick his brain about it, but the visibly frustrated Austrian storming towards us shut down that idea.

Phillip sank down onto the chair beside me, hawk eyes tearing apart the look I gave him. "Have a nice chat while I was away?" he asked, words loaded with meaning.

Cassius offered me a look full of amusement. "The best chat I've had on this whole

damn trip.”

Fuck my life.

Chapter 25

My Liebling

Phillip

My eyes never left Cassius for a second, already sensing that the sneaky bastard had used an enchanted stone that was difficult to create, all so he could steal a private moment with my woman. From the small glance V gave me upon my return, whatever was said or done while she was stolen away to frozen time would piss me off enough to act on homicidal notions.

I was sure of it.

It took every bit of my Hunter training not to slice the Dark Fae’s throat right then and there, in front of a café full of witnesses. I’d been known to do worse, and it didn’t seem totally out of character for me to go off book and kill the slimy bastard just because I wasn’t feeling charitable.

Cassius was a one-of-a-kind enchanter, his abilities both revered and feared in the Organization. The powerful items he created with his magic were the very reason Eros hadn’t killed the sneaky kotzbrocken in all the years I’d known him.

Cassius had worked with some of the most powerful Fae to cross over to the human world, and his intimate knowledge of enchantments and the complexity of its magic was dangerous to anyone he considered an enemy.

As a Fae who had lived several centuries longer than I had, maybe more, it wasn't clear, I'd once thought the devious devil could easily outwit me one day. But, ironically, Cash had a fatal weakness—he feared any level of pain and did whatever he could to evade its clutches.

One of Eros's specialties was magical torture, so Cassius did whatever the other Dark Fae commanded out of fear of one day being held captive to an endless world of torture. And he was right to be terrified. Eros would make the cat-eyed bastard suffer a fate worse than death if he were to ever cross him.

Unfortunately for Cassius, I, too, excelled in various methods of torture, and it was with that very threat I coaxed the bastard into becoming an informant.

Spying for me required the sneaky devil to be cleverer than most, and it was the very reason I was careful to never fully trust anything he said or did without the aid of the Truth Cuff. But if it was one thing I'd give to the wanker, it was Cassius knew how to manipulate and deceive anyone he came in contact with, even one of the world's greatest assassins, Eros.

But partnering up with Cash was like playing with fire. The purple-eyed Fae was too devious and quick to switch sides. Torture and my clever inventions were the only things that kept the Dark Fae honest. For this reason, I hadn't killed him. Of course, I never imagined I might one day be on the other end of things, vulnerable to his astute deduction skills—because Cash never dared to make an enemy out of me before today.

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I knew it was a risk to work with him the way I was now. The crafty Fae would latch onto my weakness, and unless V cooperated, it was easy for everything we planned to burn to the ground because of the wanker now walking beside us on our way to the coven's location.

I slid my tattooed hand behind the fiery Hunter's head and gripped the back of her neck, instantly getting V's attention. Hazel eyes beamed in the dying light, full of barely concealed shame and guilt. She'd been off since I put the ring on her finger, but even more so since Cash stole her away into a window of time.

Fuck.

"One thing at a time, V. Trust me and trust your training..." I said cryptically to her and she nodded, understanding perfectly.

Clever lass.

"Hunters are all about talking in riddles. It's exhausting," Cash complained before he comically tripped over a branch, doing a weird movement with his arms and side scuttle with his feet to keep from falling straight onto his face.

The smile creeping onto the young Hunter's face was enough to calm the rage crowding my chest. When she giggled, it was difficult to stay angry. V's raspy laughter was a balm on my tortured soul, and I vowed to protect that smile no matter what it took.

I hadn't been given the chance to make good on the promised punishment of her body

from the night before, and I was craving her like water on a hot day. Everything V did, from the teasing touches to the half-smiles and taunts she offered me all morning, made my cock hard. I was desperate to ignore responsibility so I could have my wicked way with the tempting nymph.

I wanted to worship her skin with my mouth and hands; pay special tribute to the beauty I'd been a slave to from the very first moment our eyes connected in that classroom. I yearned to hear her breathless moans and raspy voice calling my name in the throes of ecstasy, and I despised Cash for occupying my head when it was V who should live there, unrivaled by another, for the rest of my days.

Most distressing, whatever this backpfeifengesicht said to my liebbling, it'd gotten into her head. But it was easy to see she feared my wrath more than what Cash had said to her, which was a drop of comfort in a sea of bullshit.

It didn't take a genius to figure out the Dark Fae capitalized on my feelings for her being in question because of her blood, but there was more to it than her possible Siren abilities. If the kotzbrocken sniffed out the trap like I suspected he had, he'd use it as a bargaining chip to get V to do something she would otherwise refuse.

The chipper fucker had been much too happy since the private moment between them, and I'd bet Blood Slayer he was after the one thing he'd been trying to get back since coming to this realm.

My guess was Cassius's plan included using V as bait, and then the muscle to take down the group while he made a swift escape. Although, if he was truly falling for her, there was a good chance he might opt to help her finish the job, and then seduce her with promises of bringing down the Organization.

The way the bastard's eyes always seemed to find V, following her every movement, and all the disgusting little smiles he sent her way were indications Cash was already

smitten.

Since Nigel and Sloan, I'd become hyper-aware of every person who even looked at the spit-fire beauty. I used to think jealousy was for weak-minded men, but it didn't stop me from playing right into that fate myself. It wasn't that I didn't trust V; I didn't trust every other fucking person who came in contact with her. If that made me a small-minded bastard like Ionce accused that bloody dog of being, then I'd take it on the chin and be a hypocrite.

I'd be anything for V.

The young Hunter was kind-hearted and compassionate when life hadn't given her a reason to be. Had she not been, our relationship would've never happened. I was painfully aware of that fact. Yet, it was the very thing that made her vulnerable to enemies, and V tended to see the good in every person she spent any amount of time with.

Even if she didn't, Cassius was a silver-tongued sycophant. He'd find some way to woo or entrap her, and with his arsenal of enchanted items, it was uncomfortably likely he'd succeed at first.

Until I murdered the bastard once I found him.

It wasn't clear what the amulet did or why Cash was so heart set on getting it, but my gut told me that I'd better tread carefully with this one. It was better if neither Cassius or V knew I was onto them, though I got the sense my little darling might tell me regardless of what Cassius threatened.

She was such a good girl.

"Dead weight stays here," I said pointedly at Cash.

The Dark Fae put a hand over his chest, gasping ghoulishly. “I beg your pardon. I am not dead weight. I can fight, same as you.”

V’s look at the Dark Fae nearly made me cackle out loud like a little boy. It was riddled with overt disbelief. “Isn’t it your M.O. to run at the first sign of danger, Fae?”

“It’s Cassius,” the cat-eyed man corrected, brushing back his silver hair with flamboyant flair. “I happen to be quite powerful. You brought me along, so I might as well help while I’m here.”

My partner didn’t seem the least bit convinced, and it made me yearn desperately to kiss her.

Her wariness and feisty wit were among many reasons for why I had difficulty keeping my hands off her anywhere we went. I barely caught myself from reaching out and taking strong hold of that slender neck of hers—so close to fitting my fingers around that petal-soft flesh that yielded to my hand every time I grabbed it. My hands were a perfect fit every time I grabbed hold of that beautiful throat, and I was addicted to the way her gorgeous hazel eyes always fluttered shut, overcome by pleasurable bliss.

Like she was made for me and me alone.

I was beyond tempted to dominate the smirking woman beside me, and it took every ounce of my control to keep from showing Cash how little chance he stood against swaying her away from my side.

The only man worthy had tried and failed.

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It wasn't my finest hour stealing back a woman I'd previously abandoned, but I couldn't give her to anyone. Not to that obnoxious wolf. Not to a man who would've treated her like a goddess and was one of the kindest blokes I knew. And especially not to some kotzbrocken who didn't deserve to breathe the same air as V, let alone touch a single stretch of flesh on her flawless body.

"I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said in all the time I've known you," V snarked, eyeing the Dark Fae skeptically.

I snapped out of my eternal worship, sure the clever vixen had read my mind. But thankfully, she only regarded Cash like he was the scum of the Earth.

I should scorn the young Hunter. Hiding our emotions was basic level Hunter training, but this inadequacy was one of the reasons I was so enchanted with her. V couldn't hide what she felt, and it comforted me to see the way she beamed when she caught sight of my proud grin. Her entire face glowed with happiness, and I wouldn't trade a single fucking emotion to make her a better Hunter.

V could overcome any foe regardless of what her face said. No need for a poker face when you burned entire buildings to the ground with your power.

"It's your funeral, dude. Just don't get in the way of the real fighters here, m'kay?" she added, winking at me and making my hands ache to restrain her to a tree, or the ground, or maybe some wall nearby. If I wasn't careful, my dick might get hard thinking about all the ways I'd have her when we finally got a moment to ourselves.

The things this woman does to me...

“You okay over there, buddy?” V teased cutely, and I realized belatedly that my internal struggle was ironically showing on my face.

Yeah, V was more dangerous than any enemy out here. She made someone who fought with the best of them forget himself and fall into temptation with a single smile. It no longer took me by surprise how much I didn’t recognize myself around her.

I’d become an absolute idiot with the woman.

“Just considering how best to punish our enemies today,” I whispered in a seductive voice her direction, lips tilted with the insinuation behind my words. If she was smart, and she was, she’d pick up on the hidden meaning without effort.

The fiery Hunter’s eyes danced across my face before flicking down to my lips. “What, that’s even something you think about? Just spank them with Blood Slayer. Isn’t that how you always do it, anyway?”

Oh, she wanted to play.

Cassius offered the two of us a confused glance, clearly not following, and I had to be glad he wasn’t. It’d ruin the fun.

“I think I’ll use my hands today,” I teased, rubbing my neck with a tattooed hand before wrapping it around the girth with my eyes trained to the lass. “I’m feeling a little creative. I want to watch them squirm.”

Her eyes dropped to the hand stroking my neck and she swallowed, comprehending exactly how I’d punish her later.

Cash, having been totally oblivious to the brewing sexual tension, cut in matter-of-

factly, “Wouldn’t that be pointless with vampires, or am I missing something?”

V’s impish grin made it torture not to taste that sweet mouth and suck those deliciously plump lips of hers. “If there’s a way to do it, Phil will find it. He’s just a persistent asshole like that.”

Fuck, I wanted to take her by the throat, pin her to a tree, and tongue-fuck her mouth while the stupid bastard watched. Then I’d bind the asshole to a tree and have my way with her somewhere far enough away that her sexy moans couldn’t be heard by his undeserving ears.

Cassius sighed in his usual petulant manner. “You Hunters are so weird. I’ll never understand why you enjoy hunting down and finding creative ways to kill others. You call me the villain, but from where I stand, it’s you two.”

V snickered, eyeing the idiot beside her. “Says the guy who helps the worst assassin in this place and then pretends he didn’t have any hand in it. At least we know what we are. It may not make much sense to you, but we have something to protect. What are you protecting? Your own neck?”

Cassius’s eyes widened and his jaw worked, unable to rebuke her statement.

Proud wasn’t a strong enough word for how I felt in that moment. Then again, the venom she spat at Cash indicated a huge shift in her treatment of him. She no longer aimed to appeal or sympathize with the Dark Fae. So I quickly deduced a bargain was struck, and I’d need to be careful with how I went about finding out what was agreed upon, and how. Still, it was good to see my companion back to her old antics, and I soaked it in before reality dawned and everything went to shit again.

Because it would.

It always did.

Chapter 26

Feelings for Two

I wasn't sure for what reason being in the predicament I was with Cassius made me think about Sloan and wish I could see him, or why that morning I pocketed the ring the Jason Statham sounding Hunter gave me, but all day it was Sloan I thought about in quiet moments and not the Austrian at my side.

Even after I promised myself I wouldn't.

Every sly smile and playful word Phillip gave me was a dagger to the heart. Last time I'd felt like this, it was when I was with Nigel. Why the fuck was history repeating itself? It didn't fail to confuse me why it was Sloan I worried most about having pheromone-altered feelings. It should be Phillip. Why wasn't it Phillip? Was I truly broken, or did the Brit work his way into my heart without me noticing?

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Like, what the fuck, V? Are you really the girl who finally gets the person you're supposed to love back, only to realize you have feelings for someone else? Are you really that thirsty?

It was like I hadn't any fucking clue about my own feelings at all. Granted, I was new to adult relationships, and really options in general when it came to having them, so it wasn't like I'd suddenly understand how this all worked. But I thought I was mature enough to avoid—I don't know—falling for more than one person at a time.

Could this be the Siren in me talking? A convenient excuse, but one I was desperate to blame. It seemed a little too high of a hurdle to blame youthful hormones at this stage, though I'd shamelessly fall back onto that excuse if that time came.

I'd lied to myself for less.

Still, I couldn't help myself anymore. All I could think about was if Sloan's feelings were real from the beginning or influenced by pheromones? Was there any way to find out for sure? Would I ever see him again?

He'd gone with Grams and Kris after I burned down Lux's hidden underground lab of horrors. I hadn't really given the dude any reason to stay because I was the real asshole here.

Ugh, I'm the worst.

I thought I'd done away with my feelings for Sloan, blaming misplaced emotion from when Phillip abandoned me, but the memory of the man's solemn face when I left

him in the desert and his gentle, welcoming smile every time our eyes met suggested I'd only let the excitement of Phillip returning hide all the feelings that still lingered for the sultry-sweet Brit.

Once the passionate haze of Phillip's return eased and the reality of my situation came a-knocking, those stuffed-down feelings came bubbling back up.

I wanted to see Sloan again, to touch him and hear his husky laughter, to learn more about who he was now and in the past. And when I was really honest with myself, I wanted to kiss and feel his hands on me again—to finally do everything I fantasized about doing with the gorgeous Hunter.

Shit was complicated.

Okay, so it was complicated from the start, but now I wasn't sure what was still there when it came to Sloan. I felt like I owed it to him to figure it out. Really, I owed it to myself because I'd promised myself not to forgive Phillip so easily after the shit he pulled.

And then what did I go do? I got lost inside his addictive caress and dutifully followed Phillip's lead yet again. He played me like a well-tuned instrument, and it was time to acknowledge I wasn't going to be confident in my relationships until it was me taking charge and not the other person.

The question of my Siren blood aside, Phil came swooping in, evading true punishment, and worked his way back into my heart. The arrogant bastard shouldered the other man out of the way, and I just watched it happen. Again. But the fact that Phillip kept something so important from me after promising he'd tell me it all, saying it was out of misguided protection the same way Nigel once claimed, something the Austrian made damn sure to call out, made my stomach twist and knot uncomfortably.

Like the definition of insanity, I continued to expect different results with Phillip, sure that the Austrian would be a different person today than he was yesterday.

It was a reminder that Phil didn't truly regard me as a fellow Hunter, and that at one point he'd abandoned me for that reason—that he'd gotten away with breaking my heart to pieces, taking me for granted, and then reclaiming me as his with a pushy personality the minute he returned. Worse, I'd forgiven him without putting up a fight.

I've been bamboozled by a blue-eyed bastard.

I'd let Nigel take the lead. Then Phil. But I was the main chick in this fucked up tale of a vengeful woman looking to overthrow the people whomade her, and I'd be damned if I didn't take charge of my own story from here.

I looked at the bastard in question, and his cocky smile hit differently after the thoughts in my head soured. Phillip's eyes flitted away and my jaw clenched down in spite, angry he was an oblivious asshole when it suited him. Cassius grumbled about walking before our gazes connected. Then Phillip was pointing to a tree, and I wandered over to it with Cash in tow.

"I'll take a little peek at what we're dealing with. Shouldn't take me more than a few minutes, so keep an eye on this saucy wanker while I'm gone," Phillip ordered, making the Fae beside me swiftly vocalize his outrage.

The Austrian didn't stay long enough to hear Cash whine about it, so we both went silent for a moment. I was still pissed at the Dark Fae jerk for swindling me into a favor, but I didn't have anyone else to blame but myself.

"There's a way to temper a Siren's influence," Cassius volunteered out of nowhere, and my eyes shot over to him. "It's not an easy task, but you're lucky enough to

know an extremely talented enchanter,” he gloated before pulling a bracelet from his pocket. “Consider this a peace offering for tricking you into helping me. Truth be told, I couldn’t ask anyone else, and I’m grateful you’ve kept it to yourself.”

Dangling the dainty piece of jewelry in front of my face, the Dark Fae offered it to me. And when I only stared at the bracelet with understandable doubt, Cassius sighed dramatically and bent over towards his leg, showcasing his impressive flexibility and absently making me wonder if he was a dancer.

Lifting the hem of his pants, he revealed a similar bracelet locked around his ankle. “I told you there was a way to ensure I wasn’t influenced, love,” the purple-eyed menace explained. “If you want to know Phillip’s or...perhaps, someone not presently here,” the presumptuous bastard uttered, and it took all my Hunter training not to let the shock show on my face, “then you should wear it and see if their attitude changes towards you.”

The desperation to know exactly what Sloan felt for me should I ever come back in contact with him—and even Phillip—overpowered sense. Disregarding the fact that I’d ignored my partner’s advice twice now about not trusting Cash, I took the bracelet and stared down at the delicate chain with sparkling gems placed every half-inch.

Cassius stood, smirking, as I put it on, no longer hesitating like a smart-ass Hunter would. I’d blame youth for this short-sighted indiscretion. I was too far gone with the yearning to know what the men in my life truly felt for me, and I’d pretend I wasn’t warned vehemently to never trust an evil bastard like Cash by both Grams and Phillip.

I’ll regret this someday.

Before I could say anything else, a sensation hit out of nowhere and I spun around, crossbow in hand, only to find a familiar figure of a man I’d spent all day thinking

about. “How—”

“Didn’t think I’d leave you and Phillip alone for too long? Besides, you removed my ring,” Sloan said, his voice like a fantasy come to life. His eyes flicked over to Cassius, and the Dark Fae straightened, fear in his eyes. “I’ve come for a much-needed row, and I see there will be plenty of opportunity.”

“Row?” I asked, not understanding British terms in the least. “Like, as in a boat?”

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Sloan's rich laughter was like coming home after a long stay away, and I did my best not to smile like a total goof in response. "A fight, love. It's time I stop playing second fiddle."

I really didn't know what Sloan was on about—I'd never understand British people, let alone dudes in general—but it was so good to see him again.

I'd spent so long trying to recall the details of Sloan's face, his body, his brilliant pale-blue eyes and good-looking dude smile, that it almost didn't seem real to see them exactly how I remembered them right in front of me.

His gorgeous face was still devastating the second I laid my eyes on it, and I'd never get over how good he looked in anything he wore. Donning nothing but Hunter attire, Sloan gave the fashionably dressed man nearby a run for his money. I mean, I half expected the two of them to manifest a catwalk nearby and have a full-blown Zoolander-inspired model-off. It bore repeating that neither one would look ill-fitted in a high-fashion space.

Not at all.

While Cash gave the impression of it with his clothes and chic look, for Sloan, it was an entire vibe. The dude exuded a celebrity air, and it never failed to shine through on the darkest days.

Guilt should be wreaking havoc on my body and mind, but unfortunately, my elation with Sloan's unexpected return took front and center.

The Brit took several steps before closing the space between us, and his eyes stayed with me, never finding their way back over to the Dark Fae. Then his luminous gaze dropped to my hand where Phillip's ring took the place of his. For some odd reason, I wanted to hide my hand away from view. As if that would even work with someone like Sloan.

I was such an idiot.

To my continued dismay, the shame rising into my throat was born out of removing the gift the Brit gave me and not because I'd spent the better part of the prior evening dreaming about Sloan and his silky-soft lips and lust-roughened voice.

My head is all fucked up.

"It is very beautiful," Sloan muttered softly, something about his guttural voice making my throat quickly seize. "Though, I'd argue not as fitting as the one I gave you."

Holy hell, shots fired...

Ask anyone and swooning was so 19th century, but it didn't stop me from falling victim to it the minute the sultry Brit's statement hit. I barely caught the way Cassius's lips tilted upwards before Sloan was speaking again.

"I've missed you."

The guilt I'd been waiting for finally showed the fuck up. But sadly, it wasn't because I'd betrayed Phillip; it was because I didn't feel guilty about my exhilaration over the heartfelt statement said to me by a man I'd been yearning to see for days.

Déjà vu's a bitch.

Sloan barely took another step before Phillip appeared out of nowhere, hand holding his friend's shoulder. "Should I bother asking what the fuck you're doing here?"

You could cut the tension with a knife, but Cassius didn't seem to know how to read a goddamn room, because he very loudly bemoaned the partnership like his life had been ruined the second Sloan appeared. "I can't believe I have to deal with both of you bloody wankers now. Whatdid I do to deserve this?!" Cassius complained loudly, stomping his foot like a toddler having a tantrum.

I couldn't help it, I laughed out loud, and both of my Hunter companions didn't manage to keep from smiling in response. But just as quickly, the two went back to silently staring at each other. My eyes flicked from Sloan to Phillip, then back to Sloan before I realized we were here to do a job.

"Find anything?" I asked Phillip, inadvertently hiding the hand with his ring on it.

The Austrian didn't look over at first, and I almost thought he wouldn't, but then his light gaze jerked over to where I stood. "If we move now, we'll catch them before they fully awaken. Piece of cake." Then his steely eyes were back on Sloan. "Again, why have you come? You were supposed to aid Rose with gathering the Hunters on the list."

Cash peered quietly between the two Hunters before smirking. "Maybe I won't need to worry about the lot of you. Seems like you're plenty caught up in each other."

Walking a wide circle around the soundlessly quarreling pair, Cassius came to stand beside me, eyes deciphering the quiet struggle taking place on my face. His purple dragon eyes naturally fell to where the bracelet he'd given me was hidden.

"You seem to be collecting a lot of jewelry these days," he whispered, smirking happily when I glared at him. "It'll be so very interesting to see which one you favor

by the end of this little trip.”

I opened my mouth to lay into him, not sure what I'd say but figuring I'd use that teenage part of my brain to work it out while the words tumbled from my mouth. Unfortunately for me, Cash didn't wait. He grabbed my hand and dragged me the direction Phillip mentioned the vampire coven was located.

“I'll be taking this prize with me while you blokes have your little macho-man chat. Toodles!” Cassius called out, instantly barred by the other two when he put a leg out in an almost slap-stick comedy style.

It oddly reminded me of Mr. Bean, and I smiled without intending to. The day had devolved into a ridiculous series of events, so it seemed fitting it'd end with some weirdo Mr. Bean moment.

Granted, if the other two hadn't stopped Cassius, the Dark Fae would've gotten a one-way ticket to Smackdown Town, thanks to yours truly, Vindictive V. I wasn't the damsel sort. Sure, my head wasn't exactly on straight these days, but I could handle some cowardly Fae who'd gotten a little too comfortable doing what he wanted.

Except, I'd been quietly desperate for an escape—and Cash appeared to pick up on my silent plea. It was in his eyes as they trailed back over his shoulder to find me, and it was the first time I wondered if maybe there could ever be a future where I forgave the man for all he'd done, much like I had Donna and Phillip.

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“Shite. I nearly got away with it too, if not for these bloody kids,” Cassius whined in a baby voice that grated on the nerves.

It wasn’t the perfect Scooby-Doo quote, but the Dark Fae struck me as someone who added his own flair to everything he touched. In this case, a very popular cartoon phrase.

Phillip took a step forward, but it was Sloan who freed my hand from Cash’s loose hold, and the silver-haired imp cooed cutely as if he was watching a romance unfold in a daytime soap.

I tried to ignore how my pulse thrummed when the Brit touched my skin. His hand was so gentle and kind, which was a far-cry from Phillip’s, and it felt illicit to enjoy the sensation at all when my brand-new, sort-of-labeled boyfriend was watching the entire time.

Coming between us, Phillip addressed Sloan as if he hadn’t rudely muscled him out of the way. “I guess we’re stuck with you, so you keep the bloody tosser in check. I’ll handle V.”

I opened my mouth again, ready to defend myself, but it was Sloan’s voice that came to my defense first. “I think she’s plenty capable of taking care of herself, mate.”

Phillip pivoted, and I didn’t see the anger radiate on his face, but it was all there in his back, telling a story about how upset the man was. “You have something to say, Sloan?”

I'd never heard Phil use the tone he presently adopted with Sloan, and I quickly realized the situation wasn't the usual banter-heavy play the two were prone to doing; this was the real deal. They were about to have an actual fight, so I moved around Phillip and put myself between them.

"Uh, 'scuzie, but I think we all just need to calm the fuck down and remember what we're doing here," I interjected firmly.

Cassius stood, a snack in his hand, and I did a double-take at the Fae in confusion. "Oh, by all means, finish what you were saying, love. It's been a while since I've been this amused."

At least one of us is having a good time...

Chapter 27

Double Ear-Lashing

Sloan

"Look, you and I both know Phil doesn't change. He's a talented as fuck Hunter, but he's broken. When it looks like he's moved past Giselle, he hasn't. Truth is, even if he has, he's still not good enough for her. He's horribly arrogant, beyond immature, and he'll destroy her without ever truly understanding how," Kris said, her intelligent eyes picking me apart the second they flicked up.

Bollocks.

I'd spent too many days in mourning, trying unsuccessfully to do away with my feelings for V, knowing that love could drive a person to do things they never thought they were capable of doing. I couldn't do that to her.

V deserved better.

The slow turn of the dial in a much-too-long existence spent alone chimed for the first time when I met the hazel-eyed, world-altering Hunter. The blood in my body warmed, bringing to life a pulse that'd gone cold over the years. My thoughts came to life, no longer drenched in monotony and superficiality. Instead, my head buzzed and free-floated with the little things she said and did.

These days, my thoughts were harder to catch and prone to wandering, and it got worse the more I was around V. Our connection sparked and sizzled so quickly that it took my body by storm when I couldn't see her face first thing in the morning.

Some mornings, it was the only reason I got out of bed at all. I'd toe out my bedroom door and seek her out, like that first sip of coffee, energizing and comforting. Necessary and perfect. Her luscious red hair always caught my gaze first. Then her sparkling hazel eyes, so full of life and hope. She'd smile, her pouty lips upturning and dazzling on impact. I'd stand there, frozen, captivated, desperate for another smile. As always, she'd giggle before, all in slow-motion, the tiny Hunter would cross the kitchen to deliver my coffee, the steaming cup carefully held in her small hands.

It never failed to bewitch me to the spot.

Being with V was like breathing; a necessity I didn't think I'd ever have.

When I told her that she brought Phillip to life, I hadn't realized it wasn't the other Hunter I talked about. It was me. I'd come to life the day I met her, and the more time I spent around V, the more human I became. For so long, I'd been lifeless and empty, dragged through the day by duty and responsibility, chasing a mark, moving onto the next, never seeking more and never dreaming of better.

But V changed all of that.

Years ago, my sister's death swiftly stole any desire to do anything that wasn't my job. Life had come to a screeching halt the day I lost her. The night before she died, Raquel rambled on and on about love and its terrifying hold over her, calling it stronger than any ocean's current, drowning her in seconds when she wasn't near him.

The man in question, Bones, was a volatile Dark Fae who preyed on innocent humans for blood magic rituals, and he didn't love her. Not that it would've mattered if he did. Yet, she still went to him, doing whatever he asked, using her abilities to take out Hunters she'd spent a lifetime training with—convinced it was all in the name of love and their future together. To anyone else, it was clear he only used her to carry out his assassinations, but Raquel couldn't be reached no matter who tried.

It was the first time I'd ever screamed and yelled, had it out with her until there wasn't a breath left in my body. I begged my sister to see reason and come away with me. I disregarded my own morality, also in the name of love, afraid to lose the one person I held dear. I couldn't lose Raquel. She was all I had in this endless life, and I clung to her like a bloody child, fearful of my own immortality and powerlessness in the face of free will. But she turned away from me, jerking her arm out of my hold and disappearing in a crack of magic.

It was the last time I saw her before she was killed by the Organization.

I didn't want to cling to V the way I'd clung to my sister, and so I let the doe-eyed Hunter slip like sand through my fingers, ready to regret it if it meant she was happy.

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I'd been so bloody sure my despair was under lock and key that I'd forgotten who I was up against—Kris was an emotional terrorist, and she'd get the goods whether or not I was willing.

Leaving the collection of weapons on the floor, Kris stood up in another curve-clinging outfit, curly purple hair dropping around her black-coated eyes. Her hands danced up her sides, then crossed against her chest, and I'd know that pose from twenty clicks away.

I was in trouble, gods help me.

The woman was beautiful, but she was a viper who sunk her fangs in the second you showed weakness. She'd been my partner and close confidant for years; something I begrudgingly thanked Phillip for despite knowing he'd done it for himself. Her weapons were lethal, but it was her tongue you should be most wary of. It lashed and spat truth that'd tear apart even the most confident person in the room, and it never failed to enlighten anyone who was willing to hear it—truly hear it.

In all the years she and I were partners, she'd never been less than brutally honest with everyone she met. I wasn't any exception, and I silently prepared myself for a lecture. That fearsome look on her face meant I was in for one hell of an ear-lashing.

“He's going to break her heart, Sloan. Hell, the dude already has. He left that poor girl and only returned after you'd started to pick up the pieces.” She caught sight of her reflection and fixed the soft-pink lipstick around her mouth. Then her eyes were on me again, tearing apart any feigned nonchalance I projected. “Don't sit here and tell me this is for the best and she loves him. She's young. Barely a woman. Naïve to

how the world works and vulnerable to bad men. Phillip was the first person of her own kind she connected with. If I had a dollar for every time I was confused by some asshole parading as a guy who totally got me, well, I'd probably have enough money to retire."

Her speech cut through all my carefully crafted excuses—ones I'd given her when she suggested I go back to V. The femme fatale saw how deeply I cared for the little darling I left behind, and she'd never sit back and watch me make the biggest mistake of my life. As was her way, Kris would beat the sense back into me. With her fists if she had to.

I deserve nothing less.

"Besides, we both know you've never ever looked at anyone like you look at V." Grabbing my shoulder, Kris's eyes slid to the side to meet mine. "And unlike a certain asshole we're both forever tied to whether or not we like it, you actually deserve to be with her." Her dazzling light eyes caught a stray sunbeam from the window and twinkled before she winked at me, knowing I'd never be able to argue with her.

Then I was left to my thoughts before a voice tore me away from them. I pivoted, catching sight of the woman I knew only from stories Phillip and V told about her.

Rose's tired eyes glinted before she walked into the room and took a seat in a nearby chair. To anyone else, the aging woman would look frail and time-worn. Her skin hung from her bones, and the world had taken its toll on her body. But when she looked up again, fire burned in hazel-colored eyes. In an outfit that was far from grandmotherly, she narrowed her stare on me, suggesting another ear-lashing was in my immediate future.

Double bollocks.

“She’s not wrong,” Rose finally said, her weary voice wistful and airy.

Thankfully, I controlled the sigh bent on leaving my mouth. I wasn’t eager to take this verbal beating a physical route, and what I’d learned about Rose assured me I’d be knocked out cold the second I argued. My genes might be superior, but Rose would out-Hunter anyone she met.

“He’s broken and too self-centered to give my granddaughter all that she needs,” she added with a voice drenched in defeat.

I stiffened like I was under attack, unsure how best to address her, and the smile the old Hunter gave me was full of amusement. Rose motioned to the chair beside her, and I slowly made my way over to it.

“Do you want to be with her?”

I fingered through my hair, put out. “It’s not whether or not I want to be with her...the only thing that truly matters is what V wants, yeah?”

Rose’s lips twitched and she crossed her arms, staring into my very soul for all I knew. Those eyes could penetrate the deepest recesses of the ocean, pick apart a stone-faced killer, topple governments and suss out spies. And sadly, I wasn’t Phillip, she’d know the truth from lie with me.

“I know my granddaughter, but I couldn’t tell you what she wants these days, or who she is. She’s been confused since everything she learned about her upbringing was a lie.” Her faded hazel eyes slipped away from mine to the nearby window, and all the sunlight landed on her tired features.

Something about this woman ate away at the heart. Tragedy beamed everywhere you looked, plagued by a lifetime of it. The world’s burdens were in her slouched

shoulders; her granddaughter's pain in her sunken face, every line and sallow dip portraying nothing but sadness. But when her eyes skated over to me, the fire was back in glimmering irises, embers now full flame, a determination that reminded me this was V's family.

"I'm mostly to blame for that, and I know a part of her resents me for keeping it from her. But what she needs right now is someone who waits and understands. Someone who knows perfectly well what and who they are." The elderly woman sighed and shook her head. "Not someone who's just as lost and confused as she is."

Was this a coordinated effort by the women in this safe house? It was starting to seem like one, but I couldn't argue with either of them or their points.

It wasn't that I'd admitted defeat when I left that day knowing it was Phillip V waited for all this time, but I didn't really have much choice in the matter. The look in her eyes smothered out any hope I might ever win her over, and I didn't want to burden the young Hunter with my feelings. Though, that was in part an excuse. Honestly, I wanted to lick my wounds and reorganize my thoughts.

Yes, I promised to fight for her, but Phillip returned and I'd never seen her smile the way she did with him. Sure, it was after some impressive verbal beatdowns—one physical, even—but V lit up the second she saw Phillip come to her rescue. Her gaze never truly left the Austrian, and it was difficult to see our connection unraveling before my very eyes.

How was I ever to win against him?

The entire week she'd been held hostage, my thoughts churned and I was desperate to go to her. Phillip was on a warpath to find her whereabouts, and I'd forgotten for those few days all about being love rivals—until she stood in front of him, barely noticing me at all.

So, I considered bowing out like any man in my position would. I wanted what was best for V, even if that wasn't me. I'd give her whatever made her happy. Except, these powerhouse women's words sunk into me, into the place that still pined and yearned for the spritely Hunter.

Finally, I opened my mouth. "What would you have me do?"

When Rose grinned, I was reminded that the two of them were related. It was all mischief and sneaky intentions, and quite honestly, jarring on the seventy-something woman after nothing but tragedy in her expression. I hadn't been prepared to see it, so my mouth fell open in a I'm-a-daft-wanker sort of way.

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“Glad you asked. Everything you need is in here, and you’ll want to be on your way...” Her eyes looked down at the phone she pulled out of her pocket, “well, now, actually.”

I retrieved the manila folder and quickly scanned its encrypted contents, eyebrow raised.

“Oh, and Sloan,” she called out to me as I put the papers back in the folder. Looking up, her mischievous eyes greeted me with something I wasn’t expecting—sarcasm. “We’re not limited to feeling for just one person. Relationships can come in many, many forms. I’d think about that a little when you decide what to do.”

Unsure of what she meant, I gave her a curt nod, then sped off to get everything I needed for a mission to assist the woman I planned to woo whatever it took.

Chapter 28

Can’t Catch a Break

“V?” Phillip questioned, and I almost didn’t look at him out of fear of giving away my inner thoughts. “This is between Sloan and I.”

“Is it, really?” Cassius asked the internal question floating around in my head, and we all jerked our eyes over to him. He shrugged like the cat-eyed bastard he was. “I think there’s a story here, but more than that, I think you two are making the lady uncomfortable.”

Sloan was the first to back off. “He’s right.”

“I am?” Cash said in audible surprise, and I rolled my eyes.

He was a goddamn idiot.

Sloan’s arms crossed over his weapon-heavy chest, and he offered me a sheepish smile. “My apologies, V. This wasn’t how I envisioned our reunion carrying on. Last time, I wasn’t given a chance to say how relieved I was to see you unharmed after Lux kidnapped you, but...”

It hit me out of nowhere that, last we parted, I’d been the unfortunate captive of a diabolical fucker for over a week. And then what had I done? Gone all gooey-eyed for Phillip, sought out the comfort of my long-lost Grams, and left this beautiful man as a cliff note in my happily ever after.

I’m such an ass, gah!

“Thanks, Sloan,” I muttered, doing a poor job of expressing how genuinely grateful I was. Truth of the matter was, Sloan had been there when the Austrian abandoned me, and his mere presence was a safe haven. “I’m happy you’re here, truly.” The last statement I said with a quick glance over my shoulder at Phillip, and when our eyes connected, it was evident I’d pissed him off.

Good.

Cassius sighed loudly, as was his way, and cleaned his hands with a wet wipe—where the fuck does he even keep those in that ensemble?—before pocketing his random-ass snack. “Well, that was a cute break, but I’m bored now. I hate to point this out to you born-and-raised vampire killers, but we’re losing daylight. We should probably go over there and do what you lot wrangled my beautiful self into doing.”

Was this dude for real? Hadn't he, of his own damn accord, only just offered to help us with the vampire coven? I couldn't figure Cash out, but something told me I never would. The dude was a mystery and a half, and I'd have an easier time stealing secrets from the Illuminati than understanding this cat-eyed asshole. To be fair, I didn't understand dudes in general, and that was abundantly clear as the months ticked on.

Sloan's eyes tracked back over to where the Dark Fae stood, and then down to me near him.

Something about the way he stared at the Fae suggested a past that wasn't pleasant, and I mentally noted to ask the Brit about it later. You know, after I'd worked through this horny bullshit already taking front stage with the gorgeous Hunter nearby, like a dream—nightmare?—coming to life.

Shouldering his pack, the dark-haired gentleman motioned for me to go ahead of him. "It pains me to agree, but we'll be at the best advantage if we hit this particular coven type before dusk."

"Spying, were you?" Phillip asked, passing the other Hunter and taking his place by my side.

I kept my eyes straight ahead, determined to focus on the mission at hand. But it was only a second later that Sloan was on the other side of me, falling in stride with our group.

"Something like that," Sloan replied like the smooth operator he was, plenty used to Phillip's interrogation tactics.

I momentarily admired the way Sloan dismissed Phil one minute, then tossed me a cheeky grin the next. The guilt I'd been waiting for all damn day came a-knocking,

twisting my stomach into knots and lodging the shame of a woman conflicted into my chest.

It didn't take long to make it over to the entrance for the underground hideout. I'd spent the better part of the trek ignoring the heated stare Phillip sent my way several times. When we stopped in front of it, the other two Hunters shared a look. Luckily, it appeared both had reverted to their usual behavior, preparing for infiltration and completely in the Hunter zone.

Despite knowing the reprieve from the awkward-as-shit air was likely to be short-lived, I was unbelievably thankful for it.

I hadn't gotten a chance to think about the looming battle ahead with the Dark Fae bastard who put literal ice in my veins every time I faced off with him. Hadn't gotten a chance to spare a single thought for Lux and the burned facility, or the traitorous siblings who'd I once considered friends, or even Grams's surprising return after spending months worried she'd been taken out by the Organization.

But that seemed to be the way the dice rolled with my head these days. Easier to hyper-focus on the pure, unfettered bullshit of my messy love life and how it only seemed to get worse as time went on than it was to deal with shitty realities that never stopped coming.

A girl can't catch a break...

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Thanks to the distraction of pretending to do the thing Phil and I discussed—you know, the great act of losing control and using it to “lure” Cash into stealing me away in the dead of night—I had something else to focus on. Except, with Sloan here, everything was fucked up and it wasn’t clear where things stood. By the sideways glance Cash gave me when I bent down and sensed out the ground below, he had the very same question. So not only my love life, but now our entire trap was royally screwed up.

Great.

Still, we had a job to do even if it was painfully reminiscent of our previous employment under the assholes who genetically altered humans with supernatural blood.

The coven wasn’t far from the nearby town, and I’d bet my lucky stake that the disappearances and freak accidents were starting to add up based on the number of vampires said to be living underground here.

We crept, one after the other, into the tunnel. Using my freak speed to make quick work of the ladder, I waited for the other three to join me at the bottom, emptying my head of anything that wasn’t killing every vampire in this godforsaken hole. The underground network of tunnels smelled heavily of stale water and mildew. Nowhere in this underground deathtrap could light enter, and I heard the soft grumblings of the Dark Fae before his wispy, sparkly magic illuminated his face.

“Put that out, asshole,” I hissed angrily, already concocting a way to leave the Dark Fae here while the rest of us did the vampire killing.

Cassius pouted, and the light disappeared. “Well, how am I supposed to see then, Hunter? With sheer willpower? Or is this some cleverly crafted revenge where you force me to stumble around like a bloody idiot so I can eventually rouse our hosts?”

This dude is so melodramatic.

It didn’t fail to shock me how much of a teenager this grown-ass man was—not to mention how often I was left to mitigate his tantrums. Worse, the very same dude blackmailed me into a favor.

I’m losing my touch these days.

But for some odd reason, Cassius intrigued me. He was a cowardly bastard and deserved a smack or two, but he’d come to my rescue all day. Okay, sure, he was likely doing it because he was a snake-bastard and good at playing someone’s emotions, but I couldn’t hate the dude for some reason. I tried, and every time I did, the gorgeous boy band imitator did something stupid and made me laugh.

It helped me forget the bullshit presently bothering me.

No, V. Bad girl. Cash is a big hell-to-the-no. Get your head back on straight and remember your Hunter training, you fucking amateur.

I caught sight of the blind Dark Fae blinking rapidly, as if it’d make him see better, and a devilish grin spread across my face. If I wasn’t so ready to duct tape the asshole to the wall and finish the mission without him, I might’ve dragged it out for a moment longer.

But we had vampires to kill.

Sighing in defeat, I removed a pair of night-vision goggles from my pack. I’d

thankfully brought them along since I wasn't sure what the Fae could or couldn't do, and Hunters prepared for everything.

As I forced the goggles into Cassius's hand, Sloan's straying gaze and smile distracted me briefly. Then I looked back at the helpless coward in front of me, who was first grumbling about something under his breath, then fumbling with the goggles next. Cash cursed a couple times, making it a real struggle not to laugh, until he finally put them on. The Dark Fae looked fucking ridiculous, and it was absolutely glorious.

Cassius looked over at me, eyes covered by large black circles that clung unattractively to his face, and I threw an arm across my own to smother the giggle leaving my mouth. Unfortunately, the Dark Fae saw it all and immediately reacted with disgust. But his snarling lip only made it worse, and I barely kept it together.

If the bastard did one more fucking thing, it'd be the end of our covert infiltration, and I took a few minutes to breathe through the rising laughter in my throat.

Still wearing the goggles like a total asshole, the Dark Fae planted hands on his hips like a scolding mother. "Having a laugh, are you?"

Licking my lips and struggling, my eyes skipped over Phillip to find Sloan again. The Brit's laughing expression made it worth the minutes I'd spent trying not to lose my shit. "Those look very good on you," I lied and bit my lower lip.

It was clear Cassius didn't find one bit of it funny, and my eyes naturally tracked back over to Sloan to see what the cool Hunter's expression might give away—and it was worth the stolen glance. The man had a hand over his mouth, concealing a grin by the way the topography of his face had changed. When our eyes met, he winked in a way that was far too sexy for my heart to handle.

Oh, fuck. I'm doomed.

I rushed to hide my expression from Phillip, knowing he'd see it all. Shame crept into my throat like the punishment I surely deserved, but my thoughts swirled with what it could all mean. If it was this bad even on a mission, then I couldn't ignore it anymore. I'd need to say something to Phil, and soon. It might mean our relationship was forever altered—or totally over—but carrying on the way I was wouldn't be fair to anyone.

Not to Phil. Not to Sloan. Not to me.

And it'd probably be one of the hardest things I'd done since ending my relationship with Nigel.

I couldn't be sure the bracelet Cash gave me was working, but so far, no one's treatment differed from previous interactions. Cassius didn't mention how long it took for the thing to work, but what I did know was that my feelings were conflicted without the aid of the bracelet.

I liked Sloan. A lot. Enough to make it difficult to ignore, even with Phillip right there watching. Maybe it was better to be unattached for a bit while I figured shit out, as convenient as that was for me to suggest. It'd likely lead to some kind of fight with Phil, who'd probably blame Cash or something else and believe I was only confused because the Dark Fae had messed with my head.

To be fair, I wasn't certain the Dark Fae hadn't, but I'd been drawn to Sloan from the beginning. Truth be told, our relationship changed before Phillip came back into the picture. It wouldn't be crazy to think I'd developed feelings for the gentle-mannered and considerate Hunter while Phillip was gone. Feelings strong enough to contend with the ones I had for the dude who abandoned me.

If I continued to fight what I was feeling for Sloan, someone might get hurt, and I wasn't going to hurt someone like Phillip did when he left. After Nigel, I promised to be honest with myself. More so, I'd be honest with everyone else. Well, as honest as I could be when I hadn't figured out anything in my head. But not until after we defeated Eros. It could wait until we put a stop to the powerful Dark Fae.

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“Let’s get moving,” Phil cut in sharply, his voice tainted with something I couldn’t identify.

Still, I was glad to be jolted back to the present and most important matter at hand—the unfolding plan to trap an evil bastard.

Time to kill some old-ass undead assholes.

Chapter 29

Random Jo’s Request

You know those classic action-horror montages from movies like *Blade* and *Underworld*? Well, if I was asked to describe the play-by-play of our epic coven takedown, those movies would probably be the closest to what went down. Except, we had a magic-wielding motherfucker who bound and paralyzed several vampires using distinct symbols underfoot, cleverly striking enemies all over the room.

But what killed me on first glance was that the dude preened his nails with another river rock levitating above his other hand, standing in front of a row of hissing vampires, totally bored and ready to leave. I think I even caught the bastard yawning, but he was still wearing those ridiculous goggles, so it could’ve been to shift them back into place. Either case was believable for the Dark Fae apparently ready to call it quits and get back to whatever it was pretty boys did in their spare time.

Go to the spa and get massages?

Watching the Dark Fae was entertaining all on its own. It absently made me wonder if Cash put on some kind of elaborate show with everyone else, when really this allegedly spineless asshole fought like a goddamn demon. It didn't make sense at first. Cash was supposed to be the squealing, screeching damsel of the group. I had money on him being in a cornersomewhere, shooping vampires away and demanding that I come save his Dark Fae ass.

Instead, I got this weird, badass version of him.

I didn't think the dude knew how to fight, or was really any good at it, but he dodged, ducked, dipped, and dived with the best of us.

Ugh, I used a Phillip line because I'm clearly running out of my own material.

Granted, I'd been around the always-showing-off Phillip for far too long, so it seemed weird when someone wasn't bragging about their abilities. But the Austrian made it sound like Cash wasn't powerful—or at least that was the impression I'd been given of the Dark Fae.

Okay, so it didn't make sense that Cassius would be totally useless if Eros made him his personal lap-boy. He wouldn't have survived long enough going toe-to-toe with Phillip either. So, what was the truth here with the Fae? Why did it feel like the dude was a mystery, wrapped in a paradox, coated in an enigma?

I sank my stake into another vampire, side-eyeing Cash as his pretty magic swirled and burned in his palm around a different river rock this time.

How many rocks does this guy have?

The night-vision goggles made the Dark Fae look like he was a steampunk actor playing a warlock. His near-white hair thrashed violently around his head, and his

glittering power spindled around his hand in a multicolored dance of light.

With a brutal swipe of my sword, I decapitated the vampire I staked, barely avoiding the explosion of ash. I landed a kick on another onerunning at me from the other side, and then quickly took a knee to stake that one, too.

Feels good. V is back.

Blowing red hair out of my eyes that'd come loose from my ponytail, I scoped out the area and ticked off the number of vampires left, which was easily thirty by my count.

In here, anyway.

Talk about a town overrun with vampires, you just didn't see coven sizes this large anymore. Hunters sniffed them out before it got this out of control.

Back in the "hay day" as Grams affectionately called it, air quoting it every time—I blamed her for the fact that sarcasm was my first language—vampires were craftier and knew how to evade the technology the Organization used. Their sizes grew in secret, and this present size we fought was commonplace back then.

Grams would throw her arms into the air, expressing the sheer size of the covens she fought on a normal basis. Sitting back in her favorite armchair, she always got a happy twinkle in her eyes saying, "You kids have it so easy now. All this technology and algorithm-bullshit doing half the work the other Hunters and I were forced to do. You'll never really understand the danger of underestimating what you walked into..."

Sometimes Grams would give away her heartache and pain. Just a little. Just enough to catch my attention. It always felt like an illusion. Like if I blinked, I'd miss it. But it was a look so entrenched in sadness and loss it made my throat seize and eyes burn.

Then it was gone, and she'd clear her throat, acting as if she'd lost her train of thought for a second rather than being sucked into a painful memory.

“It was dangerous to underestimate some of these covens—the large ones with fifty or more. Bastards, all of them. Their leaders knew how to swarm a group of Hunters, thin the numbers, separate them from each other. Claimed the lives of some of the best Hunters I ever worked with, underestimating a fight.”

Over the last decade, we used algorithms and local source reports to find commonalities that suggested a coven was in the area. Thanks to those algorithms, many were only starting to build their numbers. Their inability to hide mass disappearances and limit “freak accidents” were the bread crumbs we, the Hansel and Gretel Hunters, picked up to keep their numbers and covens from taking root in any one area.

Or so I thought.

Clearly, whatever this coven did hid their presence from the algorithms the Organization used. Or maybe something was here that needed more looking into.

A backdoor deal, perhaps?

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If I still worked for the Organization, it'd be my job to follow up on how it happened and how it got out of hand. But we weren't under the thumb of those bastards, and we also had other world-ending issues to worry about. Wiping them out would be the best we could do here.

Lucky for us, covens rarely shared their secrets. Wouldn't want someone to take the recruitment methods that set your coven apart and made it more appealing than other covens, now would you?

We hadn't gotten the leaders yet—likely they were hiding away to save themselves and rebuild—but we'd taken out nearly twenty vampires already.

Phillip and Sloan worked together, trading moments and lines between them to overcome the odds. It was weird to watch the two men I was caught emotionally between work together like they hadn't been about to throw down a few minutes ago. Like they were still best buds.

Sloan took out each vampire with a stake-ejecting crossbow, while the Austrian swung Blood Slayer across their necks. In seconds, the two defeated ten more, and I was left in momentary awe of how easy they made it look. Cash coughed and shooed away all the ash fleeing his direction from Phillip and Sloan's efforts, grumbling about his clothes and how they were expensive and irreplaceable.

There's the Cash we all know and love.

But as I honed in on the next vamp nearby, a familiar throb took hold of my stomach. I hadn't called on it, or really expected it to show its face. Honestly, I was starting to

think we'd go through an entire coven without my power showing up because that just seemed to be my goddamn luck these days. The air was shattered with an electric explosion, tickling the senses. Another pulse, and my companions slowed to peer around them until their eyes connected with mine.

A moment passed, but nothing.

I moistened my lips, unsure, before I spun to my right and landed a silver-coated, brass-knuckle-toting fist on a deserving vampire bastard mad-dashing at me in slow motion. As with the ones before him, I staked and cut his head clean off, straddling his body in a crouch before he burst into a billow of ash.

None of the vampires in this room were any older than a few decades, at most. They weren't powerful or quick. A simple staking would suffice, but I lived by the double-tap rule. After Eros, I'd never trust the first killing blow.

Another throb hit, and the floor beneath our feet quaked forebodingly. Cassius locked his curious goggle-covered gaze on me, and my other two Hunters took out several vampires crowding them before jerking their confused eyes over to me as well.

Okay, so it's not just me feeling this. Good to know.

A feeling unlike any before slithered over my body and then it pulsed again in warning. The sensation in the air around me was the moment before the shock. It was energized and dangerous. Ominous and unpredictable. It'd been maybe thirty degrees in this underground death cave before, but now the air scintillated and climbed to the sixties. Then higher and higher until our skin was drenched in sweat as if we'd walked straight into the sweltering heat of summer after a trek through nothing but winter.

Something was different. It wasn't clear at first what, but then a spark caught my eye

before fast-growing flames consumed the space. A line of angry fire circled us with overbearing heat, and we were surrounded—my group as much its victims as the vampires who screamed out in pain and horror around us.

While I'd survive the flames, from what I knew about the other three, they wouldn't. My heart came into my throat. I waved my arms around like an asshole, turning into my own version of a bumbling idiot to shoo the flames out of existence. Sloan, Cash, and Phillip came over to me, fleeing the fire circle as it closed in on them. It rushed my crew to the middle with me, furious flames licking their heels as they went.

“You have an enchanted item in that bottomless bag of yours, Fae?” I asked, peering over at violet-purple cat eyes as Cassius remove the night-vision goggles and stared wide-eyed at the flames. “Please tell me you do. I can't call them off,” I said in a rush, words spilling from my mouth like I was new to talking. My eyes darted from one corner to the next, surrounded.

Funny how it was our intention to pretend my power was out of control, and now it really was. Classic V.

Phillip took my hand and I looked up at him, still struggling to temper my fear and anxiety. “You can do it, V. I know you can. Breathe, think, act.”

What was this asshole, a monk or something? Did he really think I was putting on a show right now? He couldn't, right? It was painfully clear to anyone with eyes that I'd royally fucked this up.

I wasn't that good of an actress.

When I opened and closed my mouth, trying and failing to somehow get that point across, the Austrian's hand squeezed around mine harder. “I know, maus. Not like we planned, but you can do this.”

Thank Christ the man wasn't dumb or oblivious in this case. I couldn't deal with a stupid asshole while my power was on a literal path of destruction.

My other hand was suddenly grabbed, taking my pulse with it, and I jerked my head over to find Sloan with a smile that could melt ice. "You're in control. You've always been in control."

It seemed fitting that I'd be caught between two men, who inspired sickly sweet poetry in my head, mere minutes from killing them both with my terrible ancient Fae powers, and still not know which hand to hold onto. Made a girl wonder if cosmic jokes were often this elaborate. I'd become my worst hussy nightmare. Death inches away, and my heart still wouldn't even eeny, meeny, miny, moe this shit for the sake of the people who might read this tragic tale of a nympho Hunter.

I'm officially broken in the love department.

Cassius's eyes bounced around, flames reflected in his luminous irises everywhere he looked. "I don't have anything for hellfire, Hunters. Maybe—I don't know—mention there's a possibility she might burn us all alive with it next time. I'll be better prepared. But I don't plan on dying today either, so find some way to call it off."

So he thinks this is part of the plan. Great. Guess I gave the Dark Fae too much credit while he fought earlier. My mistake. He was still a total idiot.

My pulse throbbed violently in my ears, loud and afraid, and I closed my eyes, trying to regain control. But the feeling only grew in my belly, and the fire stretched higher to the ceiling, flickering like my life's rage had been embodied in the flames—the total opposite of what I wanted.

Oh, awesome. I made it worse.

The two men flanking me tightened their grip on my hands, the heat oppressive against our bodies, and I tried to ignore how weird it all was. How tragic it was not to know who I wanted when I could lose them both.

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Cassius covered his mouth, coughing. Nothing but dense smoke filled our lungs, and while we didn't need to breathe, he did. Then the flames parted like large curtains on a stage, ready to welcome the first act. A figure came away from the darkness, all curves and shape, and visibly female.

Kris?

But it wasn't Kris.

Walking through the break in flames, purple magic danced around the woman in an awesome display of power. It sparkled and snaked around her hour-glass shape, never staying long but never completely disappearing either. The strange woman's golden-brown hair flicked, swished, and twirled about her head in a beautiful dance, but it was her eyes that took me hostage the second the light of the fire hit them.

They were like darkness personified in one glance. A darkness that seeped into your flesh and bones, before wrapping around your heart and holding you prisoner. Firelight burned in them, igniting like she was the flames come to life.

Both Sloan and Phillip moved into defensive positions, their weapons aimed and ready. But the woman walked on, unbothered. Then she was feet from me, lips tilted into a mysterious smile.

"Guess I'm right on time," she said with a voice like liquid chocolate. I'd never heard anyone sound sexy within the first few words, but this chick nailed it in five.

Phillip's voice rattled with warning. "Jo. What the fuck are you doing here? I thought

you returned to the Fae space?”

Is she a Dark Fae?

I didn't see any markings, but a good portion of her body was covered so the Dark Fae marks could be somewhere out of sight. Would explain the full body suit she wore, which flexed and moved like a second skin.

I wanted one. Bad.

Her eyes trailed from Phil's to mine. Then to the other two standing close to me, feet from my own destructive hellfire, which would consume them on impact. "I'm not here for you. I'm here for her."

His grip on Blood Slayer visibly tightened, but she only smiled and snapped her fingers. The rest of the flames were snuffed out with a whirl of her purple magic, and the room was drenched in darkness again.

Cassius blew out a grateful sigh, the only one shameless enough to show his relief.

But I pinned the stranger with wide eyes before I risked a look around the room. It was no longer filled with a power I couldn't control. "How—?"

"I want in. Whatever you're planning to do to Eros and the Organization, I want in on it," she said to the shock of everyone in that damn room. "And you want me to be in on it, believe me."

Chapter 30

Choke on a Dick

I stole a glance at my two Hunters, deciphering the confusion, the hostility, the apprehension before Phillip spoke up, “I guess you’ve always been an enemy to the Organization, but you’re hardly trustworthy. The Hunters you killed—”

“Oh, like you haven’t killed Hunters?” Her eyes could pierce flesh. “Like me, you’re on the wrong side of it now so you’re forced to make a choice. I made mine a long time ago, and I’m not here to argue with you about the morality of it. Or about what you Hunters did to those of us who crossed over.” Jo locked her arms against her chest, eyebrow raised in challenge. “You, better than anyone, should know how easy it is for them to control the narrative. What makes you think you know anything about me other than what they told you, Hunter.”

I mean, she’s not wrong.

“I’m sure they’re already crafting clever lies to make you three targets—the rebellious few, the scourge of the Hunter code, the virus taking hold. So yeah, save me your self-righteous bullshit. I’m only bothering with you because of her. You’re an unfortunate byproduct of a partnership with this tide-changer. If I had it my way, you and I would figure out who was stronger today. But she seems attached to you, so...you get to live.”

Phillip scoffed, not bothered, and my eyes flicked between them in growing interest.

We just met, but I liked Jo way more than I ever expected to. Anyone who put Phillip in place with logic was a bona fide god to me. Not only that, but what she said made perfect sense.

The Organization had total control over the narrative, and nothing I learned over my years as a Hunter could I trust. Not when they were responsible for breeding and experimenting on all sorts of creatures. Not after learning about my own genetic makeup and the facilities they used to lock us up like animals. Not after they

murdered my parents for no other reason but that they were close to learning the truth.

Jo's gorgeous shape was on full display in the skin-tight body suit even I didn't know how she got into. Either it was painted on or she used magic to get it on. Whatever she did, it was impossible not to stare.

She noticed me gawking because her eyes dropped down to mine and her lips tilted sensuously. "I can help you control your power," is all she uttered.

I opened my mouth, hope rising, but Phillip was quick to cut in. "Like I'd let you touch one hair on her body," he growled low in this throat.

Sloan's fingers tangled with mine, and I turned to look at him before he finally said something, surprising everyone, "I think we should let her. If we're honest with ourselves, the Organization made targets of a lot of Fae for no other reason but they refused to comply."

Cassius swallowed and put up a finger. "I, for one, don't want to be on the wrong side of this woman, so whatever she wants is what we should give her."

Classic Cash.

Phillip grunted, his arms crossing angrily against his chest, outnumbered, and I realized it was down to me when his eyes slid over to mine.

Oddly, the vibes Jo gave me didn't make me hesitate at all. What she said about the Organization wasn't wrong either. I was confident in my snap-judgment of her that she had every intention of making the Organization pay. She gave me vigilante vibes, and I was into it.

Why not risk a little? Who could we really trust in this life, anyway? Tiff convinced me at one time she was a friend, and then she tried to quite literally stab me in the back.

Jo sounded like she had every reason to hate everything the Organization stood for, even though I hadn't gotten the full picture on her beef with Eros. And we really couldn't afford to be picky right now.

"I take it you're pro Organization destruction?" I finally asked, trying to keep my eyes on her face instead of wandering down her body. Not really sure why I struggled so much to keep my eyes to myself, but something about Jo hit different than any other woman I'd met.

Jo's eyes darted over to the corner of the room. It happened too fast for even my superior eyes to track when I heard the telling thud of bodies hitting the floor. By the time I looked over, ash burst in a great cloud and several vampires were destroyed.

“Oh yeah, every person at the top and the blind Hunter minions working for them can choke on a dick,” she answered bluntly, summoning the magic-wrapped blades to return to her with a flick of her wrist. “Look, that asshole with the tattoos and get-fucked-air can get bent, seriously. Fuck right off, asshole. Cash can also choke on a dick,” she said pointedly at the Dark Fae.

He put his hands in the air. “I deserve that.”

Jo sighed and stole a reproachful glare at Sloan. “I don’t know you, don’t really care to either, but...” Smirking, her eyes took a stroll down my body, and it made my heart thump for an entirely different reason than fear. “You, V, let’s just say that I’ve heard things, and I think you’re worth my time. I’m not the type to strike a bargain with just anyone, and I always keep my promises.”

My eyes strayed over to Phillip, then Sloan. By the sheer body language these trained Hunters displayed, it was evident they didn’t really trust her. Sloan seemed more open to letting her join, but it was all there in his body he’d rather not be entangled with the mysterious woman.

And I had no reason to trust her at all, but why did I want to? Why did this woman coming to our rescue—an enemy of my enemy—make me want to trust a little? Take a chance? Be a little crazy and let her join? My gut told me that we needed her. Needed her. And my gut had gotten me this far in life—to a weirdo love triangle, a crazy unfolding of fuckery, but alive—so I’d take a chance today.

I’d follow my gut.

“I’m V,” I greeted her, reaching my hand out.

Jo’s lips twitched and she took my hand, jerking her abyss-deep eyes between Sloan and Phillip. No, but seriously, what sort of lotion did this gorgeous woman use

because touching her was like running my hand over nothing but flower petals.

“Jo. Or as the Organization likes to call me, Fae Assassin Number Two—responsible for over a thousand Hunter deaths.”

Not ominous at all.

Phillip audibly groaned as I cracked a smile and blamed my fucked luck for this weird middle-of-mission moment.

Jo was more than happy to help us finish off the vampire leaders in a mesmerizing display of her magic-paired weaponry, and then we were back where we first met her, in the large antechamber.

Her eyes swept across the room before she addressed Cash, who was eyeing the tunnel that led to the surface, “You.”

It was hilarious to watch the Fae turn his head while magic swirled around his hand and illuminated his gorgeous face in a majesty of sparkling color. From his expression, he expected her to be speaking to another asshole behind him, and then he pointed to himself and swallowed. “Me? I mean, yes?”

“You’re the talented enchanter Eros threatened into working for him, if I remember correctly,” Jo clapped back, twirling a dagger through her fingers.

Cash flipped back his hair with one hand, acting cute. “I’m honored you’ve heard of me.”

“A coward who does whatever he’s asked to avoid pain,” the blunt woman continued, and I bit my lower lip to keep from laughing when Cassius’s face fell with disgust. “Well, whatever. My guess is you keep at least one summoning stone on you,” Jo

said, not asking. “With the number of skilled killers in this room, it’s now or never. Time to summon that bastard you call master and end his terrible reign.”

In no small way, I was obsessed with Jo already. Something told me that she didn’t mince words, certainly hadn’t from the first moment we met, and she wasn’t one to play games. It was a nice change of pace.

“I do, but to summon him you’d—” Cash started matter-of-factly, not at all convinced it was possible by the curl of his lip.

“You’d need this?” Jo interjected and lifted a vial in her hand, a few thin strands of hair locked inside of it.

Cassius’s face slackened, and his mouth popped open like he was a cartoon character, drawn overdramatic for comedic effect. “You’re a terrifying woman. I can’t believe you have that.”

Shrugging, Jo stared at the vial, twisting it inside her fingers. “Eros is cocky. Cocky people tend to make shameless mistakes,” she voiced, dark eyes directed at Phillip. “No one is invincible.”

It was clear to anyone around her that she wasn’t talking about Eros anymore. Phillip and Jo locked eyes, saying nothing but everything in the silence.

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Sloan cut in, asking the question I also was curious to know, “I agree that trapping him here with this many would leave him with little options but to succumb if you can summon and bind him. I suspect that’s your aim. But am I sensing a desire to interrogate him as well? Eros will never talk.”

Jo flipped the vial in her hand, lips sliding up knowingly. “We have a Royal Siren in our midst. We’ll get it out of him. It’ll be a good opportunity to teach V how to call on and control her power.”

“What makes you think you know how to control ancient Fae power?” Phillip hissed in a voice full of hostility. His body shifted in agitation, the muscles along his arm flexing. “Who are you getting your information from?”

Sighing, Jo crossed her arms over the shiny body suit she wore, the gleam magnified by Cash’s nearby magic. “It doesn’t matter how I found out, only that I did. And let’s just say I have a history with Royal Sirens. We’ll leave it at that.”

She had a history? Wouldn’t that make her old as fuck? I had so many questions, but I was eager to learn more about my power and how to control it. I’d do anything to make that happen.

After nearly killing two people I cared about, I wanted nothing more than to bury my head in the sand. The idea that it was possible I might never have to worry about hurting anyone I didn’t plan to hurt again was too tempting to deny. It was risky, but my gut told me I could trust her.

Then it hit me. The bracelet. I peered down at my ankle where it was hidden.

As if reading my thoughts, Jo went to a knee and made both of my companions go for their weapons. She tsked them with her tongue and shook her head, lifting her eyes to my face.

“Worried about this?”

With gentle hands that teased my skin, giving me the oddest sensation in my stomach, Jo removed the bracelet Cash gave me earlier.

Both Sloan and Phillip reacted visibly to the sight of it. I had to keep my eyes on Jo to avoid their accusatory stares.

“Clever, but easy to remove. I’ll return this after Eros is questioned and cut to pieces,” she promised with a wink. Standing, the gorgeous woman offered me a quiet look before saying, “But this is a band-aid, V. Learn to control it and you’ll never have to question the way others feel again, though it won’t resolve that other small problem of who for you. But what I can say about that is it’s okay not to know. Live messy. Do what you want, and don’t apologize. That’s what life’s about, right?”

Holy shit.

I stared at her like I couldn’t make sense of her or her words, too shocked to control my face and it gave all of my feelings away in an instant. It was literally crazy-sauce how intuitive and insightful this woman was, who I’d only just met. But it was as if she’d seen right into my heart and said the things I needed to hear. As if she knew the struggle eating away at me the last couple of days.

It struck deep, and it struck hard.

But the craziest part was that instead of mortified, I felt seen. Understood. Supported by her words. A stranger, someone I didn’t know, resolved a month-long dilemma in

only a few sentences, and it made it difficult not to bend her ear and ask more questions that'd plagued me all this time—relationship issues I was desperate to understand.

“Live messy. Do what you want, and don't apologize.”

I wasn't sure what the usual protocol was for worshipping someone, but I'd do it for Jo. To me, she was a goddess and my new source of strength. It was obvious she lived by those words herself, based on the short half hour I'd known her.

Phillip's gaze intensified on the woman standing directly in front of me. “What makes you confident this plan will work?”

As if the spell had been broken, I quickly cut my eyes over to Phillip, who didn't seem the least bit convinced.

“It'll work, Hunter,” she rebuked, her voice full of disdain. “Don't be bitter it wasn't your idea...or your trap.”

Did she know about our plans? How informed is this woman?

“I think we should do it,” I finally asserted, pleading Phillip to play nice with my eyes.

His jaw relaxed, and he brushed back his hair in resignation. “If you so much as hurt a hair on her head...”

The mysterious vixen standing beside me laughed to herself and twirled a dagger in her hand, not at all put off by his icy tone. “I'm not expecting any of you assholes to trust me right now, and I really don't care if you ever do. My only goal is to convince V I'm here as her ally. You three can go get fucked.”

Ruthless was the only way to describe Jo. And I wanted to be her when I grew up, seriously.

I barely kept it together as Cash outright gasped in insulted horror. Then, grumbling to himself about scary women, the Dark Fae dug into his little bag of tricks and handed over a stone that looked like every other one he used.

How did he know one from another? All I saw were rocks.

Taking it, Jo rubbed the smooth stone between her fingers, and her lips tilted. “I’ve waited a long time to put that bastard six feet under, and it seems fitting it’d be with the girl who’ll be the reason the Organization burns to the ground and disappears forever.”

Chapter 31

The Boogeyman

The pitch-black room suddenly burst with colorful light, wisps of it floating and fleeing in all directions. Then a second later, a swirling vortex took hold of the room, hitting the five of us with hurricane-strength winds.

Jo stood with her hip out and arm up, hair airborne and the summoning rock levitating above her palm. Her beautiful purple magic exploded in strobe-like bursts all around her, and the power throbbed and took her shape with a low buzzing hum. I'd never seen anything like it.

Totally badass.

Her once-dark eyes beamed a brilliant amber as she murmured something under her breath. It wasn't English, that much I knew. Her flame-like irises, two stars caught in a sea of black, glided over to find mine. Our gazes locked before a shuddering pulse hit the air and a bright red symbol formed on the ground in front of us.

Perfect moment for some twelve-year-old caught in a woman's body to say "I think it's witchcraft!" but I managed to keep that little bit of crazy to myself.

Sensation slithered all over my body, stroking my flesh to attention—the ominous feeling of danger. I'd know that feeling anywhere. It woke the dormant power inside, rousing it from its slumber, and an answering throb echoed in my chest. Almost as if my power was responding to hers. Almost as if her power was a perfect match for mine.

The steady hum of magic intensified, drowning out every other sound, and then a figure flickered in and out of existence in front of us. The huge shape, one I'd unfortunately know anywhere, made my blood run cold.

He always did.

Eyes full of homicidal rage shined in darkness, and Eros was brought to his knees. A sound similar to a grunt but more animal than human left his throat. The air was thicker, entrenched in malice, and it seized me, body and soul, before I got my head in the game.

This was what we planned every day since Eros appeared, a real deadly pain in our asses and the ghost of a tragic past. I couldn't let fear take hold of me, not now. Eros's horrible bitch-ass life ended today, and I wouldn't let him slither away like he did last time.

I was a different woman today than I was yesterday. Okay, not really, but I'd been solely responsible for destroying an evil dude's laboratory. That meant I was better prepared to take charge and burn shit to the ground.

It was clear by the strained muscles along the elusive Dark Fae's neck that he couldn't move at all. All he had was his mouth and eyes from the way he ground his jaw and set his angry gaze on every person nearby, his neck never joining him in the look. Eros's arms were pinned to his sides, his body held hostage to a power unseen, prisoner to a gleaming red symbol on the floor, and the powerful Dark Fae struggled to get himself free.

But whatever Jo did, it worked. Sure, it was a little anticlimactic for all the hell this bastard put us through; that it only took a bit of hair and a summoning stone—oh, and a random-ass femme fatale—to get him bound and at our mercy, but I wasn't complaining. As someone who'd won a few times on sheer luck and circumstance, it

seemed fitting that'd be the way one of my greatest adversaries was brought down.

In the V's-a-lucky-bitch style.

Still, you had to marvel at the irony of it all; how odd it was that the same way he'd nearly overcome me with magical binding would inevitably be the very same way he was later done in.

Pure fucking poetry.

I hadn't sensed her move, but Jo was suddenly leaning in close from behind me, hands touching my shoulders. The heat she exuded soaked into my skin, and I shivered without intending to.

Must ask about her super cool magic and what it can do later.

Her sultry voice came next, the tantalizing slide of her hands down my back stealing my focus for a second. "I'm going to lend you my power so you can channel yours. All I need from you is to focus on what it is you want from him—the answers you need. Who he works for, why they sent him, who else is involved. Keep that in your head. Let it guide you," she whispered into my ear, her seductive voice prickling the senses. "We don't have long, but you're a smart girl. You can do this better than any of the assholes in here."

I thought girls wanted pretty things said to them. To be lavished with gifts, told they were beautiful, and taken on midnight strolls around a beautiful moon-lit lake. Shit like that. But this chick was won over by someone saying I was smart and capable of evil-assassin-who-lived-too-long destruction. That got my pulse going.

I moistened my lips and closed my eyes, ignoring the urge to ask her to go on.

Say more about me being smart...

Sloan appeared to shift in discomfort, jaw working, but I smiled at him to put his nerves at ease. And when Phillip took a step my direction, his furious eyes pinned to the woman presently hovering close to my ear like the devil on my shoulder, I quickly cut my eyes over to him.

"I'm fine," I promised them, voice softer than I meant for it to sound.

Shit, this woman totally throws me off.

Phillip's jaw clenched and unclenched, every muscle in his body flexed and visible, even his hands were wrapped into fists, but he backed off. His eyes never left me, but the Austrian didn't try to intervene either, so I sighed a thankful breath I wouldn't have to fight him while going up against the man of my nightmares.

The low growl of Eros resounded within the room, and my gaze was drawn back over to the trapped killer. His blazing eyes narrowed, the mask he wore still in place, and it gave me a powerful feeling to watch someone so formidable imprisoned by their own arrogance. Lifting my chin, I walked forward with Jo trailing me, her hands still touching my back. The caress of her magic continued with every step I took until I was inches from Eros.

Taking a knee, I stared the bastard right in the eyes, then yanked the mask down to expose the corrupt face beneath—the one I'd only seen once before.

Like I remembered, Eros had hints of a great beauty in his features, but they were corroded by evil. A pure sludge-like darkness oozed from his pores. A gruesome scar separated his top and bottom lip, and several old wounds marred his face. But the pretty eyes, strong jaw, and full lips didn't totally fit the Boogeyman under my bed.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 2:46 am

Most comforting about the ugly face of my enemy was that he might be the assassin who evaded death for countless years and the forbidden name whispered among our kind, but like us, he bled.

And what bleeds can die.

“I’d say it’s good to see you, asshole, but we both know you’re lucky not to be dead already. So tell me, who else has our mutual friend Lux sent after me and my compadres?”

Jo huffed a proud breath. “Atta girl.”

Eros flicked his eyes between she and I, then clamped his jaw shut. By the way Jo’s magic caressed me a little stronger than before, she’d expected as much.

“You know you’re no match for a Royal Siren, Eros,” she cooed, her voice coated with sass. “Answer, or I’ll turn up the heat.” Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Jo pull something out of her pocket. Then she was stabbing it directly into the bastard’s neck.

I caught Phillip smirking, and if what she did got a smile out of that sadistic bastard, then I could only assume it was a level of torture befitting my crazy partner.

Which was plenty comforting to me.

A roar left Eros’s chest, and it did its job because Cash was already taking refuge behind my two Hunters. Even with Eros caught, the cat-eyed bastard was a coward.

Figures. A zebra can't change its stripes, or whatever bullshit idiom fit this moment best.

Sadly, I only excelled in sarcasm and fucking up my life these days. Clever idioms alluded me.

Note to self: Google more sensational idioms to drop in fights.

A powerful sensation came into my throat, and I asked again, "Who are the assholes Lux sent after me? I need names, asshole. And how do we hit that bastard in his suit-wearing Achilles' heel?"

Sweat beaded on the bastard's forehead, and it was obvious the Dark Fae was fighting my influence. But like a cord snapping, the asshole sang like a canary: "He calls them the Seven. Struck bargains with powerful leaders from different groups all over this plane to go after you and the others, and to build his army. Find them, destroy them, and you'd cripple his operation. End it entirely is my guess," Eros said through his teeth, fighting the truth leaving his mouth.

It was weird to hear the sinister voice of my enemy, the one that lived in my head for months, speak as if pain laced every word. No, it wasn't weird. It was fucking awesome.

My lips twitched into a devilish smirk. "The Seven? Is that some kind of supernatural boyband or...?"

Jo giggled far too cute for a woman with deadly magic and a dagger twisting through her fingers. "I've heard of the Seven, but didn't know it referred to Lux's operation."

Phillip and Sloan came closer, Cassius still using the two of them as a shield. "Get locations," the Austrian demanded, finally joining in.

Took the bastard long enough.

“Where are they, you sick motherfucker?!” I commanded, voice booming through the quiet hum of power.

Eros lifted his eyes to me, the savage gleam hitting my gut first. Then the world shifted in a split second and the binding spell holding the Dark Fae broke apart with a loud crack. Eros was on his feet, cloak flipping out with a surge of his power. Before I understood what was happening, his hand was around my throat, squeezing, tremendous power sparking around his fingers and burning my skin on contact.

Jo, Phillip, and Sloan all had weapons out, ready to dice the asshole to pieces. The first time all three had something in common was ironically their death-to-Eros expressions as they rushed to intervene. But something exploded from inside my chest, the elusive power finally waking the fuck up, and then everything froze.

Time stopped.

I freed myself from the Fae’s murderous hold and rubbed my neck, the feeling of phantom fingers still assaulting my throat.

For a second, I wondered, as the world stood still and my companions rushed to slice this formidable killer down to the bone, why my intuitive power chose frozen time and not hellfire—or anything else I was capable of doing. Why did it always come to a pause with this bastard?

Of course, I’d take whatever chance I was given. I’d failed to kill the snake-bastard last time, and I wouldn’t this time. I’d rectify my mistake. I’d snuff out a life that had destroyed thousands, probably tens of thousands.

Vindictive V was here for vengeance, for vindication, for violence, for victory, and

I'd make it resonate and ripple. Send the message to our enemies, to the ones waiting for their chance, that no one, not this killer, not the next, would ever overcome me. I was V. I was a badass motherfucker, and I'd make damn sure the world knew it. That Lux and his Seven-whatevers boyband knew it.

Looking down at my own daggers, I took a second to breathe through the feeling in my head, the world going topsy-turvy as it always did when time froze. Nausea slammed into my stomach, but I fought through it and jerked my eyes over to Blood Slayer.

Phillip's stare was the most homicidal I'd ever seen them, save a few other times in the clutches of Eros. I wished I could give him this moment; let the other Hunter be the final blow to the bastard who'd taken good people from him. But I couldn't risk it, not with the world's future resting on my shoulders.

Stealing the sword from Phillip's clutch, I let loose another shaky breath that expelled a lifetime of pain and heartbreak. My shoulders tensed, body poised, and I didn't waste another second. With a rageful cry, I sliced straight through Eros's thick neck. At the very least, it'd be Phillip's sword that delivered justice for every life this bastard had stolen from him. I let that thought guide my hand as I stabbed it into the asshole's cold, black heart, then cut it down until the metal blade struck violently against the stone floor.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 2:46 am

The air shuddered and time moved again.

Before anyone could reach him, Eros's eyes widened and the light in them died and dulled. Blood spilled out of his body, pouring onto the floor. At least, I thought it was blood. The color was far from human. It was pale-blue with a pearlescent sheen, and it gave me the heebie-jeebies. Somehow, I hadn't noticed the color the last time I got a hit on the asshole with a few arrows, but it was hard to miss with it pouring like a fountain out of him.

Phillip's eyes shot over to me before slowly sliding down to Blood Slayer in my grip. He lifted his tattooed hands in confusion, and then stared at me for answers. Answers he already knew.

Sloan was quickly yanking me away from Eros's reach, but the Hunter couldn't say anything before the Dark Fae collapsed in on himself, body suddenly consumed in magical blue flames. Then the bastard who'd haunted my nights was gone, the blood on the floor the only evidence he'd ever been there.

It was silent for a few moments before Cassius sighed loudly, combing through his hair with a smile. "Oh, good. I was really worried there for a second we were all done for." Our group's eyes were on him, and his Adam's apple bobbed, eyes flicking from one person to the next. "What? I'm just saying what we were all thinking. But also, um, what just happened?"

Jo was near me, her face removed of all emotion. "You can move through pauses of time?"

“Say what?” Cash squealed, his comical reaction lost on me when Jo’s words registered almost as accusatory. “You mean to say she’s a Time Mover?”

Time Mover? Guess whoever made their names didn’t have a great imagination. A high schooler could’ve come up with something better.

Suddenly, my body was made of jelly, and my legs gave out from under me. Sloan moved like a flash of lightning and saved me from an ill-timed “Well, hello there!” with the floor.

“V needs rest,” was all the Brit said before scooping me up into his arms in a princess hold that instantly brought color to my cheeks.

I didn’t need to look over to know Phillip’s face and body were probably saying a lot of angry and homicidal things right about now, but I also didn’t have the strength to do anything about it. It was a chore just to hold my head up, and honestly, I really didn’t. I let it fall onto Sloan’s shoulder after a few seconds of trying.

I hated how much my heart responded to the beautiful Brit’s touch, and how a little part of me wished it’d never stop. Wished he’d hold me in his arms forever so I could breathe in his masculine scent. Let the alluring fragrance wash over my body and paint me in Sloan’s aroma.

Would I smell like him after this? Something about that gave me butterflies in my stomach, and I combatted my urges for one while the other looked on, unaware my head was cheating on him already.

Fuck.

It was another reminder that now that the nasty business of killing Eros was finished, another beyond uncomfortable moment was in my near future.

But I'd heed Jo's words. I'd live messy and apologize to no one. Okay, so I'd apologize, but only for being a confused mess of a woman who was probably putting a spell on everyone, definitely a shameless sex addict, and apparently attracted to anyone with a pulse these days.

I was hit out of nowhere with a dizziness rivaling one of those playground merry-go-rounds from my childhood. You know, the ones that probably killed and dismembered children in the eighties.

Sloan's hold on me constricted before the world faded away to darkness, and I sunk into the deep abyss of sleep.

Chapter 32

Embrace Your Ho-Ho

It took three full days to regain consciousness. My first blurry glance was sunlight streaking across a cherry-wood ceiling with a super classy fan circulating air down on me.

Sitting up, I looked around the room I didn't recognize. The smell of the sea was in my nose, and my eyes strayed to a set of patio doors nearby that overlooked a steel-grey sea, its thrashing waters still cast in morning cloud cover. It drew me over to the in-room balcony, and I walked out into the fresh breeze, letting it wake my dulled senses.

The grogginess in my head was whisked away the longer I stood in the morning sun, sprays of sea water coating my face. It was the most relaxed I'd been in a while, and I silently basked in the calm before the storm.

"You're awake," someone said from behind me, and I did a full turn because I'd

know that voice anywhere.

Her similarly colored eyes were hit by the sun coming through the door, her body cast in shadow, before my grandmother stepped into the light. And the air was sucked right from my lungs. Her tired eyes carried the weight of my fate in them, and her smile couldn't hide how much our absence from each other had affected her.

Her house slippers shuffled across the carpet as the elderly Hunter made her way over and offered me the steaming cup of coffee she'd brought with her.

"Grams," I breathed, not sure what to say now that I had her in front of me. "You look old." I took the hit she landed on my shoulder with a laugh. Inside I was crying though, because Grams had a mean-ass punch and superior senses meant it felt like being plowed by a bus.

Grams grumbled before wrapping her arm around me, her awkwardness matching mine.

I'd missed her autumn scent and comfortable heat. I'd missed the way she squeezed against me, years of wear and tear in her bones but still as sturdy as a goat. I'd missed her chiding breaths and stern but loving eyes.

I'd just really missed her.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 2:46 am

“I see your sass hasn’t changed,” she complained with her smiling mouth giving her away. “I worried this world would beat it out of you.”

Grabbing her hand with mine, I took a ginger sip of my warm coffee and stared out at the endless sea. “It tried, but I’m the granddaughter of one badass bitch.”

Grams clicked her tongue, but she beamed with the compliment. She tugged me closer and brought our heads together. It was a moment where we both closed our eyes and simply enjoyed the silence and much-needed embrace.

Then she released me and leaned against the balcony rail, her intelligent eyes breaking apart the secrets I kept hidden in my heart. “I know you’re an adult and full-fledged Hunter now...” I glared, and she smirked. “Oh, don’t give me that look. You’ll always be a Hunter. Those bastards at the Organization can’t take that from you, Vivienne. Remember that. A Hunter isn’t what they made you; a Hunter is what you made yourself, and the code is the same. We still believe in keeping the innocent safe, even if it looks different now.”

Grams always did believe in the code of a Hunter. Even without the Organization, that didn’t change for her. It was the entire reason she pushed me to think for myself, not to simply do what I was told. Not to trust someone else’s version of life. And I was grateful at the very least she encouraged me to use my head instead of blindly following orders. Maybe that was her way of preparing me for this shit-show. Maybe that was the seed of rebellion she’d planted.

“You’ve been lost since...” Grams trailed off, her soft-spoken words dying on the salty wind.

I wasn't used to the woman being at a loss for words, and I shifted uncomfortably. "I unfairly blamed you, Grams."

She lifted her hand, lips thinning and eyes watering. I took a step forward, intent on hugging the woman for all she was worth. It was rare for my grandmother to show emotion, and it made my throat constrict so tight I had to swallow several times to soothe the discomfort. But when I tried to get close, Grams shook her head and crossed her arms, rejecting me.

"No, V. This is on me. I was so afraid of what it might do to you, I forgot that life is unfair and ruthless. It comes for you whether or not you're ready. I was wrong to keep the truth from you. It only made it harder on you. It left you vulnerable and afraid to embrace the greatest parts of life," she entreated, her tone afflicted with so much regret it was heartbreaking to hear on the normally confident woman.

"Grams..."

She swallowed visibly, wiping away renegade tears with angry fingers, and set her determined eyes on me. "The days ahead will test you more than the ones of the past, and I know you're confused and struggling to understand who it is you are and what you want. If it's one thing I can tell you, love and life are complicated without the struggles you face. You're going to make mistakes, and you're going to hurt yourself and others when you do. But it's in those times of error we truly learn about ourselves, so I don't want you to be afraid of stumbling."

Tears tumbled down my face, but I stood strong against the abrupt wind hitting our bodies and the emotion shamelessly burning down my cheeks.

My grandmother finally smiled and reached her hand out to me. Biting my lower lip, I grabbed it and she squeezed once before heading inside. "Oh, and V," she called out as my gaze followed her into the room.

“Yeah?”

Her eyes trailed over to the door before finding their way back to me. “Sloan’s a good man. Phillip is too, if not a little self-centered. But I think it’s okay for you to spend some time figuring out who makes you the happiest.” My lips twitched into a smile before she added, “You’re young. Explore a little. Kiss a few, or kiss them all. Isn’t that what the kids are doing nowadays, anyway? Hitting it and quitting it?”

Did my grams just say “Hitting it and quitting it?” Who the fuck was this lady? She certainly wasn’t my grams.

I call bullshit.

Words escaped me, and I just stood there like a dumbass, gawking at the woman who’d never talked about sex my entire fucking life.

Grams shrugged with a sneaky grin, her eyes looking off somewhere in the distance, to days long ago. “I loved your Gramps, but I only knew that after I’d gotten into my fair share of beds. At one time, I easily shuffled through four or five.”

My eyes widened, and hers twinkled like that was exactly what she was aiming for.

Sadist.

“We were all consenting adults, V. And busy. Like me, they weren’t terribly concerned with being in a relationship, and it was fun. That’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

What the actual fuck...

Four or five people? Grams, the same lady who lived and breathed fighting, had a

roster of friends with benefits? Booty calls? Who was this person? Who replaced Grams with this sexy imposter who apparently Marilyn Monroe'd the Hunter world at some point? Forget the fact that she'd gone from talking about regrets to now pushing this extreme narrative of "Love one, love all, embrace your ho-ho, V!" but I couldn't reconcile the woman standing in front of me with the woman who'd painstakingly raised me over the years.

Maybe nymphomaniacs run in the family.

Before I could demand Grams explain herself, she waved at me and left the room. I was abandoned to my thoughts, blindsided by yet another mind-boggling plot twist. And for some reason, I couldn't get the theme song from Pokémon out of my head, unintentionally singing "Gotta catch them all" under my breath as I rushed to dress and head downstairs.

"You're still here?" I asked, flabbergasted by a familiar figure looming in the sitting room.

Phillip was off gathering some much-needed intel on the boyband of evil-doers working under Lux, and Grams had dragged Kris with her to do something she refused to talk about. It was all very James Bond of her as she whispered like I didn't have the hearing of a goddamn creature of the night, "Don't say a word to her, you hear?"

Kris only smiled at me apologetically before she was whisked off to a place I wasn't allowed to know to do something I was also not permitted to know. But Grams never did anything maliciously, and despite the letter I'd pored over for weeks when she first left, I wasn't concerned she'd never come back.

I wasn't worried about losing her again.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 2:46 am

Jo had a leg crossed over, wearing a pair of casual jeans and a t-shirt that had “Try Me” written across her chest. Her caramel-brown hair was drawn up into a messy bun on top of her head, and I almost didn’t recognize her. The boots she wore were the only thing even remotely similar to the woman I met three days ago. She looked up from the book in her lap, and the way her lips slid up the second our eyes met made my stomach flip-flop.

What the hell is wrong with you, V? Are you really this thirsty?

“Hey there,” she greeted, setting her book aside.

I think I said something, but my words probably sounded like gibberish because her smile only grew with my reply. It was a tongue-tied ridiculousness even I couldn’t excuse. The dangerous vixen stood and peered over at the kitchen where Cassius leaned against a cabinet, grumbling about how he didn’t like over-easy eggs to Sloan, who had somehow been wrangled into cooking for him.

The ice-blue eyes that appeared in so many dreams I’d lost count found their way over to me, and I waved awkwardly when the Brit’s gaze lit up and his mouth tilted into a breathtaking smile. “Hungry?” Sloan asked, turning around in an apron covered in frills.

No lie, he made it work. I didn’t know how, I didn’t know why, but it was a perfect look on the gorgeous Hunter. Pretty sure the beautiful bastard could pull off a trash bag at this rate.

“Uh, yeah. Starving,” I responded slowly.

Cash was in another five-thousand-dollar ensemble when he turned to look at me, cat eyes taking in my lackluster outfit with a disappointed sigh. “I’m taking you shopping. Today. This is an insult to women everywhere. Also, hope you like runny eggs because I think that’s all this brute knows how to make.”

Jo scoffed to herself before leaning into view. “How do you feel?”

It only occurred to me when she said something that I’d passed out in Sloan’s arms after defeating an enemy who’d survived the strongest Hunters in existence.

“Better,” was my incredibly suave reply, and Jo’s laughing eyes told me she also thought it needed work. So, I went on, “You were cool.”

Wow, V. You’re really laying the wit on thick today.

The woman’s hand sparkled with purple light before she brushed hair from my eyes and laid her heated palm over my cheek. The subtle caress of her power always hit me right in the hips, and I couldn’t stop the soft moan leaving my throat if I tried. Her obsidian eyes beamed amber for a breath, a fleeting second where stars lived in her gorgeous gaze, before she withdrew her hand.

“You did good back there. We’ll talk. But for now, I think you deserve a few days of telling the world to get fucked.” Jo winked, the sultry smile signature only to her back before she grabbed Cash by the ear and dragged the squealing Dark Fae out the front door.

I almost didn’t understand what was happening until they were gone and it was just Sloan and I left in the home.

The Brit removed the sauté pan from the stovetop and placed some eggs and toast on a plate, then offered it to me with another one of his heart-stealing smiles. Taking the

steaming plate, I slowly moved over to the table and watched the other Hunter follow. He took a seat directly across from me, fingering through dark hair before it fell around his eyes in a I-fuck-like-a-devil sort of way—and I'd know better than anyone that he did.

Christ, I'm so into this dude.

“We didn't really get much of a chance to chat since I came back,” he started as I tried not to shove food into my mouth. Hunger was a crazy sort of thing when you'd been comatose for days.

But my fork paused, and I lifted my eyes to his. “Sorry about that.”

His all-bad grin made my legs quiver under the table for reasons I'd rather not acknowledge, painfully familiar with his lusty stare and not prepared to feel it when I'd only just been forced to have a random-ass sex talk with Grams.

Talk about a weird fucking morning.

“I adore you,” came his blunt proclamation, and my fork dropped to the plate with a clatter. “I want to know you. I want to be the one you kiss and share moments with. I want to be the one you steal glances at; who you run to when you need comfort. I want to be a person you come to love, and I will do whatever necessary to be by your side.”

Love?

His stare never wavered. The powerful look of him, shoulders back, chest clenched under a thin t-shirt, spoke volumes of how strongly he felt about everything he said to me.

“Phillip and I are mates, and that won’t change, but I’m not convinced he’s the right person for you. He can’t give you everything you need, love. He’ll try, but he’ll come up short. I realize the two of you have only just made things official—”

I coughed after inhaling a wallop of egg, and Sloan stopped talking to see if I was okay. “Wait,” I said, voice strained from choking on eggs—and life, really, “who told you that?”

“He made it abundantly clear when we came here you were his.” Sloan’s jaw clenched. With a stolen look at the door, the Brit stood up from his seat and knelt down in front of me, bringing my hands into his. “You deserve a chance to find out what it is you want, and who. I don’t expect you to decide today, or anytime soon. I only ask that you consider me more than you did before.”

Too shocked to speak, I stared at him.

But he got to his feet and drew me up from my seat with a beckoning smirk. His hands took the shape of my face, blue eyes searching for any sign that I wasn’t okay with it. But I’d never be able to say no to Sloan, not even when it was the shittiest thing I could do.

The side of his lip lifted, my heart thumping once before his mouth came down on mine and he kissed me like he’d spent years dreaming of it. Like my mouth was the breath in his lungs after nearly drowning. And my brain couldn’t cope. It shut down. Traitor. Only my mouth and hands knew what they were doing.

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I clutched the front of his apron, bringing his lips impossibly close. Desperate to feel more, I opened my mouth to his seeking tongue. I responded the way my head screamed not to and my ho-ho body fist-pumped. I kissed him back like it wasn't the worst thing I could do.

Chapter 33

Kisses of Two

For minutes our mouths clashed, tongues seeking, entangling, caressing, and time seemed to stop. I gave myself over to Sloan and satisfied an urge I'd long suffered since Phillip came back.

And then it ended.

Sloan was the first to withdraw, his thumbs swiping longingly across my wet, parted lips. His narrow eyes were pupil-blown lustful things that I'd seen a few times but never quite like this. It made adrenaline rush my veins and my pulse thrum violently in my ears.

"Any way you'll have me, I'm yours. I won't be greedy. I know your feelings for Phillip are strong, and it's not my intention to pressure you," Sloan whispered, his mouth ghosting across mine again before retreating.

A sigh escaped my lips, full of desperate need and resignation. My hands clung to his large ones still holding my face, not ready to let go but determined to say something, anything, that may express an iota of what I was feeling—what I'd struggled with for

months.

“I do like you, Sloan,” I said slowly, watching his lips hint at a smile. “Like, a lot, and that’s why it’s confusing. I don’t really know what the right answer here is, but I do know this isn’t going to work the way it’s going right now. I need to figure things out. Try to understand my own feelings. I can’t lead anyone on by pledging myself to them. It’s not fair.”

His deep husky voice whispered, “Then don’t.”

“Don’t?” My eyebrows lifted into my hairline.

A secretive grin tainted Sloan’s lips before he stole another kiss and threaded fingers through my hair, the seductive lure of his mouth causing my body to pitch forward. But he stayed frustratingly out of reach. “Phillip and I are big boys, and we’ve lived for a very long time. Even with that being the case, we still struggle to know what it is we want. Relationships are complex and ever-moving, and they look different for each person.”

Leave it to Sloan to effortlessly put my heart at ease with his words, to say all the things I’d been desperate to hear. To validate every goddamn struggle in my heart like I wasn’t crazy. Like I was perfectly normal. I’d never felt so damn seen by any other man in my life, and it made my throat lock up with emotion.

If the Brit noticed, he didn’t show it. Simply carried on talking like I wasn’t in front of him, two seconds from crying. “It’s only natural that you’d be conflicted and unsure about having feelings for two people. I’m not asking you to choose me over him, or to choose at all if that’s your wish. I’m only asking you to make space for me. Let me show you who I am and what I can give you. I want to be a part of your life, however that looks.”

My eyes dropped away from his, battling another onset of debilitating emotion, so I started to ramble, “Grams says she was with five people at one time. Can you believe that? Grams was all like ‘We were all consenting adults, V’like she hadn’t just uttered a whole lot of fucking crazy.” I used my best Grams voice, gravelly and full of subtle chiding, air quoting her words. “She and I never talk about sex. Like, ever. It was totally out of nowhere, and now I can’t stop thinking about who those people were and where she found them. Or singing the Pokémon theme song, if I’m honest.”

The eyebrow raise from Sloan had me scrambling not to sound like a total idiot.

Too late.

“It’s still a little weird to think about her living it up with five separate people, but she was quick to say it was nothing to be ashamed of.”

The amused eyes straying to my mouth and those stroking fingers in my hair were so damn good, and they turned me into a rambling monster. Being in front of him like this should’ve stopped the word vomit in its tracks, but it didn’t. Sadly, I didn’t think anything would at this point.

“That wily old fox said I should explore. Hit it and quit it. She’s a crazy person. I mean, no one hits it and quits it, Grams. That’s for sleaze balls and people with personality problems. Okay, yeah, maybe I have a few of those problems, but it’s because I’m young, not because I’m intentionally an asshole.”

Sloan’s laughing eyes danced around my face. Then I heard his soft, chest-deep chuckle, and I just melted into V goo before pulling myself together.

Ugh.

“Anyway, Jo also said something similar the other day—live messy and don’t

apologize. I seem to be getting a lot of random advice these days.”

Oh, God, V. Just. Shut. Up.

Sloan’s smile only grew the longer I babbled. But thankfully, the angelic bastard finally came to my rescue. “I agree with Rose. You’ve had a rough go, love. Your year hasn’t been great.”

That’s the understatement of the century.

“And if memory serves, you’ve barely experienced relationships of this nature before meeting Phillip. I’d be more surprised if you’d figured it all out. Might have to then ask you to teach me your ways because I certainly haven’t, and neither has Phillip. If he cares about you, he’ll let you sort through it.”

And there it was, the one thing I needed to hear: “If he cares about you, he’ll let you sort through it.” Those were the words I refused to say to myself because I wasn’t sure if Phillip would ever be that person. Would he let me sort it out? Would he know how hard it was just to ask for it, to ask for time, like Sloan was clearly ready to give me? I wasn’t confident the Austrian would, and it tore me apart every second I didn’t say it. Because I did love him, but my feelings for Sloan were strong, too. Distracting, all-consuming, the same way it’d been with Phillip when I was with Nigel.

‘If you love someone, set them free’ was a pretty well-known quote by someone who’d written a book. Jonathan-something. I’d done that with Phillip when he left on his misguided protection adventure, and now I needed it from him. But I wasn’t sure I’d get it.

And if I didn’t, what did that mean for us?

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The fingers weaving and brushing through my hair were suddenly gone, and Sloan took several steps back, his gaze straying to the door. “Think about it, pet. I’m not going anywhere.”

I opened my mouth, but Cassius flung the door open like he’d seen some shit, and now he needed a drink. “I will nevereverwith that devil of a woman—”

Unfortunately, those teleportation stones the Fae used meant I didn’t hear him until he was at the door, and I unconsciously put more spacebetween Sloan and I, the proverbial girl caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

But what a delicious cookie jar this man is.

The melodramatic Dark Fae’s eyes caught the two of us standing suspiciously close but not. He took a moment’s pause, hands on his hip like a wary mom, before Jo pushed her way through, throwing the dude hilariously off kilter. She gave the two of us a glance, lips lifted, and his eyes cut over to her angrily. But the look Jo gave him had the Dark Fae scraping the back of his neck, throat nervously bobbing.

I got the sense that Jo had stolen Cash for a reason, and I was quietly grateful. Sloan’s supportive words and heated kiss gave me courage to do what I needed to do; to promise myself to no one and indulge a little.

Sitting back down, I pretended that I was only just starting my breakfast and hadn’t been caught in the act, but the Dark Fae beelined for me like a man on a mission and took the seat Sloan occupied only ten minutes prior.

Before we kissed like shameless maniacs.

“Spill. The. Tea,” was his demand, one clap at a time, and I could only shrug and pretend I had no idea what he was talking about. “Don’t give me those doe eyes. I know you’re hiding something, and since I’m bored, I plan to find out what that is.”

It wasn’t seconds later when Cash was on his feet, a large hole sliced straight through the side of his fancy-person shirt, artfully avoiding injuring him. When I followed the dangerous path, a dagger was sunk into the cabinet behind the gaping Fae. His accusing eyes lifted to the only person in that room brazen enough to do it.

Smirking, Jo sipped from a coffee mug and continued to read her book. “Sorry. Bored,” she explained with an impish grin before going back to her reading.

Again, I was saved.

I’m building a Jo shrine. I don’t even care how foolish that makes me.

I shoveled my breakfast into my mouth and escaped the prying asshole to get my thoughts in order and prepare my heart for when Phil finally returned.

The sound of distinguishable footfalls all the way to the door, the way Phillip let a sigh escape, the sound of his powerful body shifting before he grabbed the knob, kept me frozen to my spot on the bed, heart thrumming loudly in my ears.

I swallowed as the door clicked open and Phillip’s wide girth appeared in the frame, his intense eyes finding mine instantly. He fitted through the open space of the door and then closed it behind him, the abrupt click causing a jolt to travel the length of my spine.

Being the perceptive fuck he was, Phillip paused and let his eyes travel my body

before speaking, “Waiting for me, maus? We’re so eager tonight.”

Sure, of course that’s the road he’d travel first.

It was difficult to breathe or think with his predatory eyes licking me from head to toe, ready to act on some bedroom shenanigans, the sexy monster.

And he’d never know how much I wanted to escape in my head to that shameless place he always took me whenever we were alone, relying on ourbodies to say the words we couldn’t. But the stolen kisses, the crimes I committed both today and in my head, nagged at every part of me and locked down Ho-Ho V. I’d put it off for long enough, and it wasn’t fair to either of us.

The fear sat in my throat, making it difficult to swallow, but I beckoned the man over with a pat on the bed next to me. Phillip was an insanely talented Hunter, and he’d figure it out. He’d know that what I had to say was serious.

By the way his jaw clenched and the muscles tensed around his torso, it was obvious he already had. He took several steps before plopping down beside me, the immense weight of him nearly sending my body into his. Quickly, his lethal eyes were on me, deciphering the emotion in my expression. He reached for me, cradling my face, and the powerful look he offered me put my body into chaos.

My heart raced like he could see it all, see every dark secret. I’d never be good enough to hide it from him, and maybe that was for the best. The betrayal was in every accelerated throb of my pulse, and my stomach twisted into a thousand knots. Before uttering a word, my body punished me.

“Mein schatz,” he whispered, his thick, rattling voice making my courage falter, “is this about the deal you struck with Cash?”

I froze, not expecting that completely-off-the-mark response, and he took it as a sign he was right. I struggled to collect my thoughts before he sighed and brought our mouths together in a sweet kiss.

“I know it all. Whatever you promised him, I’ll get you out of it. Worry not, lass.” Phillip’s lips quirked up, proud of himself in light of my obvious surprise.

“That’s not what this is about,” I corrected with a frustrated sigh, taking his smile with the statement. “But before I get to that, you can’t get me out of the magical contract I made, so we need to do it.”

His eyes narrowed, the rage burning in all the blue. “A magical contract?” The Austrian started to get to his feet, but I caught his arms to stop him. “Let go, V. I’m going to kill that sneaky bastard.”

The moment had gotten so out of hand, it made me blurt out the next thing, desperate to stop him. “I might be in love with Sloan!”

That stopped him.

It'd be weirder if it hadn't, V.

His entire body went rigid, the muscles pulled so tight I worried they'd snap. Then the deadly Hunter pivoted and glared down at me. "What's that, V?"

Fuck, if those eyes could kill...

"Well, I...um, love may not be the right word. But I have feelings for him. And you. I'm really confused right now," I babbled, barely stringing two coherent sentences together, but desperate to put it out there even if I sounded like a fucking idiot.

The other Hunter stared down at me, saying nothing with his mouth, but his body was telling an epic story of the worst kind of betrayal. It tore me to pieces to see his eyes drown in an emotion he'd never show anyone else. He might be angry, but he was hurt too. It was all there in his stare.

"When you left," I started quickly, heart in my throat and ready to make me choke on my words, "he and I...well, it doesn't matter. I know you're aware that we were together, and I thought I was genuinely done when you came back. But—"

"You aren't," he finished, his voice disturbingly soft.

In a surprisingly vulnerable moment, Phillip ran a hand through his hair and sat back down, shoulders slumped in defeat. I'd never seen the man look so small and...broken. Every bit of his usual confidence washed away to expose the weak man beneath, and it was a heart-wrenching sadness that the usually cool Hunter hadn't shown since he told me about Giselle.

“You don’t want to be together?”

The way he said it, not truly asking, sort of assuming, was a fucking dagger to my heart, and I rushed to say something—anything—to take away some of his pain. “It’s not that I don’t want to be together. It’s...I’m confused. I care about you both, so I don’t think it’s fair to pledge myself to anyone. Not right now.”

A long breath escaped him before his blue eyes found mine again. The raw emotion in his gaze made it hard to say anything else to him. So, I just listened as his deep, rumbling voice broke through the quiet. “I want to be angry, but I brought this on myself, V. I’ve been selfish and took you for granted. And as much as it destroys me to say it, Sloan is someone who can give you things I can’t.”

His eyes searched the space ahead, no longer looking at me. The curve of his spine as he rested his elbows on his knees and leaned forward was tough to look at. The normal Phillip would die before showing himself in such a helpless state—at the mercy of his emotions like the rest of us. It was the vision of a destroyed man, one who saw the end but ran from it, knowing he could never truly escape it. I wanted to hug him and promise him the future, but I couldn’t.

Tucking stray red hair behind my ears, I swallowed the emotion burning my throat. “Phillip, I’m...so sorry.”

He sighed again, roughly combing back the dark hair that had fallen into his face, closing his eyes in resignation, openly grieving. Then his powerful gaze was back.

“I might not like it, V, but your feelings are your own. Thing is, I want to be with you. I’ll share you if I have to, if that’s what you want. I just...” His jaw perceptibly clenched and his chest expanded. “I’ll do anything if I can be with you.” His tattooed hand wrapped around mine, and his words were firm and entreating. “Stay. I don’t care how. Just stay.”

Fuck, my heart.

“But that’s not fair—”

“Fuck fair, V. I’ve hardly been fair to you. I know it, and it fucking kills me to see that I did this to you. That I made you feel like you were trapped. So I’ll give you whatever you want. I nearly lost you once. I won’t lose you again. If that means you exploring this thing with Sloan, orfuck it, anyone else, as long as I can still be with you, I’ll do whatever it takes.” His voice boomed, causing my body to stiffen. “As long as I can have you, even if it’s just a piece, I’ll do whatever I can to make it happen.”

Too surprised to speak, I merely stared at the man in front of me, shedding his arrogance, his signature devil-may-care attitude, vulnerable heart on display, and I couldn’t deal. It was heartbreaking, but it was also the sweetest thing he’d ever done for me.

And I fell for him all over again.

Phillip came close, taking strong hold of my face, a fear I’d never seen living in his eyes before he kissed me. Our mouths merged hotly, tongues entangling, and I gasped so loud it took us both by surprise. A deep growl thundered from inside his chest, sadness morphing to lust, and then Phillip kissed me like his intention was to devour me until there was nothing left.

The way he clung to me, brought my body into his, encouraged me to come onto his lap and wrap my arms around his neck, it was as if he was afraid I was going to run. Afraid that I might say no. Afraid he was seconds from losing me. But he’d never know how perfect his words were; how they freed me from guilt and shame.

How I, too, wanted to give him what he wanted.

Chapter 34

Road to Vengeance

“Let’s talk about this,” Cassius whisper-shouted, a tattooed hand wrapped around his throat, his feet dangling above the floor with his body several feet up the wall.

Phillip’s dangerous smile suggested he’d choose violence before any talking could happen, and I decided it was time to intervene. Mostly because I owed the cat-eyed bastard that much.

“Put him down,” I ordered Phillip, whose shoulders worked a vicious circle before he complied. “I made a choice, and I keep my promises. He’s an asshole, but this is on me. So we’ll retrieve this item, and then we’ll go after the Seven.”

Rubbing the offended area on his throat, Cash sucked in a grateful breath. “About that. I think this might be something you’d want to do, anyway,” he said, eyeing Phillip with nothing short of hatred.

Jo crossed her arms over her chest, one of the few who enjoyed the show, and tilted her head to the side, interest piqued. “What do you mean, prissy asshole?”

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Jo never fails to come up with the best way to address the dudes around us. Or how to tell them off. I'll be forever telling Phillip and Cash to go choke on a dick.

"Prissy? I beg your pardon, devil lady, but I'm far from prissy." Cassius harrumphed, a walking, talking contradiction—and he'd never know how much. Tapping his foot in agitation, the Dark Fae petulantly crossed his arms. I couldn't hide my smile, and neither could Jo. "Well, I wasn't really sure why Eros called him Four. His name is Fredrick."

Fredrick the villain, classic.

"But I...might know these so-called Seven if Fredrick and his coven are one of them. Only way to know for sure is go and find out," he went on as if it all bore him. As if he'd been dragged into it when it couldn't be any further from the truth. As if he wasn't talking about world-ending stuff here.

"Coven?" I asked, assuming right away that they were vampires.

But Jo's eyes narrowed alongside Phillip's, the ominous sensation in the air damn-near lethal. "You mean Fredrick the Blood Mage?"

I didn't like the sound of this Blood Mage bullshit, and it took me a second to connect the dots. Coven. Mage. Warlock. Were we talking about a magical kind of creature different from a Fae? I really needed to lock myself in a room and read through all the things that could kill me on this plane and the next. It was like the list never ended anymore.

To think I was overwhelmed when it was vampires and werewolves, then Shadow Goblins and Sirens. Not to forget my personal favorite, Green Dude, the Kitsunebi. I'd never forget that anime-inspired villain who wore nothing but latex.

Never.

From the way Sloan quieted near us and Jo seemed stuck inside her head, dagger spinning through her fingers, it was clear that whoever Fredrick was, he wasn't anyone we wanted to deal with.

"You said Eros called him Four?" I asked.

Cassius fixed his shirt, mumbling about how it was stretched out and wouldn't lay over his chest the same way. But then his eyes were back up, bouncing from one person to the next. "Yeah. I caught him talking about Fredrick, but he called him Four instead. I only knew because the people he listed off along this so-called Four person were powerful mages who only worked for Fredrick."

"And he talked about others?" Phillip demanded, hand clenching and unclenching in warning. He'd beat it out of Cash if the prissy Fae tested his luck again. "Who else did he mention?" Phillip enunciated singularly, indicating we were maybe a minute from a brass-knuckle to the face.

Whenever his voice was gruff and dropped so low it technically classified as a growl, violence was a certainty, and I could only do so much.

Cash made his bed.

R.I.P., asshole.

"You really need to work on your people skills," Cassius complained—and I was

dying, bent over my stomach, succumbing to a fit of laughter.

People skills! He's not wrong, though.

The sound of a dagger hitting the wall with a thud right next to the Dark Fae's head brought my eyes up and over to Cash. It was barely an inch from his ear, and the Dark Fae squealed in ghoulish horror. "You're a demon! Scarier womendo notexist."

I put a fist over my mouth, laughing again.

This dude was so damn ridiculous all the time, and it was tough to keep a straight face. Might need to work on keeping emotions from my expression around him. See how long I last. If I could make it through a day without laughing at him, I'd call that a win.

Smirking to herself, Jo tracked her eyes back over to me, the sparkle in them deadly, and I tried not to swoon.

I'd never want to be on Jo's bad side, that was for damn sure. Every time I saw that evil smile I thought so. But I was already more than a fan. I wanted her awesomeness to rub off on me, so I stuck close to her in hopes it would.

Sloan found his way over to me, touching my shoulders, which I wasn't aware had pinched together over the course of the conversation until his feather-light touch eased the tension. A second later, his eyes trailed over to Phillip. I hadn't told the Brit about our conversation, but he was impressively astute about this stuff, and I wouldn't be surprised if he knew everything already.

Cassius moistened his lips and planted his hands on his hips, always choosing indignant Karen as his go-to pose when he was on trial. "I don't know all the Seven, but at least Three, Four, and Six. It's a start, and if we hit Fredrick's coven first, we

might find out the other four. Who knows. Better than nothing.”

The woman standing beside me hummed before her smile was back. “Fucking Blood Mages. You really know how to have a good time, V.”

Oh, she’d never know how true that was. A never-ending cycle of trying not to die, and it now included all kinds of creatures that grew more powerful by the day, I swear.

My Austrian looked ready to tear shit down and break things apart with his bare hands the way his body was wound up tight, muscles bulging and trembling. He pivoted and came over to me, touching my hand so quickly it felt like an illusion my brain concocted because she was a thirstybitch. Sloan and Phillip shared a silent look before the Austrian nodded and headed upstairs.

I watched him go, surprised he’d left at all. “Do I even want to know what Blood Mages are?”

Jo scoffed and flipped her dagger in the air before sheathing it. With a sassy wink, she headed over to her room as well, evading the responsibility of telling me what it all meant.

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That's not good. If even Jo doesn't want to talk about it, shit must be bad.

With everyone else gone, it was just Sloan and Cash left with me, both who seemed on edge that I'd even ask.

Sighing in resignation, Cassius finally spoke up, "I'm sure you can gather what they use to power their magic, but it's human blood and sacrifice. It's darker magic than what Eros used, and it's corrupted bloody stuff. It'll eat away at your humanity until there's nothing left. Let's just say that Fredrick and his coven have been using it for a very long time, so they're not people others like to mess with. And for some reason, they still operate just bloody fine with the Organization running the show here. Makes a bloke wonder who their friends are."

As if he'd lost interest, Cassius pulled another rock from his pouch, and it hummed and glowed over his palm. "I need to do a few things before we leave. Toodles!" The magic in the air cracked and snapped, then the Dark Fae was gone.

Sloan brushed back his hair and expelled a tired breath. "I wouldn't let it worry you, love. We have time to work out the details, and if Jo helps you control your power, we'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who posed a challenge for you."

I smiled without meaning to. "Seems awfully convenient to put it all on me, you celebrity god."

His eyes jerked over to the stairs, on the outlook for any prying eyes or ears. When he didn't find any, he took a step closer and leaned down. His face hovered just inches from mine. "I'll be right there beside you every step of the way."

When I failed to say anything, caught totally off guard by a flirtatious Sloan, the beautiful jerk stole a kiss before heading upstairs, too.

My heart would never figure out how to deal with all these gorgeous flirtatious types. Never.

But it was an odd sort of quiet that fell over me as I stood alone in the living room, post Eros destruction and telling two men I was into them. Where the sensation of something looming nudged at the senses. Where my heart found a normal rhythm before it went back to its usual case of erratic and out of control.

One thing was for sure, my story was just getting started. With the Seven as our next stop on the road to vengeance, it was the eerie silence before the atomic blast. Shit was about to get a hell of a lot crazier.

To be continued...