



We Hunt the Night

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: I vowed to use my magic to be good...they promised to use everything they have to break our bond.

Bloodstone Academy is for strong, smart witches to hunt for their shifters, bond with them in the sacred forest, and fight with them in the war when they graduate. Only issue? Most students die from bonding, but that won't stop me.

Every generation of my family went to Bloodstone Academy, and it's in my blood to thrive there. The witch war took my family, and I'm determined to help the Umbral Authority win.

When I finally get the acceptance marking, I couldn't be happier until I walk through the gothic doors and slam straight into a tall, stunningly beautiful dragon shifter...and he shoves me onto the floor in front of everyone.

Bonding with a dragon shifter hasn't been done in a hundred years...until I walk into the forest and four of them accidentally bond with me.

Mazikeen Lycidas, Kane Ardian, Black Ashveil, Valeron Drexan are treated like gods at this academy— and they hate me. They never wanted to bond, and they don't want to fight in the war. The four of them make my days at the academy hell, and the nights even worse. No spells are going to save me from them, not when we are pulled together by the bond. No magic will help me in the war if my shifters won't fight.

They say every dragon witch is cursed, and these four are all that is left in the world...and they are determined to ruin me.

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Chapter 1

Some people are dreamers. Others are thinkers, and people like me are the type that don't stop. Ever. I shouldn't be here this close to sunset, and the tall trees creaking in the wind almost sound like they are screaming for me to get back behind the gates, back to the safety of my town. But if I do, he will die, and I can't stomach that. Few people would come into the forest and risk their lives for a small creature. In fact, this wasn't my plan when I came into the forest an hour ago, but once I heard his small little cries, I knew I couldn't leave him here. It's taken me too long to locate him in the dense foliage, and every minute I spend here is a risk. The trap is awful and if I don't get him out, he will die in here within a few days.

My knees sink into the muddy ground as I tug at the metal bars that look like a hand grasped around his small body. There was no magic in the trap; otherwise, this creature would have sensed it, and at least I didn't have to spend time undoing magic to get him out. The small creature's eyes are the brightest blue and tear-filled as he looks up at me from underneath a veil that falls to his little feet. The creature almost looks like a jellyfish that has legs and a tiny body within the shell, but the veil shimmers like sunlight shining through a blue lens. This isn't a brainless jellyfish—he's a small creature, and he's intelligent. Unfortunately, the veil that's hanging over him is really great for many healing potions, so his kind have been hunted for years. This one is just a child.

“You shouldn't be this far out in the forest before nightfall. You must know witches' leave traps all around by the gates. Where are your parents?” I mutter, pulling the bars. The friction hurts my fingers, but I don't stop yanking at it until two of the pieces fall down and snap. Good, it's broken, and no other creature is going to suffer

in there. The witches don't care about small creatures; they call them pests with brains. I disagree.

Reaching in, I gently grab the tiny creature in my hand. He is shaking hard from fear, most likely because he thinks I'm the witch who put this trap here and I'm going to cut him to pieces and use him for potions. "I'm not going to throw you into my cauldron. You're safe." Softly, I put him on a nearby log. I expect him to float away, up high into the thick, dark green leaves of the trees above where his family might be. There aren't many of them around anymore, and I wonder if he has a family at all. Is he like me, an orphan? Does he have a foster family looking after him? I hope not. That didn't work out well for me. Maybe this one is broken...he keeps staring at me. The sun shines through the trees behind it—too low. I need to get moving.

"Shoo!" I whisper. "Go! Before we both get in trouble." I rise up, picking up my draw bag of small herbs, pressed flowers and mushrooms I've gathered for a spell. Things that didn't cost me any poor innocent creature's life. He still hasn't moved. I put my hands on my hips. "You know what lurks in the forest at night, and we both can't be here. Please go."

He bows his head at me. A strange custom that the small creatures tend to do, and I bow back on instinct. He floats up, the sunlight shining through his tiny body to cast rainbow dropseverywhere around me, before disappearing into the dark forest leaves. My shoulders drop. He's safe now.

I shiver as I look at the descending sun, knowing that the minute the light disappears behind the horizon, outside the gates is pure death. No one survives out here in these forests at night, or you go missing. Death is better than going missing out here. The ruins of old human civilization are only a mile away, but I've never dared to go that far—and yet I'm curious what it looks like now. One day.

I turn around, carefully jogging back through the forest, my cloak flowing in the

breeze behind me. It takes roughly ten minutes to get back to the tall black gates that stretch into the sky. This part is meant to be guarded by the watchtower, but it's a blind spot in the day near sunset, and there's a small gap big enough for me to squeeze through. I run my hand over the magic of the gate, the shimmering wall of magic is made of black swirls and looks like ink in a pool of water. I whisper a small spell under my breath to break it for a second. Just a second is all I need to get back.

It's not night, but I still look behind me and check the forest for Mindless, our enemies. But the forest is silent of anything but birds singing their song. I squeeze through the gap, thinking about the first time I went through over five years ago. One of my classmates showed me this gap and the spell ages ago in exchange for doing his coursework. It was a fair trade. He passed the test with flying colors, and I got a way to escape my home town for a moment, to get herbs that I need for the more complicated spells that I should not be doing but I do anyway. I can't ask my foster mother for the money, or she would demand to know what I'm doing. I don't think she would understand for even a second that I want to learn every spell there is in existence, and that includes some of the spells we are told not to do.

My long braid almost gets caught in the bars of the gates as I fall out of the other side. A few strands get stuck. I pull them off, not wanting to leave any evidence behind that I was here, before repeating the spell, hiding the gap. Lights are beginning to burst to life around Saturn town as I stare down at it, at the rows of wooden cabins and the glittering yellow stone pathways everywhere. I rush straight through to the edge of town where the homes turn from small to large, to homes with lawns and pretty fences.

Most of the trees have been felled in the town, but there are two outside my home, great big, towering trees that cast a permanent shadow over our home. It helps with the heat sometimes, and other times it makes the place look haunted. I wonder what the humans wanted this town to be when they built it...because I doubt a witch town was their plan. This quiet town in the middle of Montana is haunted by the mountains

that tower over us in the distance, and outside of that is endless forests and old human towns swallowed by the war.

My home isn't far from the mortal camps, and my gaze drifts down the road, down the hill to the camps below. Mortals are humans to us, but they don't like to be called that. They like to be called humans. Once, the humans ran this world, and now, they serve witches—or they die outside our towns. They clean our houses, they cook our food, they do everything for us, and in exchange, we fight the war, keeping them safe within our towns. It's strange to think that only fifty years ago, they had no idea that witches even existed, and they ruled—or at least they thought they did. They were going about their days, fighting their own wars between each other, and then everything changed.

The witches had no choice but to come out to the world to save them from extinction, and ourselves too at that point. When the war began, we all lost. There were no winners between our races—the only difference is that we stand a chance in a fight against the enchantress and her army because of our magic.

“Juniper Daygan!” I hear my foster mother's shrill voice shout inside the house, and I wince. What have I done now? Not that I have to have done anything to begin with. She is always on my case. It doesn't matter that I'm twenty-one in a few days. I will always be a silly little girl to Melody, and I've accepted that. I tend to hate celebrating my birthday because of the day after and the grief that swallows me.

I hide my bag at the side of the house before walking up the steps to the front door, which she flings open as I reach for the handle. “Get inside now! You know I do not like you out after dark!” Her eyes are the same shade as the creature I just saved, but the light has been faded out of them for a long time. I always thought it was the death of her oldest son and husband in the war that made her coldhearted, but people say she has always been this way. I'm not brave enough to ask who hurt her.

The second I walk through the door, she grabs my upper arm and tugs me over the last step, slamming the door shut with her other hand. Hurting me in public is not something that she would do, but behind closed doors, anything is fair when I've annoyed her. Not that anyone in town would give me a second glance if she did hurt me in front of them. Melody owns the biggest house, has the most money, and pays for enough crap around this town that they'll always look the other way when it comes to her. That's okay. I don't need anyone to stand up for me. I've done it plenty enough for myself over the years. "Do you know what day it is?" She brushes a lock of her pin-straight black hair out of her face and waits.

Of course I know what day it is. I couldn't sleep last night because of nerves. "Yes."

She shakes me, and I let her. I know better than to fight back. I tried once, and it didn't end well for me. "Well? Aren't you going to say sorry? I ordered you to stay in the house just last week, and I expect you to follow my orders while you live under my roof!" I wince as that conversation comes back to me. I completely forgot she told me that over dinner—two weeks ago, not last week like she thinks. "If you are lucky enough to get the marking for Bloodstone Academy, I would like to be here. Where have you been?" I open my mouth to lie, but she carries on. "I checked in at your silly friend's house, and her father hasn't seen you today like you told our cook. Where have you really been?"

"Just for a walk. I've been nervous. Today is important for me." Today is everything to me. She digs her nails into my arm, leaving marks on me, but I barely feel pain anymore thanks to her.

"Do not lie to me! I won't have you off with boys, like that dark-haired friend of yours, being a slut under my roof." I almost want to tell her my best friend, Parker, is gay and has a boyfriend, but she wouldn't take that well. Witches are not meant to be gay, and they pretend people aren't. It's horrid and unaccepting. They only care about breeding and the war. Anything else is an issue. "If you do not get into the academy,

we will be having a serious talk about your future. The only merits you have are that pretty face of yours and that you're the last of the Daygan clan, with the namesake, too." My heart slams against my ribcage. I know I'm the last of the Daygan clan, and that pressure is always there. If I fail at anything, I let my entire family down. My mother named me after Juniper Daygan, the first witch ancestor of my clan. No pressure considering she was a saint and a very powerful witch. "At least I will be able to marry you to a good, respectful family."

She lets me go as my fast-beating heart feels like it plummets into my stomach. I do not want to marry, have kids, and make them grow up in fear of the war. I want to help win the war the only way I can—with knowledge and spells. Bloodstone Academy is my only hope, and it has been for a long time.

"Well, has a mark appeared?" she asks. "Show me your neck and move that horrid braid."

I touch my neck on instinct, pushing the braid back, and it hits my lower back. Braiding my wild, dark brown hair is the only acceptable way I'm allowed to have it outside the house. I can't get my unruly locks to behave, and they will never be dead straight like Melody's hair. Even though I'm foolishly hoping, there is nothing on my neck. I'd feel it if the mark appeared. Magic can always be felt on your skin. This day, the ninth day of the ninth month, is the only day that you get an invitation to Bloodstone Academy.

"Shame, but not unexpected. If you got in, you'd be just like your foster sister, and we both know she is far too exceptional for you to compare."

"I can only hope and pray." I smile through the lie, biting down on my inner cheek. I do not want to be anything like my foster sister, who is a third-year at Bloodstone Academy, but she isn't half as bad as Melody.

Melody doesn't call me out on my sarcasm, on how she knows I don't mean it, and instead walks to the stairs. She brushes her finger over the top of the banister to check for dust, and if she finds some, she has a reason to shout at our human housemaid Diamond. "Today I woke up happy that you seemed smart enough to be considered at Bloodstone Academy. I'd finally, finally get some praise for taking you in when your silly parents died."

"May the three-faced goddess protect their souls in her afterlife," I snap. They weren't silly. They are dead, though.

Melody ignores me, pacing up and down in front of the long wooden staircase that winds up into the house. "Everybody else in this town didn't want anything to do with you and your cursed family. All dead, the scandal! The Daygan clan was strong and formidable, even as much as the dragons! You might have had a nice inheritance to come with you, but that was all you had. No other relatives, no one to take you in, no family friends. Everyone was dead that ever knew you, except for me. I knew your father in Bloodstone Academy as he helped my mother with library keeping and I was allowed to visit. That was the only reason that I took in his daughter after all was said and done."

I want to add that she had a crush on my father in school, according to people I've spoken to, and that's likely the reason she took me in. But the problem is I don't look like my father. I have my mother's face, my mother's hair, my mother's eyes, and I'm every bit the image of her. I look at a photo of them in my room and wonder why the goddess didn't give me a bit of my father's looks when it would have made Melody like me more. I only got worse as I got older, more like my rebellious mother. Not that I remember them much anymore, but Melody said she was rebellious. They both died when I was a kid, and all I have now are photos and paintings. The house we lived in is burnt down. The money that we had was given to my foster mother and is likely invested into this house or Melody's every want and desire. I know I won't see the money and I don't care.

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I don't have much from them except for a few old spell books, a rusty cauldron in my room, and some clothes. No jewelry, nothing to mark the clan. Sometimes I wonder if they even thought about it, thought about me when they were fighting in the war, why they decided to have a child when they were still in the war, still fighting for Bloodstone Academy and in their last year of service. I will never know. Not many people have kids in a war. They know that you could die at any moment and there are enough orphan witches around.

“But maybe Bloodstone Academy wouldn't take you. You're smart, I'll give you that. You passed all your schoolwork, you are at the top of all your exams. You spend all your time with your nose in books—studying. But character...character is important for Bloodstone Academy. I was never allowed to leave the library, but I knew the students who came in. First-years, second-years and third-years were all more than just smart—they were brave and special. Even if you did get in, you'd probably die as a first-year. They will throw you into the Bloodstone Forest to try to get you to bond with a changeling shifter and make him or her fight for you in the war.” She huffs.

That part of Bloodstone Academy makes me nervous. The academy is built in the center of the Bloodstone Forest, and the forest is the home to the changeling shifters. They can't leave the forest or academy without bonding to a witch—and that is what the academy is for. Witches and changelings bond for life, fight together in the war for five years, and then we are both free to live wherever we wish. There isn't much else known about Bloodstone Academy—all witches are magically sworn to keep the secrets of the academy on their first day.

“Rue did it and is bonded with a wolf! So very uncommon, and we are so proud of

her. Well, we all know that's not going to happen to you!" She laughs. "You'd be lucky if a rabbit shifter bonded with you."

I dig my nails into my palm. "I think?—"

"I've told you more than once that no one cares what you think, Juniper. I don't, I never will, and no one else will either. We only care about the war and winning it." At least she is telling me the truth. I may hate her, but she doesn't lie to me about the state of the world and the witches' goal—to win. I want to help us win, to get revenge for my parents, and to make this world better. I can do that, I just need a chance. I need to get out of this house and away from the life Melody is planning for me.

We both stare at each other in an impasse as the clock strikes six. A grandfather clock right at the top of the stairs rings out across the house, each beat echoing in my ears as I feel cold. The icy sting of magic presses on my neck like a brand—not a marking. My eyes widen as I touch my neck, and I run across the room to the mirror, watching as the mark appears. The dragon wing wrapped around a dagger, the tips pointing up just underneath my ear. The Bloodstone Academy mark. There is a single rune written on the dragon wing in the old Latin language of the witches, and my mouth feels dry as I whisper the words. "We bleed for the stone; we bleed for the war. We are the witches, and we bind our lives to the changelings."

I got in.

I'm a student of Bloodstone Academy.

I'm free from this fucking house.

Hope burns in my chest like a fire as I stare at the mark, and tears form in my gold eyes. Melody's high heels click across the floor as she comes to stand behind me. She grabs my chin, forcing my gaze to hers. "You will not embarrass me, Juniper. I will

be watching, and if you do, I'll end the Daygan clan myself."

Chapter 2

I wish I could say the witches drove in style to Bloodstone Academy, but no, we don't. Which is a surprise, considering Bloodstone Academy is heavily funded by every rich witch family left alive and sponsored directly by their clans to make sure that their kids get into the academy. On the other hand, cars that work are rare nowadays, so the wealthy are lucky to have a moving vehicle. The rickety old truck bounces in a pothole, slamming me into the side of the door, and I wince. The rusty door looks seconds away from unlocking itself and crumbling to dust, but I clutch the handle anyway. The chipped black paint is peeling as the wind hounds the truck outside, and we continue to bounce along the old, long forgotten road.

Most witches prefer to travel by magic—moving directly from one spot to another. It's a common enough spell, but it won't work anywhere near Bloodstone Academy. The land is drenched in magic, and no one can get in without being welcomed. It's safe from our enemies, at least.

Despite the fact this truck has seen better days, my driver continues to rapidly speed down the road, getting closer to the edge of where the land meets the sea. We can't drive at night, not with the things out in the world that hunt us, and I doubt there is a witch safe house anywhere near us. We have stayed in two so far—empty, spelled homes that were cold and damp—and my driver's snoring kept me up all night. I'm glad we aren't stopping anywhere else, and I believe we are now in a state that used to be called Washington. It isn't called that anymore; it's just land and death.

I look at the back of the truck, where there are several swords, magic guns and other bags filled with weapons. I know if we were attacked, my driver can fight and defend us, but I still want this over with.

I clear my throat. “I don’t actually know your name, considering you haven’t spoken to me much. What is it? I need to thank you for driving me here.” He pointedly ignores me, like he has done the entire time. “Fine, I’ll call you Bob. You look like a Bob.” He doesn’t even react, and I sigh, wishing I didn’t say anything to Bob. “So, Bob, how long do we have?”

He doesn’t so much as blink. Great. I lean back with another long sigh, but things aren’t that bad. I’m free of Melody’s control, and as much as she threatened me, she can’t reach me at Bloodstone Academy because she never got in. She didn’t say goodbye. The little girl inside me just wanted her to hug me and say goodbye, but she stood at the top of the stairs as I gathered my bags, and she walked away before I left. The maid Diamond said goodbye to me outside the door and hugged me, which was better than nothing.

I look straight ahead at the beautiful colors casting across the sky as the sun begins to set. My pulse rises a little, so far from any safety, but with the window down, I can smell the salt air. We can’t be far from the sea; therefore, we can’t be far from Bloodstone Academy either. It will take at least an hour before the sun fully sets and it gets dark, before there is a threat.

I reach my hand into the inside of my cloak and pull out the small white note that Parker sent me this morning.

Conquer the Academy. P.

That’s all he wrote for me, but he knows that’s all I need. Someone to believe in me, cheer in my corner, and Parker has always been that. Goddess, I’m going to miss him. I think I might have gone mad growing up if I didn’t have a friend like him to tell me I wasn’t worthless or useless or any of the many things I grew up believing after my parents died. Life changed right in that moment, and every memory I have of my parents feels like I’m watching the life of someone else or someone who wasn’t real,

because they were happy. We were happy together.

Melody's daughter, my foster sister, helped as much as she could, but defending me meant her mother would lose it with her, and I didn't want that. She always pitted us against each other, and sometimes it worked—but most of the time, we knew it was Melody who was the problem and not us. I often wonder what Rue is like here. I haven't seen her for two years, not since she got into Bloodstone Academy. No one leaves the academy, not to see friends or family, not for anything but to fight in the war when the academy is over. I'm glad I won't see Melody for that long, and I'm sure Rue was too. I saw how she smiled when she left two years ago—it matched my smile.

I fold the note up and put it back, resting my head back and admiring the view. Daygan clan lands aren't far from here, and it was where I was born. I remember the black stone houses, the mansion we lived in, the forest and the small rocky beach. I nearly jump when Bob speaks. "We are ten minutes out from the coast. I will leave you there for the academy. May the goddess bless your path."

"Thanks, Bob," I mutter, shivering, this time from nerves. I mess with the tag on my suitcase for the next ten minutes of the silent drive, and soon the road comes to the end. The brakes of the truck squeal as he stops, and I look at the cliff, the charging waves smacking up the side. The sea is beautiful like this, all glittering blue, reflecting the orange and yellow sunlight. Nothing but sea for miles and miles in every direction except for the cliff. The door automatically opens at my side, probably spelled and somehow doesn't affect the academy. Maybe spelled objects like cars work near the academy then. I grab my suitcase and step out, lifting my hand to shut the door, but it does it on its own.

"Thank you for the—" But Bob's already reversed, leaving me coughing on the dust. I watch as he turns the truck around and speeds off in the direction he came in.

My hair moves in the breeze, the loose braid coming undone as I walk forward to the edge, wondering where exactly I'm going to go from here, when I see it. Bloodstone Academy is an island, an island with a million trees making up a vast forest, with a towering black castle standing right in the middle of it. It's incredible. The stone underneath is blood red, and the cliffs look like they are bleeding into the sea. It's the very reason it was called Bloodstone in the first place. It's said that a thousand witches and shifters bled into the stone, turning it from white to red over a thousand years ago. Their magic keeps the island protected.

The trees have adapted to the gothic vibes going on. They're black, creaky, winding trees with giant red-tipped leaves. The castle is hard not to stare at, and it is everything that I read about or heard about. Its high towers point into the air in nearly every direction, like it wants the world to know it is here. The main parts of the castle, five enormous towers, are thrusting skyward, with their dark black slate tips that are spiked and that hit the sky. Heavy fog seems to hover around the base of the castle, only making it spookier.

Even from a distance away, I can see thousands of gothic arched windows all framed in black. Nature has taken over a bit, black ivy crawling up all the sides that seem to merge with the castle itself. If I were closer, I bet I could see all the stone tracery that would be carved into the side, showing witches in battle, showing dragons which are nearly extinct now, and wolves and bears that make up the most of our army. I would see the snakes and the lizards, everything that can be found within this deep, massive forest. The shifted changelings are bound to this forest around the academy, born and bred right in the forest, and they are protected from the war. They have human forms and animal forms, which they can change at will. Between the ages of eighteen and thirty, they are allowed into Bloodstone to mix with the witches in hopes of helping bonds between our races. The rest of the shifters do not come near the academy. I doubt any of them know much about life outside the academy grounds, but I need one of them. Just one of them to bind to me and fight in the war with me.

My mother and father both went to Bloodstone, and they graduated—so can I. It's in my blood to thrive at this academy, and nothing is going to stop me. They bonded with twin snake shifters, and they fought in the war together. I remember them sometimes too. They died together too, and I watched it happen, even if I wish I hadn't. I push down that memory before it haunts me anymore, and pray to the goddess that they got to be together in the afterlife too. They were all best friends and loved each other. Family. An unbreakable bond. I want that with a shifter, with someone who'll be honest with me.

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I watch as the wind blows the fog around the haunted-looking castle, and even in the daylight, it's nothing short of a gothic wonder. Architecturally, it's beautiful and stunning, but it looks like a million people might have lived and died in those walls, and they very likely have. They likely still haunt it to this day. The towers themselves look like a step for a god to stand on, and the black stone makes it look like a prison that I'm going to get lost in.

I feel an icy chill to the air—magic—and I turn around to see that I'm not alone. Across the cliffside are one hundred students just like me, all in dark cloaks, a line of witches with a single suitcase. They weren't here a minute ago, and by the looks of them turning around to stare too, they didn't see anyone else here either when they arrived. I can taste the magic in the air as I watch in awe as black tendrils of magic appear in the sky, swarming down into the sea and exploding in a flash. I hold my arm up against my eyes to shield myself, and when I lower it, there's now a bridge leading straight across the sea. A black stone bridge, as old and well-made as the academy. Snake pillars, literal snakes that look like they are frozen in black stone, mark every few feet of the bridge over the sea. The other end of the bridge leads straight to the castle, over the tree line.

I don't wait, I don't second-guess this decision, and I walk straight onto the bridge and to my future. A future I get to choose, and I will survive the academy; I will help end and win this war, for my parents. For my family. I hold my head high, just like my parents would have wanted me to do as I pull my suitcase across the pebbled bridge. The wind is chilly as it blows against me, threatening to push me right off the bridge, but I keep going. I don't stop. I look behind me to see everyone else is following—no, running. It's only then that I notice the bridge is disappearing.

Oh, fuck.

Screams from people falling echo to me, and I run as fast as I can make my legs go. My cloak threatens to trip me up, and my suitcase slams on the stone as my heart races. Don't stop, Juniper. Run, run, run! I hear my mother's voice in my mind, repeating the same thing she told me on the day she died, and I don't let myself do anything but listen to her.

The screams behind me are short, horrible, and a girl pushes into me, sending me crashing onto the stone. I wince, only seeing her blonde hair, as I dare to look back. The bridge is collapsing faster, getting closer. The stormy sea is waiting for me, and I will die down there. No. I push off the ground, grabbing my suitcase, and I run, feeling the ground shaking under my feet with every step, threatening to take me down with it.

The moment I cross into the forest, the bridge stops falling. I pause, looking back into the sea, wondering if I can help anyone, but the sea is vicious in its gray beauty, and everyone appears to have sunk. No spells can save them when magic doesn't work outside the academy, not this close.

"Hey, I'm sorry I knocked you over." I turn at the new voice, a girl the same age as me, with long blonde hair and a guilty expression. She has a dark gray cloak covering her with the mark of the Venus clan over her chest. She puts her case down and steps closer, bowing her head once, a sign of respect from witches. "I came back, but that doesn't make it better. I'm just sorry. I was scared."

"So was I. I'm Juniper." I bow my head once back to her. "I might have knocked someone over too in that chaos. Why would they do that to us?"

She looks over my shoulder at the sea. "My father warned me they did this, and you got lucky the bridge appeared in front of you. Only twenty-five percent of the four

hundred first-years survive the first year. This is how it begins. They don't want weak witches fighting in the war and just becoming another powerful, controlled soldier for the enchantress to use against us." She blinks. "Oh, I'm going on again. I'll stop. I'm Winifred Venus, of the Venus clan. What's your clan?"

Here we go. I knew I would end up having to tell someone, and I know they will have heard about my clan.

I pick up my suitcase handle and begin dragging it with her at my side. "Daygan clan."

Her eyes widen, and she stops for a second. I don't stop with her, and she catches up after a brief pause. "I'm so sorry for what happened to them?—"

"I don't like to talk about it." I stop her.

Her cheeks brighten. "No, of course not." We are quiet for a long part of the walk. "I've made it awkward. I'm not good at making friends. My father says it's because I talk too much and that annoys people. He always says, 'Wini won't stop.' My brother tells me it's because I'm shy. I think it's both, but I know I've put my foot in my mouth with you."

"You haven't." I really look at her. She is tanned, likely from all that Texas heat I've heard about—at least, I think that's where the Venus clan is based. Her eyes are hazel, there is a line of freckles across her cheeks, and she is shorter than me, which is surprising because I'm pretty short myself. "I'm nervous and I'm not used to anyone asking me about my clan. You came back when most wouldn't have, and I think that's cool. I'd like a friend going into the academy too."

She beams, and I smile back. It takes us probably another fifteen minutes of fast-walking to catch up with the crowd and follow behind them as we cross the edge of

the forest and over the lower parts of the academy. At the end of the path is a huge courtyard with old, weathered metal gates that are pulled open, with hundreds of sharp spikes on top, which line the walls too. The courtyard is all black, along with the black brick floors that are chipped in places, and green plants have crawled up through the gap. My eyes lock on the towering statues of knights in each corner, each of them holding a lantern in their hands that glows a dark green.

We all spread out around the courtyard, and I look back, seeing the metal gates lock shut on their own, the road vanishing like it was never there. Bloodstone Academy students are sitting on a row of steps leading up to a big, arched door. My eyes drift down their uniforms. They wear tight, all black clothes that show off every inch of their toned and muscled bodies, with red lines down their arms and the side of their legs. The red emblem on their chests matches the one on my neck. Most of the students have a cloak clipped to their shoulders, and I watch as a few of them walk right past us, not giving anyone a second glance. I guess they aren't interested in the first-years.

I don't blame them. Any one of us could die pretty early on. A familiar man's laugh makes me turn, looking straight ahead to a man standing on the steps. His uniform is the same, but instead of the red lines and emblem, it's all silver, which matches his very silver hair. Golden skin, high cheekbones, and a tall, muscular body draw my attention, but it isn't how attractive he is that has me staring. He's familiar. I don't know why. When he turns, his dark silver eyes locking onto mine, I remember, like a key unlocking a door, a memory I've never seen before comes flashing into my mind.

"Stop, stop, Juni. We can't go too far, you know that!" I laugh, turning around to see Kane Ardian chasing me with a grumpy expression, his silver hair flashing in the sunlight. It isn't fair that he is only two years older than me, yet somehow he is so much taller. Racing is no fun when you've got short legs. He catches up to me in a minute, grabbing my arm and stopping me. I laugh, pushing him away, and he shakes his head. Something changed last year when he turned nine. He just got

older—serious.

“You don’t smile anymore, Kane!” I frown. “Why not? What happens when you turn nine that I don’t know?”

“You’ll know when you’re older, Juni.” He sighs. “Come on, our parents will be mad if they know you came out this far.”

“I know, but it’s boring here. We never leave.” I cross my arms. “And you’re my only friend, and now you’re grumpy all the time. I think you don’t like me.”

He offers me his hand. “You’re my Juni. That will never be true.”

I stumble on my feet, and Winifred catches my elbow, steadying me. Kane was my childhood friend...before my parents died. I don’t remember what happened, but we grew up together and I adored him. Kane is here...and I remember him. I shrug Winifred’s hold off me, leaving my suitcase, and run to the bottom of the steps. “Kane! It’s me, Juni.”

He lifts his head, his silver locks moving with him, and he frowns. Slowly, he rises to his feet, and he is so much taller now. Imposing even. But this is Kane, who was kind and sometimes grumpy, but kind. The frown stays perched on his beautiful face, and he takes my breath away. He’s changed a lot since we were kids. “Get fucked, first-year.”

I wince at his deep voice, at the chuckles from the two girls sitting on the step behind him, both of them watching. I frown right back. “Don’t you remember me?” I close the space between us, and even when I’m on the same step as him, I have to arch my neck to meet his arresting eyes. His frown stays, though. No recognition, no nothing. “It’s Juniper. Come on?—”

“I don’t know anyone named Juniper,” he growls, and the hairs rise on the back of my neck as his eyes brighten, the dark gray turning almost white. “And this is low, even for first-years. Pretending to know me won’t make me bond with you.” He shoves me hard, and my feet leave the ground, right before I smack onto the ground with a cry. Laughter bursts out of everyone except Winifred, who runs over to help me up. I’m grateful to have a friend in this moment, but my embarrassment and confusion outweigh everything. Kane stares down at me. “Thank you for marking yourself as the first person I’m going to kill in the forest tomorrow night, Juniper.”

Fear sends my heart smacking in my chest, and I can’t hear anything Winifred is saying as she helps me up. My head and shoulder hurt from the fall, but nothing feels like more than a bruise. I’m so confused. “Juniper, seriously, you had to make enemies with the most dangerous unbonded shifter in the first ten minutes in the academy. It might have been better if you fell off the bridge into the sea,” Winifred hisses. “Don’t you know who that is?”

“Apparently not,” I mutter.

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Wini goes to tell me, but another, louder male voice echoes through the air. “Welcome to Bloodstone Academy, first-years! Please follow me and don’t get lost. The shifters hunt the weak on the first few days here, and a lost soul is a weakness we do not allow to live.”

Chapter 3

We all turn to the man standing at the front of the courtyard, just above us, on one single step. Double doors are right behind him, opening to a dark tunnel of a corridor looking nothing but black in his shadow. The archway around the doors is made of stone, each brick with a different shifter symbol, and right at the top is a dragon, shining in gold, a stark contrast to the black stone. My eyes are drawn to something else that’s gold. A shiny pocket watch hangs out of the man’s side pocket, and he picks it up, looking at the time before his brown eyes scan the crowd. No one has moved since his shout but neither has he.

He’s a tall man with a long, ominous red cloak and a matching red suit underneath. All the very color of blood, except for the marking like the one on my neck for Bloodstone Academy, which is stitched in black on the cloak. His hair, matching his suit, is short and shaved at the sides. He’s young, not that young, maybe early thirties, and he is just short of being handsome. His features are too pointed, too sharp, and his eyes too small. We are all watching as a fox the size of a horse walks out the door, lying down at his feet. A changeling shifter. Gasps and whispers burst around the space.

Winifred leans into me. “He’s young to be a professor, don’t you think?”

“Again, welcome to Bloodstone Academy and congratulations on being fast runners!” My stomach turns at the cheers that echo through the crowd. People died today, just behind us, and they are gone now. They could have been the best of us, and they are just gone. We are already at war; I don’t understand why killing them was needed to prove anything. Couldn’t they be weeded out another way that didn’t involve their deaths?

He clasps his hands together and I notice the rows of black rings on every finger. “I am your headmaster, Mentor Parker.” Wini and I look at each other. Both of us are surprised. I don’t know why I thought the headmaster would be some old person with long gray hair, but I wasn’t expecting someone who can only be eight to ten years older than me. “This is my bonded, and her name is Sookie. I fought my years in the war with Sookie at my side, and we both chose to return to the same academy we learned at to teach the next generation. I don’t stand before you as a tutor, I stand before you as a fellow soldier in our army. We all work for the Umbral Authority, and we all want the same thing—the end of the war. Magic cannot be used within the academy unless you have signed the paperwork, and the moment you do, your magic will be restored instantly. Now please follow me.”

He turns, his cloak swinging in the breeze, and Sookie follows after him, her tail brushing the ground as they head through the double doors.

I go to reach for my suitcase, but it’s vanished. Literally vanished into thin air. I spin around before noticing Wini is doing the same thing. In fact, all of us are looking around for our suitcases and bags, but they are all gone. Wini sighs first, hooking her arm through mine. “They must be magically taken to our room. I can’t wait to get my magic back. It feels like I’m missing a part of me without it.”

“Same,” I admit, and more than that, I feel scared without my magic and the potions I have in my suitcase. My magic would have made what happened on the bridge nothing. I could have muttered a spell to hover in the air or to breathe underwater and

to swim fast. As long as I can talk, I can do magic. I've spent my entire life learning and memorizing every spell I could find. I even made some new spells too—even if it isn't allowed. My heart pounds just a little, because I don't want to lose my suitcase. It has every bit of my life in it, and I'm not sure what that says about me.

I tuck my hair behind my ears, wishing I hadn't decided to cut in the face-framing layers in the bathroom yesterday. Looking good here isn't going to matter. They proved that with the bridge. A shiver goes down my spine as we walk up the step into the long dark corridor, where there's too much to look at but all of it is cloaked in shadows. Every wall has dozens of paintings, but they're hard to see because it's so dark in here. Other than the knights holding lanterns, which must be a trend for the academy, there is no light and no windows in this long corridor, just hallways and dark corners. I stay close to Wini. Even though we really don't know each other, it's better to have someone at my side when I'm in a gothic castle of nightmares.

Mentor Parker is fast and we end up nearly running to follow him down one corridor and down another one that is mostly the same, but the knights here have gold armor, and the walls are a deep purple. The corridors don't seem to end, and we pass through too many until it's a complete maze and I'm definitely lost. I wouldn't know my way back even if I tried to go back, which I won't.

Eventually, when I'm slightly breathless and my legs hurt, Mentor Parker leads us into a room. The room is as big as a football field and as tall as one, too, with rows of windows on each side. The windows have geometric patterns in the glass, making it impossible to see outside, and they are arched at the top with a sharp point. The walls are all black stone, and there are no knights in here, nothing other than a room full of wooden chairs in rows and a stage at the front where Mentor Parker and his bonded are standing.

"Sit down, please." Mentor Parker clicks his fingers at the chairs. Wini and I find a seat in the second row, and the moment I sit down, a wooden hovering board appears

in front of me. The board has a scroll, an ink jar, and an old-fashioned feather pen on it. Wini has the same thing; so does everyone in the row.

I feel someone staring, and I turn, seeing a hooded man closing the doors. He is so tall, but his cloak falls down over his eyes, and I can only see his tanned skin and lips. He stands in front of the door like a ghost in all black.

“In front of you is a magically binding scroll. The minute you sign it with your name, your full name, you will not be able to talk about Bloodstone Academy outside of what we allow. You will not tell our secrets or history, you will not speak a word of it, and you will be magically bound to the academy for three years. Once you are taught here, you will fight in the war for five years after. If you manage to survive and do your duty in the war, there are rewards.”

Again, people whisper. I didn’t sign up for the academy for any of the rewards. I had a choice when I got my exam results back. I could have chosen to stay in the town, found a job and got my own place. But I didn’t do that. Instead, I signed my name on the scroll to apply for this academy. Most of my class did. We all want to end the war. I don’t want money or land or promises of anything but peace when the war is won. “Outside of the rewards, you will be marked in our history books as the bravewitches who fought in the war. You will be honored forever by your people when we win.”

The scroll unwinds itself in front of me until it’s laid flat, and there are dozens of sentences running from the top to the bottom of the scroll, except for a small dotted line. It’s all in the old Latin language that I learned even though I was told I didn’t need to learn it because I would never need to use it. Turns out Melody was wrong.

Mentor Parker doesn’t give me long enough to read more than the first sentence about blood binding us to the years at the academy before he is speaking. “You now get one single chance to leave Bloodstone Academy.” He nods to the hooded man at the door.

“If you choose to leave right this second, you’ll be safely returned to your families by one of our third-years. But that’s your only chance. If you choose not to go, you stay here and you do not leave unless it is to go to war or in a body bag for your families.”

I don’t have a family to go back to. My choice is already written in stone.

The silence only stretches for a second before people pick up their pens, and I do the same. No one leaves. I glance up to find the headmaster looking right at me, but the second our eyes meet, he turns away. I dip the pen tip into the ink and move it to the scroll, to the dotted line. It feels like signing my world away for a chance of freedom. Risking my life to change it. But I do it anyway, signing my full name across the bottom. The minute that I do, the scroll rolls itself up and flies away, literally going up and disappearing high into the vaulted windows and vanishing from view. The rest of them follow until there is silence, and Mentor Parker claps his hands, everything vanishing from in front of me like it was never there.

“Alright, new students, we will begin with a very brief history lesson before you’re shown to your rooms. Tell me, what is the biggest threat to the witch race?” Mentor Parker waits for anyone to answer.

A boy at the end of our row puts his hand into the air, and Mentor Parker nods. “The enchantress and her Mindless army?”

“Yes and no. Another answer?” he replies.

I put my hand up, and he nods my way. “I think the biggest threat to our race is one of us becoming one of the Mindless.”

“You are correct, Miss Juniper.” I wonder for a second how he knows my name. “The biggest threat is us teaching you to be very formidable weapons, with very dangerous shifters bonded to your souls that would turn into Mindless right alongside you. As

we all know, the enchantress can turn witches and mortals into Mindless soldiers, drained of every drop of blood in their body.” A flash of a memory flickers into my mind. A Mindless in front of me, its skin so pale, like moonlight, and its eyes gone. “They become nothing but skin, bones, and explosive magic. The Mindless do not harm children under the age of sixteen, but adults are their food, and they hunt us.” He begins to pace on the stage. “I feel I can speak for every soul in this academy when I say that this war has taken someone that we love and turned them into the Mindless—or just killed them. Our race used to be a million strong, hidden throughout the world, but still there. Now there are little more than two hundred thousand of us left alive, and humans? Well, they are much less. Shifters are the biggest surviving race, and why is that?”

A girl behind me shoots her hand into the air. “Because they cannot leave the forest or be turned into Mindless.”

“Correct...but what else can they not do?”

Silence. No one answers and I don’t know either. He smiles. “Good, you shouldn’t know this. But shifters cannot shift outside of marked witch areas like the Bloodstone Forest. If they leave these areas, they are nothing more than human unless they are bonded to a witch. A bond is their only chance for freedom.” Hushed whispers burst out, and Wini just looks at me with wide eyes. “The shifters are cursed, and they were cursed by a student who attended this academy in its very first year—the enchantress.”

“What?” Wini blurts out, and I barely hear her because people are not whispering anymore. They are outright talking.

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Mentor Parker claps his hands, and slowly everyone goes silent. “That is a secret not known much outside these walls, but she began here, and she was and forever will be our greatest failure. One day, she will be nothing but dust because we will win. We will take back the world, but to do this, we need powerful witches and shifters to fight with us. There are many witches who side with her, many shifters too, because she’s very good at speaking lies about anyone who doesn’t side with her.”

“Wouldn’t that make her over a hundred years old?” I ask.

Mentor Parker looks at me. “I will allow it this once, but raise your hand to speak. Yes, she is that age, but she looks no older than I. The enchantress made her own forbidden spells and used them to make the Mindless as well as immortal life and other terrible things.”

Well, I’m not telling them I like making up my own spells, then.

“Tell me next, how do we kill one of the Mindless?” Mentor Parker questions. “We all know spells and magic do not touch them. If we cannot use our magic, what is our move?” He waits, but no one says anything. “They are physically stronger than us. They move faster, and they can see us even in the dark. They hunt in packs and it’s rare to come across one alone. All this is true, so what is the witch’s move?”

Wini puts her hand up. “The changeling shifters’ magic is their weakness. Our bonds are sacred because we connect our souls with our bonded, becoming one. Their magic connects with ours, and then our magic works on the Mindless. Changeling’s magic is wild and untamed, but weak. Without the bond, they cannot do spells, control the base magic or use it. There have been many reports of untamed shifter magic

accidently hurting their own people.”

“Correct, Miss. When you head to the forest, you will see bloodstones on the ground. There are seventy-seven bloodstones, huge stone platforms, within the forest. You will find a shifter, bring them to the bloodstone, and cut your hand. One drop of blood seals the bond on the bloodstone. The shifter doesn’t have to bleed; they just have to be standing on it. After you enter the forest, do not leave it without a bond—you will be killed on sight by us.” My mouth dries. No pressure then. “After this, your magic is shared as one and your lives, too. They become connected to your very soul, and when you meet the goddess, it will be together.” He touches Sookie’s head affectionately. “If they die, you die. If you die, they die. There is no end to your bond. It has never been undone. Now, they, their magic, it’s weak in comparison to ours, and ours does not work against the Mindless. This changes with the bond.”

He walks to the edge of the stage and sits down on it. “There are, of course, weaknesses that come with the bond. If, say, you bond with more than one shifter, you become the weak point for them. This isn’t something to worry about. Shifters are known to hate sharing, and in our history, there are only a handful of bonds with more than one. Anyone who attacks you will go for you first. Your death would end both of the shifters; therefore, we will teach you to tone your body, to defend yourself without magic.”

My stomach feels like jelly. Wait, what? Defend myself without magic? No one said anything about physically training. I thought I’d have to do running or something equally bad, but this is garbage. I want to be at the top of every class I take, and self-defense is going to leave me right at the bottom. “You will learn healing spells to be able to heal your shifter, and powerful shielding spells, too. They learn similarly in other classes when they are of age, and together you will leave this academy as one unit, strong and unbroken. Any unbonded return to the forest for breeding. Witches? There is only one way out of Bloodstone.”

A girl at the back puts her hand up. “So we’re not going to learn any attacking spells?”

“Yes, of course you are.” He waves her off. “You will attend five classes. One on the histories. Being well-versed in the mind is important. A class based on self-defense of your bodies without magic. I will let your mentor explain that to you when you get there. The third class is on defensive spells. The fourth class will be on healing. And your fifth and most important class will be on strengthening your bond between you and your shifter. It does not come easy. It is not a natural bond; therefore, it sometimes becomes very difficult to bond together. But by the end of the three years, you will be as one.” He points at the door. “You will be shown to your rooms. Males to the right, females to the left. Tomorrow night, when the sun sets, you will go into the Bloodstone Forest of your own accord from your room. The academy will show you the way.”

The doors open behind us, and the hooded man is gone. I stand up, only for Mentor Parker to clap his hands and catch everyone’s attention again. “One more rule.” We all turn around. “It shouldn’t need to be said, but having relations with the shifter that you’re bonded to is against the rules. Pregnancies do not happen between witches and shifters, that much we know. But relationships complicate the bond, and it is not favored. Possessiveness and jealousy is a problem with shifter males in particular, and we found it is easier to make sure the relationship becomes like they are family to you, nothing more, nothing less. You are all witches who chose this future instead of staying in your safe towns and choosing a husband or wife. Love is second to the academy—to the war. Do not be a fool.”

Wini stays at my side, behind two girls who are talking far too loudly. “Ew, like we would fall in love with one of them? You know why they’re stuck in the Bloodstone Forest, right? Why they’re bound here? It’s because they sided with the enchantress in the war, well, not them, but their parents did or their grandparents. They are all rebel blood and they are sworn to fight with us until the war is over.”

I look at the floor, the mosaic brown tiles. I remembered Kane, and he is a shifter...so how was he living in the same village as me all those years ago when he was meant to be in the Bloodstone Forest?

Chapter 4

This academy is a maze—and a spooky one at that. One minute, I'm walking down a corridor that could easily double as a not-so-friendly ghost's living room with its giant fireplace, and the next, I'm going up black stone stairs that seem to spiral in three different directions. We are following a second-year with black hair and an attitude problem, because anytime anyone has asked her a question, she has told them to fuck off. Based on her attitude alone, I'm sure showing us to our rooms is a punishment for her.

Eventually she stops, waving at the staircase on the other side of the bare room we are in. Looking through the small windows, I can see we are high up. I'm guessing this is one of the many towers I saw. The girl leaves, slamming the door behind her. Wini leans into my ear to whisper, "She hates us."

"Seems like it," I mutter, walking through the crowd to the staircase. The staircase is a spiral with exits on each level, taking us to our rooms, I assume, black doors with names on each of them. "Our rooms. Time to find our name." We head up, checking each door, and I groan the higher we climb without seeing our names yet. "At least I'm going to be fit climbing these steps every day," I breathe out.

"My door. Looks like we are the top two and neighbors." She grins at me. I'm still focused on the fact I have to climb up and down these stairs every single day for three years. "I'll see you tomorrow night." She stops. "We are friends, so I'm telling you the only warning I was given before coming here. I was told not to leave the room until nightfall tomorrow."

“Why? How do we get food or drinks?” I question her. I’m not sure I can trust her yet. I really don’t know her that well, but she’s been kind so far.

“I don’t know, but you’ve seen how many of us were already drowned.”

“Okay, then.” I nod, leaving her to go into her room, and climb the final part of the steps to my door. My name is in bold white writing on the door, like someone drew it on with a marker, but I reach up and touch it, feeling it is pressed into the wood. The door clicks at my touch before slowly opening, and lights immediately flicker on, lanterns on the walls of the huge space. It’s much bigger than I thought it would be.

There’s a triangle window that looks over the forest, taking up the back wall, with a grid of black lines making the pattern of mountains. In front of the window and pushed up against it is a double bed with dark sheets that match the wooden frame. There are two chests of drawers on the other wall, next to a wardrobe that is open. My suitcase is inside, along with my new uniform. Rows of black cloaks with red stitching and lines, along with tight black uniforms, are hung up for me. A full-length mirror stands on the other side of the room, with a door next to it.

I glance inside, seeing a fully functioning bathroom, including a huge domed black bath, a toilet, and sink. The floor is all dark wood, complementing the dark purple wallpaper, and it’s gloomy in here in a cozy way. I love it. There are quite a few cobwebs on the ceilings, but it’s mine. It’s safe.

I jump on the bed and lie back, looking at the beautiful ceiling that’s slanted and all painted black, before I roll over and stare out of the window, watching the sky, watching the endless sea. Something silver catches my attention in the sky, in the far distance, and I sit up. What is that?

There are two sharp knocks on my door that make me jump. “Hey, it’s me! Your room is spelled to only let in who you want, so you need to tell me to come in.”

Rue. My foster sister. She's here. I rush off the bed and across the room, opening the door for her. Rue looks like her mother, there is no denying that, with her long straight blonde hair and bright hazel eyes. She has the same body shape and face as her mother too, but she isn't cruel. She isn't her mother, and I always knew that. Yes, we argued sometimes, like all children, but never once did she make me feel worthless. "Rue, you look older! Come in!"

She steps in with relief shining in her eyes, and she pulls me into a tight hug. It's strange to see her in the black academy clothes and how toned she is now. We've only ever hugged five, six times in our entire lives. Mostly when we fought like real siblings and neither one of us knew how to say sorry. We hugged instead. But it was never like this, not like she doesn't want to let go. I hug her back just as tightly. "Okay, I know you didn't reply to any of my letters, so you might hate me. Which is fair because I didn't stop my mom from being...well, her. I just knew if I stepped in, she might throw you out, and I didn't want that to happen. She hurt me too. I don't know if you knew that, but she did. Anytime I did something wrong. Look, even if you hate me, please listen to what I said in the letters. I assume you knew about the bridge since you're still here, so you must have read that one?—"

"Stop!" I cut her off, leaning back. "What letters? I didn't know about the bridge until it started falling away!"

She stares at me for a long moment. "Mom never gave you the letters I sent every month, did she?"

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I shake my head. “No. I asked about you, but she told me that you were busy and that we aren’t really family, so I shouldn’t expect you to?—”

“We are family. Not by blood, but by this.” She taps her heart. “I wrote every week to you with countless warnings about this place and how to survive it. I was careful not to break the rules and the contract, but I added things like “run at the bridge” and so much more hidden. I knew you’d get in and you’d be smart enough to read between the lines of my letters. You’re smarter than anyone else I know.” She narrows her eyes. “I’m not writing to my mom after this. This is low, even for her abusive ass.”

A laugh echoes out of me. I shouldn’t laugh, but I can’t help it. I’m relieved when she laughs with me. “It seems her age-old game of trying to pit us against each other didn’t work.”

“No.” She stops laughing, and she goes serious. “I’m not allowed to stay long. We’re not meant to converse with the first-years in the first few days. It’s just against the rules, but fuck them. You need to find Aster. He’s a wolf and big with white fur. He’s the brother of my bonded, and he knows all about you. Aster’s happy to bond with you, okay? He’ll keep you safe, and he’ll be an easy bond. He’s not as big as my bonded wolf, but he’s strong and kind, and that’s what matters in the war. I’ve seen most of my class die because of the bond being rejected or going wrong. You need safe, and he is it.”

“Thank you.” I grip her hands.

She looks down. “Living in that house was hell, and it took me getting out of it to realize how much it was ruining me, turning me into her...and I didn’t want that. The

war took my father and brother, who were both kind and sweet...and I am doing this for them.” Her shoulders drop. “Well, I guess there isn’t anyone in this academy who isn’t fighting for a lost soul or two. I am glad my mother took you in, but we both know that you probably would’ve been better off with someone else and not her. Somehow you managed to stay nice throughout all of it, which makes me...well, I’m grateful. As far as I’m concerned, you’re my only family, and I want to make sure you survive. Listen to me, find Aster in the forest. He’ll be looking for you too, but it’ll be madness when you get in there.”

She pulls out a dagger. It’s silver, and a glittering blade, and she presses it into my hand. “Take this to cut your hand on the bloodstone and to defend yourself.” I curl my hand around it. “Remember this: people will try to kill you in the corridor when you step out tomorrow night, so please run fast like we used to when we chased the ice cream woman down the street, begging her to stop so we could get something. Just run, the academy will show you the way, and trust yourself. Jump off the stairs if you have to. The less competition, the better, and some of the assholes here just like killing for sport and fun. They aren’t allowed to kill you once you bond. Two: do not trust anybody that’s not me. Three: You must not leave this room until tomorrow night, until the sun sets. The academy’s small creatures will bring you food and water. Don’t worry, you don’t see them. They take all your washing, anything that needs to be done around here.”

“Understood.” Wini was telling me the truth, then.

She heads to the door. “Oh, and one more thing. Four: stay away from the dragon shifters. They’re called Valeron Drexan, Kane Ardian, Black Ashveil and Mazikeen Lycidas. They’re mean fuckers and the last four dragon shifters left in the world. They don’t want to bond with any witch, and everyone wants to bond with them. In fact, they hate witches. Most of the idiots here will try to go for them because being bonded to even one dragon would be, well, it would change the war.” She shivers. “They will make a blood bath of fire on bonding night in the forest. Just run.”

“Okay, stay away from the dragons, got it. Find Aster.” Kane was on that list, and he doesn’t sound anything like the boy I remember. “And run fast.”

She pauses at the door. “By the way, I’m proud of you. I know she wouldn’t have said it, but it’s true. I’ve always known you will be the one to change everything. It all begins tomorrow, sister.”

Sister. She has never called me that before. I lift my head, feeling tears itching the corner of my eyes. “See you after the Bloodstone Forest at the celebration.”

Rue leaves the room with one last smile, and I sit on the end of the bed, looking at the dagger in my hand. I can’t hurt anyone; how could I use this? I’ve spent my life buried in books and never once thought knowledge wasn’t enough. What have I gotten myself into?

Chapter 5

The moment the sun starts to drop in the sky, my stomach twists into knots. Last night, I could barely sleep because of the screaming, the sound of doors opening and shutting. The screams haven’t lasted all day, just a few now, and I wonder how many died in the first twenty-four hours at the academy. I can smell blood in the air, and it’s horrid. I continue to pace, touching the dagger that I’ve clipped to my new belt that I found in the drawers.

I walk over to the mirror and look at myself again. I pulled my dark hair up into a high ponytail, the locks falling around my neck and onto my shoulders in dark brown waves. The Bloodstone uniform clings to my body because it’s made to be tight, with a slightly high collar around my neck. I’ve never liked my wide hips or the curve of my body, and this outfit only makes my faults more obvious. I do love the heavy black boots I found, which lace up to my calves.

My parents survived this academy, and they once stood here, just like me, wearing the same uniform. I swore to myself I'd make them proud—that I'd fight because they can't anymore. I will fight for the Daygan clan because I'm all it has left. They named me after the clan that stood for over a thousand years, and that has to mean something. I have to mean—do—something to make sure my family isn't lost and forgotten.

I look over at the door when I sense something—a small creature. It moves so fast, like a shadow, and all I see is cat-like ears before it's gone. The small creatures won't speak to me, and I'm not used to that or the way they hide from me. I guess it's normal for small creatures to hide from witches in most places. The creature has taken my empty plates, and there is now a dress hanging on the back of the door that wasn't there before. It's a gray gown, plain but effectively grand with its massive skirts, and there is a note pinned to the corset. I almost don't want to read it, knowing that the dress isn't random. I pick the note off the dress.

“To leave the room, you must wear the gown. May you greet death or your bonded future in the best attire.”

What the fuck? I can't run in a dress! I grit my teeth, tugging the gown off the door and putting it on the bed. I take my uniform off and wrestle the dress on, which fits me perfectly. After tying the laces at the side, I walk over to the mirror. The skirt flows out from my waist where it's tight—almost too much. It hurts with every breath. The gown is also too long, hiding my boots, but I know I'm going to trip on it the second I run. The note said nothing about fixing the dress, only that I have to wear it.

I attach the dagger belt to my waist over the dress before pulling the dagger out. Using the mirror as a guide, I cut a massive slit down the one side and trim the bottom of the dress until it hits my lower legs, just above my boots. I throw the leftover fabric on the floor. It's gone nearly instantly, thanks to another small creature

that I don't get a look at this time. "You're quick and I'm friendly! I won't hurt you!"

I know I'm shouting into the void and they might not even be listening to me, but I have to try. A morbid thought echoes in my mind—am I wearing a dress for my coffin, so I look nice? Are they that certain most will die tonight? My eyes drift one more time out the window over the forest and up to the sky. Goddess, please be by my side today.

The door creaks and I turn, seeing it opening on its own. I push the dagger back into my clip and run to the door, peeking out into the silent and dark staircase. The lanterns have been dimmed so much that only a little shadow of light pours out under each fixture on the way down the staircase. The rest is cloaked in black shadows, and it's far too easy for people to hide in this staircase.

Run. I hear Rue's warning in my mind before I take off, going right past Wini's room, where her door isn't open yet. Mine opened first, I soon realize, as I pass more closed doors. I get halfway down when I see students waiting at the bottom in a line, all of them hooded and hidden, but their whispers echo in the air as much as the air suddenly goes cold with their magic. Whispers are magic in our world. We can only say the spells as whispers because to say them aloud would make them never work. Our goddess is one of whispers, and right now, they might as well be chanting.

The floor under my feet turns to ice, and I scream as I slip and slide right down into the hooded witches. I slam into them, unable to stop, knocking two of them off their feet. Vines snap like snakes out of the hands of one of the standing witches, and I roll to the side, gripping the banister as he walks towards me, his deep voice familiar somehow. "This one is mine. Run, kill the others."

The others leave as my heart races, as he steps closer, a spell whispering under his breath that I know. A death spell. I throw myself over the side of the banister, not knowing what else to do to avoid the spell.

A scream echoes out of my throat as I fall for what feels like seconds, right before I slam straight onto the stone, hearing my ribs crack. I taste blood in my mouth as I climb to my feet, barely feeling the pain over the shock. Screams echo from above, their pleas ringing in my ears as I walk backwards. My heart is still racing as I hear the sound of so many footsteps on the stairs, and I don't know if people are coming down or up them, but I can't stop. I turn and I run.

I don't look where I'm going. I don't even think about the corridors of paintings and shadows. I barely see any of it, barely register the way my ribs are hurting and how hard I'm breathing. I just run and run, desperate to get to the forest, to get out of this castle. I feel blood trickling out of the corner of my mouth, and I wipe it away with the back of my hand. I will not die at the hand of some witch in this academy. If I die, it will be avenging my parents. I studied for this; I worked my ass off to be the best in my class, the best in my school, for this chance. I can survive a little longer.

I unexpectedly run right out onto a balcony and slam into a metal railing that overlooks the forest. There is a small staircase right next to me that leads to a path, the path disappearing into the dark, creepy forest. I look back at the academy, seeing an endless stretch of corridor I ran down. The academy somehow led me here, just like Rue predicted. It knew where I wanted to go. My hands cling to the metal railing for a treasured second for me to breathe.

The second does nothing to calm me down, escaping when I turn to the left and see a row of corridors appearing in the stone, with people running down them towards me in gray suits or gowns, some covered in blood. Within moments, I'm not alone, and the entire balcony is full of first-years. I run down the steps before anyone can get near me. The mossy ground path makes it hard to run on, almost bouncing my every step, and I know if I hadn't cut the dress, I would have tripped minutes ago. "I can do this." I don't know why saying it out loud helps me, but it does. I focus on the tree line, on finding Aster and a bloodstone. One cut, one drop of blood, and the hunt is over.

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I glance behind me and see the other first-years, and I search for Wini, but I don't see her in the crowd. It's too much chaos and too many of them are getting closer. I drop my hand on my dagger just in case, just as a roar makes me clamp my hands over my ears, and I fall to my knees as my ears ring with utter pain. The roar is so loud it shakes the very ground under my knees, and leaves fall from the sky, along with the newly falling snow, until the ground is covered in the black leaves.

A dragon lands on top of the trees, branches cracking under its clawed feet. It's a huge, monstrous silver beast of a dragon, and it's nothing short of massive. It stretches its neck, roaring again into the night sky, so loud it must even shake the stars. Silver scales, the very color of the moon above, cover every inch of its body as it lowers its head. Its eyes are so silver they almost look white, and it breathes fire within a second—and no one can run away. I scream as I jump to the left, narrowly avoiding the line of blazing hot fire that I feel drift up every inch of me.

My dress sets aflame, and I pat it, rolling to put the fire out as the smell hits me. The smell of burning people. I lift my head, my ears still ringing, and see something I will never forget. People burning in gowns and suits, students who just wanted to learn. I stare for far too long, breathing in far too much smoke and death, trying not to pass out as the world spins.

Sickness rises in my throat as I climb to my feet in a daze and run right into the forest, as far away from the burning people as I can, and the dragon leaps into the sky once again, only to dive and begin to burn a path right through the forest. I choke on the smoke as I run past the trees, disappearing off the path and into the thick woods. I slam straight into a tree, smacking myself in the face, and I drop, falling onto the damp ground.

Another roar echoes through the trees, further away this time, and it's the only reason I manage to get up. I climb onto my knees and come face to face with a bear. The bear isn't a normal size, it's black-furred and the size of a car. It swings a paw at me, catching my dress as I stumble away, the fabric ripping as I get to my feet. The bear snarls behind me, but I don't dare look back as I take off, jumping over a fallen log before finding a clear path through the forest.

Aster, where are you? I listen for the noise in the forest, but the dragon roars block out any howls I might have been able to hear. I can only hear the dragon. The deeper I get in the forest, the fainter the smell of fire and smoke becomes until it's easier to breathe, until I know I'm alone and slow down.

Touching my chest, feeling my racing heart, I try to focus. I can't see anything but trees and bushes, and it's silent here. I glance up, but the tall trees have hidden the sky, and I can't make out anything in the darkness. I can't even see the top of the trees. Moonlight shines through the trees to the left, and I walk to it until it's shining over me. I walk slower, my legs hurting, and I glance down, seeing burns on my thighs and dozens of cuts all over me. I know shock has a hold on my senses, because I'm not in pain like I should be right about now.

What am I going to do? How could Aster find me in this chaos when we have never met? I don't know how long I walk until I come out to a clearing in the forest, where the moonlight has illuminated a stone circle on the ground. I can't see what it is. Most of it is covered in thick moss and glowing red mushrooms.

Something makes me look to the skies, a feeling someone is watching me, and I'm right. A familiar roar echoes from the skies above again, and when I look up, it's not just one dragon now—there's four. All of them are the same color, all silver and beautiful as the moonlight dances across their wings. Moonlit death. I'm going to die.

Three of them fly straight down and land around me, thumping onto the stone one by

one and shaking it so hard I nearly fall over. The biggest dragon stays in the sky, gliding in a circle around us. I don't know which dragon to look at first. The one right next to me, so close his hot breath is warming my side, has no eyes. They look like they have been scratched out, with big scar lines down the tissue instead. Claw marks are everywhere on his scales. Not a single one looks untouched. The dragon roars at me, spit cascading all over my dress and hair.

“Don't eat me!” I put my hands up, stepping backwards. The other two, whose eyes are bright silver, watch me so closely as bright orange fire rumbles in their mouths. Something instinctual tells me that these aren't Kane, but he is likely to kill me anyway. He doesn't remember me, and even if he did, he owes me nothing from our childhood.

I turn my head up as the wind blows against my dress—not the wind but the force from dragon wings. The final dragon descends from the sky as chunky snowflakes fall between us. I've always loved the snow—fitting I'll die on the first snowing night of the year. I reach up to catch a single snowflake that will die in my hand, just like I'm going to die in dragon fire.

The dragon lands with a thump, and I stumble back, pulling the dagger out of the sheath. I will fight to the end. I have to. They aren't going to listen and what else can I do? A woman with a dagger against four dragons might not win, but I will damn well make them bleed. The blade runs straight across my palm. I look down as the world slows, and a drop of my blood falls in the air. Slowly, it drops right onto the ground—onto a bloodstone. A bright, blood red light blasts out of the ground in lines, and my eyes widen as it slams into the dragons, cutting through their bodies like blades. I see my hair turning silver, the very colour changing as it flickers around my face. They each roar as I feel like my soul is ripped apart into four, and I will never be the same again.

Chapter 6

My body hurts as I wake up, as the world fades back into light and fire? Wait, fire? I can almost feel it against my skin, in my blood and bones. The world tastes like smoke, and my chest hurts. I roll my tongue around my dry mouth, coughing on the smoke in the air for a long few seconds until I get it under control. I can hear shouting—men I don't know are shouting loud enough to wake the entire forest. Wait, it's the hunt. I was hunting for my bonded, and then...I'm not sure. Then what? My head hurts and every inch of my skin feels like it's been dragged through a bush. I don't know them, but they are arguing like I'm not here at all, and all I can focus on is that I'm in pain. I breathe through the pain, one breath at a time. My ribs hurt the most, so breathing is difficult. I can feel the burns on my hip and my lower legs.

“How the fuck would I know there was an old bloodstone this far out?” one of them shouts. “This isn't my fault.”

“No, it's hers!” another male roars and then snarls like a caged animal. “I suggest we get rid of her before this becomes permanent. She fucking bonded to us!”

A smack and thump echoes to my left, shaking the ground as I try to focus my vision. My hair is back to its normal colour, falling over my face. “Don't be a fool. She dies—so do we! Don't be selfish for once in your forsaken life, Vale!”

“She's waking up,” Kane states, his tone clipped and cold but recognizable. I should be relieved to hear him here, but he isn't the boy I remember. He is a dragon shifter changeling, and he just wanted me dead. My body feels sore, so sore, and I'm confused. What just happened? I remember the dragons around me, I remember cutting my hand and the ground glowing. Wait...it wasn't just glowing. It was a bloodstone. Goddess above, this can't be real. This can't be happening to me.

I roll onto my back and lift my hands above me, looking for the mark I saw on my father's and mother's palms. The bonding mark. My palms are stinging before my vision completely focuses, but there isn't one mark like there was for my

parents—there are four runes on my palms. The black runes look like dragons with their tails entwined, circling around a flame. Two on each hand. Not one. Not two. Not three...but four. I've bonded to four dragons, and I've somehow survived it.

A shadow hangs over me, a man with glasses and dark hair. He is pale, a contrast to his enormous, thickly muscled body, charming looks and black hair. The locks hover over the tips of his glasses, and behind them, his eyes are the deepest blue. "I'm Mazikeen Lycidas and you're my bonded. Take my hand—it's going to be okay."

"For fuck's sake, no, it isn't. Don't lie to her!" I turn to see a man with thick silver hair being held back by a brown-haired man, who's wearing gloves as he pushes the man back a few steps. All of them are dragons. The silver-haired man is angry. His eyes are nearly black as he catches me looking at him. "You're dead for doing this, witch!"

Mazikeen crouches down, touching my arm, and a buzz shoots through my skin. "Hey, don't look at him. Just at me." He smiles, a playful grin that I don't return. "Your Juniper Daygan?" I push his hand off me, hating how it felt strange to have him touch me, before climbing to my feet. Mazikeen doesn't seem bothered by me pushing him away. "Well, I know of you from Kane." He points at Kane, who is leaning against a tree in the shadows, his face hidden from me. "The rude one is Valeron Drexan, but we call him Vale. The other dragon holding Vale back is Black Ashveil."

"You can't be happy about this, Black," Vale snarls, pushing him back and storming up to me. He shoves Mazikeen back a few steps, and my heart freezes as he stops right in front of me. "We are bonded to this...weak, clueless witch! We are fucking doomed."

I flinch as he shouts into my face. "I didn't mean to?"

“That’s your excuse? Pathetic.” His lip curls. “I hate witches, especially ones like you. You might have me bonded with a hex, but you mean nothing to me. I won’t fight for you. I won’t ever do shit for you.”

My cheeks burn. “But the war?—”

“Is a witch war.” Vale shakes his head, a laugh bursting out of him at whatever he sees on my face. “And news flash—we love the war. It kills a fuck ton of witches every day, and that’s fewer for us to deal with.”

“That’s enough.” Kane’s voice cuts through the air. Vale surprisingly steps back away from me, joining Black and Mazikeen.

I feel Kane coming closer before I turn to face him. Even as a kid, he looked like a storm when he was mad. That storm has only grown into a hurricane, and I can’t help but feel scared as he stops in front of me, his short silver hair glimmering in the moonlight. I put my hands up. “Whatever I did, it was an accident. You scared me and I was going to die. The dagger was meant to be my last defense, not a bond.”

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“We weren’t gonna kill you.” Kane is surprisingly calm—unfeeling almost—with every word. “I wanted to speak to you alone and help you find a fool to bond with in this forest. Now, you’ve cursed us all.”

“What?” I whisper.

“You bonded to the last four living dragon shifters left alive. You die, you take our entire race fucking with you.” He leans down. “You absolute bitch. Wasn’t what you did when we were kids enough? Didn’t you hurt me enough back then?”

What is he talking about?

“Don’t call her that.” Mazikeen moves to my side. “She is our bonded and I can already feel everything changing. We can begin this hating each other or find a way to make sure we all get out alive. We all have people that need us, Kane.”

Kane’s laugh is empty. He puts his hands in his pocket. “Be seeing you, Juni, and I’m going to make your life hell for this.”

His threat smacks into my heart, making it beat so fast it might escape my chest. He walks off with Black following him, who hasn’t said a single word to me. Vale is still here, watching me closely. He walks up to me, cocking his head to the side. “Run, Hex. I’m hunting you now.”

Mazikeen goes to say something, but Vale punches him—hard. The sickening crack of his nose breaking echoes to my ears, and Vale jumps on him, punching again and again. I care. Every punch feels like it’s hurting my heart, and my hands itch to do

something. A spell. Anything. Is my magic back now that I'm bonded? Mazikeen goes limp, and Vale, with a face covered in a spray of blood, looks at me with his devil-like eyes. "Your head start is over."

I turn and run from my bonded like my ass is on fire. I do not want to end up like Mazikeen. Vale's laugh echoes through the trees, through the very forest, like he is whispering through himself. "Undo this or I will make every moment of your life hell. I will haunt you day and night."

"I can't undo a bond!" I yell into the trees. "I don't even understand how it's done in the first place!"

"There isn't a spell to undo it, but you're a smart witch, apparently. You're going to make one." His laugh is outright creepy. Make a new spell to break a bond? I don't know where I'd even start. Yes, I can make new spells, small ones, but they are forbidden here. I run faster, clueless as to where I'm going, and I know Vale isn't far behind me. He isn't going to let me go that easily.

How is this possible? Four dragons and one witch? It hasn't ever been done in anything I've read... In fact, one dragon shifter bond is all I've ever read about. The history books haven't really explained bonded more than about two ever. The magic between us all is probably going to kill us. I'm so lost in thought I don't see the black swirling portal until I fall right through it and out into cold air, a heavy breeze and thick snow. I'm high up, too high up, and I turn around to see I'm on top of one of the towers. Oh fuck. There isn't a way down, and the portal shimmers as Vale walks out. He is so casual, like he isn't hunting me.

"I should thank you for the magic boost. Portals have always been challenging until now." I keep walking back until my back hits the stone edge of the half wall. He steps into my space, and he grabs my neck tight. I gasp, clawing at his hand, and he lifts me right into the air with hardly any effort. He holds me right over the edge of the tower

of the academy.

“You are all betrayers,” he snarls at me. “I hope this fucking hurts and you’re with the healers for a few weeks. I’ll bring you back up here when you feel better.”

I struggle to get the words out, and I kick my legs, my stomach exploding with fear. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Let me go!”

He smirks. No, he fucking wouldn’t. “Bye, Hex.”

Valeron Drexan, my bonded, throws me right off the tower.

Chapter 7

I spin in the air, in the chilling wind, and the ringing in my ears is so loud. I can’t think. I can’t breathe, as time itself feels like it slows for a long second as I fall through the air. I’m a witch, I know spells, and I don’t need anyone to save me—I never have. I whisper the Latin words under my breath, the old Latin rolling off my tongue easily, just like the hundreds of times that I’ve memorized each spell again and again. I’ve mastered the language so I could master the spells. Icy cold magic flings around me, and I bounce off the floor, never quite touching it, almost like an invisible cushion. It still takes the air out of my lungs from the impact, shaking my ribs, and a piercing scream echoes from my throat. The burns on my legs seem to brush every inch of the ground as I collapse onto it, wincing.

I roll onto my back, looking up as a silver dragon flies across the sky, with the stars twinkling above him. Vale. The fucking asshole who just tried to kill me. I might be bonded to him for life, but I am going to get revenge, and I am going to make him pay for what he just did. I don’t question how I know it’s him, how my soul seems to recognize his dragon and send the name into my mind. Our bond is new, and our souls’—magic—connection will only grow stronger from what I’ve heard.

I grit my teeth, standing up, and dirt falls off me, but it doesn't help. A cleaning spell. Another few words and the mud is gone, most of the visible ash is cleared from my skin, and I look a slight bit better. Not great, but I only have to get to my room.

I walk up to the castle, through an arched dark gray door, and the warmth of the building hits me instantly. I sigh as I close the door behind me, taking a long breath even though I'm still shaking. I still can't believe that just happened. Was it real? I'm not sure, but I lift my hands into the light, shining from the fire lanterns on the walls, and see the runes. They are real; they aren't my imagination, and I am bonded to four dragon shifters. Not just four dragon shifters, but the last four in existence. Kane was right in a way when he said I cursed them all, because our enemies are going to want me dead because my death would kill all four of them too. That would it, the last real chance for the witches against the enchantress.

Dragons can win wars—they have done in our history. The last enormous battle for the witches was just under a hundred years ago, and seventy dragons and their bonded went to war. They all died in that battle, but the enchantress's forces took a massive hit, and it was a victory for that alone, but the dragons lost too much. There were no more bonds between witches and dragons recorded after that, and slowly, their race has begun to disappear due to the low birth rates for all shifters. My lungs suddenly feel like they are too tight, like I can't breathe fast enough. I don't want this. This is too much pressure. What have I done?

The corridor lights up brighter, the rays of it flashing into my eyes. Under the light, I can make out the shape of a small creature. It's about the size of a cat and has cat ears that are pointed, but its body is longer, and its tail hangs to the floor. I guess it wants me to go that way. The light dims away, back to normal, and the small creature is gone. I push off the wall. The panic attack was just about gone, thanks to the shock of the light. Maybe I can make friends with the small creatures here after all. Well, I hope so. I turn down a long, winding corridor that spins and turns in several ways, like most of this academy.

“Take me to them,” I say out loud, hoping it helps. “Take me to them so I can kill them,” I snap, because there is no way I’m staying silent for what Vale just did. Attempted to kill a bonded? I know it’s against the law, and he can’t just get away with it. They might be dragons, smug and arrogant, but I don’t think they can shift inside the academy, and they’re bonded to me now. It was an accident; it wasn’t what I wanted to do, but our fates are entwined now by the goddess because of what happened out there. It couldn’t be anything short of something our goddess wanted, and all of them seem like absolute assholes. Why would the goddess want that for me? I don’t know, and when I eventually die, I can ask her. I’m pretty sure Vale thought I wouldn’t die. I’d just be severely hurt, but even then, that’s bad. I’m going to have to watch my back around him continuously.

I’m so lost in my thoughts that I step straight out of the corridor onto a stage with the headmaster standing alone, waiting in the middle. Thick curtains mark the one wall, and I can hear people chatting, laughing, and their feet tapping the floor as they walk around. The headmaster waves me over, but my eyes go to the board behind him on the wall. It’s a chalkboard, all black, with the Latin for our heroes written across the top. The rest of it is a chart and a list of names. I count fourteen names, and right at the bottom, being written in white chalk as I watch, is my name. The other names have a box next to them and a rune inside, all of them different. Their bonded.

“Welcome, Juniper Daygan. I have gotten your name right?” I nod and he smiles. “Well, come closer then, Juniper. As you can see, your name has been added to the leaderboard, and when I confirm your rune and your bonded, that will be marked on there, too.”

“Leaderboard?” I look at Mentor Parker, confused.

He seems like he has answered this question a few—or fourteen—times before. “This is our leaderboard. You earn points throughout your years at the academy. Everything from your lessons to your tests and training earns a point. You name it, you get a

point for it. We expect you to care for the weapons given to you and bring the right weapons to your classes. Points are subtracted for missing items. The leaderboard keeps count, and you can check it whenever you wish. Currently, it's at random. Earning the points will begin tomorrow morning with your first class. The more tests you do, the more spells you practice, the higher you will get on the board. Everyone accepted to Bloodstone is competitive enough to be at the top of their classes, you included, and this helps keep that competitive spirit alive."

"What happens at the end?" I clear my throat. "Are there rewards for being at the top?"

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“You benefit with the reward of life and the honour of fighting in the war for your people.” His voice is dull. Bored.

“Life?” I blink in confusion.

“Well, this academy, as you well know, gets rid of the weak. Weak are not needed in battle or wars. You need to be in the top seventy percent of this, and if you’re not.” He goes quiet and draws an invisible line across his throat. My stomach hurts. “You will be donated to the afterlife as a gift to the goddess. May she rebirth you as a stronger witch. Your bonded also will join your classes, and they have their own leaderboard, which they do get rewards for.”

Holy shit. “Why? I thought once we bonded, we were safe and?—”

“Don’t for a second believe you’re safe at Bloodstone, Miss Juniper Daygan. You’re not.” I think he is warning me, but it comes across as a threat. Like he is certain of the fact I am not safe here. “Now, everyone’s waiting to hear who you bonded to.” He waves at the curtain wall. “The celebrations are just behind there, but I need to know who you bonded with before you can join them. The castle wouldn’t have let you back in if you’d not bonded. You need to say the name out loud. What’s their name and race?”

My heart’s racing. My voice seems to echo around the castle as I say the four names. “Mazikeen Lycidas, Kane Ardian, Black Ashveil and Valeron Drexan. They are dragons and they are my bonded.” Whether they want to be or not.

Gasps burst out from behind the curtain, whispers, some shouts of disbelief, and it

goes on and on as the headmaster just stares. I don't blame them. He frowns, his eyebrows tightening. "Four. You bonded with four dragons? Lies come with hefty punishments, miss Daygan. Are you quite sure?" He steps closer and roughly grabs my wrists. "Show me your hands."

I do, showing my palms and hating how he is gripping my wrists tight enough to bruise. The marks on my palms are clear as daylight. "I'm not a liar, and I don't know anyone who would be foolish enough to lie about that."

For a long moment, he just stares at my hands, stares like it might change the markings there. If there was a chance that worked, I'd stare myself. I'm already wishing this didn't happen, that anything else happened, but it's real and I have to accept it.

"It's true. By the goddess, in her holy name, it is true," Mentor Parker says. "You have bonded to four dragons and survived."

I look up at the board as four runes appear next to my name, all the same as the runes on my hands. I'm the only one in the whole row of fourteen that has more than one rune next to their name. I see Winifred's name and a wolf marking next to hers near the top of the board. She survived then, and I'm glad she did.

The headmaster clears his throat, dropping my wrists. "Congratulations. I believe this is history in the making." He doesn't sound happy; he sounds like he just witnessed a murder. "As this is a unique circumstance, I will need time to talk with the other tutors and call the Umbral Authority about this situation, as they will no doubt wish to meet with you. But for now, please join the celebrations and enjoy yourself. You've clearly earned it." A gap in the curtains appears, a few steps down into a thick crowd waiting for me. I want to get away from the headmaster as quickly as I can, and I go to move, but he grabs my shoulder. "How did you do it?" he whispers low.

“It was an accident,” I tell him honestly.

He searches my eyes, seeing that I’m not lying. “You probably don’t want to tell that to anyone else here. You just made yourself the biggest target in this academy and in the war. When our enemies hear about you, they are going to do everything in their power to make sure you end up dead, along with your dragons, before you reach your full potential.” He lets me go. “It’s well known the dragons didn’t want to be bonded at all, and they are very, very dangerous shifters, who have lost everything, and that has darkened their souls.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I offer, because what else can I say to that? I’m well aware of the shit show I’ve accidentally gotten myself into and the target on my back.

He lets me go and I’m tempted to rub my wrist to wipe off the feel of him touching me. I’ve never liked anyone touching me, hugging me, or just being close in general except for a rare few people in my life who earned my trust. I know it’s because of Melody and the trauma she caused. I know I could accept that not everyone will hurt me, but it’s easier said than done to make my mind and body accept that truth.

“Nothing done by the goddess is accidental...” His eyes are scanning me like he’s trying to solve a puzzle. “She must have a path for you. Aren’t you special?”

“I never asked to be anything from her except to help in the war. I don’t want any more children to lose their parents like I did,” I reply, crossing my arms. I take another step back towards the curtains.

“Some people are born to fates they don’t choose.” He walks away first, to the leaderboard, giving me his back. I leave through the curtains as quickly as I can, wanting to get away from him. The crowd is as huge as I thought it would be, filled with a mixture of second- and third-year students in their uniforms, some older people, and dotted around are first-years, which are easy to spot. We all look like we

have danced with a fire and dragged ourselves through at least ten bushes for the perfectly chaotic, messy look.

People are trying not to stare as they continue drinking while I go down the steps. I spot a first-year guy shoving little cakes into his mouth off a server's tray and, by the thin look of him, I'd bet he is from one of the poorer towns to the south. I'm half tempted to join him and eat too, but I know if I tried to eat anything now, I'd throw it all up.

I'm relieved when Wini comes rushing through the crowd, and the second I sit down, she hands me a glass of wine. "I've never been allowed to drink...is it nice?"

"No, but it has healing potion in it, and you look...well, how I do." She waves at her gray gown, which has blood, black burnt bits, and massive rips in the skirt. She is also covered in mud. "I used the mud puddles to hide while the dragon went past, and I tore my dress so I could run. I'm so glad you're alive...that was terrifying. I'm going to have nightmares for months."

"So will I." Today will go well with all the nightmares I usually have and can't ever get rid of. I down the drink, which makes my head swim.

There's a bitter taste in the back of my throat for a long moment, and an icy feeling spreads in my stomach, but any pain in my ribs fades away. The burns on my legs stop hurting, and when I look down, they are gone. Nice.

A man steps up next to Wini and bows his head at me. "Pleasure to meet you, and congratulations." He's got dark brown hair that's tied at the back of his neck in braids, and he is very pale, like he never really sees the sun, almost the color of moonlight. His eyes match his hair, the same brown color. "Aster Rogue," he introduces, offering me a hand to shake. I shake his hand back. "I was looking for you in the forest, but...it was chaos. The dragons like to make a mess of the

situation.”

“Aster? As in the brother of Rue’s bonded?” I question, and he nods.

“I think maybe he was looking for you, and I don’t know how, but we ran into each other, and I asked him to bond with me. I hope that’s okay.” Wini rubs her arm. “I didn’t know he was looking for you until?—”

“It’s fine.” I cut her off. How could she have known?

She smiles at me. “I knew we’d be good friends. Good friends don’t get angry at each other for things they can’t control. I can’t stay long. My mother’s on the council, and she’s over there waiting for me.” Wini points through the crowd, and I turn to see a gray-haired woman laughing, sipping a drink. For a moment, I freeze, feeling like I know her. I do...but how? I stare at her so long I don’t notice Aster and Wini are still talking. “I’m just going to say hello because she won’t be here for long. You should come with me, Juniper.”

“Perhaps I should keep my old friend company, sister.”

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My head swings at the sound of the male voice. He can't be here. Oh fuck, he really can't be here. But as he steps up to Wini's side, as his blue eyes lock onto mine and that familiar, old tension brews in the air like a stale potion that should have been thrown away years ago, I accept that he is real. Hemlock Mercury is at Bloodstone Academy. I really thought this day couldn't get any worse, but then my ex-boyfriend, my very secret ex-boyfriend, is somehow here. Lock stayed in our village for two months, and he liked small creatures just like me. Lock was always in the forest, helping and leaving them food. We began to talk...and the talking, along with his dimples, led to much more than talking on the forest floor. But it ended, swiftly and brutally, and I never wanted to see his handsome face again.

"Wait." I look between Lock and Wini, and I see it. They are familiar, in a way siblings are, the same nose and the same face structure. "He's your brother? Lock?"

I remember Lock telling me about his younger sister and how much he loved her. I'm surprised he let her come here, knowing it's likely going to get her killed. I knew seeing him again was always a chance. There aren't many witches left in the world, but I hope he is just visiting. That hope sinks faster than a stone when I see his black uniform that snugly fits every tall inch of his body. "Yes, Juni. We don't share the same last name because we have different fathers, but Winifred's my sister. I asked her to look out for you."

"Did you?" I sarcastically direct the question to Wini, who looks sheepish.

Wini clears her throat, her cheeks bright pink. "Yes, he did, and I kind of forgot until we met." She hisses to Lock, "You didn't tell me that this was a thing and awkward, or I'd have told you to fuck off."

“I’m telling our mother about your new foul language,” he smoothly taunts before looking at me with a smile that won my heart—or at least my vagina—over a few years ago. I’m not a love-struck girl who falls for the first guy to give her attention anymore, though. Love has to be earned and proven. It has to be constantly fed because if it isn’t, it dies. Whatever was between us is dead, and there isn’t a spell to breathe life into it. “Now leave. I need to speak to Juni.”

“I still want to be friends. That wasn’t...” She stops, seeing me glaring at her brother. “I’m going to leave you both to it. Please don’t hate me.” She smiles at her new bonded. “Aster, please come with me. I’ll introduce you to my mom.”

“Of course.” Aster looks between us and nods at me before going with Wini.

“As usual, you’re gaining quite a bit of attention, and this time it’s more than the fact you’re insanely beautiful,” he purrs.

“And as usual, you’re where I don’t want you to be,” I mutter.

“You’re still mad at me,” he notes. Dumbass. He was never the smartest. He holds his hands up, his gold, family clan ring shimmering in the light. “I was visiting all of the towns as part of my leadership introduction. You knew I would be going back, and I had to go back to the academy. We were just kids. I was seventeen and stupid, but I’m not anymore.”

“I’m well aware of what we were, and what we are now isn’t changing.” I lift my chin. “I’ve had enough of men today.”

He coughs on thin air. “Well, you’ve certainly gotten stronger willed since we were seventeen.”

I glance at his uniform, the number two in Latin on his chest, next to the Bloodstone

Academy logo. “Second year?”

“Yes, and I’ll be watching over you, along with Rue. We are friends, not sure if she told you that.”

I scrunch my face. “You slept with?—”

“Fuck, no. Just friends!” He shakes his head, and he looks disgusted. I’m not sure why. She is pretty and single. “Have you had enough of that healing potion? I’m concerned about your welfare?—”

“Yes, and I’m fine.” I stop him before he begins his no doubt practiced speech to get me to talk to him. I want to be anywhere but here. I’m not in any shape or form to be here, but I’m not telling him that. He walked into my life and made me have feelings for him, possibly even love him, even though I clearly wasn’t his first. Those are things that meant something to me and I thought meant something to him. I thought I was someone who meant enough to say goodbye to, to say something before disappearing. Everyone leaves me. This is a fact I’ve gotten used to. First my parents when they died and then him, and I bet I’ll have a long list as the time flies by. It’s a fact of life that people like me don’t have people supporting them and sticking around. My heart pangs for a second, but I push the pain down. I have no family clan to have my back, to advise and show me the right way.

“I have to tell you about?—”

“Ah, there’s my wayward son, and you must be Juniper.” An older woman’s voice interrupts whatever he was going to tell me. Lock’s mother stops next to him, kissing his cheek. She smiles at me, bright like Wini’s smile. In fact, she is the spitting image of her daughter, but her hair is gray mostly except for the dark ends. There is a large, circular, pure gold pendant resting in the center of her chest, the sign for the Umbral Authority, and her light gray outfit is a mix between a suit and dress. “I am good

friends with your foster mother.” Well, there goes wanting to know this woman. “I do think the marriage proposal between you two is a brilliant idea. We do need to restore the Daygan clan. I knew your mother and father only briefly, but in my time here, we were students together and?—”

I blurt out one sentence. “What marriage proposal?”

“Didn’t your foster mother tell you? Oh, the silly goose, she must have wanted it to be a surprise.” Goose? More like a feral cat who eats their young. “She knew how close you were with my son and called me the second you got into the academy. I can just imagine your children now! Both of you are so beautiful.”

“Mom, come on, that’s a bit too much.” Oh, he speaks.

Lock and Wini tell her to calm down, but I’m stuck, feeling like my world is spinning out of control, but my feet won’t move, won’t let me run away. The academy was meant to be freedom from an arranged marriage and the sinking feelings that came with imagining that life. I’d rather die. How could Melody have known about Lock and me? I didn’t tell her and I made sure we were never followed or seen. Not that many people would be brave going outside the limits of the town, anyway.

Their mom is still rambling on. “But of course, the marriage will happen after the academy and your years in the war. You two can just grow close here. Especially now that you are very formidable with your bonded, Juniper! As my future family, I will stick up for you with my fellow council and make sure they take your future into kind consideration. We all will no doubt be meeting with you soon.”

She is warning me her protection is based on me accepting the arranged marriage. I can tell she feels she has won when she looks in my eyes, but little does she know, I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure I never marry him. Or anyone I don’t love. I remember enough of my parents and their true love to know what is real.

I want what I remember; I want someone I'm desperate about and makes my heart race when I look at them even if they scare me to death. Dammit my mind wonders to them. My bonded. Am I so fucked up that I only think of my psychopathic hot bonded dragons as the only attractive men I've seen here? I just need to meet more witches that aren't Lock or my forbidden bonded. They hate me, so it shouldn't be a problem to ignore the attraction. I push that thought away really quickly before I end up dead. A relationship with any of them is a death sentence, or at least a heavily punishable act.

She carries on talking, but everything feels like it fades. Marriage to Lock? This has to be the worst night of my life. Absolutely the worst night in my life.

Wini must see it in my eyes, see me spiralling into a pit of depression I've always fought to get myself out of. "Mom, maybe I should take Juniper to her room. It's been a long day, and I think we both could do with some sleep."

"Yes," she agrees. "I will see you soon, Juniper."

"See you around," I manage to say, my mouth dry. Her eyes are assessing as I walk away with Wini, out of the crowds and into a quiet, empty corridor. I suck in a deep breath, and I'm tempted to scream and scream.

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“My brother’s a dick. You can say whatever you want about him, and I guarantee I will have heard it before and agreed. My mom wants the best for him, and your bloodline is all she sees. I had no idea about the whole marriage proposal, but he probably did. I’m just sorry.” She clears her throat and steps up to me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. It takes me a second, but I hug her back, sobbing into her shoulder for a long moment. “If we both survive this, you can marry me to avoid my brother. Don’t worry, I don’t want your babies, and I don’t fancy you. I firmly like men. We can live in a big house with girly shit and forget men exist except for when we are horny.”

I burst into laughter. “Deal. You’re my kind of crazy, Wini.”

She laughs and leans back. “Come on, sleep will make all this seem a little less bad.”

Wini waves to the end of the corridor. “Are you okay? I know this is probably going to be difficult with what happened, but you’re alive. You’re fighting still, and that is something to celebrate, and it is worth celebrating.”

I know she is right, but celebrating what happened today feels like cheering at a funeral. “I’m not okay, but I’m coping enough. It can’t get any worse.”

The day is nearly over. I can have a bath and then sleep. There couldn’t possibly be more to go wrong. I’ve been accidentally bonded to men that hate me, put the dragon shifter race at risk of extinction, been thrown off a roof by my bonded who probably didn’t even care that I managed to survive it, and then found out that I’ve been given away in a marriage proposal with absolutely no consent on my part—and to my ex of all people.

I walk with Wini, my legs still shaking, and I feel exhausted. She looks at me when we get to a row of steps. “Dragons haven’t fought for us. No generations in the last hundred years have fought for the witches. They’ve avoided bonds, and then they all end up dead, and now four of them are in the war. This is big, this is life changing. Four of them with you could end this war. Do you know what that means?” I don’t answer her, and she sighs. “I know you feel under pressure and scared, but everything happens for a reason. Every move in our lives is guided by the goddess, and she did this. I know she did. She wants the war over.”

“I didn’t want this. I wanted to be someone normal,” I admit. “I wanted to make spells that helped the war. This is nothing like I imagined and planned out.”

“You still can be the smart witch, the dragon witch, and any title you earn here. Every witch in our history that is remembered began here. You can do that too.”

I know she is right; I know I should answer her, but all I want is to curl up in bed and not think for a good eight hours. But somehow, the day is not done with me yet. “You do know about the room change, right?” I stare at her, stopping on the staircase that leads to the rooms and close my eyes. “Your bonded stay in a shared space, well, room, while you are at the academy. Usually, the academy just makes up a room to be in the room, so you should have five separate rooms in there and one big communal space. They worked out that bonds need to be close to each other as much as possible for the first few years. It’s not good for us to be that far apart.”

“I can’t sleep in there with them. They’re going to kill me,” I snap. I know it’s not her fault, and I immediately feel bad for taking it out on her. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have snapped then.”

“Oh, they can’t kill you. They’d likely die too. There aren’t many stories of bonded surviving without each other.” She grins.

“Did I tell you one of them threw me off a roof?” We are at her door. She doesn’t know what to say as she stares at my face, waiting for me to laugh and say it was a joke. I don’t blame her. “Well, if I die tonight, you know who did it.”

“Good luck,” she chokes.

I pause, looking back. “I wish you were sent to the towns. I never made friends except your brother, and that didn’t work out well for me.”

“Me too, but I’m not an heir to the Umbral Authority like he is. He was born that role, and I grew up with everyone telling me how handsome my brother was, how amazing it is to be related to him, and how lucky I am that I will have a brother on the Umbral Authority one day when my mother steps down.” I shake my head at the thought of growing up with Lock shadowing over me. I imagine it was hard for her. If anyone knows what a hard childhood is like, it’s me. “He’s like a pretty picture on a wall, except for right behind that pretty picture, everything’s a little rotten. But he still told me about you. He’s never spoken to me about a girl before, and he told me about you. I’m really fucking glad you’re not a swooning nutcase who wants to be his wife. It will do his ego good to have you around, but be careful.”

I watch her walk away down the stairs, thinking about what it must have been like for her to grow up in his shadow. A few steps and I’m in front of the door to my bedroom. Which isn’t just mine anymore, and I hate that. It was the first thing I could claim as my own, and I wanted to keep it. Not share it. Not with them when they hate me.

I walk through my door before I can chicken out and run in the opposite direction. We don’t have separate rooms, and my stomach sinks like a rock in the sea. The room has changed massively to incorporate five double beds in a half-moon shape, each with their own window right behind them with the beds pressed against it. There are more chests, more wardrobes, enough for one each for all of us, and there are four

more doors, I gather, to all the new bathrooms.

Maz is lying back on his bed, but he sits up when I come in and happily grins. There is no black eye or bruise or any swelling on his face from where Vale punched him. Their healing skills are not a rumor, then. Black, if I remember his name right, is here, but he's already in bed and sleeping. One of the bathroom doors is shut with a light pouring out from the edges, and it could be either Vale or Kane. Either way, I'm happy they are both in there and not out here.

"Hey, I don't know what happened, but I'm sorry?—"

"Your psycho fucking friend threw me off the top of the tower," I snap, "and nearly killed me. I can't decide if he is stupid or just mean. If I die, so do you all."

"He thinks he is strong enough to survive it because he doesn't want the bond," Maz softly explains. "I don't agree with him."

"I guess we are lucky that I'm good at spells, and Vale is going to learn exactly how good I am at them. He wants to play dirty, then fine," I angrily shout, hoping Vale is in the bathroom and hears me. Maz climbs off the bed and comes to me, but I storm over to my suitcase, which is resting on the cabinet. "And one more thing, and this goes for all of you, don't touch my stuff. I swear to the goddess, I will come up with the most sickening spells and make sure that all of you have your cocks turned into pencils. Permanently." I'm not sure how I'd make that spell, but I would. I can hex things too.

Maz doesn't come much closer, just lifting his hands. "Noted, but I haven't actually done anything, so I'd like my cock exactly how it is because it's kind of perfect."

"Oh, my goddess." My cheeks brighten as I rummage through the suitcase until I find the top I was looking for and a pair of shorts along with new underwear that I hide in

the top so he doesn't see it. I grab the duvet blanket off my bed and pillow next.

"What are you doing?" Maz questions. I turn to see him standing in the moonlight, his arms tightly crossed.

"None of your business. Go away." I go into the bathroom and shut the door, flipping the lock. I throw the pillow and the blanket into the bathtub before daring to looking at myself in the mirror and taking a long breath. I barely recognize myself under the grime and ash, under my nest of messy hair. I don't bother showering. I don't want to wipe the ash and the death off me quite yet. I just need to sleep, and pretend this isn't happening, but I can't sleep in that room with them.

I strip off and pull on the old tatty shirt. It's got holes all around the rim of it. The dark gray has faded so much now. It almost looks white. There are some stains that I've never been able to get out because I'm not willing to try to use a spell on it, but it's my comfort top; it's the only thing I can sleep with. It's the only thing I have left of my father. They found me in this top when I was a kid. It was huge on me back then, falling down to my feet, but now it doesn't. Now it just stops at my thighs.

I climb into the bathtub, wincing as the cold porcelain touches my thighs and stomach, before I curl up and pass out, asleep within seconds. I don't know what time it is when I wake up to a strange sound outside my door. The sound of a woman screaming pierces the air of the academy.

Chapter 8

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I know that woman's sound, not the screams as much as she knows mine. We both listened to them growing up. I throw myself out of the bath, nearly stumbling on it as I run to the door, unlock it, and rush out. Rue is on the floor, and Black has a gigantic sword, an old-fashioned black sword, pointed at her neck. He looks like he just rolled out of bed himself, his dark hair messy and his shirt crumpled to his thick, golden chest which I can see because it's got a big V shape slit in the centre. His gray joggers are loose around his hips, and he growls low, sending goose bumps up my arms. "Who the fuck are you and why'd you walk in here? This is my room."

"That's my sister, and this is my room!" I run, leaping in front of her as Black lifts the sword. The metal of it looks like it's cut from one giant diamond and somehow perfectly shaped into a blade.

"This is our room, bonded," Black grunts, putting his giant sword on his bed. He grabs clothes from one of the wardrobes and stops next to me. My blood warms as he leans down, very careful that not an inch of us is touching. "She doesn't come in uninvited. You don't have guests, no fucking men or anyone in our space. Got it?"

I want to scream "Or what?" but some arguments are too tiring to fight right now when I haven't had coffee and he doesn't look like he'd give up on this argument. I also don't want Rue in the middle of it. I nod. "Fine. Same goes for you."

"We don't like witches, and our kind hate the academy," he informs me, and I frown. Wait, why do they hate the academy? "I'll shower and then wait for you outside to escort you to class when you are done. You shouldn't be alone, not with us as your bonded. There will be a target on your back."

I shiver.

“No, I came to escort her, and she is safe with me.” Rue’s voice is firm, with a confidence I do not have. I need to learn it. “You’ve had her all night, and I haven’t seen my sister in two years for more than ten minutes. I will make a deal with you that I won’t walk in here uninvited, but you let me walk her to class in the mornings, dragon. Plus, it will give you more time to make sure there are no one brave enough to touch your bonded. They say dragons are cursed, and we both know it’s true. I won’t let your curse touch her.”

“What curse?” I ask.

Black grumbles low, his blue eyes turning to me. “Is that what you want, Juniper? Mornings with your foster sister.”

I clear my throat, needing to look away from the intensity of his stare, how it makes my body feel like it’s burning to life. “Yes. This is my foster sister, Rue, and I trust her.”

“Then she can walk you. Make sure you eat.” He turns and goes to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. I watch the door for a second, wondering if he doesn’t really hate me all that much. Or at least not as much as I thought he did. He doesn’t want me to die of starvation, so that’s a plus.

Rue rubs her arm. “I thought they’d all left early for the bonus class our bonded are invited to. They get extra points for going. As for the curse, it’s a silly thing really, but all dragonbonded in history have died awful deaths. There are whispers of an actual curse but I’m sure it’s just rumours. The only curse is your bad luck.” She glances at the sword and then at the door. “You certainly took my advice to stay away from the dragon shifters well.”

“It was an accident,” I mutter. “And they all want me dead.”

“Of course they do, most do.” She shrugs. “They are like wild, untameable animals until the bloodstone literally puts a collar on them and forces them to behave. Not many of them want that.” I’ve never thought about it like that, and now that she said it, I don’t like the thought. “No wonder that one is grumpy. Do you know no one can touch him and he can’t touch others? He has a permanent curse on him from the enchantress herself.”

“What?” I balk.

“Yeah, anyone that actually touches his skin dies. That’s why he wears the thick gloves and everything’s covered up, up to his neck usually, and he doesn’t speak to anyone. No one messes with Black Ashveil. Then you’ve got Kane, who is rumored to have killed his entire family as a kid. Vale is known for killing for sport, and Maz? Well, he fucks everything female in the academy and charms all the males even though he doesn’t swing that way from what I’ve heard. Maz will be pissed now he can’t fuck anyone because of the bond. Well, I guess he could back with his own people...” she clears her throat while I try to process everything. “Black’s not even the most frightening of the four that you’ve managed to bond with. I’d put money on it being Vale and no one knows much about him other than he is smart. Wicked smart and no one competes with him. They are all a mess. What happened exactly in the forest?” She puts her hands on her hips.

“Later. I can’t go over it all now,” I admit. My head is reeling with all the new information.

She lowers her hands and steps closer. “Hey, accident or not, you’re still bonded to four dragons, and that’s made you a bit of an interesting gossip for the school. They’re going to come at you, push you, and want to be your best friend. So you need to be ready, and you can’t go out looking like that. You’re still wearing that dirty shirt

that you've always worn every night."

"It's mine," I say defensively.

"Get some uniform, go shower, and smile," she prods.

"Okay, alright." I grab the uniform from my wardrobe and go into the shower. I turn the shower on as I strip down, letting the hot water make the room fill with steam. The water runs literally black throughout the entire shower, spinning into the drain hole at the bottom, the ash, grime, and blood pouring off me. When the water's finally clear and I've scrubbed all my hair, I get out and whisper a spell, my hair instantly drying in wavy, messy locks. I know this spell, but I've never been able to make up a spell to straighten my hair, to make it more than the thick wavy mess that it always is. After somehow tugging my brush through it, I'm pretty sure I'm making it worse. I put two braids on either side of my face and clip them back before pulling on my uniform and tying my boots.

"I can do this," I tell myself again and again in the mirror, because if I somehow survived yesterday, I can survive this. I think I have no choice but to survive this.

Rue's waiting for me by the door when I come out. "So, your first lesson is in the histories? Your bonded will be in your class too because they're not allowed to learn about the histories until they're bonded. Most of them are usually really curious for the first lessons, and it can be annoying to wait for their questions to be answered. They don't always have to attend all lessons, but they get their own rewards, things sent back to their camps in the forest, like food, electricity, structural help, things like that, important things that make a difference," she explains as I step out and shut the door. "The higher they are on the board, the more stuff they get for their camp."

"Don't they just have that normally?" I question.

“No. So, they have to earn it, and they earn it by attending classes, so you’ll find a lot of them will attend because they need stuff.” I frown at her. I didn’t know that. “Everyone knows the bond is a little hectic, so to speak, in the first couple of weeks. It can feel a bit like hovering on ice, hearing it crack under your feet but never knowing whether you’re just going to fall straight in or get by. So the best thing is just to keep walking, and you will get to the other side. You got this.” I really, really don’t. Her confidence in me does not help.

Rue passes me a breakfast bar and a bottle of something green and gross looking, but it smells like mangoes. “It’s a spelled energy drink. Drink it up and eat that. You’re not going to make breakfast.” She notes the time by showing me her watch. “You need to be up an hour earlier if you’re going to make it, and set an alarm.” On what? I don’t have anything to set it on.

“What would I do without you?” I ask as I sip the delicious drink and eat the breakfast bar after.

She grins at me. “It’s weird having you here, but in a good way. Did you see that Lock is here yet? I did write to you about him being here in letters, but now I’m aware you haven’t read them.”

“That would have been a good heads-up.” We turn down a windy corridor that is filled with students. If it wasn’t bad enough, every single one of them turns to stare, whisper, and some outright point at me.

“I never asked because it felt a bit strange, but you and him? Sometimes I thought there was more than friendship between you. He used to stare at you all the time when you weren’t looking,” she tells me. “You must be happy he is here.”

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“I’m not. Neither do I like the marriage your mother has arranged for him with me,” I mutter. “I’m getting a headache even thinking about it.”

“Oh, well, shit. I’m sorry.” She looks shocked.

“It’s fine. I have absolutely no intention of going through with it. So it doesn’t matter.” I shrug a shoulder.

A feeling somewhere deep in my chest beats to life when we stop in front of a solid orange wooden door. My bonded are in there. Rue must read my expression. “Good, you’re starting to sense them. You’ll eventually get to the point where you can find each other anywhere, doesn’t matter where in the world. You’ll eventually get to a point where you can send thoughts to them, but that’s usually like a late second-year, third-year thing. You can’t do it often, anyway. It takes a lot of concentration and power. I will meet you after your classes today, and we can have dinner together.”

“Great,” I say, trying to process that I’ll never escape my bonded.

“Okay, good luck.” She pats my arm and I open the door to walk in.

There’s a teacher at the front with very vibrant red hair. The curly locks of hair are a mess, pinned into some kind of a chaotic bun on top of her head. She’s wearing very floral clothes, almost like a jumpsuit, and questionable flip-flops. The room smells heavily of incense, some kind I don’t know. “Ah, Miss Daygan. You’ve turned up a bit late, but there is a seat for you somewhere. Come on, come on.”

“I saved one for you!” Maz offers, patting the seat. Wini and Aster are a few rows

back, and they wave. Black is seated on the other side of the empty seat. There are no other empty seats, so I reluctantly go to sit down, turning my head back to see Kane and Vale, both of them sitting on the desks, their back leaning against the wall. The shadows hide their faces, but I know it's them, and they are watching me like I'm their fucking prey. There must be about sixty students in here, if not a little bit more, and thirty of them look like witches. There are roughly thirty first-years left alive. Thirty out of two hundred students that came here hoping to save the world.

“So, everyone, I'm Tutor Sona. I will teach you anything you need to learn about the histories of our race, and of our bonded race, too. I usually start this class by asking who bonded to the strongest shifter and then talk about that shifter, but this time, I won't need you to raise your hands to tell me. The gossip around Bloodstone seems to be correct. We all know who that is.”

She looks at me, and several people whisper. I want to die and hide in my chair.

She clears her throat. “Dragon shifters are the top of the food chain when it comes to changelings. As we are aware, they have unfortunate circumstances that left them with not many, four to be exact, left in this world. Below them, we have a mixture of bears, wolves, snakes, lions, tigers, panthers, and below that several of the less important races, not useful in a fight, and therefore we will not cover them. They live in the forest, as you well know, outside all of our academies. How many academies are in the world?”

I put my hand up. “Yes, Juniper.”

“Five.”

She looks pleased. “That's correct. But why is Bloodstone the best?”

A man near the front row shoots his hand into the air. “Because you have the best

shifters, the best tutors and the highest survival rate in the war.”

“That is correct. The other academy, like Silverstone, only takes a small number of students, whereas we take a larger class. Tell me, what was the first bonding that was ever recorded in our history?” She looks around. None of us say anything, and I’m not sure what the answer is either. “See, no one knows. It’s an error in our history that we don’t know exactly where we came from, who began this. Many people say it was the goddess, that she split herself into three different life forms and we are cursed to, one, fight forever and, two, be bonded. She is the three faced goddess and the only true power in this world and beyond. No one knows her truth, and that is the price that most of us pay so that we can learn knowledge, but not always the truth. In these books here are spells that you never ought to see. Dangerous spells, spells that can instantly kill you if not said right or pronounced perfectly.” I shiver in excitement. “You are not to say them, to practice them in a range of anybody else except for your bonded, because they are the only lives you are allowed to take. We do not accept infighting in the academy, and these spells going wrong will be classified as infighting, and you will be terminated.” She smiles like she hasn’t just threatened to kill us. “Now, can anyone tell me the five original spells?”

I put my hand straight in the air. “The first spells in our recorded history are all forbidden spells. There is one for time, love, death, life and the worst spell of them all—power.”

“That’s brilliant, Juniper. I did read from your school that you had an extreme aptitude for Latin, and to know these spells—and their warnings—is a sign you have studied hard.” She smiles. “Many of you could learn from Juniper. Four dragons and already getting points from her tutor for answering questions? You have competition for my favorite, Vale, and you only came in here for fun before you bonded. I thought I’d never get a chance to really teach you.”

Any hope of fitting in sinks with her speech and the glares from everyone except

Black, who might be snoring in his seat while his eyes are closed. Maz is grinning at me, and I roll my eyes at him. I hear his heavy footsteps, hear and feel Vale come closer until he stops right at my side. He looks right at me. “I don’t see any real competition here. Only a stupid witch.”

I feel blood rushing to my cheeks as Maz snarls at him, “Piss off, Vale.”

More whispers and gasps burst out in the crowd.

I grit my teeth, looking forward. I’ll show him. Competition? Fine, it’s on. Vale moves to sit at the front after grabbing one of the books, and I rush over to get the second one before anyone else. I glare at the side of his perfect face until I’m back in my seat, and I open the first page. I refuse to let the asshole dragon ruin this. I’m learning new spells, I’m free of Melody, and I’m honoring my parents.

Nothing else matters. Maz leans into my side. “Vale is a genius with an endless memory. He can’t forget anything he sees, and his dragon is a nasty fucker. Just stay away from him.”

Vale turns to look at me, like he heard Maz’s warning somehow, and he smirks. A smirk that sends a frigid chill down my spine. I can’t stay away from him—he’s my bonded too.

Chapter 9

MAZ

The cake that was in the palm of my hand disappears the minute I step out of the border of the academy and into the forest. “Fucking jackasses.” I knew it would be like this, but everything I’ve eaten today feels like poison in my stomach when I know what it is like to starve. I grew up with nothing but the rags of clothes that

moths had eaten, the shared food that never quite filled my stomach and left me always wanting to go to sleep without the sound of my stomach growling. Even in dragon form, there is little left to hunt in the forest to sustain him. He catches fish when he dives into the sea, like the others, but even the fish are becoming rarer these days. I just hoped I could carry home some treats for the kids, but they make sure that I can't. The witches need us controlled and under their thumb—which is only possible when we need them for survival. Why would they give us free food inside the academy if we're just going to walk it out and give it to our people? They don't want that. Perfectly controlled slaves to be used in their war is all they see us as. That won't change anytime soon and it's the main reason I didn't want to bond with any witch. The witches here are brought up to see us as less than them—creatures to be tamed and controlled. They don't see us as people like them, with magic and feelings, and that shit. We are their defence against the enchantress. A witch who clearly hates her own kind, and no one knows why. Not that I'm on the side of the Enchantress. Her war has cost me too, and continues to do so, and too many bonded witches are Mindless now. Mortals too. No good person could turn someone into one of those things.

I clench my fists. Fucking hell, now I'm one of the bonded. I almost want to look at my right hand, where in the center of the palm is a witch mark, an old ancient marking of my binding to her. It really pisses me off that's my favourite hand to jack off with, and now I picture her every time I wrap my hand around my cock.

Juniper Daygan.

She wasn't anything like I expected her to be, and it's bothering me. I feel our bond like a noose around my soul, tugging and telling me the way to her. My dragon has never liked to be chained up or held down, yet he accepted this bonding with open fucking arms. He accepted her without even thinking of me. I always assumed we were on the same page when it came to bonding and the war—that we want nothing to do with it. But then I saw her. The first time I saw Juniper Daygan was when she

was running through the forest, her clothes burnt thanks to Vale, and her eyes panicked.

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Yet she was stunning enough to stop my dragon in his tracks and from flying away to safety. He turned and followed her like a lovesick puppy.

The leaves crunch underneath my feet, under the sticks and everything else as I continue to walk towards the borders of the village. I let the noise and smell of the forest distract me for a second, distract my dragon, which is already itching to go back to her. We usually like walking in the forest alone for some peace and quiet, but not this time. This time it feels wrong to be walking in the opposite direction to my bonded witch, but I need to go back to the village and my dragon needs to chill. It's important I check that they're okay. Being bonded means I can't be there to protect them from the witches, from the witch students that come and play jokes on the village like it's fun. From other witches who come in just to be dicks and be cruel, knowing they can, and no one can do a thing about it. Small creatures, especially the ones at the academy, are treated the same, and I hate it. The witches don't think about coming here often when there's a dragon or four roaming across the skies. But now all four dragons are bound, and it's a different story.

I'm scared for them, and I know once I'm taken to the war front, I won't be able to do anything to protect the clans.

I have to make sure they see me coming back, know that I'm coming here, and I won't be gone for now. We all agreed to take it in turns to come back and make sure we are seen doing so between classes. I know they're not happy with the situation, but it could have been so much worse. Juniper doesn't seem like a brain-dumb thing the witches have forced into being their slave and she might even be sympathetic to the shifters—especially if we show her the truth. Some witches in the academy see how bad it is and try to help us when they hear what life was like for their bonded.

The leaders of the witches try to make sure they don't believe us or that we cause this to ourselves.

Not the fact they trapped our ancestors here with spells.

Not the fact they won't let us leave and they starve us.

Not the blinding fact we are their slaves.

A small part of me is glad that something is changing for once because the years blur by and sometimes I can't even remember before. I didn't want to fight in a war, not for the witches, because I hate them, but the war—I do want it over. Juniper is our bonded and there isn't a way back from this. I know Vale will be trying to make a dangerous and most likely deadly spell up from scratch to break the bond, but we all know it isn't possible. The only way out of this is death.

She's pretty and I can't get her out of my head. Her body is that perfectly torturous mix between curvy and slim, where her hips flare out and her breasts—fucking hell, they're definitely a handful and I want them in my face, on my tongue. Her long brown hair falls in messy waves down the back of her neck, dark luxurious locks and perfect for gripping as she rides me. She's almost doll-like, her eyes big and a unique shade I've not seen before. She's a beauty and I know nothing about her, other than the fact that if we weren't bonded, I'd definitely be trying to sleep with her. I can't do that now and it's forbidden.

It would fuck everything up to sleep with her. Or try to.

I rub my face, realizing I'm already hard as a rock from just thinking about sleeping with her. Or just her in general. Her hair smells addictive and her scent overall is here to lead me into sins. She smells like cherries and books. I rub my face again. Fuck, I need to stop thinking about her.

After I adjust myself, I jog through the forest to run off some of the energy before I get to the border of the village. I've only got about an hour before afternoon training class, which is going to be a shit show for Juniper and there is fuck all I can do about it. The magic of the border is nearly invisible to anyone that's not a shifter. To me, it looks like orange waves in the sea. I step through it to the other side, onto the weathered stone path. It's the only path in the village, everything else is mud and sloppy snow that has mixed with the mud to make it brown. The stone pathways are chipped and broken. It sets the tone for the entire makeshift village. Mud bricks and plastic tarps are what hold together many of the homes, which are filled to the breaking point with shifters. The forest looms a shadow over the village, and I step into the darkness as I go down the path. There are some better built houses made of wood and stone, but they are so old that nature has crawled over the edges, chipping away and threatening to pull the entire house down. There's a smell to the village, a smell that doesn't linger in the academy but out here it does. It's the smell of poverty and within is the smell of burning fires heating the homes.

"Good afternoon." I turn to see Maclan, a kind leopard shifter who never bonded. He might not have bonded, but he always told me to try every year, and I wonder if it is because he regrets not choosing someone. He lifts his hand and waves to the seat next to him to invite me over. I can see nearly every one of his ribs under the small vest shirt he's wearing that is covered in holes. There are no warm cloaks around here to keep anyone warm from the winter air. All the uniform I was given for the academy has to be given back each night, otherwise we lose points on the leaderboard.

"I'm in a rush, sorry! I'll sit with you next time." I carry on walking through the village, feeling eyes drifting towards me. I make sure to light some of the fire pits as I go past with a wave of my hand, my elemental fire magic bouncing off my fingertips. I'm the only one of us four that can do that. They need to shift into their dragon form to cause fire, but I've always been able to summon just a small amount of it.

When I finally get to the end of the path, I find my foster house. It's still standing.

That's a good sign. I haven't been back for a few days because I didn't want to be in the forest around the bonding time unless I had to be. All four of us grew up here for the most part, and it made us close. No one wanted to take in four male dragon shifters—especially, not with our well-known fiery temper and lack of control over our magic while aging. Granny Dubois took all four of us in without a second thought and we were little shits. I don't think there is a day where I understand how she kept going, kept looking after us while we were all grieving and angry. That woman taught us how to bemen, how to fight for our people, and not to believe any of the bullshit the witches try to teach. I would be dead if it wasn't for her. Vale calls her Hope, and I hate him most of the time, but I agree with his nickname for Granny Dubois. She is hope. Her house has always been full, before and after us, because she fosters anybody that needs help. In this war, there are always fucking orphans that need someone to be kind and take them in. I get why hardly anyone else takes them in when they are just another mouth to feed. Two kids, twin rabbits who are about eight years old, are sitting out the front playing with a withered checker set that I used to play with too. They look up, but they don't say anything to me. They don't speak and haven't done since they were found as babies in the forest, covered in their parents' blood. The witches didn't bother to make up a reason about what happened to them. They just knew it was one of their students and they didn't care. "Good afternoon."

They look away and go back to their game. Another foster kid, Romano, is leaning against the wall, his red hair shaved. He's coming up to the age of being ready for the academy. Seventeen, one more year to go for him.

"You're bonded now." He says it like a question.

"I am." I lift my chin and look into his eyes. Challenging me. I know it's normal for wolves to try to dominate everything they come across, either by staring it down or peeing on it, but I'm a dragon. He would be a snack for me and my dragon holds the gaze with a silent warning. He looks down at the ground. "You alright, Wolf-boy?"

“No. I have less than a year before I become you.” He snarls at me before storming off into the forest, shifting at the last minute into a brown wolf. I know his mother was bonded and died two years ago, but his father didn’t claim him or step up. I’m not sure he even knows who his father is—if anyone does at all. We all know what that feels like to be a kid and drowning in pain. How to push the boundaries with everyone that cares. I feel nothing but rage sometimes and that rage began years younger than he is. It shaped who I am, and I try not to let it take over. Rage for how the witches treat us, rage for the fact that we are nothing but slaves that they put shiny collars on and drag into a war to protect them. They don’t look at the elderly and young in the villages as they suffer. If I don’t go to my classes and don’t keep up the leaderboard, they don’t get food sent here. They don’t get any help with supplies and medicine either. It would be so simple if magic worked right in the village and the forest, but it didn’t then and it doesn’t now. Even now, with the boost from the bond, my magic is dancing around my body like a frayed electrical wire. It’s too dangerous to attempt to use it.

“She’s inside. She’s on one today.” A girl hops out of the front door. I don’t remember her name and she is one of the neighbors’ kids, I think. “She’s speaking a lot.”

Brilliant. I hope she has been taking her medication, but there is a good chance she isn’t. There’s a smell of cinnamon in the air when I step in and shut the door behind me. She might be making cinnamon bread, and she mostly makes it from things she plants in her garden. The soil isn’t good in the village, so most things do not grow, but somehow, she gets her herbs just right. Cinnamon is an easy one because there are five trees in the village, all spelled to survive the weather, and everyone shares. I turn around the corner and I find that she has four loaves that are on the counter, steam rising off them into the air. She’s in front of the old stove, two candles lighting up the room from the counter at her side. The table is in the middle of the room with a pot of daisy flowers and other little potion bottles of her medicine. They are empty, and my heart hurts. She ran out, and she didn’t say anything. Dubois is slightly

hunched over from a spine condition and her long grey hair falls off her shoulder. She never wears anything, but her oncebonded uniform of Bloodstone Academy—black clothes that are now not tight anymore, they're withered and hang off her frail form. I've offered to get her clothes from trading at the academy, but she refuses. She never speaks about her bonded, or her time in the war, but sometimes I see her looking out of a window or in a mirror like she is remembering another time. Something precious to her.

She turns when the floorboard creaks under my foot, and there's a kind smile on her face as she sees me. "My boy Maz!" She always sounds delighted to see me, and it makes me feel good about myself. "Come sit. I'll cut you some bread up. I know it's your favourite."

"No, please don't." I walk over and touch her shoulder, where her bones stick out. "They feed me at the academy, remember? You need it. Children need it."

She huffs like I've annoyed her, and she pours me a glass of water, with a drop of lemon in it, and comes to sit with me at the table. We always sit around the table when we need to talk, when I'm not sure what to do. Kane is always sitting with her. Black rarely does because he bottles his life up and Vale? I'm not sure. If he did sit here, he wouldn't tell anyone.

"I took in another one this morning. Just three and traumatised." She looks at me from the other side of the table. "The sweet darling is upstairs napping right now. Keeps asking for mum and dad. Both dead, I presume, they haven't come back from the war. She was with her uncle, but he went missing." She leans in. "I checked in with my friend and her mother's witch has been confirmed dead. Had a big fancy funeral a year ago. Don't know what they did with her mother's body, but you know they don't send us our dead back. We don't get to bury them." There's a bitterness in her voice, one that I grew up listening to, one that fed my very thoughts, until they became my own too.

“I look forward to meeting her.” I send a silent prayer to any god or goddess who might listen to it for that sweet girl to know peace.

“You will, she’s nice. Talks a lot, even at three.” She looks at me like she is waiting for me to explain why I need to talk. I’m not sure how she always knows, but she does.

“I’m going to keep up with all the classes. Make sure enough food is sent here to help.” I offer. I’m beating around the bush when I need to fucking jump into it.

“I know all four of you do as I’ve raised you to be honourable men. The fucked-up parts of you are unfixable.” So blunt sometimes, but she is right. “How is your bonded witch? Tell me she isn’t a brainwashed fool?”

I clear my throat. “Her name is Juniper Daygan. She has no relatives left in the Daygan clan. She’s the last one and I don’t think she is stupid.”

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“So you have something in common.” Dubois seems pleased.

“That’s one way of putting it.” I rub my face. “Vale isn’t coping with this. He threw her off the roof of Bloodstone Academy.”

She waves her hand to shoo me away. “He was just testing her witch skills and spells. Any decent witch will know a basic hovering spell.” She clicks her tongue. She never tells Vale off for most of the shit he does. Vale is her favorite by far. Even though he’s a complete asshole to everybody, he’s not to her.

“He punched me in the face so I couldn’t stop him.” I try adding that.

“Then I’ll talk to him. You know I don’t like fighting between you two.” I almost smile. He might have knocked me out, but he is so fucking dead when he sees Dubois next. There isn’t much I’m scared of anymore, but Dubois telling me off? Fucking terrifying.

“The cards are now in play.” My smile drops as she speaks in a voice that’s deeper, stranger than usual. This again. I swear her eyes almost glaze over when she goes into this strange place, a place I can never quite get her back from. Dubois reaches over and grabs my hand tightly in her grip. “Listen, it’s repeating. The cards are in play. You must stop it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Maybe I need to get you some more medicine.” I scratch my head. “I will take on extra classes. Pay for the medicine through the academy somehow... I’ll speak to the headmaster.”

“The cards in play, but the gold will save. The goddess—” She stops mid-sentence. “There are three faces to the goddess, after all. One face is always in our favor.”

She worships the goddess. Everyone does. The witches do too, but I see her as someone that cursed our race to be slaves. I’ll never worship her fully like they do. What goddess forces her people to be slaves?

“I have to go back to class.” I cover her hand. “I just wanted to check in on you.” It seems to work because she blinks and then smiles, like nothing happened. Dubois never remembers what she says in her episodes, and the healer we saw just once at the academy, because I was fucking her, told me that her mind is spiralling to a point of no return. I won’t accept that.

She covers both our joined hands. “I’ve never been prouder of you, and this is meant to be.”

Nothing about my new bonded is meant to be. She is only meant to tempt every unholy, sinful part of me until we both shatter.

Chapter 10

The next class can’t be embarrassing, right? Wini walks with me after history class ends, which was about two hours long, which I have judged by looking at the various clocks we passed in the corridors. Maz left after an hour, so did Kane, but Vale didn’t. He answered all the questions before I could even put my hand up. We’re walking through a corridor now that has rows of bookcases on either side but no books in them, just empty, dusty bookcases. I can smell the dust, and I wonder what was on these shelves to begin with. Between every five or so bookcases are some triangle-shaped windows casting light onto the floor that we walk across.

“So, what exactly is training?” I question. All I’ve been told by the tutor is that the

rest of our afternoons are always the same—training.

“We’ll spend the majority of our days training for various things, but all in this next class, from what I’ve heard,” she explains. “I think they call it training because it covers a wide load of subjects. I haven’t seen our formal schedule yet—I believe we will get them tomorrow—but I think our morning classes change from healing to history and such, but our afternoon is always training. My brother’s is like that.”

“Okay, sounds easy enough.” Which is a lie because it definitely doesn’t.

My bonds are ahead of me, walking together as a tight group, one I am definitely not invited into. Everyone else is side by side with their bonds, walking together in alliance and talking. Getting to know each other, even if it is tense. Mine want nothing to do with me. Even Aster is right next to Wini, staying on the other side of her. But there’s just me. I’m the only one who seems to have bonds that want nothing to do with their bonded. I hate that it hurts.

Eventually the corridor widens into a huge stadium. It’s tall, vaulted gray walls are so high up I can just about see the roof. The room is massive, big enough for the dragons to shift without breaking anything and still leave a lot of space for everyone else. There are two huge doors at the end that are open, leading straight into the forest.

Our tutor, I presume, stands in the middle. He’s a rounded man with no hair, and he is wearing a thick black cloak that covers his front except for his belly, which pushes the limit of his shirt buttons. His legs are quite stubby and he’s overall quite short, but there’s a sternness to his face that suggests he’s not kind at all. His dark eyes seem to assess us one by one as we come in. His voice is deep and outright scary as he yells, “Everyone stand with your bonded. Or a group of bonded,” he adds as an afterthought.

I see all four of them standing over at the furthest point away from the group, and

Kane looks at me with disdain as I walk over. I stand next to Maz, who grins down at me. A low growl echoes out of Vale's throat, and Maz looks away from me. Bully.

“Welcome, everyone, to training. I am your tutor and you will call me Den. This class will be different than any you have attended before. In every lesson you come to me, I will train you how to connect to your body, to win in a fight where magic is not there and your bonded are busy. Sometimes you will train with your bonds. Sometimes you will train in combat and defense. Other times, I will expect you to learn to shield. Overall, every lesson here that you learn will be good for you. It will teach you. Today we're going to start with bonding. I think it's important that you make a bond with whatever animal you've bonded with and you go into the forest behind to strengthen that bond. You run with them, ride on their back, whatever it is. But I expect you to spend the next hour moving—not sitting—moving throughout that forest until you're covered head to toe in sweat. Until you're tired and you're desperate to come in to have food.”

No one says a word, and an uncomfortable silence echoes. Tutor Den continues, “As there are considerably big dragons here, they should go first.” He looks at me. “Juniper Daygan you can choose one to shift. The others can fly around with you. From what I understand, that was how the Dragon Riders of before did it.”

“We are not to be ridden,” Kane says coldly. “By anyone.”

Vale walks away to get a chair. He drags it across the stadium, the sound of the chair screeching across the floor, echoing. Everyone is watching and my other bonded just pretend Vale isn't making a point. Putting on a show. He sits on it backwards and looks straight at me with a taunting smirk.

“Crawl to me, here in front of everyone, and I'll shift.” He curls a finger at me as my cheeks brighten. “Be a good girl.”

Everyone stares. Then laughs. I want to die. Vale laughs so loud it echoes around the stadium. The only saving grace is my other bonds don't laugh, and neither does Wini nor Aster. The laughing doesn't stop, and my entire face feels like it is burning. It just goes on and on. My chest hurts when all three of my other bonded go and stand behind Vale—a show of support for him. They are happy for me to burn. Maz won't look at me. Black is unreadable, and Kane was looking at Vale with a locked jaw. I don't know why it hurts more that Maz chose to side with Vale when he is being a bully. They aren't going to shift for me. I'm not saying please to them or begging. Fuck that.

Tutor Den comes over. He looks at my dragons. “If you refuse, both of you lose points.”

I grit my teeth, knowing I can't be losing points or I'll drop down the board. Vale tenses, but he doesn't get up to shift. He doesn't change his mind. His jaw is set, his mind made up. I can almost see it now—my name is slipping down into a low percentage because my dragons won't help me in this class at all. They don't need to kill me. Bloodstone Academy, just by me being here and them doing nothing, is going to do that for them. Tutor Den looks at me with a flash of sympathy before moving away, going to the others. One by one, they shift for their bonded. Great bears, one enormous snake, several wolves. I hopelessly watch as Aster shifts into a huge, white, fluffy wolf, and Wini climbs onto his back like they just know how to do that. He runs right out into the forest.

That should have been me, not this. My heart pounds so loud in my chest as I feel myself taking a step back, and another step. I don't know when I turn and walk straight out as the world blurs until all I can think about is them laughing at me, of my name being at the bottom of the board. I don't even register myself leaving. I have never walked out of a class, but I can't just stand there while they do that.

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“Wait!” Maz shouts behind me, and I pick up speed. “Dammit, you’re fast. Come on.”

I stop and spin, making him dig his boots into the academy floor to stop himself from crashing into me. “Look, you can flirt with me as much as you want, but you know it’s forbidden for us to have sex, so what is the point? I’m not going to sleep with you. I don’t know what game you’re playing, trying to be my friend and then turning around and siding with those insane fuckers inthere. You realize what happens if I get to the lower part of the board, right? Death.”

“Same thing happens to us if we get to the lower part of the board.” He hesitates. “There’s a reason why we can’t have dragon riders anymore.”

“Why?” I snap.

“I’m not allowed to say,” he murmurs low. “If we were to side with you, any of us, even me, it would change things. Things that cannot be changed back. I did not side with them because I do not want to be your friend. I do want to sleep with you, I’ll admit to that. But, goddess, hear my words, you’re gorgeous. What did you expect?”

I shake my head at him. His glasses fall slightly down his nose, and I step closer to push them up. “What’s with the glasses?”

His shoulders drop just a bit. “I’m going to get some food and we can talk about it. I guess we’re going to be bonded for life, and I might as well tell you before some other nosy fucker does. It’s not a secret; it’s more of a legendary tale in my clan. Even if we only keep the story for a little while longer.”

“Do you want it to be a little while? I mean, you’re the last dragons in existence. Surely you want to live and have more dragon babies,” I question as we begin to walk.

“With who? There are no female dragons left.” He shrugs. “Without a female dragon, a half dragon at least, there’s no future for our kind. It doesn’t work like that for dragons. We can rarely breed with witches, and it would rarely happen. I don’t know a record of a halfling in our history. We’ve accepted that we’re just the last. We have no plans to make a future generation, and maybe there shouldn’t be.”

I want to ask more about that, but we come out to a sprawling cafeteria, and it’s full of people. Dozens of students are spread out across the cafeteria, where there are three long serving counters with glass displays and piles of trays to slide across the counter on the other side. It is fully staffed—with shifters, I think—but they are older and wearing all green.

He takes me over to one of the counters. “All the food’s free and I always try to eat as much as I can.” He explains, handing me a tray. I take it, looking at the food as we pass it, and my mouth waters. There’s everything from lovely golden eggs and sausages to bacon and toast, not just normal toast but French toast too, and cups of Nutella at the side. I grab one of the plates of French toast and one of the Nutella cups before putting a bunch of fruit on my plate and picking up a bottle of water. When I turn around, I’m surprised to see Maz has three plates of pancakes, one plate of waffles, far more fruit than I thought was even there, and eggs piled on top of it, and two bottles of water.

He follows my gaze and flashes me a grin. “I’m a dragon. I need more than this. I’m bigger than you.” He grins. “Don’t worry. I still look gorgeous when I’m eating all this.”

I just shake my head at him, but he makes me smile. He somehow makes what

happened in class seem less awful. We go and sit at a table that's empty, right in the corner, away from anyone else, and I'm thankful. Enough people are staring. I don't want to sit down and have more questions thrown at me. We eat in silence for a long time, the minutes ticking by. The French toast is perfect and likely one of the nicest foods I've ever had. Melody always put me on diet after diet, claiming no one likes a woman with curves, so meals like this would have been out of the question.

Maz has finished a good portion of his meal when he pauses and looks up at me. "Tell me about you. Like where you lived and what you liked to do."

I blink at the question. He wants to know about me? "I lived with my foster mother Melody, and she has a daughter who goes here. Her name is Rue," I begin. "I love studying and?—"

"No, wait." He stops. "Tell me something not many people know about. I don't want the practiced speech you did to get in here."

How did he know? "I like small creatures. I think the witch world is cruel to them and they shouldn't be."

He grins. "You'd fit in well with my foster family then—in fact, all the shifters. We believe the small creatures are the goddess's eyes and we should treat them as such. I don't think I've met a witch who doesn't call them vermin."

I wince at the word. "They aren't that. I used to sneak out into the forest to leave food for them, potions that I know help them grow food in the forest. Sometimes they'd leave me rare ingredients for my potions. My classmates couldn't figure out how I got them without money, and they hated that. It was amusing." Maz laughs, and I chuckle with him, but my stomach turns to lead when I sense my other bonded. I turn, seeing Vale walking in with Black, both of them deep in conversation. "I don't think I can face Vale again in class if he's gonna act like that to me."

“He’s being a dick. He wants a rise out of you,” Maz deadpans. “But come on, Juni. You are a very fucking smart witch who got in here, so do something back and don’t tell me.”

I stare at him for a long moment. “I’m not sure where your loyalty lies, dragon.”

“My loyalty lies with the people that are back in our clan. My adopted clan that is. The shifters that grow up knowing there’s a very good chance that they’re going to be captured like dogs in a forest and forced into a war that is not our war.” His voice is quiet but loud enough that it carries to me but to no one else. He whispers a word, not a few words, in Latin, and the sound disappears from around us. The world goes silent. It’s an impressive spell to know and perform so well. “To be honest with you, you don’t know what you’ve walked into here at this academy. Many of the people back in the clans are not in good shape. We will attend every class because it sends food back to them. They starve otherwise.”

“I didn’t know?—”

“Witches mostly look the other way when it comes to us. You need us for the war, and we need you because we can’t leave the forest and therefore starve in it. Sometimes I think whoever wins in the end doesn’t matter.”

He looks at me for a long moment. “I was born in dragon form. It’s rare that dragons survive being born in dragon form, within an egg, but my mother did. It’s said that she had been ripped apart by a thousand spells, yet she still managed to fly away from the enchantress’s army, from the Mindless that were pulling her down. She got up into the sky. I think she wanted to land somewhere with me, to give birth to me. She was already in labor, but she couldn’t get to somewhere safe. The enchantress has a dragon Mindless too, and one flew up to the sky, right towards my mother.” My hands tremble slightly, and I tuck them onto my lap. His poor mother. The enchantress has Mindless dragons? “She gave birth mid-air, and the egg fell into the

trees, smashing. When the egg smashed, the branches scarred me in dragon form when I was a newly born dragon baby, and I lost my sight. I've never been able to see in dragon form, but in my human form, these glasses are heavily spelled so I can see. If I take them off, I will not see a thing."

"I'm so, so sorry." I reach across and touch his hand. Electricity spikes through our touch, and I almost gasp. He locks eyes with me as he turns his hand, linking our fingers softly. "That's awful, Maz."

"Yes. That's why I always try to be happy, because I'm a miracle and I want to make sure that my people survive this, like the wolf shifter who ran into the forest, picked me up in a forest full of Mindless, and carried me out." He shrugs. "I was taught to be brave like my mother. Like him. Like my father, who died before he knew my mother was pregnant."

"And why don't you fight in the war? Surely, if the war's over, your people will be free too," I whisper.

"When the war's over, it's over for witches only." He looks right at me, taking his hand away. "Whoever told you that there was only one war lied. There's another, and I am on my people's side. I'll never be on the witches'. Not even for you."

Why do I feel like I've heard that before?

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I stare at him, understanding what he's implying. It's dangerous to talk about stuff like this. He whispers more words in Latin, and the sound barrier disappears, the world fading back with the heavy noise of everyone in it. He digs into his food with a grin on his face, which I'm not sure is real at all. Maybe there's more depth to him than I thought, and I don't know why that interests me far more than the flirty side of him. The depth, the mystery, the bond, goddess help me, all of it is going to get me killed.

Chapter 11

The weeks pass at Bloodstone like I'm living the same day over and over—my bonded ignoring me in class and following me around outside of it. Maz is the only one who speaks to me and eats lunch with me every day, often with Wini and Aster, sometimes with Rue. It's the only part of the day I enjoy.

I look up at the leaderboard. My name is around the middle, thanks to the amount of coursework and bonus work I've been doing for my healing and history classes. It's still not enough to climb to the top because the training lessons are pulling me down. I turn to look at the shifter leaderboard on the other side of the room. Aster is at the top, which makes sense with how high up Wini is on our board. My dragons are in the top ten though, and Vale is nearing the top of the board...even with failing the training class. How the fuck is he doing that?

My legs are aching from training because Tutor Den is making me work on my physical strength since I can't get my bonded to shift and they won't teach me combat training without my bonded joining. I take a step forward and pause, sensing a small creature. I look down, finding a watch lying by my foot. I lean down, picking

up the leather watch and smile. “Is this a gift?” I see the shadows in the corner of the room move a little, again those sweet cat ears poking out. It doesn’t approach me, and that’s okay. Everyone has boundaries. “Well, thank you. I won’t be asking everyone for the time now. You’re very smart.”

The creature is gone and I’m sliding the watch onto my wrist when I see something on the inside. I turn it over, frowning at the word. *Tempus finis*. It’s Latin...and I don’t know what it means. That’s nearly impossible. I’m fluent and yet I can’t read it. I’ll have to see if a resource at the library can tell me. I head through the academy, knowing and trusting that I’ll find my own way to the library. Thankfully, everyone is at dinner around now and I’m not hungry, so it’s quiet in the corridors.

I open the midnight-blue door at the end of the corridor and step into the small library. I kind of expected it to be bigger, but it’s long instead and every bookcase is pitch black. The books in them are covered in thick rails and bars, as if they might drop out and run away all on their own. In front of the rows of books is a small half-moon-shaped silver desk, and an old lady is seated behind it, looking down at a book in her hand. She looks up, her blue eyes locking on me, and she waves me over.

“Good afternoon,” I begin. “I wondered if you had any books on Latin words. Not regular ones, but maybe rare and forgotten words?”

She sighs for a long moment. “Yes. Wait.” I blink at her sharp tone. She begins whispering a spell under her breath, and suddenly the rows of books shake, right before one book comes flying through the air, literally flying on its own, and landing in front of the woman with a bang. “No books leave this library. Read over there.” She points to a small table by the door. “Leave it on the desk when you go.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, because it feels illegal to speak as loudly as she does in this quiet space. She ignores me, and it’s kind of refreshing after all the staring. Maybe I should come heremore often. I was worried the stories Melody told me of growing up

in the library would be real, the ones where she said it was horrible in here. It's not. Against the madness of Bloodstone, this is peaceful. There is an open book on the table when I sit down, a book on the three faced goddess. One page is a beautiful art drawing of her in shades of red, yellow and black. The other is a bunch of poems and prayers to her. I almost want to read that book, but it flies up into the air the moment my butt hits the seat.

I open my book instead. I take the watch off, leaving it on its side to compare the unknown word with the entries in this book. Hours pass easily as I read, lost in the words that are not used in spells or the witch world anymore. Most are outdated or simply replaced for better pronunciation, but others are useless. When I get to the last page and know I need another book, I finally see it.

It is a word used for time. Practically the most important time in your life. I smile, putting the watch back on, only then continuing to read the book's entry. "The word for time was replaced because using this in spells turned out to destroy bonds between our races. It was deemed too dangerous—" The rest is blurred out.

That's strange. There are no spells to destroy bonds... Have I accidentally gotten close to what Vale wanted in the first place? I shut the book and walk out without looking back. I'm in a daze as I go through the academy and to my room. Well, our room. I'm not sure I like that we share a space, but they do stay out of my bathroom/bath bed. My back might hurt from sleeping in there, but it's fine.

I walk into the room and pause. It's been getting messier and messier as the past two weeks have gone on, but this is far worse than it has been. There must be a hundred weapons thrown about on the floor, as well as books and bedding left on the floor. It isn't dirty; there isn't food or worn clothes lying about, but it's nearly impossible to walk through without accidentally chopping off my foot.

"Vale!" I shout. He's sitting on the bed, polishing one of his swords.

“This is ridiculous. The mess is everywhere. I can’t even get to my wardrobe. Do you ever pick any of your shit up?” I snap.

“I need to know where they are,” he coldly replies.

No, he doesn’t. This is insane. He doesn’t need this many weapons. “Yes, but can’t you hang them on the wall, do anything about them? I’m sure the small creatures could help?—”

“They know better than to touch my stuff. That’s why they’re not helping. Learn. From. Them,” he deadpans.

“You scared them?” I snarl.

Vale lifts his eyes from his sword for the first time since I came in here. The room smells like them all, fire and forest, something earthy, and it annoys me that they smell good. “Don’t tell me you have a soft spot for them. I already embarrass you in every class. Do you want me to tell the academy you have small creatures as friends?”

I shake my head, and my cheeks burn. “You’re an insane bastard.”

“No, you’re a bitch, Hex. This is my room, too,” he growls at me.

I grit my teeth together and go back to my bathroom, where I plan to ignore him for the rest of the night. I open the door and see the bathtub is gone. Just gone. The shower is still there, with a new glass wall built around it with a door. It’s not big enough to sleep in, though.

“Where is the bathtub?” I protest, turning around and walking out. “You know, where I sleep?”

“Kane decided that you didn’t need to do that anymore, so he threw it out,” Vale explains, sounding bored.

“Fine, I’ll sleep in one of the other bathrooms,” I say out loud.

“I wouldn’t suggest that. He’ll get rid of all of them, and I’ll be more pissed at you. I like a bath.” He waves at the untouched bed I only slept in once. Never with them in the room. “Sleep in the bed. We like to know where our enemies sleep. We need to know what the fuck you are doing at all times.”

I look around me. “Where’s my bag? Where are my clothes?” I search for them, but my wardrobe is empty other than the uniforms. My heart races like a wild horse as I keep searching.

“Don’t ask me,” Vale yawns.

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He starts sharpening his sword, and it makes this annoying noise ringing across the room over and over as I continue to search.

The door opens and Maz comes in carrying two huge shopping bags and a big smile. “There you are. I knew you’d be mad about the bathtub, so I went shopping for you. I wasn’t sure you had much money, and I felt bad seeing what you were sleeping in every night and the clothes you had—they all just looked a bit worn. I don’t have much, but a shifter I know is great at spells and made you some clothes for a small price. I got rid of the old things and bought you all new clothes.” He holds up the bags like they are a prize, but my stomach drops.

“Where’s the shirt that I sleep in?” I ask Maz, my heart racing. The room spins as panic sets in. No, no. He didn’t destroy it. I can’t sleep without it.

He frowns and my breathing gets faster. “Well, I told the small creatures just to put them all in the fire.”

My eyes flicker to the fireplace, to the ashes there. I run over, barely wincing as my fingertips burn. I dig through the ashes, finding one scrap of the fabric left, one tiny gray square. That’s all I have left.

“How. Dare. You!” I scream at Maz.

Vale is watching me like snake in the bushes, hunting it’s prey when it’s weak. “Told you she is fucking crazy, man.”

“Whoa, I thought I was doing a nice thing.” Maz steps closer. “I’m sorry, I probably

should have asked if you wanted to donate your clothes or something, but?—”

“Get out. Just get out!” I scream at both of them. “This was my father’s! I was found in this, and it’s all I have left of him! You took the very last thing of comfort I’ve ever had. How. Dare. You!” My repeating words hit home and Maz’s eyes shatter in pain. He almost takes a step closer, but he thinks twice of it.

Maz looks heartbroken, but I can’t find it in myself to care. Bloodstone Academy has officially taken everything from me.

I run to the bathroom, slam the door behind me, sitting on the floor as I hyperventilate. I look at what’s left of my father’s shirt. They took it. They took everything. Now there’s nothing left of him. Nothing left of my parents for me anymore.

Chapter 12

I turn up first for training class, feeling a bit of a spring in my step after crying on the floor of the bathroom most of the night. I need something to make me feel better, and this...well, this will do it. I left the room early after sleeping on the floor with my duvet, working on the hex all night. It is a complicated, mostly illegal spell. They can take the bath, but I’m not sleeping in the same room as them, absolutely not. The floor isn’t that bad. I’ve slept on it a hundred, if not more, times when I was locked in the attic for misbehaving. At least the bathroom floor isn’t rotting wood with spiky nails.

I lean against the wall, trying hard not to grin as I hear and feel Vale stomping down the corridor towards me. He searches around the room until his dangerously angry eyes fix on me. I figured out how he was getting all the points...he was cleaning the weapons for the class and giving them back. It’s grunt bonus work, but he was doing it a lot.

Until now...

“What the fuck did you do?” he shouts, storming over to me. “Undo the spell, the hex, whatever the fuck you did to me!”

“Well, witch magic doesn’t work on dragons.” I smile tauntingly.

He is breathing heavily. “Undo it.”

“Undo what?” I blink innocently.

He pushes his entire body into mine, and my body reacts even if I don’t want it to. His hand clasps around my throat, his hard body pressing me into the wall. “Fucking undo it, Hex!”

“I didn’t do anything.” I smile at him. It’s the first real smile I’ve had in ages. Maz was right. Getting back at him is the right way forward. His scent surrounds me now, like bergamot and oak mixed with fire. His eyes are dark, but the corners are slipping into silver.

Kane pushes him off me. “Enough, brother!” He pushes Vale back. “You’re going to fucking shift. Calm down!” He looks over his shoulder as I rub my neck. Vale didn’t hurt me. It’s just the shock. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I don’t know what his problem is,” I mutter the lie. This is fun.

“Someone hexed all my weapons. I can’t touch them. I can’t bring them here. I can’t take them to any of our training. I am losing points by the second and going down the board,” Vale shouts. “Someone hexed me and I know it was her!”

He must be so pissed that his smart self can’t get past my hex, and the added spell I

wove into it hides my identity and makes it impossible to change back.

“What a shame. If you get on your knees and crawl to me, I might help you figure out a counter spell.” I smirk. I’m basically admitting it was me, but it’s worth it.

“Fuck’s sake,” Kane mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose.

I continue to glare at Vale. He lunges forward, but Kane stops him from getting closer. “I really hate you.”

“But you can’t hurt me, can you?” I arch an eyebrow. I’m done being scared of him.

A dragon roar echoes from his throat, and he shifts. His dragon bursts out of where he stood only a second ago, the change so quick and flawless. Kane moves completely in front of me, but to my surprise, Vale’s dragon turns and scratches the wall. He leaves through the doors at the back, jumping up and flying out of sight.

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Kane lifts his eyes to mine. He searches my face for a long second. Like he's looking for something, something I don't know. "What are you going to do?" I ask.

"Did you hex his weapons?" Kane questions.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." I shrug. "Where is my bathtub?"

"You're good at lying. I see that hasn't changed," he breathes out. "And you have a bed. Use it. We aren't going to touch you or any shit like that if you're scared."

That thought never crossed my mind. It's weird how I trusted them almost instantly on that part, when I rarely trust anyone. I change the subject. "I didn't remember you at all until I saw you at the academy. Do you remember me, then?" I wanted to ask that from the beginning, and now we are alone for once. He usually avoids me like I smell bad. "I have flashbacks. The first flashback I ever had of you was here when I arrived at this academy. Until then, I had no idea who you were. I don't remember my parents much at all, and if you were there, do you remember them? Can you tell me what you know?"

"What kind of flashbacks?" he demands, crossing his arms.

"I don't know, like...just a memory from when we were kids," I mutter. "Do we know each other from when we were kids, and how? You were supposed to be here in the forest."

The class is beginning and people are coming in. He leans into me. "Pretend that flashback never happened, or we will both end up dead." He nods behind him. "I've

decided to train you in combat after all.”

“Really?” I ask, shocked. None of them have agreed to practice and train with me in combat before.

He doesn’t answer, instead going to the spare mat and waiting for me like everyone else. Tutor Den raises a bushy white eyebrow and nods at Kane. Alright, this is really happening.

I run my eyes over Kane for the first time, over the tight black uniform that fits him perfectly. He isn’t as muscular as Vale and Black, but his body is toned and his waist thin as it dips. His silver hair is brushed back, and his silver eyes study me right back. I feel like he really doesn’t want to do training with me, but letting me out of his sight when I’m clearly pissing off his friends isn’t a good idea either. I don’t care what his reason is, I’m excited. I usually just sit on my own and do stretches because none of my bonded will come with me to train.

“Attack me,” he orders, standing firm.

I raise an eyebrow at him. “I have no idea how to do that. None of you helped me in the first classes of the term and watching taught me nothing on how to fight. The tutor wouldn’t help because my shifters turned their back on me. Everyone here is a lot more advanced than I am already.” I wave at them all. “This is pointless. We both know you will ditch me tomorrow.”

“Run at me. You do know how to run, right ?” He sarcastically demands. I do, and he knocks me to my feet without even moving.

“I knew that would hurt.” I groan, climbing to my feet.

“Why don’t we split up and go against people who are not our bonded?” Aster

suggests, and I look over to see him standing with Tutor Den and Wini. “Kane against Wini, and I’ll go against Juniper. Wini has training, and I didn’t until I came here, so I will be a fairer fight than you, Kane.” Aster smiles at me, and I’m not sure. Wini looks a little confused, too. “As long as you take it easy on my bonded, Kane.”

“Sounds like a good idea.” Tutor Den claps his hands. “Everyone swap with someone else.”

Kane glares at Aster, whispering something to him that makes Aster pale before he walks away to the mat with Wini. Wini looks terrified of training with Kane. “I don’t think your bonded wanted this.”

“But I did,” Aster smoothly answers. He’s on me in a second, pushing me straight to the ground with a slam that takes all the air from my lungs. I hear something crack in my back with the slam of the force. Not another broken rib. I swing my foot out to try to knock him off balance, but it’s like hitting a rock, and I don’t know what I’m doing. He jumps on me, pinning me to the floor with his body, and he punches me hard in the face. The world spins. I didn’t expect it, not the force of the hit, not any of it.

Kane is running to us, or a blurry version of him that I can see. Aster grabs my chin, forcing me to look at him. “You have the best of our race bonded to you, and you are wasting it. They need to see what happens when they leave you untrained and weak! When you’re weak, we all are. This isn’t personal and I am sorry, but someone needs to do it.”

He punches me again. Stars burst across my vision, and for a second, I see an image of Vale in the forest and he is kissing me. The vision is gone so fast, and I’m left wheezing from the pain, my head hurting.

“Get off her—” Blurry Kane is closer now.

Tutor Den is here too, holding him back. “If you take him off her, this is on you. Kane, you go straight down the leaderboard and you will be punished. Do you understand? This is her fight.” He grunts. “Aster is right, this is your fault. By letting her get weak and untrained, you’ve put her in danger. You are the strongest of your race and you are failing them all.”

Kane doesn’t say anything, but I swear he is shaking, and then Aster punches me again. Again, I see stars. The world spins in and out for a moment as I hold my hand up, trying to block. Another image comes up. This time I’m between Kane and Maz, both of them pulling at my clothes, stripping me and kissing me. I feel like I’m home, and happy, and content. What the fuck is going on?

“Enough.” Kane lifts Aster off me, and he throws him straight across the room. He flies across, slams into the wall, and breaks it. Wini goes running after him. “Down the leaderboard you go, Kane. So disappointing. Neither of you get points for that.”

Kane looks down at me, gritting his teeth, his eyes flaring like he’s angry. I smile at him. “You protected me.”

“You should be completely out of it. Why are you smiling? How are you not in an extreme amount of pain?” he demands, confusion making his dimples pop. “You’re absolutely insane, Juni.”

He leans down, picking me up like I’m weightless. Maybe I am now. Or maybe there is something wrong with my brain from being beaten. Who knows...or cares? I snuggle into his neck and he freezes, his hands tightening on my thigh and arm. Heat pours through my body as I breathe in his fiery scent. I must be delirious. “It doesn’t hurt. I don’t feel pain much anymore. I stopped feeling pain or caring when it hurts when I was about twelve.” I yawn. “You smell nice, like Vale. I could lick you.”

“Goddess, stop punishing me,” Kane mutters, and he walks faster. “Don’t lick me,

and explain why you don't feel pain."

"Okayyy." I laugh. "Well, being punched in the face is kind of new, but not being slapped. They're really very similar, though Melody used to like to kick me more in the stomach or whip me. Sometimes she'd cast spells to have a broom or shoe hit me over and over while I couldn't get out from the spell. She is good at healing potions and silencing potions. She fixed anything she did to me and made sure no one heard my screams outside the house. She was happier when I stopped screaming. I knew if I screamed, she'd carry on for longer. She'd hurt me more because I think she liked it. She'd use weapons and—" I stop, seeing Kane has paused, his eyes wide as he looks at me. I can't read the look in his pretty eyes. "I stopped feeling pain after about twelve like I said. It hurts, but not enough to care."

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“That bitch hurt you?” he asks. He asks it like he is going to set the world on fire depending on my answer. His eyes are fully silver.

I pat his cheek. “Yes, and I think it was character building. I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t live through that. It’s okay, I’m free now and I still laugh. I still make jokes sometimes.”

He leans down, looking into my eyes. “You’re mine now.” I shiver. “And it’s not character building, it’s abuse. She will never lay a finger on you again. No one will.”

“Why can’t Black touch people, and did you really kill your family? Why is Vale mean? Why is Maz always joking?” I blurt out. “Also, why are all dragon shifters built like gods or Greek statues? You have muscles on muscles, a pretty face, and dimples! It’s not fair.”

He sighs. “You’re clearly not feeling well.”

“Oh my god!” I hear Rue running over. “What happened to her?”

“Aster beat her up and I’m taking her to the healers,” Kane answers. “She isn’t speaking sense.”

“A dominance thing?” Rue asks, and I feel her touch my arm. “Shithead.”

Kane’s voice is deep, dark, and scary. “He touched what’s mine and will be dealt with.”

“I’ll teach him a lesson too,” Rue snaps. “And if we are being frank, you all need to care for your bonded more than this. If she knew how to defend herself, she might not be in this situation. Do you honestly want her to die, painfully?”

“No one asked your opinion, witch,” Kane grumbles.

“You don’t have to be mean to me, you know.” I yawn. “I just wanted to be friends with my bonded, to have someone who wanted me. No one really cares about me and I’m alone.”

“That’s a lie,” Kane whispers low, and I swear his lips brush my forehead before I pass out. When I wake up, which feels like a second later, I’m in a healer’s ward, and Rue’s with me. None of my bonded are here, and I feel fine.

“Yeah, you took one hell of a beating.” Rue looks up from the book she was reading. “You definitely had a concussion. I won’t tell you about some of the things you said, because I don’t know if you’ll take it very well.” There is a man in here by the door, someone that looks a little like Aster. Rue looks behind her. “Oster, my bonded.”

I nod in greeting. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m sorry about what happened. Aster has been punished by your bonded, and I’d appreciate if you told them enough now,” he asks.

“They don’t listen to me,” I admit and look at Rue. “Wait, did Kane come with me?”

She winces. “Yes, and it was a little embarrassing. Don’t worry about it. There is a party in a few hours. Do you want to come?”

“I’ve never been to a party,” I tell her, even though she knows this. I can feel one of my bonded coming closer.

“Neither had I until here.” She hands me a note. “Say the words, and the academy is spelled to open a door for you.”

I just finish tucking it into my pocket when Black walks in, followed by a tutor. I think he teaches the higher years. His hair is peppered gray and his skin is dark, matching his suit. “Juniper Daygan, the Umbral Authority are with the headmaster and wish to speak to you.”

“And I’m coming with you,” Black cuts in as fear coils in my stomach. I have to meet the leaders of the witch world and explain the big fucking mess I’ve gotten myself into.

Chapter 13

I’m glad Black is with me, but the rapid drumbeat in my chest goes on and on. Black is silent; the only noise is him flexing his gloved hand occasionally. Whatever the healers did, it worked. I feel completely fine. Black pulls a small book out of his cloak and begins to read it. I peek over his shoulder, seeing a painting of the enchantress on one side and writing on the other. The enchantress is drawn as a monster of a woman, her hair like snakes and a face covered in cracks, yet she is still pretty under it all. Fire dances around her feet in obsidian flames. I’m feeling way too dizzy and slightly terrified to be sitting here, outside the headmaster’s room while we wait, so reading over Black’s shoulder is actually refreshing. He looks at me—like I’m odd.

“What? I don’t have a book with me,” I tell him.

“It’s not that,” he mutters. “You’re close to me. People don’t get close...just in case.”

My heart hurts for him. “I’m not scared.” I am, but he is my bonded and I get what it is like to be the outcast. I grew up like that and hated it. I was never hugged by

Melody and rarely by Rue or our maid or my bestie. I wasn't touched by anyone until Lock came along. Kind of makes sense to me why I fell for his tricks.

"You should be." He moves away a bit, but he lowers the book to his knee so I can easily read it. The book only describes what most people already know, how the enchantress began her attack in Europe one random night and didn't stop. America, or what was left of it, was protected by the witches. It's all we have left now. The enchantress has the rest of the world now. The countries' names have been forgotten, and the Mindless roam free.

Eventually the headmaster comes out, leaving the door wide open, and he pauses when he sees Black. "This invite is only for witches." So much disdain leaks from his tone. Not an inch of respect to be found.

"I'm not going in without him. I feel like I need support in there." I lift my chin. "Black is my bonded. We are taught to stay together."

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Black is staring at the side of my face as my cheeks heat, but I keep my eyes on the headmaster. “The council won’t like it. It’s not always best to start off with an argument. But please go in.”

I can tell he doesn’t want me going in there with Black, but I do, anyway. We head in together through the large door that’s easily big enough to fit both of us, and the council are all seated in chairs around the back of the desk. All five of them. Each one is meant to represent one of the first spells. Lock’s mother is lovely. I don’t know the others. All the colors of their cloaks that hang over them are different, lined with black underneath. Their hoods are pulled up over their heads to hide most of their faces.

I think Lock’s mom is the only female on the council, based on the way they look. They are imposing, and immediately my knees feel weak. Black’s gloved hand rests on the middle of my back and nudges me forward before he yanks it back like he’s afraid I’ll burn him. We sit in the chairs on the other side of the desk, and Black is clearly in the one the headmaster planned to sit on, because Mentor Parker looks pissed as he moves to lean on the wall.

“A pleasure to see you, and may the goddess bless our meeting. We fall in her honor.” Lock’s mother begins. What is her name? I’m stuck with the knowledge, or lack of it, that I don’t know. Lock and Wini never mentioned her first name and for some reason, it bothers me. What are all their names?

“We fall in her honor,” they all repeat. They stare at us long enough that I repeat it, as does Black.

“We’ve already met, Juniper, but not everybody else has,” she begins. “I do not know your name, dragon.”

“This is Black Ashveil. I rarely go anywhere without one of them now,” I explain. A total lie. They would go anywhere happily without me.

Each of them lowers their hood, and for a moment, I am overwhelmed with how familiar they look. Like I know them all and I can’t put my finger on why. I’ve never read a book on them or seen a picture. It’s considered too dangerous to have things like that when our enemies could steal them. I stare at the group for a long moment, and a taste of fear settles on my tongue. All five sitting in their chairs, so still it’s unnerving.

“I’m Bael.” His name feels wrong. “We’ve had a long discussion about you, about how you apparently accidentally managed to bond with four dragons. Lies,” a stern man in the middle begins. “Tell us about the bonding.”

I’m so tired of being called a liar about this. I did not plan to go to that forest and bond with four dragons. “It was an accident and I’m not a liar.” Except for hexing Vale. “I have no interest in lying to you, and I wouldn’t because I’m not brave enough. You’re in control of our world. At the end of the day, I signed up to Bloodstone because I want to end the war. It took my parents from me. You have it in your records what happened to me, and that horror keeps me up at night sometimes.” Black looks at me with questioning eyes. “Often enough that I wish it never happened. I can’t change the past, but I can change the future, and that’s why I learned as many spells as I could. Sometimes, I think my brain is full of a million spells even though I’ve not had a million years to learn them. I believe that the war can be won, and I did not bank on having dragon shifters to help me in the war, but now they’re here, and they would help with the war, right? I think everybody at Bloodstone and everybody on our war front wants the war to stop. I want the end of the war.”

“Dragons would help, but their extinction would be awful for us. We never wished for them to be bonded with just one,” Bael counters. “It is a bad omen from our holy goddess.”

“The entire witch world is watching you, Juniper. So, learn at the academy, and become the best. I expect to hear from your tutors that you’re doing everything in your power to make this bond work. It can be volatile, make you do unspeakable acts. When it’s this intense, I expect you to be on your best behavior,” Lock’s mother demands.

“Of course. I’m dedicated to—” I begin, but she cuts me off.

“I’ve seen enough. You can leave.” I nod, going to stand. “Please tell your fiancé hello.”

I tense. “Of course. I’m dedicated to the academy.” Not him. The fucker.

Black looks frigid as we go outside with the headmaster leading us. He shuts his door and points a finger at me. “Next time they call an Umbral Authority meeting, you come with none of the dragons. Shifters are not welcome in here. They are not witches.”

“Our bonded makes that choice, not you,” Black responds coldly. There’s a warning in his tone. Mentor Parker doesn’t give an answer, his shoulders tight as he goes back in and shuts the door behind him with a slam.

“Wow, that was tense. Thank you for coming with me.” I rub my arm.

“Are you really engaged?” he asks, stepping closer.

His eyes are nearly silver. “No, well, yes, but it’s an arranged thing. I’m never going

through with it, and I didn't ask or want it. Him." Black looks so relieved, and I don't know why I like it. "Do you want to come to a party? I'm going now. I haven't been to a party before. I didn't really have a lot of friends back in the town I was in, so I would like to go."

"You ask, I say yes," Black grunts. I can tell a party is the last thing he wants to do, and I like that he is doing it for me. Although a party involves socializing, that's not something I admit to being a huge fan of.

I pull the piece of paper out of my pocket, the one Rue gave me with the instructions on how to get to the party, and I say the words out loud in the academy. When I do, a new door appears in the corridor out of nowhere. I open it up, and on the other side, it's almost like a nightclub. Music blaring, strobe lights flickering in different directions, drunk people dancing around. It's a mix of all three years. Most are in their uniforms, but others are in short dresses and shirts. We go in and the door shuts, disappearing altogether. I look around for Rue, but I don't see her anywhere because there are so many people in here.

My eyes do meet with someone else in the crowd, and I groan. He comes over and stops in front of me. Far too close in front of me, and he outright ignores Black, which is rude. But thinking back, Lock was always rude. I just didn't see it.

"My Juni, I never had you down as a party girl." He charms.

I cross my arms tight. "You don't know me anymore. Stop pretending to."

"You're avoiding me." He figures it out. No shit, Sherlock.

"Well, yes," I deadpan. "I have zero interest in any kind of future or anything with you."

A low growl echoes from Black. “In other words, my bonded told you to fuck off.”

Lock frowns at Black, and my chest warms. No one ever sticks up for me, and I think Black might just be the first person. “And you’re just a shifter. Your opinion doesn’t matter. She’s a witch. You can’t have her, right? She’s not yours.”

“She. Is. Mine.” He steps into Lock’s space, and Lock takes a big step back, a flash of fear in his eyes. They stare each other down.

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“Alright, no fighting. I’ve really had enough of that today,” I ask, touching Black’s arm.

He looks at where I’m touching and something cracks in his eyes. “You should go with your people,” Black says coldly.

Lock comes closer to me. “He’s right. This is your world, with me, not them. We don’t belong in each other’s.” He grabs my arm and pulls me along with him. I see Black standing by the wall, watching us disappear into the crowd.

“That was mean.” I tug my arm out of Lock’s grip when we get to the bar.

“Not really, sweetness.” Urgh, that nickname is disgusting. “I feel like everyone treats them like more than they are. They are just tools for us to win the war.”

I shake my head. “That isn’t true.”

“In what way are they the same as us?” he scoffs. “We can do magic. They barely can.” I know that isn’t true for my shifters at least. Vale easily opened a portal, which is a level five spell. I’ve never attempted it. “Look, I know it must be confusing sleeping in a room with them. I sometimes get confused with my own bonded, but as long as you don’t ever cross the line, there won’t be a problem. I don’t think any of them are stupid enough to cross the line either. The punishments for both of you are very severe.”

“I’m not crossing a line with anyone. I’m not interested.” I wave him off, but my heart screams that I’m a big liar. Traitor. That those four—well, not Vale—are the

only men that I can't stop thinking about. For more reasons than our bond. It's madness, it's insanity, and it can't be real.

"Come on." He takes another step forward, boxing me into the bar. My heart leaps, but not in a good way—in fear.

"My fiancée." He strokes his hand down my arm, and my stomach rolls. "We're eventually getting married. That's the end goal for us. I would love to start enjoying ourselves now, before it becomes just a chore for us to breed. I can take your mind off the academy and those dragons. I can make sure you're at the top of the board and that you're not killed off because they are fucking about. You're my future wife and I will protect you."

"Look, I'm not your future wife. I don't want any special favors. I just want you to leave me alone," I hiss. "You cheated on me with Lily. I know that."

"How did you find out?" He looks shocked, not guilty, not anything but upset he was caught.

I laugh, but it's hollow. "They talk around the town. Surely you know that. I found out not long after you'd left. I thought I loved you, but then I realized when I heard that, that I didn't, actually. I don't know what I was thinking. Either way, I'm not interested."

"I was a stupid young boy, alright? I'm not now. Look, you can trust me—take my hand. Come on, Juniper, please just?—"

He's yanked away and a thick fist slams straight into his face. My eyes widen as I see Kane right there before he starts beating the crap out of Lock on the floor. He holds his hand over the guy's mouth so he can't scream or cast a spell, only lifting it to punch him. Lock goes limp after a second of being beaten up, and it doesn't surprise

me. We've gained an audience, so many people staring at us. Kane stands up and casts his eyes around the crowd, blood dripping from his knuckles. "No one touches our bonded."

His voice echoes around the room, and he looks once at me, not meeting my eyes, before he walks out. No explanation. Nothing. I'm left with everyone staring at me and that warning echoing in the air like a spell. Rue is nowhere in sight. Neither is Black. Maz steps over Lock's passed out body and touches my shoulder. "Hey, come on. I have somewhere else we can go that's better than here."

He leads me out, outside the castle, onto a bench that overlooks the forest. The walk eases some of the tension from what happened, making me feel a little better. Not by much, but a little. "Where have you been tonight?"

"At the camp, making sure everyone's got enough food. Things aren't always good back there, and their best hunters are now bonded." He means them. Shit. "I don't have any biological family, but I have an adoptive aunt, and she has a lot of adopted kids. She took in all four of us, actually. Slowly, over time, we ended up growing up together. War only breeds orphans."

"I'd like to meet her sometime," I offer.

"I'd like that too." He stares at me for a long moment. "Kane's history with you. It's complicated."

"It's not that complicated—he just hates me, but tonight was confusing. Are all four of you that possessive?" I question.

"Yes, and no. Dragons can be known to be possessive about their bonded." He smirks. "But Kane is worse than most." Maz looks at me for a long moment. "I'm sorry about your father's shirt. I saw the minute that I told you I'd thrown it away that

it meant something to you, and I felt sick. I fucked up and I'm sorry."

"It did mean a lot. It was my father's. I don't have anything else of his." I look down. "But you didn't do it on purpose. You were just trying to do something nice."

"I'm still sorry. Come here." He wraps his arm around me and pulls me to him. I rest my head on his chest, listening to his heart beat slowly. A gentle thump, thump, thump. "If I could go back in time, I'd change that. I definitely wouldn't destroy that shirt. I thought I was helping you, and you had so little in your bag."

I lift my head, realizing our faces are so close together, just inches apart. My eyes drop slowly to his lips and back up, finding his eyes are fixed on my lips too. Everything in me tightens, my heart racing as we stare at each other.

"I wish this wasn't forbidden," he whispers softly, his breath washing over me, minty and fresh. His scent wrapping around me like a blanket. God, he smells nice.

"Me too," I admit out loud, because it's not something I wanted to admit before. But there's a connection, there's something. We stare at each other for a long heartbeat where I wonder if he will cross that line and how good it would feel. One kiss. One fucking forbidden kiss.

He lifts his hand, stroking my cheek and sliding his hand to the back of my neck. Kane's voice is like rolling thunder. "Maz, something happened at the camp. We need to go back."

I jump, surprised I didn't feel him getting closer. Maz lowers his hand slowly before climbing to his feet. "See you soon, Juni." I turn to watch him walk to Kane, who has a face of fury, and his silver eyes are glowing like the moon in a night sky. What would have happened if he hadn't interrupted?

I would have kissed my bonded...and ruined us both.

Chapter 14

KANE

“Is there really something wrong with the clans, or did you just want to interrupt?” Maz asks the second we are away from our bonded and walking outside, around an old balcony. “I wasn’t going to do something stupid.”

He forgets that I know when he is lying. It’s clear, from his tone to the tell he does when he messes with his shirt and tugs it down, which he is doing right now.

“You were about to fucking kiss her.” I hiss at him. I almost want to grab his shirt, pin him to the wall and punch him for being a fucking idiot. Crossing a line with Juniper—that’s fucking too much for even a punch to get through to him. I would know because I think about crossing that line daily. She haunts my dreams; she haunts my every waking moment. She’s all I can think about. And I hate myself because I can’t tell her. I burn for her, and she hates me. It has to be this way, for her own safety, but fuck, this is hard. In every fucking way.

I don’t know if Maz can read that in my eyes like I can read him. We both have feelings for our bonded when it’s forbidden to cross that line. They kill shifters for a kiss like that. They make an example out of them if they fall in love. An example which could mean all of the people we care about ending up dead. Maz drops his gaze and turns, leaning on the banister. “I know, and if I kissed her, I wouldn’t have stopped unless she told me to. I’d have risked us both and loved every moment. I’ve never felt like this, Kane.”

“Look, have sex with someone else and you will get over her. Go back to the shifter clans. You’re a dragon. They all fucking love you. But not her.” I pat his shoulder and look out at the forest. “We bonded to her for life. We have to protect her, and they would hurt her if she kissed you back. If you have feelings for her, swallow them and don’t act.” It’s what I do. Every morning when I watch her sleeping for a second when she isn’t looking. I’ve turned into a creepy fucker just to have stolen moments with her that she can never know about. “You’ve never cared for any woman before. It’s just because she is forbidden and pretty.”

“It’s not like that.” He grits his teeth.

For a second, I actually believe him because it’s her. It’s Juni. I dreamt of her for years before she arrived, wondering what she looked like from when we were kids. But she doesn’t remember me or those years we met first. I don’t know how she’s forgotten that we were all together when we were kids, that our parents were rebellious, that they wanted a community with their bonded. They wanted a safety net for their daughter. But I was a kid too. I don’t know the exact reasons why they did everything. But I do know something went wrong; something went very wrong. And it was her fault.

I lost everything that night and so did she. Somehow, her memories were taken with her. Yet she isn’t the dark-haired, wild, rebellious girl that I remember when I was a kid myself. Now she’s a beautiful woman who is tempting—really fucking tempting. If I’m honest with myself, seeing them close like that, it made me jealous. I still feel like there is a sinking rock in my stomach that won’t go away as I picture them over and over. I don’t get jealous... except when it’s her. She somehow made me more jealous than I think I’ve ever been in my life. Maz—he’s like a brother to me and I don’t get jealous of him. Fucking hell, what’s wrong with me? Maz is kinder than the lot of us, and if she wanted him, it would make sense. I’d never deserved her and once she learns half the shit I’ve done in my life, she’d be afraid of me. I’d betray my family by even touching her, too. She is meant to be someone I hate and since day

one, since I pushed her away from me, it hasn't really felt like that. I never imagined seeing her again, and there she was.

"Enough about Juniper. There are genuine problems in the clan. I was looking for you. Some students were pissing about, and they caused a flood on the south side of the village. Kids were injured. Two people have died." I grunt, tasting the sadness of their loss as my dragon grieves. There is an old saying in the dragon culture.

"By flames they are reborn, by time they are endless." Maz says it before I can. "Who? Tell me Granny is?—"

"She wouldn't die on us. Knowing her, she will outlive us all." I joke, but it doesn't last long enough to make either of us smile. "Alder and Exei." I tell him. Elders. They were old, pushing at least one hundred fifty, but they didn't deserve to be drowned inside their own home on a random night while witches laughed at their joke. From what I've heard from Black, a massive part of the south village is damaged, and we will need to work all night on repairing the homes, so people have somewhere to sleep. "Everyone is coming back to help and see if we can do a cleanup before morning. They wouldn't have fucking done that if we were there."

I know it's pointless to feel guilty when it changes nothing, but the guilt is there, haunting me. The clan is my responsibility—mine and theirs. Our parents were the clan leaders, and we are to inherit that title if we survive the war. Even without the official title, they all look at us like we should have a clue what to do next. I don't know most of the time, but I know I will not give up. I have to fight for our people and get us out of the forest. I'd take my chances against the enchantress. It's better than dying as the witches' slaves.

Maz is shaking. I rarely see him angry—he's just never been like that, or he hides it very well. "They killed us for a joke? When will this ever-fucking end?"

There's so much going on that we hide, and moments like this only fuel our secrets. "Their blood will run down the halls and we will laugh one day, brother. We will burn the rest of it down and our people will be free. Nothing has changed." The clans are not meant to communicate, but secret correspondence is passed around the world by small creatures. They want to be free too. What the witches will never understand is that keeping an animal caged up is only going to make it bite you when it gets free. The changelings are ready to be free and the witches will not see it coming.

Sometimes I wonder what Juniper will think... but I hope she will understand when we explain it to her. I don't think she is as loyal to her race as much as she pretends to be. "Does the headmaster know about the flood?"

"I told him." I say flatly. "And he didn't offer any help. Told me to deal with it and to get out."

He is the first witch I'm going to burn when the real war begins. "Fucking asshole." Maz mutters. "Maybe Juniper will help. We should ask her."

"No, I don't want her involved yet." I stop him. "Maz, no."

Being honest with myself, I want to go back and make sure she's okay. I don't like leaving her alone without one of us around. She doesn't know it—not that we follow her—but we do. The amount of people who I've had to threaten to make sure they don't lay a finger on her since we've been bonded is growing to an insane amount. Sometimes it's fun to break a few noses and bones. Maz drops it, knowing he has pushed his luck tonight and we have to get to the clan. We can fly there from the nearby open balcony area. We are walking towards it when I hear an obnoxious, grating laugh.

Lock walks out onto the balcony in a suit, with a smug smile. He is healed from my fist, but the vengeful glint is strong in his eyes. Try it, fucker. He is lucky he is alive,

considering what he did to Juniper. Lock is a fucking asshole. Why she was ever with him I won't ever understand, but I'd rather kill him than let them get married. That would mean he'd have to be permanently around and it's just not happening. Plus, she would be miserable with him. Juniper deserves a male who will fall to his knees for her and die to make sure she is okay. This asshole wouldn't bow for anyone, and he wouldn't risk a single strand of his hair for her. I know men like him and he does nothing but cause pain. I've been plotting his death for months. He'll die a painful death that looks accidental, and no one will know it was me. Or us. Men die in the war all the time and it's a shame he will join them. I'll dance on his grave when all is said and done, too.

"Ah, there's my fiancé's bonded little dragon pets." He looks me up and down like I'm less than him. When we both know in a fight, I'd win. In fact, I'd really fucking enjoy it. His friends laugh behind him, backing him up. Cowards.

"What's your name again?" I pretend to have no clue, even though if I've named him Lock, the already dead ex asshole in my head.

"Lock." He grits out and the flash of anger fades into a charming smile. I don't know who that idiot smile works on, but I see right through it. "Have you seen my fiancé around? I'm looking for her. I want to get her a drink, get her alone. Run my tongue?—"

"Shut the fuck up!" Maz growls and steps forward, silver bleeding into his eyes. I'm tempted to let him shift and watch Maz's dragon eat Lock. Well, I don't think he'd actually eat the fucker. He likely tastes like an asshole too.

"You're catching feelings for her!" Lock claps as he laughs loudly. I put my hand on Maz's chest to stop him from going closer and level him with a look. He growls low but stops. "She's pretty, isn't she? I can tell you she's far more fucking pretty with all her clothes off. The moans that she made when my cock was inside her... fuck, there

is nothing like it. Juniper is easy to bed because she is desperate for someone to love the poor foster girl. But even she has limits, and fucking a dragon has to be one.”

Silver bleeds into my eyes as my dragon roars in my mind. It’s jealousy. It’s rage. All of it echoes through my blood, like we’re exactly the same being right now because I feel it. How fucking dare he speak about her like that? I know my eyes must turn silver, but the fucking idiot says nothing. Maz is now turning to push me back, away from them.

“You realize she is mine? You’re going to have to be nearby, listening to me fuck her every single night. I’m going to get her pregnant. She’s going to have my babies, and you can watch—watch as I do anything I want to her, because she’s mine.”

No. Juniper is mine. I’ll burn anyone that dares to touch my bonded.

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“Why? Because your mother said that you can have her like she’s some prize horse? I hate to tell you this, but Juniper is nothing to be owned by anyone. She’s her own person, and you are nothing to her. She regularly avoids you.” Maz laughs. “She goes the opposite way any time she knows you’re near. Even your sister helps her to avoid you. Doesn’t that say everything? You must have been really fucking poor in bed because you’ve got a pretty face, but still, you didn’t manage to keep her. You’re pathetic, witch. Truth is, if she was in my bed, she wouldn’t be leaving. She’d want to come back, not run away.”

Lock grits his teeth and I growl low. His eyes drift to mine and finally, fear flashes there. He takes a few steps back as he senses the magic in the air as I begin to shift. My dragon crashes out of me, my wings slamming through the walls and smashing them. Every part of my senses strengthens as my dragon takes over, flooding to the front of my mind. I have basic control, enough to tell him where to go, but not when he is angry like this. Scorching fire burns in his throat as they run from us down to the door of the balcony, his friends pushing in front of Lock to get away. My dragon roars with a blue fire that chases Lock until he gets to the door and barely manages to slide inside before the flames crash into it. The balcony is still on fire as I jump off it and into the sky, hearing Maz shifting and jumping off after me.

I fly high like I can almost touch the moon, my wings spread out wide, knowing that I might be able to fly anywhere. But while Juniper is in this academy, I won’t leave her.

Chapter 15

No one wants to hear their mother screaming, but it’s what wakes me from a pleasant

dream. The real world isn't a dream, and it is horrible. Why is my mama screaming? I climb out of bed, throwing the sheets back, running as fast as I can to my wooden door. It rattles with the bells I have on the back of it, an art piece I did with Kane. My feet sink into something warm and sticky, and I look down to see its blood. A puddle of my mother's blood because her body is a few feet away, and she isn't moving. I've never seen anyone dead before...but I know people die if they lose too much blood. Her belly is cut open, and I can't stop looking. "Mama?"

Latin words fill the air, fire lacing across the ceiling in plumes that grow and grow. My father comes running down the corridor, slowing when he sees me, only to freeze, to dig his feet into the floorboards. He isn't alone. A shadow follows him from their bedroom at the end of the hall. I've never seen my brave dad scared. Not even when a bee stung him in the forest outside. But he is scared now. My dad screams at me. "Juni! Get out of the house and run!"

Behind him is a person, but it doesn't look like it's alive anymore, but it is moving. Will my mama do that? No, she isn't one of them. The color of its skin is pure white, like all the blood has been drained away—it doesn't have any eyes, just nothing. Its nails are long, black clawlike things that slash through the air, trying to get to my father, but his magic holds it back. He is using a shield, a glittering gray one, but it's cracking every time the thing hits it with its nails. I drop to my knees and crawl to my mama, picking her head up into my lap. She feels warm and not cold. "Mama."

She never ignores me, but she does now. I want her to wake up. I want her not to be dead. Mama's eyes are wide open but empty, like the light that made her perfect has just gone.

"Leave!" my father screams at me one more time before putting his back to me. I can't move. The creature roars, slamming into him as it breaks through the shield, pushing him to the ground. But I can't move. I can't do anything. Not as I watch it claw into my father. Until I know my father's dead too. Mindless. That's their name,

and it makes sense, because this thing has nothing in it, like mama and daddy now. Just emptiness. It stands up and walks towards me, dragging its claws across the floorboards.

I will be Mindless soon.

I will be gone but with them. I want to be with mama and daddy.

It was my birthday yesterday, my eighth birthday. Is eight a good age to die? I don't think it is. We ate cake; we smiled and laughed. All the boys were over, and it was nice. It was the best day I've had in a while. Maz bought me a new watch.

I put my mama down and crawl back to the wall as it comes closer, sniffing the air because it cannot see. Goddess, I want to live. Please don't kill me yet. I will end the war and stop these things if you let me live. I don't want to see mama and daddy yet. The Mindless takes another step towards me as my blood pounds in my ears until the creature's standing right in front of my face. It lowers its head, sniffing once more before it walks away from me and down the stairs. It smells like rot. More screams echo in the air from outside.

I look at my parents' bodies, and I turn around to run back into my room, slamming the door behind me and going straight to the window. The window creaks as I pull it open to sneak out. I've snuck out a million times, but I'm sobbing this time and it's so dark outside. I glance at the stars and the moon in the middle of them. How dare the sky be so pretty on such a horrible night? I keep crying as I shakily lower myself out the window, the sobbing making it really hard to breathe. Where's the air gone? Why does my chest hurt? My mama and daddy are gone. Those creatures are filling the fields outside the houses, and I pray for a second that the boys have gotten away. The shifters must sense them better than witches?

How did they find us?

I climb to the end of the small balcony and down the plastic pipe before my feet touch the cold grass. I run straight into the forest, turning around just once to see the house going up in flames from my father's spell. I don't know any spells to stop a fire, and I'm too young for them to work. My teddy bears are in there. The watch I got from Maz and the dress my mama made me for my birthday. Daddy got me a bike, which will burn too. All of it will be gone. My father's shirt moves around me, and I almost trip a few times as I grab the bottom and keep running. I run and run into the trees until I don't know where I am. But I don't stop. I can't stop. Because maybe if I run fast enough, I can run back in time itself and stop this from ever happening. Maybe, just maybe.

I get right to the end of the forest when I turn around and see that I was followed. Ten of those Mindless monsters are there. They're all different shapes and sizes. Some are people in rotting clothes and smell bad. Others are animals that I can't clearly see in the darkness. A tiger steps into the moonlight. Its eyes are missing and there is a hole in its side, showing his ribs that sparkle in the moonlight, which filters through the trees. I place my back against the tree as it circles me, then roars once to the trees, to the sky. The sound is horrible, like a person screaming for help. They take off, leaving me alone, and I run in the opposite direction through the forest. They didn't kill me, but they should have. I keep running, hearing nothing but my heartbeat for a long time.

"Juniper!" Black shouts. I stop, turning to see a man a few feet away. He has thick dark hair, and he looks confused as he stares. "Stop running."

"You're not here...I don't see anyone here." I watch him back. "Who are you?"

"Yours," he breathes out.

I wake up screaming and kicking, realizing tight arms are wrapped around me, whispering words of comfort as reality hits. It was a memory, and one of my bonded

has me. I'm not a little girl trapped in the forest and running from the Mindless that killed my family. That night, I lost everything and everyone I knew. Or did I? I've never remembered the boys before. That wasn't true, they were not there. No other kids survived that night, and I remember reading the newspapers about the death list of my clan. They were not there. Black was in my memory too and he has never been there before. "You're okay." Black? I open my eyes, seeing I'm still in the bathroom, on the floor, in my makeshift bed. Wait, I'm in his arms. "You're here, you're with me. Wherever that nightmare was, it's gone. You're with me and I'm not letting you go. You're safe. You always have been when you're with us."

"They're dead, they're dead, they're dead," I whisper over and over until my throat feels raw and I manage to push down the mind-stealing fear I felt back then. The fear I still feel. I know I'm going to battle Mindless one day, that the promise I made to the goddess that night to save me is something I intend to keep, but the Mindless will always scare me to my bones. Black holds me to him, his lips pressed against my forehead as he rocks me back and forth.

"I know. I was there. I could see you. I don't know how you did that, how we did that, but we shared that nightmare. I managed to wake up enough to crawl to you in here, and then I went back to the dream. You saw me that time..." He shakes his head.

"Black." My heart stops. "You're touching me and I'm not dead."

His eyes widen, like he hasn't realized it at all. Like he came in here half-asleep to rescue me from my nightmare. Black looks down to where his hand is clamped around my waist. My black cami top has risen slightly, and I can see his fingers are touching my bare skin. We both stare in silence, and I hope he can't see how my body is reacting to him—liking him. My head rests on his shoulder, my full cheek pressed against his skin there, and I swear his lips were just on my forehead to press a soothing kiss. He came for me, and I was not cursed.

“How?” he breathes out. “I’ve killed anyone I’ve touched because I was cursed as a baby. How are you immune?”

“What happened?” Maz walks in, rubbing his face, and he looks completely shocked when he sees us. Join the club, buddy. “How?” He repeats what Black said. What I’m thinking too. “It’s nearly morning, but I thought I heard you scream in here, and then I noticed Black was missing, too. Kane and Vale had to do things in the camp, so they aren’t here.”

“A bad dream, and Black was in my dream somehow,” I admit to him. There is no point keeping this a secret. I couldn’t explain it if I tried. “That was a memory, my worst one. You shouldn’t have been there.”

“What was that nightmare?” Black demands. “When?”

I look at them both. I almost don’t want to tell them because it hurts to think about that night, or the nights after it. “You know that people say that Mindless don’t go after children? I know this because they attacked my house. I walked out to see my mother already dead and my father fighting for his life. They were powerful witches, and their bonds were near, but all of them died anyway. I was told over a hundred Mindless attacked the houses we lived in and killed not only my parents, but the entire community. My aunt, my grandmother, and all of the people I knew are gone. I was the sole survivor.”

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I gulp and take a deep breath to expel some of the anxiety before continuing. “Once the Mindless had ripped my dad to pieces, it came close to me and then just walked away. I climbed out of my bedroom window and ran into the forest. A group of them followed me, but they might have been going through the forest, I don’t know. They circled me for a bit before they ran away. I was lost in that forest for four days before someone found me. I saw Mindless every night. They came up to me every single night. Every night I screamed and cried and begged for someone to find me other than them. Other nights, I sat in complete silence because I was so terrified. I was in my father’s shirt. I became kind of weirdly attached to it after that.” I feel raw after telling them this. “I haven’t had nightmares that insane for many, many years. It was like living it again.”

“As long as I breathe, you won’t face it alone again.” Black strokes my arm, completely in awe. “I’m yours now. Anything you want, you tell me, and I will make it so. My loyalty is to you, Juniper.”

I blink. “I’ve never actually had anyone on my side.”

“Well, I will be forever, and I’ll walk with you on any path the goddess lays out for us.” He nods and I nod back. He is my bonded and there isn’t a path I wouldn’t go on for him, either.

There’s a knock at the door outside the room. I lift my head, seeing a mixture of feelings on Maz’s face. “How are you touching him?”

I look at Black. “I don’t know.”

“Black?” Maz questions.

Black simply looks at me. “It’s a gift from the goddess and a sign. She is our future.”

Something passes between them, and the door is banged two more times. Maz grunts, turning to go and open the door. I climb off Black’s lap, and he pulls me to my feet, holding my hand. “Thank you for waking me up from that. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome, Juniper.” He smiles at me, keeping hold of my hand as we walk outside the bathroom together. I let him because it must be so strange to finally be able to touch someone after years of not being able to...and because I like it. I like how it feels to have his warm skin pressed against mine. It feels familiar and normal.

As Maz opens our door, I stop mid-step and turn to Black. “Wait, I’m not going to be cursed, right?”

“No, the curse instantly kills people. It drains them into Mindless. I think we would know if you were cursed.” His eyes cloud over, like he is thinking of when that happened before.

“Has that happened to your family?” I gently ask.

He nods, unable to say it out loud. “It isn’t your fault. It never was.” I go to tell him it’s okay to be upset, but Maz is speaking too loudly.

“It’s for you, Juni. It’s the foster sister and the friend.” Maz leaves the door open. “I’m going for a run.”

I walk over and pull the door further open, finding Wini and Rue in casual clothes. “Do you want a girls’ day? I’ve got a picnic.” Wini holds up a basket of food.

“And I’ve got an old DVD player with some cool DVDs to watch,” Rue offers. “You know, like we used to. I know you loved that.”

“I’ll just get changed. Sounds great.” I grin.

They both look at where I’m holding Black’s hand. Rue clears her throat. I’m going to have to explain that one to them over the movies. “Come to Wini’s room. I’ll be there.”

Black shuts the door on them and leans on it, letting my hand go. “Do you trust those two?”

“Shouldn’t I?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer, his eyes unreadable. I go back to the bathroom, looking at the makeshift bed on the floor and back to the main room. Enough is enough. I pick my duvet up, my pillow too, and put it back on the empty bed that is mine.

Maz is in tight shorts and a tank top when he comes out of the bathroom. There is too much golden skin on show, and my mouth waters. “So, this means you’re sleeping in that bed now and we don’t have to feel guilty about the bathroom floor and beg you to come out?”

“I’m sleeping in the bed, but don’t smile about it.” He doesn’t listen to me. “Stop with the smiling.”

“I can’t not be happy—I’m delighted.” He begins his stretches. “Today is good.” He nods at Black...who is smiling. Maybe it is.

The rest of the day, I spend with Wini and Rue, all of us laughing and joking, being normal. It reminded me of the years where Rue and I used to sneak up to the attic to

watch movies on old, scratchy DVDs when her mother was out for a good couple of hours. It was nice, quiet, and normal. Sometimes the best days are that—the normal ones.

I walk back into my bedroom when the sun is setting, only for a rope to wrap tightly around me when I step in. The rope wraps around me a dozen times before lifting me up off the floor. I scream in shock for all of a minute before the rope goes over my mouth and tightens. I'm thrown on the bed. Kane's bed.

He walks over like a devil, his eyes furious, a notebook in his hand. "This is a book on all the ways you've annoyed me this week. A whole fucking novel, Juniper. It's nearly forty thousand words. What do you have to say for yourself?"

I laugh, but I can't respond to him. He clicks his fingers and the rope around my mouth drops back. I can't help the snarky reply that leaves my lips. "Technically, it's not a full novel unless it's over forty thousand words. It's a novella. Now let me go."

He snarls at me. "No, I'm going to read it to you, considering how you love books so much. Now, let's begin with how you smiled at Lock over breakfast and?—"

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“I didn’t smile at him!” I snap. I actually smiled at something Wini said. I didn’t invite Lock to sit at my breakfast table, and I wasn’t happy he did. It ruined my breakfast.

“You did. I poisoned his lunch because of it, and he is still sick. That’s on you and, yes, you should feel bad.” He sighs.

“Is this a confession book about how insane you are?” I whisper. I’m kind of impressed. I had Vale down as the nutter, but all this time it was Kane. The secret nutter.

“No, it’s a book about you and how fucking annoying it is to be bonded to you.” He binds my mouth again. Insane and a kinky fucker. I don’t know what to make of him as he keeps reading a list of all my faults this week. After he’s finished the book, I glare at him, and the rope falls off my mouth. “Say sorry.”

“Sorry you didn’t get over forty thousand words. Next week, I’ll do better.” I smirk.

“How did Black touch you?” He grits out. “It shouldn’t be possible, but it happened. Tell me how.”

“I don’t know,” I admit honestly, because I really don’t have a clue. “Now, will you untie me?”

He stares at me for a long time. “Seems like you don’t have a clue about a lot of things, and that doesn’t make any sense. How could you forget?”

“Well, why don’t you just tell me? What’s with all these stupid games between us? Just tell me the truth.”

“I can’t.” He bites out. “You may have forgotten, and I can’t find myself speaking a word of it without feeling like my throat’s going to close up.”

“Who the fuck has been putting spells on us?” I bite out.

“I don’t know,” he mimics me. “Frustrating, isn’t it? I can’t stop thinking about you, and I can’t tell you why. I can’t breathe a word of it.”

My skin feels warm as he stares at me for a long moment. “Did you really poison Lock?”

“Yes. Do you care?” he challenges.

Honestly no, but telling Kane that seems like a really bad idea. He might go around poisoning people I do like. “Do you feel remotely bad about punching the shit out of him the other day?”

“No.” He stands up and walks to the door.

Oh, he isn’t leaving me here like this. “Don’t you dare leave, Kane!”

“Well, getting rid of the bathtub didn’t work, and it makes me sleep badly, knowing my bonded is sleeping on the floor. I have more problems of yours to sort out, and I need to know exactly where you are. You can sleep like that. See you in the morning, bonded.”

I scream at him as he leaves me in his bed, and he walks straight out, laughing. I hate the fucker.

Chapter 16

The dream is different this time. It doesn't feel terrifying like the last time, but it is the same. Not a normal dream—something that feels like so much more. I can't seem to control my body as I stir a spoon around a pot of boiling hot soup. I can even smell the rosemary and chicken, the carrots and potatoes in it. I can feel the warmth on my face, but as I lift my head, I see my reflection in the glass. I'm younger than I thought. I must be about eight or maybe seven. No, I'm seven. My hair is down in thick locks, just as untameable as it is now. This is a memory—but I've never seen it. "There you are."

I turn to see Black coming into the kitchen of a house I don't recognize at all. It isn't the home I grew up in. This kitchen is more like a cottage, with its high beams and brick walls. Black shakes his head like a dog, and he flashes me a boyish grin. Because he is a boy. Black must only be about twelve, and it's startling to see him this young. "Come outside?"

I roll my eyes. "You know I can't. Your aunt will be mad if I leave the pot alone." The boy's aunt is a good woman but strict and scary.

"She won't. She loves you." Black winks. "And I'll sweet-talk her."

Sweet-talking our parents is a thing that only Maz is good at, and he knows it. My mama says he can charm even a mouse, and I don't think she is wrong. Like it's normal, like we have done it a million times, he comes over and slides his damp hand into mine. He leads me out, talking about how good dinner smells, but all I can focus on is him touching me. Even now, even as a kid, he knew he could touch me. How could he forget that? How is it possible? His eyes are so bright and alive, and I have never seen him like this, even for a heartbeat.

"Come on, it's raining." For some reason, that makes me happy as he pulls me with

him, and we go outside without our coats. The rain is heavy and thick, but Black laughs, stealing all my attention again. “It’s a storm. How brilliant.”

“You’re the only person who likes the rain, Black!” I laugh. I look up, seeing Maz, Kane and Vale sitting in the window, their legs hanging out as they watch. I don’t like Vale, but he is one of them and I have to put up with him. Black just laughs more, and he pulls me to him to begin dancing, of all things, his hand clasped in mine. We both laugh as he dances around in the pouring rain.

“I could dance in the rain with you forever!” I shout over the storm.

“Well, you will. Because we will be bonded,” Black shouts back. He sounds like that is what he wants...but the future-Black does not.

“Yes, we will,” I say with certainty. I’m so confused as he continues to dance around with me, spinning me to music I can’t hear. I doubt he can either. I feel nothing but happiness—home. Dancing with Black feels like home.

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I sit up in bed, still feeling rain on my arms, but when I touch them, they are dry. What was that? It felt like a memory, but it wasn't. It couldn't be. Black comes through the door with a tray in his hands. "I wanted to get you breakfast," he claims. No one has gotten me breakfast before. In fact, no one has made meals just for me. Our mortal housekeeper wasn't allowed to feed me meals. My foster mother used to let me eat the scraps of the meals she had bought from a cook in the town. I always wondered why she bothered when our housekeeper made her three meals a day but someone told me she was sleeping with the cook. "It's Sunday so we just have training for the morning. I'll shower and we can head down."

What? I stare at him for a long moment. "Thank you for the food...but why?" I frown. "You have all acted like bonding was the worst thing to ever happen to you, and now you're acting like we are close friends."

Black leans against the bedpost. "I didn't want to bond because of what it means for us...not because of you."

I tilt my head to the side. "What does it mean?"

"Witches have their own seers...and so do the shifters. Our bonding is predicted, and I wanted to avoid the rest." He sighs. "But then I saw you and, fuck it, I lost interest in caring what the seers warned...only that I want to know you. I landed on the bloodstone for a reason, not an accident, Juniper. You want the truth? I'm here. I stayed away because I do that with everyone in case they accidentally touch my skin. I didn't want to hurt you, and now that I know I can't, nothing is going to keep me from you. You are mine."

My face feels warm. “Okay. I always wanted to be friends with my bonded.” He seems to tense at the word friend. “Hey, have we ever danced in the rain?”

He looks at me with a frown on his face. “Not in reality. I dream sometimes that we danced together as kids, but it’s not real. I dream a lot of shit since you came back.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I mean came here. Not back. I think I’m about twelve in that dream, and we are not in the forest, so it can’t be real. I was born here and I’ve never left.”

“Yeah, it must have just been a weird coincidence that I had that dream then, too.” We stare at each other for a long moment, both of us knowing that this is weird. Far too weird.

He straightens. “I’m going for a shower, and then we can go for training. Eat up. I got you everything you like.”

He has. I look down at the plate full of all my favorite foods, including French toast. I frown, wondering how he possibly knew that, as he walks off, grabs clothes, and goes for a shower. I’m too hungry and still feeling really tired despite sleeping. I shove food into my mouth before I go and shower myself, getting dressed, and putting my hair up into a high ponytail.

When I come out, Black’s already waiting for me. “Let’s go. You look very pretty today. You’re going to walk with me everywhere now.”

“I don’t really need an escort, Black.” I shrug. “I’m used to walking alone.”

“That was my error. You should have never walked alone for even a moment, and you will not again. I will be there. I vow it.” He reaches up, touching my cheek. I feel like I can’t breathe. I forget how to as he stares at me. Black looks away first, but he takes my hand, linking our fingers together.

“People are going to think we’re dating,” I mutter.

“Fuck what people think. The only person that matters is you and what you think.” Black shrugs. “By the way, please undo the hex on Vale’s weapons. He is an asshole, but he needs those.”

“He hasn’t apologized.” I shake my head as he opens the door and we head out into the corridor. “So, no.”

Black sighs. “You don’t understand. We all have to be at the top of the leadership board for our aunt and the children she adopts from the war. They need food and supplies, and no one else helps them because why would they? Their own families are hungry enough.” My stomach hurts from the thought. “If it helps, he won’t like that. You can claim to be the bigger person and undo it. That will piss him off without hurting others.”

“I’ll undo it.” I nod at him. “But please tell me more ways to annoy the fuck out of Vale.”

Black laughs low and I grin. We both go silent as we walk into the stadium. Maz waves an arm to call us over, and I’m surprised. He is standing on his own, away from Vale and Kane, who are sitting together on chairs at the side. They both look mad. “Today will be a brilliant way of ruining his life.”

“What?” I ask.

Black doesn’t answer because our tutor is already clapping for silence and we have gotten to Maz. “Good morning class. Today will be focused on bond training. You know the drill.” Great, another day of being sidelined. “Who is going first?”

To my utter shock, Black steps forward. The room goes silent and everyone’s eyes

shoot to me. Even our tutor. “I will. Dragons go first. Every fucking time.”

Is this real? It can't be, he has to be playing me or something.

“I walk on the path with you. In sky, in air, in blood. We are one,” Black murmurs in my ear before he walks away.

Maz looks more unsure, but he turns to stare at me. “I will shift next.” More hushed whispers burst out of the crowd, and Maz follows Black. I feel like time pauses as they walk forward and they shift. My mouth pops open and my jaw might as well drop to the ground. Two massive silver dragons fill the end of the stadium before the open doors, the pouring splintering rain outside hammering on the floors.

My eyes drop to Vale and Kane, who are furious. I stare at Kane for a moment longer, like he might join them and then Vale might stubbornly follow. But they don't move; they just watch me like I'm their enemy. I'm their bonded, this is normal. I don't get why they are so mad. None of us can change this. There isn't a spell for it.

“Congratulations, but move.” Tutor Den nudges my back. A bit of hope, hope that I might have someone to fight in the war with me feels so strange but perfect.

I didn't think this through...I have to ride those massive dragons. In the sky. When I'm scared of heights...well, more of falling, to be honest. I still move, knowing Tutor Den is going to get mad if I don't, and I don't want to blow this chance with my bonded.

Both of the dragons turn their heads to look at me, Black's eyes like diamond gray slits. Maz might just have scars where his eyes should be, but he still seems to know where I am. I don't know which one to get on first, but Black possessively moves closer with a growl burning in the back of his throat. I think that decision's made, especially because then Maz starts walking out towards the forest. Each thump of his

feet on the ground echoes throughout the forest.

I'm not sure where to get on until Maz crouches down, his wing lowering for me. I'm really doing this. My hands are shaky as I move closer, running a hand over his wing. His scales feel hard and tough, and they cover every inch of his wings. This is Black. He isn't going to hurt me. I climb up his wing, which is easier than I thought, and onto his back. I can feel his heartbeat under my boots as I walk across his back and slide into a small groove on his neck, which cups my thighs near perfectly, and I lean forward. The grooves in his back look and feel like he is almost designed for witch riders, and he's easy to hold on to as he turns and starts stomping out to the open doors. Oh fuck. The rain pours onto me for a moment, and it's refreshing for only a second before he jumps into the sky. I scream.

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His massive wings and the force, the sheer power of them, sends us shooting right up into the sky. Into the storm. My stomach fills with butterflies, and sickness rolls in my throat when I stop screaming as he shoots up through the clouds, through the pouring rain and right above them into the bright sunlight. Light pours into my chest from the sun, and Maz's dragon flies up, spiraling around us, a roar echoing in the clear sky. The sunlight makes their scales look like diamonds, and it's beautiful to see. Unforgettable. The bond in my chest, the one to them, feels like it burns to life, and it is filled with joy. I grin as we fly and straighten up, knowing he isn't going to drop me.

Eventually Maz turns and flies back, but Black shoots down, straight into the forest. I nearly fall off, my thighs clinging to him for dear life. I barely see the clearing before he stops, landing on the bloodstone. The same place that we first bonded by the looks of it. The rain is relentless even now, even hours after we took off, and the gray skies do not look so pretty down here. I very ungracefully fall off the side of him, rolling across the bloodstone before he shifts back. His clothes are still there.

"I don't understand how you have clothing when you shift back," I mutter.

"Would you prefer I didn't?" He watches me for my reaction.

Yes. "No, I was just curious about how your magic works." My words falter as he comes closer. And closer. Black doesn't stop until he is right in front of me, our bodies pressed together, our breaths mixing. "What are you doing?"

"I don't care about the rules. I don't care that it's forbidden. All I care about is that there hasn't been a single moment in the day that I haven't thought about you. I'm

telling you, I've never wanted anything for myself. I never thought that there was even a single chance I could have anything or anyone for myself. Then I met you and I was glad when we bonded. I didn't feel what the others did, and I'm so fucking glad I got to get close to you, the most beautiful girl that I've ever seen." He touches my arms. "I want you. Forbidden or not, I don't care. I want you."

He wants me. I want him too. I don't stop him as he slides his hands into my hair, and he finally kisses me. I feel the passion that burns me through each kiss, through each move of his lips against mine. He kisses me in a way I imagine only a dragon can. All-consuming, from his tongue in my mouth to the heat I feel down my body and between my legs. This kiss feels familiar almost, like I've kissed him before, like I know how he tastes. I almost climb him, my legs wrapping around his waist, as he groans at the contact. I can feel him hard and pressed against me, and I purposefully move my hips. "Fuck, you're killing me, Juni."

"I feel like it's a good way to die," I mutter, but I want more. Now that we have crossed this line, I don't want to stop.

Black stops, and he freezes. He turns his head to look behind him, and I follow his gaze to see a man running away. Lock. "What the fuck is he doing out here?" He puts me down. "Wait here. I'll kill him."

"No, wait, don't." I grab his arm. "You know who his mother is, and she will make us all suffer. You can't kill him. I don't think he wants me dead, so he might not say anything anyway."

"Do you love him?" Black demands. "Is that why you don't want me to hunt him?"

"No." I touch his chest. "No, okay? We were a thing once, but that was a long time ago, and it is not now." I smile softly at him. "I like you. I want to know you more, Black."

He kisses my forehead. “He is still dead if he speaks. Not even you can stop me.”

I don’t bother to defend my ex anymore. He isn’t worth it. I’m exhausted by the time I come back to our room hours later. Black leaves me at the academy door to go get us dinner and bring it up to the room, even when I tell him I’m just going to get into bed and fall asleep. Thunder rattles across the sky as I open my door, and my wet clothes are stuck to me. I’m too tired to whisper a spell to dry me.

I go over to my bed and stop. My father’s shirt is on my bed, every stain there that was there before, and there’s a note on it.

“This shirt is now indestructible from fire, magic, or anything else. I made it with the square you had left.”

It’s not signed by anyone, just left blank. I don’t know who did it, but they must be smart and good at spells. There isn’t a spell to fix things like this and remake them, let alone make them indestructible.

I’m staring at the note as the door opens and all four of them come in together, Black carrying a tray of food and drinks.

“Which one of you made the top?” I demand, turning around.

“What top?” Black questions, coming over to put the tray on my bed.

Vale just frowns at me, and Kane shrugs. Not those two.

I look at Maz last and he clearly doesn’t know; I can tell by his face. They still all come over to read the note and look at the shirt. “Well, one of you must have done it, and thank you. I really mean it.”

I can't help the massive smile on my face.

I pick the top up, finding some shorts in my wardrobe before getting changed in my bathroom. For the first time when I get into bed, I sleep peacefully with dreams of all four of them that feel real.

Chapter 17

VALE

I shouldn't have fixed the top and spelled it to never be destroyed. She keeps smiling. And what's worse? I like that smile.

There's something very wrong with me. First of all, I let her win in class. I really shouldn't be doing that. Class has always come easy to me, from potions to history, because my memories are endless. I never forget things—they just stay and linger. They don't go from my mind and sometimes I wish I could forget things. When you've had a hard life, you don't want to remember every fucking detail of how hard that life was. I'd prefer to forget it all.

I'm glad that she likes the top. I told myself I fixed it because I don't like girls crying, and particularly I don't like her crying. But the truth behind it, the annoying truth that irritates me, is that I want her to be happy, and that's wrong. I shouldn't care this much. I should hate her. She forced me to bond with her and she has no idea how to fight. Juniper is a walking death sentence, and the situation is only going to be worse when we go to war. I know she hates me and it's best that she does. She will never know that I spent a week on one of the most complicated spells I've ever made up to make that thing fireproof, destruction proof. I didn't sleep for two nights to perfect the spell. Juniper could put that top in the middle of a war, have a million shifters go at it, and it would still survive. The truth was there was magic in the fibers of the cloth that was left. Powerful magic. It was hard to tap into that magic, to make

something new and old at the same time. Why would anyone leave magic in a top if not to make it indestructible?

I watch as she goes into the bathroom before I decide to leave the room. I need to get away from her and the smiling.

Kane shouts after me. “Where are you going?”

I don’t answer him and slam the door shut behind me. I just need to be away from her. From how she smells so fucking good, from how her smile makes my heart do weird things. I have to admit it to myself—I’m attracted to her. I like that she gives as good as she gets. She really fucking impressed me when she hexed all my weapons, even if I wanted to kill her for it. She is a smart and wicked witch.

I walk through the academy, ignoring anybody who shouts out for me, blanking them all. I don’t know where I’m going until I’m standing in front of the leaderboard and my name is in the top three. Kane’s at the top. That fucker Asher is underneath him and then under is me. Black and Maz are fourth and fifth. All of us keep our names high up, since supplies are sent back to the camp for the foster kids, and they depend on it to stay alive. When we go to the war, wherever we are on this board is what is left for our families to live on. I’m surprised Asher is still up for climbing the leaderboard after I beat the shit out of him for hurting my bonded. He doesn’t get to teach her a lesson—only I do that.

My dragon tells me Kane is coming near, even before he walks into the room with his hands shoved into his jogger pockets. He stops at my side, looking at the board in silence for a long time. “Are you worried about slipping down the leaderboard? I’ve seen you’ve been working hard to?”

“No.” I cut him off. Because of the spell for the top, I’m in third, but after a few days I’ll be back up there. I have nothing to distract myself anymore unless Juniper comes up with another problem.

“Then what is it?” he demands.

“Nothing.” I snap. “I didn’t ask you to follow me.”

“I could tell you’re pissed and when you’re like this, you are hot-headed and reckless. I’m making sure you don’t do anything stupid.” Kane, the leader, the one who feels like he needs to watch us all and fix everything. He can’t fix me.

He’s one to talk though. “Reckless? You poisoned her ex. For what?”

“She smiled at him over breakfast.” He shrugs. That doesn’t sit right with me, and he should be dead. Maz and Kane are half in love with Juniper, and this just makes it clearer. Our bonded group is in chaos and it’s dangerous. “You spelled the top, didn’t you?” Kane asks, but he knows. There is no point in admitting it. “I honestly thought it might have been Black because he’s good with spells and potions, but you’re the best. I should have realized it was you. Why?”

“I have nothing left of my family.” I remind him. “Nothing. Except...” I look down at the gold ring on my finger that I keep cloaked. It can’t be seen by anyone in the academy. It’s rebellious, and they’d try to take it. I drift my eyes away from the ring that my father wore. “I wouldn’t like to lose it. That’s the only reason I helped her.”

“Right.” He doesn’t believe me. “You know—you’re always very intense with your women, but you get bored so fast. She doesn’t give in to you and she challenges you at every moment she gets. I think all four of us have a problem because she’s different and exactly what we need. I’ve realized that I don’t know what I want, but I know I won’t leave her side.”

“You can’t ride with her—you know that, right? It would be making her...” I warn him with a low growl.

“I know what it would be making her. I’ve read the prophecies, I’ve read every bit of it, over and fucking over, from the minute that I was told about them. The minute that we were given the dragon books on our history and the curses of the dragon race. I know what it would make her, and she is not ready for that.” He snarls back. “I’m not ready for that.”

“Neither am I.” I chip. When we all turned eighteen, we were given the history of dragon books—books that were written to warn about every curse that’s ever been laid upon us, every bit of magic used on the dragons to control them. Our ancestors wrote about how they broke the chains, how they freed themselves, only for all of us to be captured again like slaves in this forest. “She’s growing weak without us properly teaching her.”

“There’s nothing weak about her.” Kane reminds me. “I thought you’d know that by now. The truth is, she has become our weakness.” He is right, and I hate her for it. We are the only shifters that don’t get fucked with, and now the witches have a way to break us. She is our weakness, and I know he is right. “By the way, leave the wolf alone.”

“He deserved it.” I shrug. “I don’t care.” The only reason I didn’t kill the wolf for touching her is because he had a point. An irritating point.

“Let’s go fly. It always helps.” Kane suggests. A peace offering.

I look at the board one more time before nodding and going with Kane. Nothing is going to help get her out of my blood and soul. For some reason, the more I argue with her, the more I feel like it’s seconds away before we both slip into something so dangerous that no spell will save us.

Chapter 18

I barely slept. I can't get the kiss out of my head, or the feel of his skin against mine. How the entire kiss felt like... well, familiar. Intoxicating. Addictive... and forbidden. I can't be in love with my bonded, can I? The same questions are flickering around in my mind, and I can't find an answer. I can't find a single reason why my bonded has become an obsession of mine in all the wrong ways. If Lock talks, we will all be punished. Terribly punished and mostly likely killed. There are reasons why we can't be together—our races do not mix. I was born to witches; to continue the witch race and I know that—but I can't stop looking at my bonded. Wanting Black to kiss me again. Wanting so much more. This isn't smart of me. It's reckless and dangerous—everything I'm not. I roll over in bed, looking at Black's empty bed. He left me in our room last night and said he was going to find Lock. I felt like I should have told him not to kill Lock, but that asshole likely would deserve it, and I was too confused last night. I need to find Lock and get him to keep his mouth shut. I'm not sure how I'm going to do that, but I'll find a way. I glance at my watch and figure if I skip breakfast and the shower, I'll have half an hour to find Lock before potion class. I don't want to be late to that class, and Lock will be in it. I just won't be able to talk to him there in front of an entire class.

All my bonded are gone, but Vale and Kane's scent lingers like they slept here. I'm not sure they did. I was so tired that I didn't even look at their beds before I crawled into mine last night. I suspect they are angry still about Black and Maz shifting—and I don't want to argue with them about that this morning. I need coffee, but finding Lock is more important. I throw my clothes on and grab my dagger, sliding it into my waist clip before using the bathroom quickly and rushing out of the room. I knock on Wini's door and wait.

Wini grins. "Hey! Do you want to go?—"

I hate interrupting her, but I have to. "Sorry, but have you seen your brother? I don't even know where his room is, but I need to find him."

She pauses. “Whatever is wrong, my brother is the last person you need, bestie.”

“It’s not like that.” I wince. “I just?—”

She holds her hand up. “No need to explain it. But ask the academy and it should lead you to his room. If not, he might be at breakfast.” She looks back into her room. “My bonded is sleeping in, but if you give me five minutes, I can come with you.”

“That’s okay.” I reach over and hug her. I might end up dead today for kissing my bonded if her brother talks and I want her to know she is a good friend. “Thank you for being my friend. I know I’m strange, but it means a lot.”

“This feels like a goodbye,” she mutters.

I lie. “It’s not.” I pull away from her, unable to look into her eyes. “See you in class.” I leave before she can ask me anything else, before she can work out that I’m scared. Because I am scared. What if they see Black as the issue and try to kill him? I don’t know if I could survive losing one of my bonded, but I’ve read war reports of it being possible when witches are bonded to two shifters. One dies and the witch can survive it—but she goes mad. Her mind is cracked and broken. My heart would shatter with him, and I will do everything I can to make sure I don’t lose him. I have to. I search the breakfast hall and grab a coffee when there is no queue, but Lock isn’t here. The academy is no use, sending me through endless corridors that lead back to the potion classroom and not Lock’s room, no matter how many times I ask. Dammit. Eventually I know I’m out of time and join the class, coming into the room and sitting at my table around the cauldron, while waiting for Lock to come in. Black and Vale stroll in a few moments later, sitting at the same table as me, Vale not meeting my gaze. Black’s thumb brushes mine under the table and I shiver, turning to him. “Did you find Lock?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:59 am

“No, but he is a calculating little shit. He will blackmail us first and I’ll sort him then.” Black confidently shrugs, leaning back in his seat. Headmaster Kim comes in and the room goes silent. He isn’t our potion teacher. My heart freezes in my chest when Lock follows him in—a smug look written over every inch of his face.

Vale leans over. “What the fuck is going on, you two?”

My cheeks brighten as Black looks at him. “I kissed her, and that fucker saw.”

“Why isn’t he dead?” Vale asks with a coldness that I’m not sure I’ve heard from him before. He drags his eyes to me, and for a second, his eyes drop to my lips like he is thinking about Black kissing me. Vale sharply looks away, at the front where headmaster Kim and Lock have stopped. Headmaster Kim clears his throat, and the room goes silent. “Repeat what you told me, Lock.”

He points at Black. “I saw shifter Black Ashveil kissing my fiancé. I believe it was not the first time. They have broken the law, and it is not my fiancé’s fault. Her shifters are manipulating the sweet girl I know and love.”

My eyes flicker to Vale, to Black, to Wini and Asher. Everyone knows now. There is only one thing to do.

“Love?” I almost laugh as I stand up, every single one of my classmates looking at me. My legs shake, but I don’t sit back down. “You’re a liar and you have no proof. You’re just mad that I don’t want to be with you.” I turn to headmaster Kim. “He is a liar, sir.”

The class is silent, and I watch as headmaster Kim looks at me, then at Black, and then Vale. He turns to Lock. “As the son of a very well-respected woman, we have to take everything you say very seriously, Lock. There seem to be two truths here and I will get to the bottom of this.”

Black stands next to me. “What she’s saying is true. Lock has been threatening and accusing us since we first bonded. He has been cornering all of us for weeks and casting spells to hurt us, but we have not reacted.”

He what?

“One of them poisoned my food! I was being sick for a week straight!” Lock snarls. “And then my room keeps locking me out, the creatures don’t help me, and so much more shit that I know is because of them and their attraction to my fiancé.”

I almost smile. I’m kinda proud of my bonded right now.

“There is zero proof that any of that is do to with us.” Black looks down his nose at Lock. “You aren’t worth our time. You are a liar and a cheat... and you lost her. Continuing to be dumb isn’t going to win her back. She is not yours.”

“We’ll do truth spells to get to the end of this.” My heart stops in pure fear. No. “With dragon blood, we will be able to use them on witches. It is advanced magic, but we can make it work.”

Lock looks smug again and nods at me. “I’ll keep Juniper with me until this is sorted. I can talk some sense into her.”

“She isn’t going with you,” Vale stands and moves to my other side, Black taking one possessive step closer to my other. A united front. Something I never thought Vale of all people would ever allow.

“This is disgusting behaviour, and I will not accept it within my academy!” Headmaster Kim shouts, waving his hands in the air. “She is a witch, and she will come with us?—”

“I won’t. I know where I belong and I’m standing here with my bonded.” I lift my chin. I can already hear the chatter of other students, the word “Traitor” echoing around.

Headmaster Kim takes a step forward, and a dragon swoops past the castle, a roar echoing that shakes the very walls. Vale smirks. “I would do that. Kane will burn the room down and you’re not fire proof. Witches make the best burnt snacks.”

“Keep them here and I will get help!” Headmaster Kim runs out of the room, and he is followed by the rest of our class. Wini stays for a moment longer, but Aster pulls her out, her worried eyes meeting mine.

Silence echoes as Lock moves to stand in front of the door. I’m not sure if he is brave or stupid. Vale cracks his knuckles. “Oh, I’m going to enjoy this.”

“You can’t lay one finger on me, or your people will die. My mother would make sure all of them are dead. Kids and all.” Vale flinches, so does Black. Sickness rises in my stomach as Lock looks at me. “You, on the other hand, can come with me and we can just forget all of this. We were good together until Bloodstone. I was coming back for you.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you, Lock. You’re completely insane. Why would you tell them what you saw?” I hiss. “I never thought of you as a backstabbing, betraying asshole until Bloodstone. But love? Trusting you? You don’t know the meaning of it. You just threatened to kill children!” I shake my head. “I’ve never been more ashamed of my own race until right now.”

“Because it’s wrong for you to be with them,” he shouts at me. “You know this deep down. You’ve been brought up to know this!” He clenches his fists. “They are animals! Useless except for the war and when we win, there will be no need for any of them to be alive anymore. Witches will rule. We are the superior race.”

I shake my head. “What I’m feeling isn’t wrong, but you are.” I respond coldly. “Get out of our way.”

He takes a step forward. “No.” He is fast, whispering a spell and chains burst out of the wall, plaster and dust blasting into the air. They wrap around Vale, pinning him to the ground as he roars. Black reaches for him, only for another powerful spell to throw him literally through the wall to the other side, like it’s not a wall at all, and I scream.

“I think you need to learn this time because you never fucking change!” He walks towards me through the fog of dust. He is too powerful for his age...how is he doing this? Magic literally hovers in the air around him like black diamonds, glittering in the smog. “You’ve got too many bonded. If we get rid of this one, then the others will step into place just after that.”

“RUN, HEX!” Vale roars, and he is cut off when a chain snaps around his mouth. His eyes are desperate as he looks at me, and I have to rip my eyes away.

“You can’t kill him!” I don’t move. I stay close to Vale, who is fighting the chains, but there are too many of them, covering his arms, legs, and body.

“I know the spell and I think I’d get away with it.” I run to stop Lock, but he is too far, the whisper of a spell already leaving his mouth. I barely make it two steps before magic explodes and the entire room shakes. I slam straight through the door onto the other side, where I roll to a stop, coughing from the impact. Lock walks out and looks for me. My eyes find Black, passed out on the floor with blood pouring from a nasty

cut on his head, back to the open doorway where magic is dancing a death march in the air. Black, swirling magic is in the air, bound to the room, but it's death magic.

Forbidden magic.

One touch and that's it.

Vale.

I climb to my feet and face Lock, blocking the way. Tears roll down my cheeks and I paint a confused look on my face. "You saved me."

Lock, the fucking idiot, falls for it. His shoulders drop, and he walks to me, placing his hands on my shoulders. "I love you and everything is going to be okay. That dragon will be gone soon, and I will stay with you through it all."

I smile before I punch him straight in the mouth and blood sprays across me. Before he can react, I bring my knee up between his legs and he cries as I make impact and his knees slam to the floor with a bang. Before he can fall further, I grab his hair and lift his head so that he is looking at me. Rage is pounding in my body like a drug. Blood is pouring from his mouth and all I can think is—good. "When I've saved my bonded, I'm going to watch them burn you. They are mine, they belong to me, and you do not get to kill them. How. Fucking. Dare. You." I lift my knee and smash it into his jaw, which cracks under the slam. Before I step away, I pull my dagger out and point it at him. "Say another spell and I'll put this where the sun doesn't shine."

"Don't go in there, it's death magic!" He snarls. I see him going to whisper, but I'm faster. I whisper a spell first, a new silence spell, and his eyes widen as his mouth disappears.

“Bet you didn’t know I make up spells. Good luck talking with no mouth, dickhead.” I walk over and I slam my dagger into his arm. He can’t scream, but he passes out. I turn on shakylegs and walk to the classroom, feeling the magic in the air, the wrongness of it. Black magic is dancing through the air like lost spirits in a forest—glowing and beautiful—but death. They are death and there is no way to stop them known to us. The enchantress made up this spell and uses it in the war. It kills everything.

Vale.

His eyes meet mine in disbelief, in horror... and I think worry as I walk in. I whisper a spell at the chains to undo them one by one, beginning with his mouth. I need to be closer to do the rest. They are too strong, the magic needs touch.

“Fucking get out of here, HEX!” he screams at me.

“You know I don’t listen!” I shout back, fear making my blood feel cold as a black swirl of magic dances around my waist and continues through the air. Close. Too close. “I thought that’s why you hate me so much, Vale.”

I walk straight to him, every footstep shaky. He sounds broken when he speaks next, and it hurts my heart. “For once, just listen and leave. I can survive this.”

We both know he can’t. We both know it’s impossible. When I get close, I throw myself on top of him and the contact is enough for him to pull at my magic, to strengthen his. I whisper the undoing spell with him. “Get off me and let me protect you. Please, Juniper.” He has never said that word to me. “Please don’t break me by staying here. Go away. Fuck, please.”

Please. Please. Please.

I can't let him die, though.

My eyes are wet as I lift my head and touch his cheek. "No. You're my bonded and we might hate each other... but I won't let you die."

"Hex, fuck, don't—" Just as the last chain is undone on him, a swirl of black death magic slams into my chest. Time freezes as I stare into Vale's *name eyes. The black swirl goes straight through my chest, through my heart, and back into the air.

For a moment, all I see are his eyes. All I see is his fear. I've not felt pain for a long time, not really, but this? I scream as pain rips through my body, digging into my bones and swimming through my blood. I slam my hands onto his chest on instinct, a spell easily rolling out of my head, out of my memory like I've done it a thousand times, yet I don't know it. A life spell that shouldn't exist. Instinctively, I pull magic from my bonded and red magic, like pure fire, bursts out of Vale's chest into my hands. Vale lets me drain him of magic, drain all of them as I whisper an endless, timeless spell.

The black death magic turns to ash around us and Vale doesn't ask how. He doesn't ask anything, as he scoops me into his arms. "I'll never let them take you from me."

He won't be able to stop them.

Chapter 19

"Find the tarot cards, please." A female screams to me, from across a blood-soaked field, her body hidden in thick fog. Flowers have grown in the ground, the pink petals moving in the breeze around my legs. "Take them and come to me. We can end this. You were born to end this war... and not for them."

The woman keeps desperately screaming from deep within the fog. I take a step

forward, only to fall straight into the blood until it marks my very soul.

I wake up to the feeling one of my bonded with me when I open my eyes and instantly, I'm not as scared as I thought I might be. I used a new spell, and I don't remember ever making it up. Where did that red magic come from? How did it exist in the first place? Wait, Vale? I feel him down the bond and my shoulders relax. He is alive and likely left me to it. All his promises about never letting me go gone up in smoke. It's Vale. What more could I have expected?

I don't expect it to be Kane lying in the bed with me, his eyes searching my face. "You."

"What fucking spell did you do?" He hisses low. "And tell me you're okay. I know you are healed but tell me you are fine. I need to hear it. I should have been there."

"Don't know what spell or what happened. I swear," I whisper back. But I did know it, like I'd done it before and more than once. "I'm fine. Look, I've made up silly spells for like drying my hair and stuff like that, but that was?"

He touches my cheek. "I always thought when we bonded with you that we were the biggest threat to you. Dragon riding bonded die. They always die, and it's an actual curse. But you stopped an out-of-control death spell with a whisper of a spell. The enchantress uses that spell to hold ground, to win. You just made a spell a hundred, if not thousands of witches, have only prayed to try to make. Died to try to make. Everyone saw you do it." He grunts. "I don't know how you did it, but it was incredible, and you saved him. He's an asshole, but he's like a brother to me. All he's done is treat you badly. Why would you save him?"

"That's between me and him," I answer because I can't explain it. I can't explain how it felt like my heart was ripped out of my chest when he was going to die. I can't explain how this sheer panic that I felt, like—I can't think about it either. Not yet,

when it's too raw. "Tell me the fucker is okay, though."

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He laughs low, and I feel his body vibrate against mine, everywhere we are touching. We are close, so close. “He’s out there defending you to the headmaster with Black and Maz because Kim has called the council. I think it’s best you come into the forest with me and to the clans. I can defend you better there. We all can and make a plan from there. You are not safe here and I’m done pretending I care about anything but your safety.”

“I can’t do that. I came here for a reason and maybe I know more spells... I’ve forgotten somehow.” I shake my head. “Honestly, I think I’m going mad sometimes. I keep seeing these things that aren’t real. Like us living together as kids and planning to be bonded. But how?” I blink when something in his expression shifts.

He searches my eyes. “You really don’t remember what happened, do you?”

“No.” I whisper.

“I wish I could fucking tell you, but I can’t. I’m hexed just as much as you are to forget.” He grits his teeth. “I wish I could make up a spell for it. I want to know what happened that night and why you did it. I can’t stop wondering if I was wrong about what I thought. You don’t seem like a murderer.”

“I’ve never killed anyone.” I state, but the words feel bitter in my mouth. Like a lie.

“It’s sad you don’t remember the many you’ve killed.” Lock’s mother’s voice echoes, and we both turn to see her walking into the room. She isn’t alone. There are five witch guardians behind her, personal protectors of the council members. Extremely well trained and deadly. “I have your other bonded and I have witches in Bloodstone

Forest ready for my command or my death. If either of you harm me or I say the spell, they will kill every shifter child in the clan's school."

Kane and I go still. His eyes drift to me, and then back to Lock's mother. "I never had you down as a child killer, Fasrah."

Fasrah. Her name echoes in my head so many times it hurts. I know that name. Why? How? Her eyes drift from Kane to me. "Say a spell, Juniper. Any move I do not like, and that foster sister you care about is dead."

"You have my full attention and if this is about the spell, I don't know how?—"

She cuts me off. "Shut up, child."

"Don't speak to her like that!" Kane growls, fully protecting me and rising to stand. The room feels warmer, and all the heat is coming from Kane. From his dragon. One spell from Fasrah and Kane collapses with a thump onto the floor.

A scream bursts from my throat as I jump for him and collapse to his side, breathing in a sigh of relief when I see he is just sleeping. "What's going on? I know you're angry about that spell, but I don't remember how I did it and I'm sorry! Don't take this out on my bonded!"

"Of course you don't. I think it was the first year that you made that spell up. Or the second or the third?" She wonders while I stare at her in confusion. "This time they didn't figure out you are their mate, and you have dragon blood." What the fuck? I don't have dragon blood. I'm not a shifter and my parents were witches. I don't know what a mate is. Isn't a slang word for friend? "They usually do, and then everything spirals. This time was a little different and I will study it."

"What are you talking about? I've only been here one year." She is insane.

“You have only been here one year, yes, but you’ve done it over and over. Every time you make the same mistakes. Every single time and we are disappointed. I was hoping you were smarter this time. Lock changed everything by planting false memories of you two being together and we assumed with him as a love interest, you wouldn’t care about the dragons.” False memories? There isn’t a spell for that, it’s impossible. What she is saying is madness. “But then again, you’ve done it again, and we’ll have to reset your memories and all of theirs with the goddess’s three tarot cards.”

“Tarot cards?” I frown.

She rolls her eyes at me as I hunch over Kane. If she touches him, I’ll fight. The threat of the children and Rue is the only reason I haven’t moved. “There are five objects in this world that once belonged to our goddess. The tarot cards are three of them, a lost glass piece is another, and the fifth is.... well, no one quite knows.” She shrugs. “They hold her magic, and we bend it to do this to you because of who you are. Who you have always been.”

“What are you talking about? I don’t understand.” I shake my head.

“There was a prophecy, one written at the same time that the Enchantress took to power. It said that her daughter would, in her first year, change the course of the world. She will fall for love, or she would fall for magic. The prophecy had strict instructions of what to do when you appeared, and we are following that plan.” For a moment, she looks sorry for me, and I hate it. I hate her. “I know this is difficult on you, even when you don’t remember. I’m not sure where you learnt that spell you used today, but it concerns me. I’m half tempted to call my sister and ask her to beat it from you.”

“Melody is your sister?” Lock and Wini’s aunt? That means they are Rue’s cousins. Do any of them know?

“Yes, well, half.” She brushes some dust off a shelf. “Now is the part where you tell me you don’t know what I’m talking about and to leave your bonded alone.” She steps closer. “But I will not do that. Every time that you choose them, every time you fall in love with them, like you do time and time again, you will choose love and not the war. You betray your race. You will choose them and curse all of us and we have to reset the year. We reset the memories of all the surviving students and pull a few new ones in. Winifred doesn’t deserve this, and I’ll make sure you don’t end up friends like the last two years.” She lifts her nose. “The memories, ones that have been coming back, are loose ends that we tend to fix for the next time. That shirt that you wear had enough magic bound into it. It wasn’t meant to be destroyed and when it was, I know you remembered things. The only reason Melody let you keep that top was because of the hex on it. I’m sorry for any discomfort these last few months have caused.”

“I grew up with them.” I whisper, my mind swimming with thoughts. With memories I had in dreams. It wasn’t fake...it was real. My mind has been screaming at me this entire time.

“Yes, your parents were rebels and were encouraging misuse of bonds for their own cause. They were our most trusted guardians until they ran away with you when you turned one. I was thrilled they ended up dead.” She waves a hand and my heart drops. “Well, they weren’t your parents. Just adoptive ones...as close to family as you might get. Your adoptive mother was the same clan as your mother, and it was easy to keep that up.”

“They were my parents,” I snap. “Not adoptive! I look like my mother!”

“No, you do not. You think you do because you have never seen your real mother’s face. I make sure it’s hidden from you in case it triggers your memories.” I’m not ready for any of this, but she keeps going. “Your mother is the enchantress, and you are a halfling born of her bonded dragon who is dead. She has two more bonded alive, and she is looking for you. You will be our weapon to end her and her war.”

I can't breathe as I cling to Kane's arm. "No. You're wrong! You're lying!"

Her head falls to the side. "Why would I bother lying to you now, Juniper? You won't remember this, and I do like seeing the same shock on your face each time I tell you. You are a halfling with incredible power, and the daughter of the enchantress. You are the only one that can take her down, and you will do it. You just won't remember this or them. These last few months will be gone like that." She clicks her fingers. "I forget how old you all are now. We are running out of time before you look in the mirror and know you are not twenty-one anymore."

"You're stealing time from me." I hiss. "And I do not believe you." I may say it, but a part of me screams it's true. She pulls out an old, weathered gold box from her pocket and opens it with a heavy click. The second it falls back, golden light pours from the box and three cards hover into the air. "Stop! Please, I'll do what you want. Just stop!"

I know she won't. This is normal for her, and I've lost years to this. I can't even remember them now, only stolen dreams my mind has clawed back. I'm going to forget them again.

"Yes, you will, child." She clicks her fingers and the blank tarot cards begin to fill with drawings. I can only focus on one, a square of runes, and inside it is Bloodstone Academy. My dragons fly above it, only three of them, like one didn't shift. The power from the tarot cards, the burning light, slams into me and Kane with a force that floats me into the air. I feel claws digging into my mind, deep and punishing, and I can't do anything but scream as my world is ripped away from me.

As my bonded and I forget everything—again. I will find a way back to them. I can't lose them. They are mine.

Epilogue

JUNIPER

Two days later.

Iremember.