



Finding Our Home

(Reclaiming Hope #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Neo~

The first time I saw him, he took my breath away. He'd looked across the courtyard and made eye contact with me—his brown eyes that were bright and shining with silver around the irises—and I hadn't been able to look away. I didn't even know his name. All I knew was that I wanted to find him again and talk to him. The only way I knew how to do that was by becoming a bestower—a human that allowed vampires to feed from them.

Dorian~

His blood was more alluring than any other I'd encountered before, which was saying something. I wasn't that old, but I wasn't that young, either, so I'd seen, and tasted, my fair share of bestowers. But never had I smelled one that made me want to forget the rules, forget the consequences, and take him right here and now no matter who saw. I wanted his blood—and his body.

What will happen when human and vampire come together? Will one night of passion be it for the couple or is it possible that there's more than only lust at play?

Finding Our Home takes place in the Reclaiming Hope world, but is a standalone novella. To read the series in chronological order, read it after Keeping Them Unseen.

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War rages the world; death, terror, destruction, and chaos rule. Humans, spellcasters, and shifters fight on both sides; but the vampires, they fight against the Ministry, against the Dark Witch and her minions, like they have for centuries.

Trust is something that's hard to come by, but vampires, humans, and a handful of shifters have set aside their differences to work together because nothing will stop her from coming. Nothing will stop her from hunting them down.

For now, the Arlin pack, Dregan-den, and Idris-den have found some solace on an island out of her reach. The shifter pack and vampire dens are trying to rebuild and plan an attack, but the different species have to learn to work together after centuries of distrust.

One of the rules the supernatural beings on the island live by: even when the world is in chaos, if the opportunity for a small moment of peace comes your way, you grab on and hold tight because another moment may never come around...

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Neo

The first time I saw him, he took my breath away. He'd looked across the courtyard and made eye contact with me—his brown eyes that were bright and shining with silver around the irises—and I hadn't been able to look away. I didn't even know his name. All I knew was that I wanted to find him again and talk to him.

That was what made me seek out Dorothy, the head bestower on the island. I wanted to offer myself up.

Dorothy stared at me for a long moment before asking, "Do you even understand what becoming a bestower entails?"

"Um... I let the vampires drink from me when they need to?" It sounded like a question, and my voice was small. Shit.

She so didn't look impressed. "There's more to it than that, and to be frank, I don't think you have it in you."

"Dorothy, stop being so cruel," another bestower said. I was pretty sure his name was Remi.

She rolled her eyes. "He looks terrified and unsure. You and I both know that won't fly."

"Well, you're pretty terrifying looking, so I don't blame him." Remi laughed when she smacked his arm, but then he looked at me with a smile. "Why do you want to

become a bestower?”

“I want to help out.” No, I want to meet that vampire and get him to drink from me. I almost groaned out loud at the thought, but somehow managed to keep it in.

He eyed me with a tilted head. “You know we’re not looking, right? We need help in the gardens and fields more than anything.”

“I know, it’s just... I-I feel like this is where I’m supposed to be.”

Remi and Dorothy exchanged a look before she sighed. “If you’re this scared of me, your blood is going to taste sour, so I suggest you get yourself under control before we send you back.”

A small smile formed on my lips. “You’ll let me?”

“We always take donations, so I’ll get you set up,” Remi said, and I frowned.

“Donations?” Crap. That’s not what I want. “So I won’t get fed from?”

“Great, a blood junkie. We don’t want your kind here.” Dorothy was more terrifying than a damn vampire.

“Chill out, Dorothy. If you’re just looking for a high, you won’t find one here.”

“Wh-what are you talking about? What high? I thought I could help. I can’t do much on the fields because I have an old hip injury, so I thought I could be useful here. I assumed the vampires needed people to feed from, so here I am.”

“Oh, sweetie.” She was so condescending. Damn. “It doesn’t really work that way unless you’re friends with a vampire and they ask you. Most of our den have a

bestower they're faithful to."

Remi looked at her. "Most, but not all." He looked at me. "Let me see if anyone's looking, and I'll be right back." He grinned before walking out of the courtyard.

"If you're solely here to take advantage of any of my people, and that means any vampire, shifter, or human in my den, I'll chop your balls off and feed them to you before I remove your head from your neck."

"Wow, babe, when did you become so violent?" A large man walked over and put his arm over Dorothy's shoulders, then looked at me with silver-rimmed eyes and grinned, shooting me some fang. He was a vampire, but not the one I was looking for. He leaned into her hair, and I heard him say, "It's kinda hot when you get all protective of me."

"Not just you, ass, everyone. Get off me before I stake you." She shoved him off.

I thought he would get mad and hurt her, being a vamp and all, but all he did was laugh and lean back in to smack a big kiss on her cheek. Apparently, vampires weren't the scary creatures I always thought they were. Well, not all of them. Some of them looked mean as hell.

Remi came back out, and when he saw the vampire standing with us, he made a face I couldn't interpret. But then I saw the vampire's face and my eyebrows lifted. He looked so happy, his pale face lit up and a huge smile spread over his face, and then he was suddenly standing in front of Remi—must've used his vamp speed.

Remi met the vampire's gaze as the vamp leaned in, and when he spoke, his voice was deeper than it had been a moment ago, "I believe you owe me a round two, Remi. I've been looking forward to it all week."

Remi sighed. “Why don’t you find your own bestower, Jorin?”

“You are who I want.” Jorin’s voice was dripping with so much lust and want and need, I was blushing from where I stood.

“Well maybe you shouldn’t have screwed half the population this week. I said no.”

Jorin hissed loudly, making me jump back, but all Remi did was gently push the vampire out of the way. “I need to find Jael, anyway. Let it go.”

The vampire hissed and spoke in a language I didn’t recognize before disappearing so quickly I couldn’t track him.

When Remi reached me, I asked, “Aren’t you afraid he’ll compel you and make you...?”

“Once you’ve drank enough vampire blood, it’s unlikely it would work except with older vampires, and Jorin isn’t very old. And if he did try it, he would lose his head.” Remi waved it off.

“H-how? What do you mean?”

“Dregan would never allow it to go unpunished.”

“Dregan? The Elder vampire?”

Remi’s brow furrowed as he took me in. “My den leader cares just as much for bestowers as he does for vampires. He would protect me.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He said it with such finality, I had to believe him. “Not all vampires and dens function this way, so we’re lucky. And I know that Dregan won’t even allow any den that treats their bestowers like slaves on this island.”

I nodded because I didn’t know what to say to that. Dregan seemed scary—like, the scariest—from afar.

“If you’re fed on tonight, you have to promise me that you’ll come back here tomorrow so I can make sure you’re okay,” Remi said.

“O-okay.”

“Not because anyone will hurt you, but because there are better ways to replenish your system that you’ll need to know.”

“Okay, I’ll come back.”

“Good. There’s a vampire coming out to meet you shortly. If you two hit it off, he might take you back to his room, if not, you can donate.”

“B-back to his room?” My cheeks flamed and my eyes went wide at the implication.

Remi and Dorothy laughed as Remi said, “To feed, Neo, not for sex. Well, unless you both want it, but that’s not part of the deal, so don’t look so terrified. But, uh, just so you know, being fed from makes you really horny.”

My cheeks flushed deeper. “I-it does?”

They laughed again. “It’s an aphrodisiac.”

I blinked in surprise and embarrassment, but then I turned and saw the vampire I’d

been looking for standing a few feet away and staring at me with a hunger I'd never seen before.

“Would you like to try that out?” the vampire asked with a lust-filled voice. One that sent shivers down my spine.

Oh dear god, what have I gotten myself into?

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Dorian

I could already smell his lust from here and it was enticing. So much so I was having a hard time staying back. Imagine my surprise that it was the same human I'd been thinking about for days; the same one I'd been trying to find since I first saw him.

His blood was more alluring than any other I'd encountered before, which was saying something. I wasn't that old, but I wasn't that young, either, so I'd seen—and tasted—my fair share of bestowers. But never had I smelled one that made me want to forget the rules, forget the consequences, and take him right here and now no matter who saw. I wanted his blood—and his body.

The guy was staring at me with wide eyes and flushed cheeks. He was adorable with his blond hair and blue, scared—yet lustful—eyes. He was pretty small, even by human standards, but he was sexy as hell, and I wanted to devour every inch of him.

A slow smirk formed on my lips when he only stared at me instead of answering, and I stepped closer to him. He gulped loudly, revealing his slight fear and hesitation, so I decided I should take him for a walk before taking him to my quarters. I didn't want to wait to drink from him, but I also didn't want him terrified of me. “Would you like to go for a walk?”

He blinked, like he was coming out of a trance. “A walk?”

I grinned. “Yes, a walk. The night is still young, and the weather is nice.” I stepped closer to him and held out my hand. “I'm Dorian. It's a pleasure to meet you...?”

“Uh... I’m Neo.” He cleared his throat and pushed the hair out of his eyes before grabbing my hand to shake.

We both gasped as soon as our skin touched, and it was like a strange spark shot up my arm and straight to my chest. What in the hell is that? The warmth grew, spreading through my body, and all I could do was stare into his blue eyes. We held our hands longer than we should have, but I didn’t want to let go for anything.

But then he snatched his hand away and stammered out, “N-nice to meet you, t-too.”

I heard some snickering, so I glared over Neo’s shoulder at Remi and Dorothy, but that didn’t stop them at all. Stifling a sigh, I refocused on Neo and asked again, “So how about that walk?”

He nodded and stepped up beside me as I turned and headed out of the courtyard. I was tempted to put my arm out for him to grab or to hold his hand, but I refrained so I wouldn’t make him anymore uncomfortable than he already was.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him wringing his hands and pulling on his sleeves, not to mention I could smell his discomfort since he was so close to me. I wanted so badly to pull him to me and hold him—a feeling I didn’t understand—but I didn’t think he’d appreciate that very much, so instead, I asked, “How did you come to live on the island?”

“Oh, um, well... my village was sorta attacked by witches and the Dark Witch showed up. And, uh, some of the shifters helped me and a few others escape to a nearby ship. They brought us here.” His eyes took on a faraway look, making me regret asking the question. And again, all I wanted to do was hold him.

“I’m sorry. That was insensitive of me. I wasn’t thinking.”

“I-it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. I know most of the humans that weren’t a part of my den were brought here after their homes were desolated. I’m sorry for the horrors you’ve seen, my treasure.” His eyebrows lifted, and his mouth opened at the little pet name. I had no idea where it came from, but since he appeared to like it, I’d have to keep using it.

“Everyone has lost people in the war,” he finally whispered.

“That doesn’t make it okay.”

Smiling a little sadly, he kept walking forward.

I wanted to lighten the mood, so I asked, “Would you like to see my favorite spot on the island?”

“Sure.”

I debated it for a good ten seconds, but in the end, my need to touch him was far too great, so I grabbed his hand and laced our fingers together. I expected him to pull away or get upset, but he gasped, then clung to my hand as tightly as I was clinging to his. With a grin, I pulled him toward the north-east side of the island.

“Are you taking me to the hot springs?”

I smiled. “Yes, but to one in particular that many don’t know about.”

When we walked past the bigger hot springs, I felt Neo tense up, and I knew why. There were several couples having sex and drinking blood in the pools, just like there always was. There were a lot of vampires and bestowers on the island, and not a lot of privacy. When we had time to relax, many came here to bathe and have some fun.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “That’s all... normal.” I waved my hand in the vampires’ directions.

He nodded his head but didn’t say anything.

I need him to trust me. “I can see that you’re uncomfortable, and I’m not sure how to rectify that, but I want to try, so I’m going to tell you a little about myself.” I grinned at him, and he sent a hesitant smile back, making my heart flip in my chest. “My name is Dorian Mortas Kiebusinski, and I’m about one-hundred and eighty, give or take, which isn’t very old by vampire standards, but probably seems old to you. I was turned when I was twenty-two by a woman named Cassandra Tizane Kiebusinski.”

“You have the same last name as your... maker?”

I smirked. “It’s called a sire, and you take on your sire’s name when they turn you.”

“Oh, um, okay.”

“So anyway, she got me into some trouble—she wasn’t a very good person back then, neither was I, truth be told. But when I was shot in the chest, she chose to keep me rather than let me die.” I really didn’t know why I was sharing quite so much information about myself, but his breathing was evening out, so I continued, “She started out as someone I hated, but I grew to love her very much over time. She was killed about fifty years ago by a hunter.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Um, what’s a hunter?”

“Before the war, there were human factions that knew of our existence and killed any supernatural beings, regardless of whether they were good or evil. They were known as hunters. It’s hard to say whether or not they exist anymore since the war has things so... messed up.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Dorian.” His voice was so soft and sweet, hearing my name roll off his tongue warmed me from the inside despite the topic at hand.

“Thank you. I will always miss her, but vengeance for her death was swift.” Maybe don’t tell him about the people you murdered, you idiot. “I was lucky that Dregan took me in when I came to him. He and Cassandra were old comrades of a sort, so he didn’t hesitate to take me in and under his wing. They fought together in The Red War.” At the look on his face, I added, “That’s what the last war between vampires and shifters was called. I guess humans don’t teach you about that since our existence was secret for so long. But there have been many wars and battles between us.” I could tell he was a little overwhelmed, which was the opposite of what I wanted. Maybe I should just shut up. “I think we should stop the history lesson there for today and just enjoy the night, what do you think?”

He licked his lips, and I could tell he was thinking about asking me something.

So I pulled him to a stop, then stepped in front of him, bringing my nose close to his shoulder where I knew he’d be able to feel my breath on his skin. Grinning, I watched goosebumps appear on his creamy skin that I couldn’t wait to sink my teeth into. “I’d be happy to answer your questions another time, my treasure, but we’re almost to the spring, and I’d like to enjoy my time with you rather than bringing up old hurts and devastations.”

“Will there be another time, you think?” His breathing was coming out in quick little gasps, so I knew my proximity was doing exactly what I intended. I might’ve wanted to keep him from being overly scared, but I also wanted to taste more than just his blood. I needed to stay away from heavier subjects and focus on that. Focus on his skin, blood, and the gorgeous blush along his cheeks. He wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

I grinned at him, then cupped his cheek with my free hand since I refused to let go of

our combined hands, and I whispered, “One taste of you will not be enough for me, my treasure.” I rubbed my thumb along his jaw, then over his throat, stifling a moan when he opened his mouth. “After tonight, you’ll have to decide for yourself. I will never force you or ask you unless it’s something you want as well.”

“You won’t compel me?”

“Never, my treasure, never.”

He searched my eyes for a few seconds, then nodded. “Where’s this spring you’re taking me to?”

I smiled and dropped my hand from his cheek, but tugged on his other. “This way.” I pulled him around a rock formation, then between a crevice in the rocks and waved my hand around the small pool—the unoccupied pool. Perfect. “Here we are.”

Neo looked around the small area with wide eyes, taking in all the small flowers and the moss on the rocks around us and the steam coming off the spring and the small, decorative chest on one side that held towels. Everything was glowing in the moonlight. “Wow. This is beautiful.”

I stared at the side of his face, not paying one bit of attention to the pool, and nodded. “It is.”

He glanced at me, then blushed, obviously catching on to my meaning.

Grinning, I forced myself to let go of his hand so I could remove my shirt. Neo’s breath hitched as he looked me up and down. I knew I looked good—I was a vampire, after all, and the vamp genes in my body kept me muscular and bigger built than I ever was as a human, and since I never went long without blood, my dark skin remained dark. I had tattoos left over from before I was turned on my right pec,

around my shoulder, down my arm, and along my rib. Most vampires didn't have any color to their skin or any ink, so I lucked out in that department. And if Neo's face was anything to go by, he thought I lucked out, too.

I shot him a little smirk as I took my pants off—but left my underwear on so I didn't scare him away. There would be plenty of time for that if he was on board with my plan. “You might want to take your clothes off before you get in.” I stepped one foot into the water, then turned around to face him and opened my hands, palms forward. “You coming in, my treasure?”

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Neo

How could someone with such a sweet, smooth, sexy voice be so provocative that he had me blushing again?

I was nervous. God, was I nervous. But I was also excited. This was exactly what I wanted. He was going to drink from me, and I was pretty sure I was going to love it.

He tilted his head. “If you’re uncomfortable, we can do this elsewhere. It’s easier if you’re shirtless because there’s less chance of blood stains since it sometimes drips, but it’s not impossible to do with—”

I cut him off by whipping my shirt off my head and throwing it in the pile with his clothes.

Dorian’s mouth opened and his pretty vampire eyes widened as he took me in. “Wow. You’re gorgeous.”

I was sure he could see my blush, even in the moonlight. “Th-thank you.”

He held out his hand, staring at me with something that looked like awe. “Would you like to join me, my treasure?” Every time he calls me that, my heart flutters.

My heart was in my throat, so I simply nodded, then unbuttoned my pants, stepped out of them, and grabbed his hand. That same strange energy flowed between us where our skin touched. Must be a vampire thing. No wonder people like being fed on, just being touched by him is amazing.

The water was hot and felt great on my skin, but not as wonderful as his touch when he put his hand on my hip and whispered, “Sit and let me know when you’re ready. If you’ve changed your mind, I’ll respect that, but... your blood smells heavenly. I’d very much like to taste it.”

And why the hell did that sound so good to me? “I-I’m ready now.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded, and he smirked at me before pushing me back against the edge of the pool. He stared into my eyes for a few seconds before running his hand through my hair and gently tilting my head to the side. With one last look at me, he leaned in and ran his nose along my neck, making me pant with want and need already.

His tongue brushed my skin, and goosebumps popped out all over me, and then I felt his fangs sink into my flesh. It stung, but when he took his first gulp, it turned from piercing pain to intense pleasure, and we both moaned together. Holy crap!

Dorian readjusted his grip on me, pressing his body close, and making my skin sing with tingling bliss with every small touch. He gulped harder, and I closed my eyes and gripped his hips, letting the feeling take over my body. Oh god. Letting him drink from me is better than I imagined.

He held my head in his hand and wrapped his other arm around my back, holding me securely to him as he drank deeply. I could feel his erection pushing into my stomach, and there was no doubt he could feel mine against his thigh. Every part of my body felt so good, so right that I didn’t even care. There was no embarrassment, only the want and need to be closer to him and to let my blood sustain him.

I wonder if that’s just the venom in his fangs talking? Not that I cared one way or another. I just wanted him in any way he’d have me.

“You taste divine, my treasure,” he muttered against my skin before taking another gulp. “I don’t want to stop, but...” He moaned and took another gulp, then pulled his fangs out and licked my wound before leaning back to look me in the eyes. Vampire saliva had healing properties, so my wound would close up soon. He smirked, and for some reason, seeing the blood—no, my blood—dripping from the corner of his mouth made me groan out loud. His smile grew as he leaned in close to me. “If I don’t stop now, I’m afraid I’ll take too much, and I want you to have energy.”

I groaned again, and he rutted against me, making my cock rub against his leg and his cock against my stomach. He ran his tongue along my shoulder again, probably licking up a drop of blood, but then he trailed his lips up my neck with a barely-there touch that had me squirming and dying to pull him closer.

Holy shit. I’m under his spell, and I don’t want to come out of it.

His nose brushed my cheek, then my own nose, making his lips a hairsbreadth from mine. “Can I kiss you, my treasure? I’m afraid I’m being selfish after you gave me sustenance, but I want to taste your lips just as badly as I want to drink from you again.” His voice was husky and laced with lust.

I groaned again, unable to form words, so I pressed forward, just a hair, and my lips brushed his. We both froze as the strange tingling spread from his lips to mine and all over my body. But then it was like something unleashed inside him because he was grabbing my hair and pressing against me and running his tongue across my lips and rutting his hips. He was kissing me with more passion than I’d ever expected.

The blood on his tongue tasted metallic, but knowing he’d taken what he’d needed from me, from my body, made it freaking hot. He had drunk from me; I’d supplied him with what he needed—that knowledge sent my lust up a notch. Holy hell.

He owned my mouth, kissing me like it was his last breath, like I was special, like he

wanted me. I'd never been kissed like this. I'd never felt more wanted and needed in my entire life.

I opened my mouth to allow access, and the second our tongues brushed, I felt more than heard a deep rumbling in his chest that was sexy as hell.

Dorian startled a little—at what, I wasn't sure—but he shook it off and deepened our kiss, then ran his hands down my back. My chest tightened in a strange way, almost like it was trying to rumble back at him.

What the hell is that?

It freaked me out at first, but Dorian cupped my cheek and whispered against my lips, "It's okay, baby."

I closed my eyes and decided to trust him. As soon as I had the thought, the strange rumble in his chest grew louder, and my answering almost-there rumble grew warm, leaving a quiet comfort in its place as my body lit up with fire.

I thought it might be awkward kissing him because of his fangs, but it wasn't hard to avoid being pierced. Thank God. I never wanted to stop kissing him, but I was dying to taste his skin, too.

His hands were everywhere; rubbing the skin on my back, my sides, my thighs, taking off his underwear, then mine so we were left gloriously naked. His skin rubbing all over mine was making me feel like I was going to burst. When he grabbed my ass under the water, I gasped and broke our kiss to look at him.

He stared back, the silver ring in his eyes glowing bright, and he kneaded my ass cheeks with his hands. "Tell me now if you want me to stop." His voice was deeper, but there was an underlying hiss beneath it. I'd heard of this—his vampire side was

riding him hard, fighting for control. “If we go any further, I won’t stop.”

I swallowed and nodded. “I want you. I don’t want you to stop.”

“Are yo—”

“Don’t stop, Dorian. I want to feel you inside me. Right now.” I’d never been more sure.

He hissed again, then devoured my mouth with his as he ran his finger over my hole before plunging it inside. We both moaned loudly, and the water lapped around us as we ground against each other, and he worked my hole open.

He kissed his way down my jaw and neck, then used his free hand to grab my cock under the water. He stroked me and played with my slit, and all I could do was hold onto him.

But then he suddenly pulled back and bit into his wrist. I was in such a lustful haze that I didn’t realize what he was doing until he held his bleeding wrist up to my mouth and whispered, “Drink.”

I blinked myself out of it enough to ask, “What?”

“It will be... more pleasurable for you if my blood is coursing through your body. And... I want to share this with you.”

My eyebrows scrunched together a little at that because I didn’t understand what he meant, but he looked intense, so after hesitating for a second, I tentatively licked his wrist. I thought it would taste gross, but it was sweet and tangy—did all vampires’ blood taste this good?—so I wrapped my lips around his small cut and gulped in a sip. Dorian closed his eyes and moaned in pleasure as if it felt just as good as rubbing

our bodies together. His chest rumbled even louder, and that sent a thrill through me. I sucked in two more gulps before his wound closed, and I licked up the rest of his delicious blood.

Gripping my face, he pulled me to him, tasting himself on my tongue like I had earlier. He moaned into my mouth and rutted against me with a new vigor.

“Damn, baby, I want to taste every part of you, but I need to take you first. I cannot wait, my treasure.”

I moaned and nodded, gripping his shoulders tighter. He easily lifted me up so I could wrap my legs around his waist as he lowered to his knees in the water and lined his cock up with my hole. I had the fleeting thought that we needed a condom, but then I realized that he was a vampire and couldn’t get or transmit anything. He pressed in past the tight ring, and I hissed in pain. The water wasn’t exactly helping, but he froze and allowed me to adjust as he kissed me and kneaded my ass to help me relax better. Once I did, he pressed in farther, and he moaned loudly, but paused again.

“Fuck, baby, you feel so good.”

I’d expected him to just thrust and take me roughly, but he didn’t at all. He made sure I was okay every step of the way. This wasn’t the vision I had of vampires, but I have to admit that I love everything he’s doing. Little by little, he pressed inside me until he was all the way to the hilt, and I was flat on his lap.

He grabbed me under my thighs while I held his shoulders, and he lifted me before slamming me back over his cock.

“Oh, fuck,” I breathed out before he did it again and again and again.

His muscles rippled and flexed with every movement, and water dripped down his

skin. I leaned in and licked his neck, making him groan and pick up his pace.

“I want to drink from you.” His voice took on a husky quality—and I liked it.

I tilted my head to the side. “Then drink from me.” My voice was so lustful, I hardly recognized it.

He groaned, then leaned in and ran his nose along my skin again. “You’re not replenished enough, my treasure.” He grabbed me, lifted me up, and pushed me against the side of the pool so he was over the top of me. “Let me taste your mouth again.” He claimed my lips before I could respond to tell him that I was replenished plenty, that I wanted him to drink from me again, but then his tongue and lips and cock took over, and I couldn’t think about anything other than how amazing it felt.

“Come for me, my treasure,” he spoke against my lips. “Come for me now, Neo.”

Hearing my name put me over the edge, and I screamed out and shuddered around him, my body quaking, my nails digging into his skin, my come shooting out between our stomachs. Dorian moaned loudly, and I felt his come filling my hole deep inside me and his body trembling around me.

But he didn’t break our kiss. He kissed me through it, making me feel treasured and cherished. He kissed me long after we’d both come down from our highs of pure ecstasy. When he eventually pulled away, he rested his forehead against mine, panting, and we stayed that way for a long time.

He kept his eyes closed, so I was able to take in his gorgeous features. His dark skin and plump lips that tasted like heaven. His messy hair—I must’ve grabbed it at some point—the intricate tattoo on his shoulder. His muscles. Holy hell, he had muscles for days. All vampires did, but being this close and allowed to touch them was crazy.

He opened his eyes and the silver shined bright. “The sun will be up shortly, but I want to wash you before we walk back.”

I didn’t know what he meant, so I simply nodded.

He smiled a little, then gently pulled away. He jumped out of the pool and walked over to the decorative chest, and when he bent over to look through it, I had a perfect view of his ass. I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d ever let me top him. I didn’t typically top, but I had a feeling I’d like it with him.

I shook away the thought and pushed it out of my mind. For all I knew, this was a one-time deal, anyway.

He came back over with a bar of soap, a washcloth, and two towels. He set the towels down by our clothes, and got back into the water with a small smile. “I always keep my trunk well stocked.”

That probably means this is where he brings all his bestowers. I frowned at the thought. Ugh.

Dorian’s smile turned into a smirk as he lowered into the water in front of me. “You’re the first human I’ve brought here, but there are a few other vampires that know of this place.”

“Oh.”

He chuckled, then wet the soap and washcloth before lifting them in front of me. “May I?”

I was sure my eyebrows were high on my forehead. “Uh, sure.”

He rubbed the skin on my chest with the washcloth, and when I went to take it from him, he paused to look into my eyes and softly say, “Let me take care of you, my treasure.”

He began washing every inch of my skin, and I could only sit there and let him. He was so gentle and kind and nothing like I thought he’d be. He even washed my hair, and seemed happy to do it.

When he took special care to wash my hole, he whispered, “Did I hurt you too badly?”

I shook my head. My stomach was a bundle of nerves because I’d never in my life had someone treat me like I was special.

“My blood should help with that.”

“I-is that why you told me to drink from you?”

He smiled. “That’s one reason—the main one, yes. But it also feels good, and sharing blood with my lover is something I’ve always loved.”

I nodded once, then looked away.

Dorian cupped my jaw and turned my chin to face him, then he leaned in and kissed my lips softly. “After I wash, we need to head back, but I’d like to show you where my room is in case you want to return tomorrow night.”

“Do you want me to?”

“Very much.”

“Then I’ll come back.”

“Good.” He blew out a relieved breath, then started washing himself.

“I can do that.”

He shook his head with a smile. “I like seeing you relaxed and cared for.”

I blinked at him. Is he serious?

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Dorian

Once I cleaned myself off, I wrung out the washcloth and stepped out of the pool. Grabbing a towel, I made my way back over to the chest to return the soap, then I laid the washcloth on top of it to dry.

Holding out my hand to Neo, I pulled him out of the pool and wrapped him in the other towel to keep him warm and dry him off.

Taking care of my lover to this extent wasn't something I typically did. I wasn't cruel, but I didn't go around bathing them, either. Something inside of me was telling me to care for him. It was rooted deep within me, and after hearing my chest rumble the way it did, I was pretty sure I knew what.

But that wasn't something you brought up only hours after meeting. Especially not to a human that had no idea about my world.

"My blood should help keep you warm," I told him after I'd dried him off and he was dressing. "But tell me if you get cold on the way back, okay?"

He looked at me like I was crazy, but he nodded.

Once we were both dressed, I kissed his lips and grabbed his hand to lead him back to the castle where all of us in Dregan's den slept. It was baffling that I technically lived in a castle now considering I'd lived underground for about fifty years before we'd escaped to this island. Not that the castle really looked like a castle anymore seeing how old it was, but we were working on rebuilding it. Our den was large and we

needed to stay close together, so it was the best choice for us. The shifters had one corner of the castle so Dregan and his True Mate, Christopher, could stay near both their people. But the rest of us tended to steer clear of them.

We passed the other hot springs, and they were empty since it was so close to dawn. We walked beside one another, and this sense of contentment filled me, and I knew without a shadow of a doubt that Neo was meant to be in my life.

Now I just had to find a way to keep him.

But not today. Today, he needed time to process being fed from for the first time, and I knew that Remi and the other bestowers would want to fuss over him and make sure he was okay. I could tell that Remi had taken a liking to him, and even though Remi hadn't been a bestower very long, the other humans looked up to him. Plus, Neo hadn't eaten anything all night. Shit. Maybe I should've gotten him food.

As much as I wanted to ask him to come to bed with me, it wasn't right to take that time with the others away from him.

"I'll be sure to have food brought to my quarters tomorrow night for you," I said as we approached the castle.

"Oh, um... thank you."

"I'm sorry I didn't think to bring any with us. You're probably famished. I have water in my room, so when we get there, I can give you that, at least."

"That would be great, thank you. I'm a little hungry, but I'm not starving or anything." He sent me a small smile that made my dead heart flip.

And I couldn't help it. I had to taste his lips right that second.

So I did.

Pulling him to a stop, I cupped his cheek with my free hand and slowly kissed him, savoring the flavor. I could taste myself on him, I could smell myself on him, and that made the beast inside me more content than ever.

When I pulled away, he smiled at me, so I smiled back, then tugged him inside the building and away from the rising sun. There were lanterns lit in the halls to light the way for the humans that lived with us. As a vampire, I could see in the dark, but it was nice having a little light. We'd bricked up the windows on the lower levels of the castle so there was no chance of anyone getting hurt from the sun.

I stopped at my door and unlocked it before lighting a sconce on the wall with one of the torches in the hall, and once I returned it, I fixed Neo a glass of water. There was an old armchair in the corner, plus my bed and a dresser, but not room for much more than that. Neo sat in the armchair, so I claimed the bed, even though I wanted to pull him close to me.

"Can I ask you a question that might be rude?"

"We don't sleep in coffins." I patted the bed beside me. "I sleep on a bed, just like you."

He smiled and rolled his eyes. "I can see that. Although, I've been in a bedroll on the ground, not an actual bed."

I frowned. "They didn't give you a bed?"

"They ran out. They're making more, but I let everyone else get theirs before me because I'm used to sleeping on the ground."

“What does that mean?”

He shrugged and sipped his water. “My village was poor—really poor, and specifically, my family was. I had a brother and two sisters all living in the same house with our mother since my father died when I was young. It’s not like there have been mattress stores open in the last decade, so I got the floor.” He shrugged, but looked sad, and something inside of me squeezed tight.

“You lost your whole family?”

He nodded, then sent me a sad smile. “We tried to fight them, but we didn’t have the right weapons the—what are they called?”

“Holy Tree-infused.”

“Yeah, that. We didn’t have any, so nothing we did slowed them down. They just kept coming at us. I even...” He cleared his throat. “I even sliced one of the witch’s throats and she didn’t stop, she... she still killed my... my brother.”

I jumped from my seat in a flash and knelt in front of him, cradling his head in my hands before pulling him into a hug. “Oh, my treasure, I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

He shook his head, but wrapped his arms around my waist. Even though I was squatting down, I still pulled him onto my lap and rubbed his back and kissed his hair, and after a few minutes, he muttered, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to cry on you... I’ll... I’ll understand if you don’t want me to come back.”

I gasped and pulled back to make eye contact with him. “Why would you say such a thing? I want you to come back. Nay, I don’t want you to leave at all.”

“Wh-what?”

I sighed and leaned my forehead on his. “I don’t want you to leave, Neo, but I’m afraid I can’t ask you to stay all day with me. But... perhaps you can stay for a little while and lay with me?”

“What?”

I leaned back again and took in his pretty, puffy face, then wiped his tears off his cheeks. “Would you stay in my bed for a few hours? I can ask someone to bring your meal here. I want you to stay all day, but the other bestowers will want to speak with you since last night was your first time.”

“I’m not hungry, so... laying down sounds nice.”

I kissed his forehead, then scooped him up and carried him to my bed where I laid us both down, our heads on my pillow, facing each other. After I brushed my fingers through his hair, I whispered, “What was it that you wanted to ask me?”

“Huh?”

“When we came inside, you said you had something to ask me that might be rude.”

He laughed a little. “Oh, right. Um... I feel kinda dumb asking now, but... I was gonna ask you if vampires really, like, explode in the sun or whatever?” He let out this adorable unsure laugh that made me kiss his nose as I chuckled.

“You can ask me anything you’d like, okay?” After he nodded, I answered his question, “Vampires don’t just burst in a puff of ash like the old movies used to show. It’s more like we’re allergic to it and with enough exposure, we’ll die. And it’s extremely painful. I’ve been burnt more than a few times over the years.”

“Oh wow. I’m glad you heal quickly.”

I smiled at that. “Me too, although sun exposure heals slower than other injuries, however, it’s not as long as it would take a human to heal from severe burns.”

He nodded, then suddenly slapped his hand over his mouth, trying to cover up a yawn. I laughed at that, then leaned in to kiss his lips again and whisper, “Go to sleep, my treasure, and when you wake up, I want you to find Remi so you can get some food and anything else he thinks you need.” He nodded, but I had to make sure he understood exactly what I meant. “I’ll likely still be asleep—my body will be still, like the dead.” He nodded, so he must’ve already known this. “But I don’t want you to wait for me, okay? I’m worried that you haven’t had anything to eat.”

“I’m fine.”

“Promise me you’ll leave to get food and find Remi.” I almost wanted to compel him, but I didn’t think he’d appreciate that afterwards if he realized what I’d done.

He searched my eyes for a few seconds before smiling softly and nodding. “I promise.”

“And do you promise to return to me once the sun goes down?” I ran my fingers through his hair.

He nodded again, this time without any hesitation. “If you still want me, then yes.”

I hissed and tucked my face against the side of his neck, letting my fangs graze his skin as I muttered, “I want you more than anything.”

He shivered in pleasure, making me smile with the knowledge that I had that effect on him.

I licked his skin and moaned at the taste, then leaned away and laid my head back on the pillow. He looked disappointed, so I ran my thumb over his lips. "You haven't eaten." I smirked. "But perhaps I can give you a little something, after all." I bit into my wrist, then pushed his shoulder so he was flat on his back, and I could hold my wrist to his lips. "Drink up, baby. Drink, and then rest."

He eyed me briefly, then put his lips on my wrist and gulped down my blood. I groaned at the sight and willed myself to have enough control not to take advantage of him. He needed to rest and he needed food. My blood would hold him over, but he still needed those things, and I wouldn't have him hurt or hungry or exhausted because I couldn't keep my lust in check.

That rumble started in my chest again, and I could feel his chest vibrating back. Knowing exactly what that meant made me almost giddy, but I held back so he wouldn't think I was some crazy vampire he wanted nothing to do with.

When my wound closed, he licked up the blood, then faced me, looking shy with his flush skin. Pulling him into my still rumbling chest, I wrapped him in my arms. The bed was so small, I knew he could feel how badly I wanted him, but I simply held him in my arms, and surprisingly, my monster within was okay with that. The beast was okay with knowing that Neo was close and safe and that my blood coursed through him. Which could only mean my theory was right.

I was already so far gone over this little human that I hardly knew. But I was looking forward to learning every little thing about him. If I had it my way, Neo wouldn't need to wait for a bed because he'd be sharing mine from now on.

I could only hope that he'd be accepting when I told him exactly what was going on and exactly who he was to me.

Kissing the top of his head, I settled in for sleep with my little human softly snoring

against my chest.

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Neo

I woke up, still snuggled against Dorian's chest—his very still chest. I'd been warned about this when I first started talking about the idea of becoming a bestower, so I shouldn't have been surprised. But hearing that they were still like the dead and feeling it against my body was completely different. He wasn't breathing, he had no heartbeat—well, actually, that wasn't true. They had a heartbeat, but it was so slow it would go hours without beating, and apparently when they slept, it was even slower. They didn't actually need to breathe to remain living—or undead—but it helped their bodies and was a habit left over from their human years, so they still breathed when they were awake, but not when they were sleeping.

So it felt like he was dead. And even though I knew he wasn't—if he were, he'd be turning to ash—my stomach clenched and it felt like my heart was in my throat.

He's not dead, he's not dead, he's not dead.

Dorian had me caged in completely, so once I calmed my ass down, I lay there for a few minutes and breathed him in. He smelled good. I didn't expect him to smell good; I'd thought they would smell like... the dead. I sighed to myself. I still had a lot to learn about vampires, that was for sure.

My stomach suddenly growled so loudly, I startled in the quiet room, and Dorian's eyes popped open. Before I knew what was happening, I was flat on my back with a vampire hunched over me. For a brief second, I was afraid he was attacking me, but then I realized that he was actually huddled over me like he was protecting me from some unseen threat.

He took in the room, and I said nothing as my heart raced. Dorian's eyes were glowing, and he had this look on his face that was pretty damn terrifying. Like he'd kill anything that crossed his path. So I held as still as I could and tried not to pant too loudly.

He hopped out of the bed, but stood there with his back to me for a few seconds before he walked to the door and checked in the hallway. When he turned around, he scanned the room again, then focused on me. After taking me in, his face softened a little, but his voice came out gruff and angry. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I shook my head. "I-it's fine." I sat up, bent my knees, and wrapped my arms around them.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then opened them and stepped closer to me. "I thought you were in danger."

He thought I was in danger? Not himself?

"Something startled me awake. Usually when that happens, it's because we're being attacked. I had to make sure you were safe."

"Wh-why?"

He took another deep breath and stepped close enough to run his fingertips over my cheek. "I care for you already."

My eyebrows rose. "I haven't even known you for twenty-four hours."

He smiled a little. "I know, my treasure, but I hope in time I'll know everything about you."

I really had no idea what to do with that, but my cheeks flushed with embarrassment because he looked so sincere.

He sat beside me and looked straight ahead. “I’m coming on too strongly. My apologies, Neo. I’m not used to navigating the human way of thinking.”

That was... an odd way to put it. “You’re, uh, fine.”

He smiled a little, but after a second, it turned to a frown. “Do you know what woke me?”

My cheeks heated even further. “Um... my stomach growled.” I cringed, thinking he’d get mad.

To my surprise, he burst out laughing. “Oh wow. Okay.” He chuckled and turned to me. “You need to go eat.”

I nodded. “Okay. Uh, you want me to meet you back here later?”

“Or I can come to you. Would you like me to meet you at your quarters?”

I tried to stifle a smile, but it popped out anyway. “I don’t really have quarters. I’ve been staying in the large rec room with the others from my village and anyone that’s waiting on a home.”

“You don’t even have a room?” He frowned.

I shook my head. “No, but there are a lot of people working on building huts and things. There’s a list of people ahead of me, so it’ll be a while before I have a place of my own.”

His frown deepened. “I didn’t realize that many were still waiting.”

“Well, new people tend to arrive on the island when the ship goes to shore. They’re building fast and repairing old homes and apartments. Families get the homes first, so... there’s a whole system.” I waved it off because it wasn’t worth getting into right now. “Anyway, I’ll probably just go over to the courtyard after I eat.”

“I’ll find you tonight. Is that alright?”

I grinned. “Sure.”

He smiled, then leaned in and kissed me gently on the lips. “Until tonight, my treasure.”

“Until tonight.”

With much difficulty, I made my way out of his room, shutting the door behind me. I knew he needed more sleep, and truth be told, I did too, but there was no way I’d be able to sleep right now. Not when I was starving and excited about what happened last night and what would happen tonight.

After I ate, I sought out the other bestowers like I was told to do. I didn’t search for Dorothy, though, I searched for Remi. And once I found him, we talked for a long time. So long, in fact, I felt like he could become a good friend.

“Oh my god, Remi, it was... perfect,” I said as I fell back on an old couch beside him. I couldn’t believe I was telling him all about my night, but he’d already told me about his first time being fed from with a vampire named Jael.

Remi looked amused. “I told you it’d turn you on.”

“Mm. But it’s not only that. It was so... so intimate or something.”

“I’m glad he treated you well. It isn’t always like that with some vamps.” He shrugged when I looked at him.

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s only been like that when I’m friends with him or her. There were a couple times when I let a vampire I just met feed from me, and it felt good and everything, but it didn’t feel... special.”

I nodded. “I guess that makes sense.” Sighing, I looked up at the broken ceiling. “That rumble thing he did with his chest was really sexy, and I swear it felt like my chest was trying to rumble back.” I laughed. “That probably sounds insane, but I swear that’s what it felt like. Gah! I really loved that rumble thing.” When Remi didn’t say anything, I turned my head and found him staring at me with wide eyes. “What?”

“I don’t know what rumble thing you mean.”

My brow furrowed. “It started the first time we kissed. Like, right after he fed from me, we kissed, and his chest, like, rumbled so deep, I could feel it more than hear it. Then when we were you know , it rumbled the whole time. And again when we were in bed or whatever.”

He shook his head. “Nope. No idea at all.”

I blinked at him and slumped down on the couch. “Oh.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. I’ve only been a bestower for about a year, and I haven’t had a ton of vampires feed from me, so it could just be a... Dorian thing or

something that vamps do occasionally, I dunno.”

“Oh.”

“We can ask Dorothy about it if you want?” I could feel his eyes on me, but I didn’t look at him.

“No, no. That’s okay. I think I know someone I can ask.”

“Who?”

I stood up. “Chris.”

“Chris who?”

“The shifter.”

“Wait a minute. You know Chris? As in Christopher, the den leader’s True Mate?” His eyes were wide again.

“Yeah, he helped me get away from the witches when they attacked my village. He saved my life.”

“Oh wow. Um, yeah, go talk to him. I’m sure he’s more knowledgeable than any of us.”

When I looked back at him, I noticed how uncomfortable he suddenly seemed, so I asked, “You okay?”

He waved me away. “Yeah, I just don’t think Christopher likes me very much.”

“Why? He’s like the sweetest person I’ve ever met.”

“I know, but... he and Jael don’t get along, and since Jael is my main beholder, he kinda keeps his distance.”

“I haven’t even seen Jael yet. I’ve heard of him, but haven’t seen him for myself.”

Remi smiled a little sadly. “He’s been keeping to himself since we arrived here.” He took a deep breath and blew it out. “Honestly, I miss him. He won’t even drink from me.”

I frowned at that. “That sucks.”

He shrugged. “It’s fine. I just really like him, but he’s been dealing with a lot of stuff, so I get it. I just have to make sure he’s eating.”

My frown deepened. “You have to take care of him?”

“No, but I want to.” He smiled sadly again, then made a shooing motion with his hand. “Go find Christopher and find out what that rumble thing’s all about.”

“I’ll see you later.”

“Drink lots of water today, and make sure you eat before he drinks from you again, and eat again immediately after. But water. Drink water.”

I laughed. “I got it, Remi. You’ve only told me fifty times.”

He chuckled. “Well, we had a bestower pass out on us a few weeks back because she didn’t drink enough water. Oh my god, Dregan was so pissed. Her beholder got ripped a new one for not making sure she was cared for.”

My eyebrows rose, but I simply nodded. “Good to know.” I waved at him and headed toward the shifter area. It wasn’t like the island was divided or anything ridiculous like that, but the shifters tended to hang out in one area and the vampires in another. They didn’t mingle very much. At least not that I’d seen.

Right before I turned the corner, I heard Chris’s voice say, “Hey, Neo!” And as soon as he was in sight, he rushed over to me and pulled me into a hug. I hugged him back because I was finally used to getting this greeting.

That was another difference between the shifters and vampires. Shifters were very tactile; always hugging and touching and rubbing your arm or back or neck. It was really nice once you got used to it, but it was honestly a little shocking at first. Vampires aren’t like that at all. In fact, they seem to be the opposite; always standoffish and distant. Except for Dorian last night. He was sorta all over me... and I’d loved every second of it.

“How are you doing, Neo? Are you hurt? I smell blood.” Chris frowned and started checking me over for injuries.

“No, I’m not hurt. I must’ve gotten a little blood on my clothes or something. Um... I was, uh, with a vampire last night.” For some reason, that was embarrassing.

Chris’s eyebrows rose high on his forehead. “Oh. Did he close the wound for you?”

I shrugged because I hadn’t checked, and it wasn’t like there was a mirror hanging anywhere.

“Where’d he bite you?”

I pulled my collar down. “My neck.”

Chris inspected it for a second, then nodded. “Looks healed. Good. I would’ve had some words with your beholder.”

“Hey, Neo!” Spencer, a shifter in Chris’s pack, called out. “Stop hogging him, Chris.” Spencer came over and gave me a hug, too.

The pack never strayed far from each other, so soon I was getting hugs from the rest of the Arlin pack; Teagan, Cameron, Nate, Tre, Kai, Patty, Zeke, and the young wolf, Felix, that had been stuck in his wolf form for years.

After everyone greeted me, Chris put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Why don’t we go for a walk?”

“Sure.” Blowing out a relieved breath, I followed after him with a little wave to the others. I didn’t want to have this conversation with an entire pack of wolf shifters.

Once we were close to the water, Chris asked, “Which vampire drank from you?”

“Dorian.”

He nodded. “He’s a good guy, but tends to stick to himself lately.”

“He was very kind to me. I, um, I like him a lot.”

Chris smiled at me. “That’s good.”

We walked for a bit in silence, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. That was one thing I loved about Chris, he never rushed me and was always patient, allowing me to gather my thoughts. I said, “I have a question for you.” He nodded, so I continued, “I mentioned it to Remi, but he didn’t know what I was talking about. Okay, so... the first time Dorian and I kissed...” My whole face burned so hot, it was probably on

fire. Just get it out already to end this. “He, um, sort of rumbled. I mean, like, his chest made this rumbling sound, and it felt like my chest was trying to rumble back.”

Chris stopped walking, and when I turned to him, I saw his soft blue eyes staring at me with something that looked like shock. Then a slow smile spread on his lips and he grabbed my shoulders. “His chest rumbled? Like deep, really deep?”

I nodded.

“And yours tried to rumble back?”

I nodded again.

“Oh my god, Neo, do you know what this means?” He was yelling now.

I shook my head.

“Holy shit. You found your True Mate!”

“I found my what?”

“Your True Mate!”

“I don’t... I don’t know what that means.”

“Oh, that’s right, you humans don’t call it that. What do you call it? Uh... soulmate? Dorian is your soulmate.”

I wrinkled my nose. “What in the world are you talking about?” I’d heard the term before when people referenced Dregan and Chris as a couple, but I’d assumed it was some weird shifter or vampire name for being married or something.

He sighed. “I’m not sure why some humans don’t believe True Mates exist, but they do. I know because Dregan is mine. If he wasn’t, his bite would kill me because vampire bites are poisonous to shifters—as in, we die. If he wasn’t my True Mate, I wouldn’t be able to hear his thoughts in my mind or have him hear mine. Which, by the way, woke him up because I’m so excited for you.” He laughed and grabbed the back of my neck, squeezing it.

“And you think Dorian is my True Mate?”

“Yes. That rumble that you heard? That only happens when we find our True Mates and connect with them. My chest rumbles for Dregan, and his does for mine. It’s leveled out and doesn’t happen as often now that we’ve completed our bond, but it’s still there.”

What the heck is he talking about? I need to sit down.

Instead of heading back to find a seat, I just planted my ass right there on the grass.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I mean, I think so. I’m just shocked, I guess. I don’t know what to think.”

Chris sat beside me. “This is something to celebrate, Neo. You’ve found your True Mate—the person you were destined for; the person that was made for you. Not everyone is as lucky.”

I nodded my head even though I still didn’t know what to think about that.

Did I feel a connection with Dorian even though we’d just met? Yes, absolutely. But could he really be my True Mate or whatever the hell it was called? Did I even believe in soulmates?

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Dorian

Jumping to my feet, I woke for a second time when my door creaked open. I had the intruder pressed against the now-closed door with one hand around his throat and the other pressing his chest back as hard as I could. It took a second for me to realize it was Dregan, and as soon as I did, I dropped my hands, backed up, and bowed my head.

“My apologies, my liege.”

Dregan waved me off. “I walked in unannounced, no apologies are necessary.”

I bowed my head again.

Dregan walked in and looked around my small room before sitting on the armchair. I had no idea what he was doing here, so I sat on the edge of my bed and waited. He crossed his ankle over his other knee and leaned back with his hands steepled in front of him. “Christopher has reason to believe that you’ve found your True Mate.”

“I met a human last night named Neo, and I felt an immediate connection. I saw him from a distance a few days ago and had been looking for him, but he found me first. Last night, my chest rumbled, and I felt his answering.”

Dregan nodded, then smiled, just a tiny bit—he’d never been one for showing much emotion. “That’s what I thought. Congratulations, Dorian. I’m happy you found him.”

“Thank you, Elder.”

He gave me one short nod. “I wanted to talk to you about turning him.”

“I haven’t even told him we’re True Mates, so—” He held up his hand to stop me, so I snapped my mouth shut.

“The urge to turn him will grow stronger every day, especially because he’s a human and you’ll feel like he needs the strength and healing abilities of our people, but I need you to remember that it takes time to build up a supply of your blood in his system. The longer you have him drink from you, the better.”

I nodded. “I understand.”

“Good.” He stood, so I followed as he said, “I have something to show you, but you’re sworn to secrecy.”

My eyes widened a little, but I nodded. “You have my word.”

He leaned in so his eyes were close to mine. “Promise that you will tell no one other than your True Mate.” He was compelling me. Or trying to. It wasn’t as effective on other vampires, but because of his age and the fact that he was an Elder and the den leader, he had more power than any other vampire on the planet. Which meant that his magic was practically blowing me backwards. I didn’t think I’d be able to disobey him even if I wanted to—which I didn’t because I trusted him with not only my life, but my True Mate’s as well.

“I’ll tell no one other than Neo.” The fact that he’d included my True Mate in this secret was one reason I loved Dregan dearly, and why he made such a good leader. He’d never expect someone to keep a secret from their mate.

“Good.” He nodded and started to turn around, but paused and sighed before turning back. “Christopher told me I should apologize for compelling you without warning you first, so... I’m sorry.” Must’ve been talking to him through their link.

My eyebrows rose higher than ever. “Oh, it’s okay. I understand why you did.”

He nodded at me. “You’ll understand further when I show you. Your mate is with mine, so once I explain a few things, Christopher will bring Neo to you.”

“Is he—”

“He’s fine. Healthy and safe. I should have told you that immediately. He’s safe. My mate won’t let anything happen to him.”

“Thank you, Elder.”

He gave me another short nod, then headed out the door. I stayed close behind him as he walked through the halls. Most people moved aside when he came through, but a few that knew him better said hello. When we passed Remi in the courtyard, Dregan grabbed his arm and asked, “Have you seen Jael?”

Remi shook his head. “No. He was already gone when I dropped off a glass of blood in his room.”

Dregan sighed, but cupped the back of Remi’s neck. “Thank you for caring for him.”

“My pleasure.” Remi smiled, but it looked a little sad.

Then Dregan was off again with me trailing behind him. We passed the small town we were rebuilding, then walked into the wooded area in the center of the island. No one ever really traveled deep inside the forest, so I was surprised Dregan was leading

me there. We walked between huge oak trees, and a sudden icy fear wrapped around my whole body, making me freeze. A strange fog surrounded me, blocking out the moon and hurling me into total darkness. Even with my vampire eyes, I couldn't see anything. Not one damn thing. Holy hell. I can't go any farther. I need to turn around. I need to run and never come back here again.

A hand touched my arm, making me jump and try to scramble back, but the hand clutched me hard enough that I couldn't get away from it.

“Dorian, close your eyes.”

Trusting Dregan, I did so and listened to his voice.

“Nothing will harm you. This is simply one of my wards. They grow stronger every day, so I didn't realize they'd grown this far out.” He said a few words under his breath, but I was too distraught to understand them. “Take a breath and open your eyes. You should be immune to them now.”

I blinked my eyes open, and was relieved to see the forest around us.

“Are you okay?” Dregan asked.

“Yes.”

“There are more wards up ahead, but I'll try to catch them before you cross them.”

“What about Neo? Will he be okay?”

“Christopher knows what to do and will make Neo immune. No harm will come to him.”

We walked for a few more minutes, stopping four more times so Dregan could mumble words with his hand on my arm making sure I could pass the wards. Whatever he was showing me must've been extremely important. Never in the time I'd known him had he compelled me or any of the vampires I knew like that, let alone have this many wards up except around our old home. I had no idea what could possibly need this much security.

Finally, he led me to the edge of a clearing, but he turned and blocked me from entering. "Do you know the story of the Holy Tree?"

"Of course." When he didn't say anything, I added, "It's the magical tree in which vampires were born, but it was destroyed by the Dark Witch about twelve hundred years ago."

"Correct. The Holy Tree was a place of honor, so when Jacqueline passed away, her village buried her body there because she was so beloved. They had no idea that she would emerge a week later as something else. The Holy Tree gave us eternal life. When it was still whole, any that we buried beneath Her would return to us as vampires. She was beautiful and strong, and we created many vampires in Her image. She blossomed at night, so we mirrored Her and became creatures of the night as well. She was light and magic and pure. But the Dark Witch took that from us. She burned Her down and destroyed our light. But the Holy Tree still found a way to fight back. Her ashes were so pure that they burned the evil witches. I collected Her ashes and had weapons forged. Did you know that I was there when She burned?"

I shook my head. "No, I didn't know."

He nodded and looked off to the side for a moment. "It's something I still have nightmares about." It surprised me that he admitted it, but I didn't say anything. "I collected as much of the Holy Tree's ashes as I could, this is no secret. When I did it, I didn't know we'd make Holy Tree-infused weapons to protect us against the

witches. I had only wanted to respect Her ashes.” He looked into my eyes. “But there’s something I never told anyone until a few months ago. It wasn’t only ash that I collected that terrible night; I found a root.”

“You did? Did you plant it?”

He shook his head. “Nowhere was safe. The Dark Witch found me no matter where I hid, and the Holy Tree needs moonlight to grow, so I couldn’t plant it when we were hiding underground. But I kept it safe. I protected it with my life in case one day, I found a place the witches couldn’t reach.”

“Like an island.”

He nodded and smiled. “They can’t cross large bodies of water.” He moved to the side. “But I’ve warded this place more heavily than any other in case the Dark Witch finds a way. But the time has come.” He waved his arm out to the clearing.

Right in the center, there was a tiny tree shining in the moonlight. It was completely white and almost looked like there was a glow coming off it.

“May I?” I whispered out of respect for Her.

“Of course.”

I stepped into the clearing, and closed my eyes as the rush of magic tickled my skin and raced through my veins. A small laugh bubbled out of me at the sensation. It was so pure and beautiful and strong and majestic. This all-encompassing feeling of love and joy filled me as Her magic radiated out and all around me, and I found my eyes filling with tears at the purity of it.

“She’s impressive, isn’t She?”

Another laugh bubbled out, and I turned to face him. “She’s magnificent.”

He smiled, bigger than earlier. “Just wait until She grows.” He walked up to me and slapped my shoulder as we both looked at the tiny, white tree that was barely a few twigs but somehow had more magic in its system than anything I’d ever felt before—including the man beside me. “Now you see why I swore you to secrecy.”

“I do, and I appreciate you sharing this with me, Elder, but I don’t understand why you have.”

He sighed. “I know I’ve been aloof and haven’t been a good replacement for the sire that you lost, but I want you to know you can come to me with anything.”

I had no words for that. Dregan had always been kind to me.

“I had planned on bringing you here someday, but when Christopher told me you’d found your True Mate, I figured sooner was better.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Since the Holy Tree was burned down, the chances of successfully turning a human has been about fifty-fifty. When She was fully grown, and we buried our fledglings beneath her, it was one hundred percent as long as the human had enough vampire blood in their system.” He waved at the tiny tree. “She’s not grown yet, but given time, She will be, and when She is, you’ll be able to turn Neo without any risk of failure. But you’ll have to wait until She grows and Her magic is saturated into the very soil we stand on. If you wait, it will be safer. But I wanted to give you a good reason to wait and not only rely on my word.”

I was overcome with emotion, not only because of the Holy Tree or the fact that Dregan was being so kind, but because I would be able to protect and keep Neo safe

forever—if he'd let me. "Thank you, Elder."

He surprised me by wrapping an arm across my shoulders and kissing my temple. He'd never done anything like that before, but I appreciated it. Maybe it was the presence of the Holy Tree making him feel the love and joy or maybe it was because he'd found his True Mate and now he knew love and joy.

A minute before I heard his voice, I felt his presence behind me.

"Dorian?"

Smiling, I turned around, then rushed over to him and pulled him into my arms. He seemed surprised by my actions, but he didn't pull away. He wrapped his arms around my neck, and I leaned down to tuck my head against his skin over his collarbone. I breathed him in and held him tight, then trailed my lips along his neck and jaw until I got to his mouth. He eagerly met my kiss, but when he moaned into my mouth, I had to pull away before I couldn't stop. Having sex right here in front of the Holy Tree and the Elder and his mate seemed like a really bad idea.

Breaking our kiss, I rested our foreheads together for a minute before I pulled back and looked at Dregan and Christopher, who'd luckily turned around so their backs were to us. They had their arms around each other and were looking at the Holy Tree, pretending to ignore us.

I cleared my throat. "Sorry, Elder, Luminary."

Christopher—the Luminary or den leader's mate—turned and smiled. "Don't apologize, Dorian. It's good to see you tonight."

"You too."

Dregan turned around and walked over to Neo, but knew better than to try to touch him or even shake his hand in my presence—True Mates were overprotective, especially when they weren't mated yet. "It's wonderful to see you again, Neo."

Neo blushed and his heart rate picked up a little, so I tucked him under my arm to pull him closer to me.

Dregan looked at me. "I'm afraid I've scared him. I met with him briefly before I came to your quarters."

I was about to ask what he met with him about, but Christopher said, "He knows you won't compel him again."

An involuntary hiss came out of my lips. I couldn't stand the thought of someone compelling Neo.

Dregan looked at me. "It was a necessary evil, Dorian. We'll leave you now. You're welcome to stay for as long as you'd like."

"I brought you a blanket, and some water and food." Chris held a quilt and basket out to me, so I took them and nodded my thanks, although my body stayed tense until they were out of sight and earshot.

Neo rubbed my chest. "It's okay. I get why he did it. Chris gave me a brief vampire history lesson before we walked here, and I can feel the magic pouring off the tree."

Taking a deep breath, I pushed away the annoyance and closed my eyes for a few seconds.

"It's incredible. It's like I can feel its love and happiness or something."

“That’s what I feel, too.”

I smiled and kissed his temple, then led him a little closer before we laid the blanket on a flat area and sat down. Once I got comfortable, I pulled him close so he was sitting between my legs and leaning back against my chest. Running my fingertips up and down the skin of his arm, we sat there staring at the Holy Tree and enjoying each other’s company for a while.

“Did you speak to Remi about drinking a lot of water and—”

His laugh cut me off. “You’re probably the fifteenth person to tell me that today.” He chuckled, and I smiled. “I’ve been drinking water since I left your room, and I’ve already eaten more today than I have all week put together.”

“I have to make sure you’re taken care of.”

“So Dregan doesn’t chew you out like he did when a bestower passed out from lack of water or whatever?”

My brow furrowed and I frowned. “No, because you’re my True Mate.”

He sucked in a breath, but didn’t reply.

“Surely Christopher talked to you about it?”

He nodded, but still didn’t say anything.

I couldn’t tell if he was upset or overwhelmed or what, so I kept talking. “The first time I saw you, I wanted to know you. I was drawn to you and even spent my nights wandering the island trying to find you.”

“You were looking for me?”

“Yes, but I didn’t have your name so no one knew who I meant when I asked. It was so close to dawn when I saw you that I didn’t have enough time to run over to you. I regretted not doing it anyway and damn the sun because you were all I was thinking about, and I thought I’d lost you. When Remi asked me if I wanted a bestower last night, my automatic answer was no, but something told me to go to the courtyard, and I’m so glad I listened.”

“I-I was looking for you, too. That’s why I started asking around about becoming a bestower and everything. I got as much information as I could before I went to Dorothy last night because I was hoping I could find you and have you drink from me.”

I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around his chest. “I’m very glad you were the one in the courtyard last night. I was starting to think I wouldn’t find you again, and that scared me.”

“I’m glad you were the vampire that showed up.”

“Me too.” I kissed the side of his head. “Last night was more amazing than I thought possible. I know we have a lot to learn about one another, but I hope you’ll give me a chance because I already care about you. The connection I feel with you is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.”

“I want to get to know you, too, Dorian.”

I hesitated, but decided that complete honesty was the best way to go. “I hope that you’ll want to complete the mating ritual with me one day.”

He was quiet for a few minutes, then whispered, “You’re winning me over already.”

I smiled at that and squeezed him tight. “Will you drink from me?”

He laughed a little. “Aren’t you the one that’s supposed to drink from me?”

I shrugged. “It’s supposed to go both ways, especially for True Mates.”

He looked back over his shoulder at me. “You really believe we’re soulmates?”

“I have no doubt, my treasure.”

He took a deep breath. “Okay, then I’ll drink from you if you’ll drink from me tonight, too.”

Leaning in, I dramatically sniffed his neck, making him squirm and laugh. Hearing him laugh was a wonderful feeling. I wanted to make him laugh some more, so I said in a really terrible accent, “I want to suck your blood.”

He cracked up and said, “Wow, I didn’t realize vampires could be such dorks.”

I laughed. “I’m sure you’ll get used to it.” He snorted out a laugh, so I held him to me and kept sniffing him over and over until he was giggling like crazy, and I was laughing along with him.

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Neo

Sitting here with Dorian was amazing. It felt right, like this was exactly where I belonged—no, exactly who I belonged with.

When he finally stopped sniffing me—what a cute dork—he bit into his wrist and held it in front of my mouth. This time there was no hesitation. Grabbing his arm, I put my mouth over the bleeding wound, then gulped in as much as I could before it healed. I could feel Dorian growing hard behind me, which surprised me. I didn't think letting me drink from him would have the same effect as him, a vampire, would have drinking from me.

I licked his wrist clean, then whispered, “Your blood tastes good. It doesn't really taste like blood.”

“Vampire blood generally tastes better than human blood—although almost all blood tastes good to me—but for you, mine might be even better since we're True Mates. Your blood is the best I've ever tasted.”

“Really?”

He grunted. “Mhmm.” Then he leaned his chin on my shoulder. “You're delicious.”

I snorted at that because it sounded ridiculous, and I leaned back into him as I stared at the majestic tree in front of us. I couldn't believe that the scary monsters I'd always heard about had come from such a beautiful thing. Not that they were actually scary monsters at all. So far most of the vampires had been kinder to me than many

humans. I wonder how they got such a terrible reputation? I wonder if there's any truth to those scary stories?

The wind blew and I shivered from it.

Dorian wrapped his arms tighter around me. "Is it cold? I can't always tell."

"Yeah, it's pretty chilly because of the wind. We're lucky it's not snowing."

"Is it that cold out?"

"No, but some of the humans were saying that they figured it was sometime in February, but obviously they could've been wrong."

He grabbed the edges of the blanket we were sitting on and managed to wrap us up in it together. "I haven't kept track of the month since we fled our home."

"Did you keep track before that?"

He nodded against my shoulder. "Before things got bad, we had electricity in our underground home. We were lucky that our running water came from a well, so we still had that after the war started. I used to have a TV, and there was a big radio in the common room. The antennae was run above ground so we could listen to the radio. It was a good set up."

"I was pretty young when we lost electricity. I think I was maybe ten?"

"So that makes you around thirty?"

"I think so."

“Mm. So young.”

I lifted the shoulder he wasn't leaning on. “I mean, you only have what? A hundred and fifty years on me? That's not too bad.”

He chuckled and kissed my neck, so I tilted my head to the side to allow better access. He trailed kisses up and down my neck for a minute, then buried his face there and groaned. “Even your skin is delicious.”

“You don't have to stop.”

He spoke against my skin, so his words were mumbled. “Actually, I do. I need to take you home.”

Disappointment shot through me, but I tried to hide it. “Oh, um, okay.”

He lifted off my shoulder and tried to see my face. “What's wrong?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“Okay, no.” He pushed the blanket off us, making me shiver again. “That's not how this works.” He picked me up and turned me, placing me on his lap, just as easily as a freaking flower or something. He cupped my jaw and turned my head to look at him. “If you're upset, you have to talk to me.”

I looked off to the side without moving my chin from his grasp and sighed before looking into his brown eyes with silver rims.

“Talk to me, Neo.”

“Fine. I'm... upset—no, um, I'm disappointed you want to take me home because I

thought you were going to feed from me again tonight, and I thought that maybe..." I trailed off with a shrug and looked down because now I was also embarrassed. Ugh .

I could feel him staring at me for a long moment, then he finally jerked his head back and said, "Wait, do you think I meant take you back to your home?"

I nodded once.

"Oh, my treasure, I'm sorry. I meant that I want to take you back to my quarters, to my home."

"You don't want me to go back to the rec room?"

"Not at all. In fact, I'd rather you never go back there." He grabbed my arms and put them over his shoulders.

"What does that mean? Where would I go?"

He smirked. "To my room, of course."

I squinted at him in confusion, and he chuckled.

"You're my True Mate, Neo. And as such, I would love for you to stay with me."

"Like... live together?"

"Yes."

"Until when? Until I get my own place...?"

He leaned in and kissed my chin. "No, my place would be your place—our place."

I squinted again.

He smiled and laughed. “Move your belongings to my—I mean our quarters and never leave.” He lifted his shoulders in a shrug.

“I’ve known you for like two nights.”

“And you’re my True Mate.”

“But you don’t know me.”

“I know enough.” He rubbed his hands up and down my back. “You don’t even have a bed, Neo.” He stared at me for several seconds, then sort of sighed. “If you’re not comfortable sleeping with me, you may take the bed, and I’ll take the floor. You’re a human and more fragile than me.” That sort of sounded like an insult, but it was true, so...

“It’s just... you don’t know me.”

“But our souls know each other.” I was about to argue, but he stopped me with a finger on my lips. “I know by human standards we haven’t known one another long at all. But you’re my True Mate, and I’ll go crazy if you’re far from me, especially if I know you’re sleeping on the floor. If you’re not comfortable sleeping in my room, I’ll come to you. I’m sure I can arrange a sunlight-proof area in the room or find a sun-proof sleeping bag or something. But that way, you’ll still have the other humans around you. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“You would do that for me?”

He nodded. “Anything, my treasure.”

That was a pretty bold statement, so I wasn't sure I fully believed it, but he looked sincere and so freaking serious, it was hard not to.

"My parents met in February, too, you know."

"Wh-what?" I was confused by his random subject change.

"You said that you think it's February, and I was reminded of a story." Running his fingertips over my cheek, he smiled at me. "My parents met at a tiny grocery store. Not like a grocery stores like you remember, but a small... shop, I suppose is the word. Anyway, they met and fell in love, and a week later, they were married on Valentine's Day."

"Seriously?"

He grinned. "Yes. They were very much in love and grew old together."

"Did they... know?"

"That I'm a vampire?"

I nodded.

"No, they believed I died when I was twenty-two. That was the vampire way before humans found out about shifters and the world exploded around us. But I used to visit them every year, the night before Valentine's Day. I would leave cigars for my father and chocolates for my mother from all over the world. I checked in on them and sometimes I left them money when I knew they were struggling. They had money problems like many people, but the one thing they never lacked was their love for one another or for me. Not a day went by growing up where I didn't feel loved by them. They were wonderful parents."

I buried my fingers in his hair. “They sound like it.”

He smiled sadly, then kissed my nose. “So maybe it’s fate that we met in February, too. Maybe in a week we’ll be mated and in love and start our life together, just like my parents.”

My chest filled with so much warmth, I didn’t know what to do with it, so I kissed him instead. I held his head and played with his hair as I devoured his mouth, and he wrapped me so tight in his arms it was like he never wanted to let me go.

But then he broke the kiss and whispered, “May I drink from you?”

I groaned out, “Yes.”

He leaned in, pushed my collar to the side, and bit down on my neck. It stung again, but only for a split-second before it turned to bliss, and we both moaned. Why did being fed from feel so damn good?

Dorian drank from me and ran his hands over my back, arms, ass, and into my hair. I felt like he was everywhere, yet I wanted more. More of his touch, more of his skin, more of him. I had the urge to lean down and bite his shoulder, which was so weird, but the more I thought about it, the more I wanted to do it. Is vampire blood addicting?

He pulled his fangs out, and I groaned in protest, but he licked my wound closed and whispered, “I can’t take more after drinking from you last night, too.” He kissed my shoulder. “Thank you, my treasure.”

Cupping his jaw, I pulled his mouth to me, giving him a deep kiss so I could taste my blood on his tongue. He moaned loudly and moved his hips under me. I wanted him so fucking much. I wanted every piece of him.

He broke the kiss. “Will you let me take you home—to my home tonight? We can take it one night at a time?”

“Yes.”

He blew out a relieved breath and kissed my lips again, but pulled back. “If I don’t stop kissing you, I’m afraid I’ll lose myself and try to take you right here, and...” He glanced over my shoulder. “I don’t feel right doing that here.”

“Uh, yeah, you’re right.” I glanced over my shoulder at the Holy Tree. “Yeah, definitely right.”

He chuckled, then abruptly stood up. Since I was on his lap, I was afraid I’d fall, but he lifted me with him, then gently placed me on the ground before picking up the blanket and the basket. “Let’s hurry. Your scent is killing me.”

I let the vampire lead me by the hand all the way back to his quarters, and once I was inside with him, I sorta never wanted to leave. Maybe this whole True Mate and living together thing was real; maybe I should give it a chance—give Dorian a chance—give us a chance.

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Dorian

Since I'd brought Neo home with me two weeks ago, the two of us had barely left our room. Neither of us could stand to be far from the other for long. Neo was on the same schedule as me now, so I even walked with him down to the kitchen every night when we woke to get enough food for him for the night. I couldn't keep my hands off him.

It'd been the best two weeks of my life.

Neo grabbed my hand and grinned at me. "Are you ready?"

I leaned in and kissed his neck. "Mm. Definitely."

As we walked through the courtyard, Neo pulled me to a stop simply to kiss my lips. It made me smile even wider than I already had been. He'd really come out of his shell and was completely comfortable with me now and not shying away from talking to me or kissing me whenever he wanted. Including when other people were around. Not that we were making out in front of people, but he would lean on me and kiss my cheek and hold my hand. It was something that I hadn't really had since I'd turned. By nature, vampires weren't the types to cuddle, but when it came to our True Mates, all those feelings of being near and touching them came rushing in.

I led him up to the top of the castle where one of the balconies was still intact, and we set up our blanket and basket of food for him. Once we were settled, Neo pulled out his food and leaned against me as he ate.

“I really like it up here.” He shot me a small grin.

“Me too. It’s nice when it’s a clear night like tonight.”

“Mm. I love looking up at the stars.”

I kissed his temple and put my arm around his shoulders. “Me too. Can I ask you a question that you don’t have to answer right now?”

He set his food down and turned to look at me, but remained leaning into my side. “Sure.”

“Would you ever... consider becoming a vampire?”

He tilted his head and examined me. “You want to turn me?”

I was afraid of making him angry, but I knew I needed to be truthful. “Honestly, yes, I want to. But if you don’t want to be turned, I’ll respect your wishes.”

“Uh, so Remi told me that bestowers live longer lives from the venom in your fangs. They live even longer when they drink vampire blood like I’ve been doing.”

My heart sank, but I tried not to let my disappointment and worry show. “That’s true, but most bestowers are turned before they pass, if they wish.”

He nodded. “So... if I didn’t want to become a vampire, you’d be okay with it?”

I closed my eyes for a few seconds to gain my bearing since it felt like I was stabbed in the heart. Then I looked at him and his sweet blue eyes. “I would respect your decision, but that doesn’t mean I would be okay with it. But I’ll take whatever years you’re willing to give me, and once you’re gone, I’ll see one last sunrise.”

His brow furrowed. “Are you saying that you’d kill yourself if I... died?”

I nodded. “I wouldn’t be able to bear living without you.”

“Oh, Dorian.” He wrapped his arms around my neck and pulled me close. “I’m sorry, I was only thinking out loud. I didn’t mean to upset you.” Leaning back, he cupped my cheek, rubbing his thumb over my skin. “I want to spend eternity with you, too. If that means being turned, then that’s what we’ll do. I don’t want to live—or die—without you, either.”

I breathed out in relief, but still managed to say, “You don’t have to decide now. We have plenty of time before the Holy Tree is ready.”

He climbed onto my lap and hugged me close as I wrapped my arms around him, and he whispered, “I love you, Dorian Mortas Kiebusinski.”

I leaned back to look him in the eyes. That was the first time he’d said it. “You do?”

He nodded. “Very much.”

Sighing, I hugged him and buried my face against his neck. “I love you, too, Neo Lachlan Farone. So much.”

He kissed my hair and whispered, “I’m ready.”

I leaned back again. “You are?” He nodded. “Are you sure?”

He grinned at me. “Yes.”

I kissed him deeply, then stripped his clothes off before he had a chance to change his mind. It’d been so hard being patient, but I wanted him to feel ready before we

completed our bond. He laughed at my hastiness, and I smiled at him. He had such a wonderful laugh—he'd brought so much joy to my life in the short time I'd known him; I couldn't believe that he was mine.

He pulled my shirt over my head and scooted off my lap to pull his pants down and unhook his knife from his leg while I pulled my own pants off. He had a small blade that I'd started making him carry on him for protection. Then he climbed back on my lap, and we both groaned as our skin touched. He ground his hips on me, and I grabbed his ass, pulling him in so our cocks rubbed together. He pinched my nipples and kissed my neck, then licked his way down to the spot he'd bite into to complete our bond.

We had to bite each other at the same time with the intention of connecting to have a complete bond. If only one of us did it, we'd have a partial bond. He could use his knife to cut my skin first, then bite down on it. It would hurt for a few seconds, but it'd be worth it. And I was sure that it would feel amazing once he started drinking from me.

I shoved my fingers in his mouth, and he licked them seductively before I pulled them out and ran my wet fingers over his hole, then pushed one inside. We moaned in unison as I began opening him up.

He threw his head back, so I licked and nipped at his neck while I pushed two fingers, then three inside of him. Neo grabbed my face and pulled me into a deep kiss that made me groan as he rode my fingers.

“I'm ready, Dor.”

I groaned again, then pushed him onto his back and lined my cock up with his hole. I used my spit to wet it before slowly pushing inside. We'd had so much sex over the past two weeks, he was practically ready for me all the time, but I still froze to let him

adjust once I was fully sheathed inside him.

He smiled up at me and ran his hands through my hair, then gently pulled me down for another kiss, and he melted under me, so I began thrusting slowly. I kept the pace slow because I didn't want to rush. I wanted him to feel good. Neo's fingers dug into my back, and he met my thrusts, trying to make me go faster, but I didn't comply because he was trembling and falling apart in my arms. And it was gorgeous—the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

“Dorian.”

I kissed his lips, then ran my tongue down his neck. “You're so sexy like this.”

“Oh, Dor, I'm so close.”

I could tell that he was—I was too—so I whispered, “Cut my shoulder.”

“I don't know... if I can.”

I kissed his lips, but kept the slow, torturous pace. “I need you to. I need you to drink from me.”

He was panting and out of breath and flushed from his chest, up. But he was as beautiful as ever. He reached over his head and grabbed the small knife, unsheathed it, and held it in front of my shoulder. “You sure?”

“Do it, baby. Now.”

He searched my eyes, then nodded and wrinkled his nose as he cut a small slit in my shoulder. I held in the hiss that wanted to escape because I didn't want him to feel bad for cutting me.

“Drink, my treasure.”

He dropped the knife over his head, then grabbed my shoulders and sucked on my wound. It stung, but then the pleasure of being drank from overtook the pain, and a small moan escaped my lips.

When he leaned back, I kissed his blood-covered lips and whispered against them, “You ready?”

“Please.”

I grinned and pecked his lips, then leaned down and bit into his neck. As I drank, I thought about how much I wanted our connection, how much I wanted him in my life, how much I loved him. Just drinking wasn’t enough; you had to think about how much you cared for your mate, and I’d never cared for anyone half as much as I cared for my Neo.

I leaned back and our eyes met. I could see how much he cared about me, too. But more so, I could feel it in every part of me. But our bond wasn’t complete yet.

“We have to drink together, baby. Is my wound still open?”

He looked and nodded. “Together, Dor.”

We nodded, then both leaned in and bit down. As soon as we gulped in each other’s blood, I felt a surge of emotions fill me—emotions that weren’t my own, but reflected mine. I felt his appreciation, his joy, his excitement, his love for me. I felt it so deeply within my soul that I laughed against his skin. It lit me up from the inside out, and the love we held for each other sparked brighter than a star.

Everything that I was feeling from him, he could feel from me. I could sense him so

easily that I knew his eyes were filled with tears of joy.

And then we were coming together in this crazy powerful ecstasy that coursed through our bodies, hearts, and souls. I could feel his pleasure, and he could feel mine. And it was fucking wonderful.

Memories that weren't my own flashed through my mind. Faces of his brother and sisters and parents. Memories of him playing with his dad out in a field where they planted their food; memories of him helping his mother bake cookies; memories of him playing with and fighting with his siblings; the memory of their deaths; the memory of a giant wolf named Chris carrying him on his back to safety. And all of the emotions he'd felt came with every memory. It all came flooding in at once and was overwhelming, yet amazing.

Neo was seeing flashes of my life as well and feeling my emotions.

But then the memories faded and all that was left was the two of us and the love we felt for one another.

He loved me so deeply it blew me away.

We pulled our mouths away, I licked his wound closed, and we held each other as our bodies trembled.

Can you hear me, my treasure? I asked in my head.

Neo gasped, then those happy tears trailed down his cheeks. I hear you. This is so crazy.

I kissed his tears away and chuckled a little. It is, but I hear we'll get used to it. We're connected together forever now. No matter how far apart we are, we'll still be

connected.

He wrapped his arms around me and held on tight. Don't even think about testing that theory.

I laughed and tucked my arms under him. I have no intention of ever testing that.

Good.

I love you, Neo.

I love you, too, Dor.

I smiled down at him. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For doing this with me, for being here, for being my True Mate. Take your pick."

He grinned. "Vampires are so sappy."

I snorted out a laugh, then laid my head back down on him.

We stayed that way for a long time, just soaking each other up and talking and testing our new link. But when it got too late, we had to clean our mess and get inside before the sun came up.

As we were walking back hand in hand, Neo said, "I never thought I'd meet my person, but now that I have, I'm glad he's you."

"Yeah?"

He stopped me and kissed my lips. “Yeah.”

I smiled and let my True Mate pull me all the way back to our room.

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Neo

I grabbed the bag of food and water, then pulled my True Mate along toward the hot springs. We'd planned to go back there for a while because it was a special place, but we hadn't had a chance over the last couple of weeks. I was excited because Dorian had made sure the others that knew about our hot spring would steer clear so we'd have privacy tonight. We just wanted to have a nice night together.

He wrapped his arm over my shoulders and tucked me into his side as we left the courtyard, but I needed to taste his lips, so I stopped him and kissed his mouth and thought, I love you, Dor.

He kissed me back with a huge smile. I love you, too. Hearing his voice in my head still made me giddy.

I hadn't really believed that would happen for me since I was a human, but now that I could hear his thoughts, I wouldn't want it any other way. His love for me was exponential and almost knocked me to my knees at times.

He kissed my temple. "And it will keep growing every day so you better get stronger legs."

I snorted out a laugh and shook my head. I guess he'd picked up on my random thought.

"Do you know how to swim?" he asked me. We had access to each other's thoughts and even our memories, but they could be hard to interpret, and it was nice to have

conversations about things, anyway.

“My older brother taught me. I love swimming.”

“Good. Maybe we can swim by the beach when the weather gets a little warmer.”

“I’d like that.”

We finished the walk to the hidden hot spring, set down our supplies, and before I could do anything other than stand up, Dorian was on me, pulling me into his chest and capturing my laughing lips with his.

“I thought we were bathing, Dor, not messing around,” I joked.

He chuckled. “Pretty sure we can do both.” I grinned and went to step into the pool, but he caught my arm. “Not so fast.” He pulled my arms over his shoulders and tugged me flush against his chest, kissing me like he wanted to devour me. I do want to devour you.

We both laughed again, but didn’t stop kissing each other.

A loud noise in the distance broke us apart, and suddenly, a huge gust of something—like wind, but more powerful—blew me back away from Dorian. He got knocked back, too, but he used his vampire speed to rush behind me and catch me before I could fall all the way to the ground.

“Holy shit!” I yelled. “What the hell was that?”

Dorian looked in the direction the gust came from. “Magic.” He licked his lips. “Magic so potent, I can taste it.”

Licking my lips, I noticed a strange grainy, earthy taste in my mouth. It almost tasted

like I'd eaten dirt, but there was also a gross sour taste underneath of it. What the heck?

"I don't know. But..." he trailed off, and finished through our link, I think I felt dark magic.

"What's dark ma—" Another loud sound came from the same direction, cutting me off, and Dorian pushed me behind him, protecting me—from what? I didn't know. "Dor, Wh—"

A large grey... thing—a bird, maybe? Did birds grow that big?—flew through the air. It was too far away to see what it was, but it had to be huge. It flew straight up toward the moon, then in the opposite direction.

"What the fuck is that?"

Dorian turned to me with terror in his eyes as the loudest roar I'd ever heard filled the air. It was coming from the same direction, but it was so loud and forceful it shook me to my very core. It filled my veins, making me tremble in fear.

Dorian scooped me up so fast, I couldn't protest, and he started running toward the freaking roar. He held me close as he ran using his vampire speed. I was so terrified, I could hardly get the words out. "Wh-what is that?"

He kissed my temple. "Dregan's war cry." He pulled me closer, and I noticed that I wasn't the only one shaking. I'll protect you, my treasure, I heard his voice in my mind.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and whispered back, "I'll protect you, too."

He kissed my temple again as we arrived in the courtyard with the rest of the vampires, bestowers, shifters, and humans. Everyone looked like they were ready for

a fight as Dregan stomped into the square. He walked to one end of the courtyard, and when he turned to face us, everyone went silent. I'd never seen a vampire so out of control as he was in that moment. His power was radiating off of him, and I had no doubt that his vampire side had completely taken over. The man I'd met as Dregan was gone, and only a monster stood in his place.

Whoever caused this reaction should be terrified to face his wrath.

The End

Thank you for reading Neo and Dorian!